

Three Days

Three days—what if that is all you had left?

Imagine waking up Friday morning knowing that come Monday you would leave your family and home for six months, possibly longer. How would you spend your weekend? What would you do?

Two Friday's ago, I faced this very conundrum. I knew Monday morning, March 3rd, 2003, I would fly aboard the aircraft carrier Nimitz to steam west to protect freedom in this dangerous and scary new world. With the perils inherent in my chosen profession, I even considered the possibility that I might not return home alive.

So, what did I do?

Like most anyone would, no doubt, I savored every minute. I enjoyed opportunities and activities that would not be available beyond Monday morning.

Allow me to share a few examples.

I PLAYED WITH MY SON

This is my third deployment aboard a carrier but the first as a father. Friday morning my two-year old son Slater and I didn't bother changing out of our pajamas until a couple of hours after waking. We rolled around the bed, playing hide and seek in the comforter and pillows, messing up the bed, me scratching Slater's checks with my morning beard.

We played our favorite game: "5-8." This is either a running or jumping game—so named because it begins with counting. As is typical of toddlers, Slater's counting was not great at first, so he used to say "3, 8, 5, 8" and then either run across the room or jump off the couch into my waiting arms. He can count 1, 2, 3 now, but we still use the original name.

I savored this time with Slater, trying to imagine how different he would look and act six months from now without his father home. I took in his smell and the softness of his skin, trying to carve the memory into my brain so I could enjoy it later.

It's not working.

I miss that little guy so much it makes my stomach hurt. I love him more than just about anything else in the world.

I WORKED ON THE HOUSE

I eventually took Slater to preschool Friday afternoon so I could get a few things done around the house while Beth was teaching. No doubt most of us, most of the time, don't give a second thought to a simple chore like mowing the lawn or performing a home improvement project. How fun is it, really, to hang a mantle above the fireplace?

But there is a need for creative expression and pride in a job well done that most humans possess. Face it, you enjoy tasks which improve the appearance or value of the things around you (cars, homes, etc.).

When you are confined to a floating metal prison, it's tough to find this kind of satisfaction. Instead, everything becomes work; you can't escape it. Projects at home aren't for the boss, the client, or anyone else but you.

Now, my wife Beth will tell you I swore at that stupid mantle from when I began fussing with it the night before, which is true, but the fact is I delighted in every second of it.

I ENJOYED ONE OF MY FAVORITE HOBBIES

My mother is concerned her boys have an incurable *need for speed*. She may be on to something. I can't help it—I like to go fast.

Friday afternoon I took a ride through the green hills west of Lemoore on a motorcycle my brother Rocky had loaned me (thank you). A motorcycle can make you feel like the master of your domain as you navigate through twisting and rolling stretches of road. I suppose it comes down to the innate desire to be in control. On a vehicle with two wheels you can do that far better than any with four.

But the ride serviced another need: the recent rains and spring flowers afforded a beautiful sight as I rode the 80 or so miles to California Highway 101 and back. It was tough to concentrate on the road ahead with the stunning scenery to the sides. I knew I would not enjoy such a panorama for a long time.

It also struck me as strange that at 120 miles per... umm... I mean, at the slightly faster than normal rate of travel (sorry, mom), it only took five to six seconds to cover the equivalent 1,000-foot length of the aircraft carrier I would be confined to for the next six months or so. Granted the carrier itself would obviously be moving, but still.

I ATE GOOD FOOD WITH GOOD FRIENDS

Saturday night Beth, Slater, and I enjoyed sushi with our good friends Robert and Tracy. Knowing I would be faced with various forms of chicken for the foreseeable future, savoring one last meal—the “final supper,” if you will—was a no-brainer.

Admittedly, the food on ship is not *that* bad, but it's tough to satisfy a specific hunger when you have no choice in what is served. Feel like Mexican tonight? Tough, you're getting pork adobo. Pizza sounds good... oh look, mystery meat. Heck, at least there's always a salad bar, but even that gets old.

Do you take it for granted knowing your favorite food is readily available anytime you want? Next time you have a specific craving I challenge you to eat something else and see if you are equally satisfied. I love sushi. And beer, which is *also* not available on the ship. Saturday night I enjoyed them both for the last time in who-knows-how-long.

