

Three More Days

By the time the USS Nimitz pulls pier side in San Diego on November 5th, 2003, 246 days will have passed since that crisp morning I said goodbye to my family and deployed to help defend America's interests abroad.

Two hundred and forty-six days. That's eight months. Two-thirds of a year. We left in winter and are returning in fall.

Yikes.

Looking back, it is difficult to explain the emptiness and anxiety we all felt once the Nimitz completed carrier qualifications off San Diego and headed west. At the time, tensions with Iraq were nearing the boiling point as the 'Global War on Terror' entered its second year.

Most of us, myself included, could only look ahead at the seemingly insurmountable eight-month deployment and wonder how our families would cope. How would *we* cope? It wouldn't be easy. But I was reminded of the most enduring lessons from flight school: how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

And so, that's how we would approach this deployment—one day at a time. For clarity, however, this brief recap is offered one season at a time:

WINTER

Barely ten days into deployment the ship made a four-day visit to Pearl Harbor. With the Iraqi situation then at a fevered pitch, however, no one really seemed able to enjoy themselves on Hawaii's beaches—we wanted to get in on the action. But after departing Hawaii, the ship took its sweet time crossing the Pacific into the eastern hemisphere, as if stalling.

SPRING

The war kicked off in late March while we conducted exercises near Guam. Like most Americans, Nimitz sailors were glued to the TV trying to follow the situation, only it was worse for us because we wanted to be a part of it (that and the cable connection was spotty, as usual). It's a strange conundrum: nobody wants war but, by God, if there's going to be one then we want to be a part of it. The analogy I often use is a sports team that does nothing but practice and scrimmage. Eventually the team wants to play a real game. So did we.

But this fight was not to be ours. By the time the Nimitz arrived in the Persian Gulf in early April, naval aviation's role in the conflict had already subsided considerably. The four other aircraft carriers operating in the Gulf (and several in the Mediterranean Sea) packed up and returned home to a hero's welcome. Seemingly, it was all over just as quickly as it had begun. Yet someone had to keep the watch, ready to respond at a moment's notice. Someone had to walk the beat—billy club in hand. That someone was us.

For the next four months we flew long, boring missions over Iraq without any tangible impact, other than establishing a "presence." But then every night we would hear reports of American soldiers being killed by ambush attacks and improvised explosives. This only added to our frustration.

Brief visits to the middle eastern ports of Bahrain and Dubai helped break up the monotony of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, but otherwise those first several months were among the most difficult of deployment both personally and professionally—that is, I missed my family and we had little job satisfaction.

SUMMER

I am not normally one to pass an opportunity when it arises, so in late June I took a break from ship life and served as a liaison at the coalition's theater air headquarters in Qatar. Despite living in a tent and daily high temperatures near 108 degrees F, the experience was rather enjoyable. For three weeks I traded my flight suit for desert cammies and the ocean for dirt. The highlight of the trip was spending the 4th of July in Iraq helping rescue a Nimitz jet flown by a good friend who had diverted to the captured airfield due to a malfunction (some of you may remember a previous email chronicling this adventure).

While in country I was able to see first-hand just how devastating war is. Damaged or destroyed Iraqi hangars, bunkers, and aircraft littered the airfield and surrounding area. I took pictures on burned-out Soviet-era tanks and in front of Saddam Hussein murals. It was one Independence Day I won't soon forget.

Before leaving Qatar, I was also afforded an opportunity to visit Djibouti. The U.S. military maintains a presence in that small country on the Horn of Africa and my visit was part of an assessment of possibly basing American fighters there. You can ask me about Djibouti some other time, but in short: it certainly made me appreciate the good ol' US of A.

One night in late July, not long after I returned to Nimitz, there was a sudden buzz about the ship. Orders had come down: we were to make best speed out of the Gulf to off the coast of the eastern Horn of Africa where a "high profile target" was supposedly sighted. If positively identified, we were to help take him out.

The orders could not have come at a better time—the ship and airwing needed a change after several months of operating in the sweltering Gulf heat. For five days our e-mail and "sailor phones" were secured so no one could inadvertently disclose our tasking as we raced down at best speed.

But it was all for naught—by the time we arrived off the coast of Somalia someone up the chain of command either changed their mind or the target disappeared, so again we saw no action.

Regardless, operating off Africa was something different, in 20 degree-cooler temperatures, and that was enough for us. The Indian Ocean seas were a bit more churned up than what we were used to in the