I ENJOYED ANOTHER OF MY FAVORITE HOBBIES

Sunday was my first and last day on the ski slopes this season. Like motorcycle riding, there is something about skiing I cannot seem to get enough of. Yes, there is the speed thing again, but there's more. The challenge of manipulating the skis under various conditions, dodging trees, rocks and other skiers... it's all part of the experience.

Of course, the incredible view from the sides of snow-covered mountains wasn't too shabby either. Like the motorcycle ride, I paused to consider this splendid planet in all its glory... then I skied some more.

Since Beth and Slater wanted to sleep in and meet me at the resort later, I had the morning to myself. I rode the chair lifts with various strangers and, as in any situation where you are confined abnormally close to someone you don't know, small talk normally broke out. Most of you who know me well understand I normally prefer not to draw attention to what I do but, for some reason, that morning I felt the urge to talk with people I didn't know from Adam about my "first and last ski day" and impending departure.

To a man, each one of them expressed their gratitude for those of us in the military and wished me luck. One fellow even produced two beers from his backpack which we enjoyed during the quiet ride up the snow-covered mountain-side.

I like being a fighter pilot for a number of reasons, the reaction I get from folks I meet is one of them.

I CALLED THE FAMILY

As Sunday came to a close my fear of the nearing end increased. Slater and I played some more, then after he went to bed I picked up the phone. First, I called my mother.

Being a parent now, I better understand the love she has for me and I am sometimes troubled by the thought that I perhaps did not cherish that as much as I could have. I have often marveled at my mother's accomplishments: can you imagine raising four hellions, like us Aiello kids, on your own? In a foreign country?! On minimum wage?!! Wow. And we all turned out okay: no druggies, criminals, or dead beats—way to go, Mom.

I also spoke with my step-father Jim and brother Rocky. I contemplated calling my eldest brother Kai (it was getting late) when my sister Anna called. Kai and I spoke the next morning. I had spoken with my younger sister Julie earlier in the weekend.

It was wonderful to hear everyone's voices and to receive their generous good wishes and prayer vows. Beth is scared of the prospect of having a big family but I wouldn't have wanted my childhood any other way. My family members are my best friends and I enjoyed the convenience of talking to them before departing.

I MADE LOVE TO MY WIFE

(Sorry honey, but we're all adults here.)

Of all the depravity of a deployment, my wife is surely who I will miss the most. Intimacy and physical contact aside, even just being with someone who knows you better than any other—and who accepts your faults as well as your strengths—is a luxury we should not take for granted.

Beth and I are not perfect (well, she may be but I'm not), but she's the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. Being away from her is not easy. I miss her sassy smile, her beauty, and positive attitude. Out here you just get smelly, smart-assed, type A personalities who use the *f*-word too much. What I wouldn't give for just an hour on the couch with my wife. There is no substitute. And this is just the first week of the first month...

I CRIED

Monday morning was tough. Slater and I rough-housed and played "5-8" in the morning as I packed and tied up a few remaining loose ends around the house. Beth went to work but came home at lunch to see me off.

We took Slater to preschool before heading to the base. Slater normally hates being dropped off anyway, even just for the day, but this day was different. In a quiet voice I tried to impress upon him that we were saying good-bye for a while and as my son cried in my arms, I joined him.

It felt strange to have the teachers watching but they knew what was going on and their sympathy was evident. Slater is clearly too young to grasp the situation so I know he was only upset about being dropped off at school, but I'm going to pretend he was crying over me. Since then Beth says he has been asking "where daddy go?" as he looks under the sheets at home. That breaks my heart.

The ride to the base was quiet. I drove, not knowing when I would have the next opportunity. As we unloaded my bags there was still little to say, although there was so much I wanted to share. Beth and I hugged and kissed, tears running down our cheeks the few remaining minutes before she had to return to work. It wasn't a traditional send-off, especially in the Navy where you would expect someone to be waving from the pier, but our exchange as she drove off in the Suburban is indelibly etched in my mind's eye.

I LEFT

Two hours later:

"Lemoore Tower, Hawk 15, flight of two for takeoff, runway 32 right."

"Hawk 15, Tower, you're cleared for takeoff, change to departure frequency. Ya'll have a safe deployment. Good luck, Godspeed, and we'll see you back here next fall."

"Thanks tower. Hawk 15 flight cleared for takeoff, switching departure, good day."

And here I am.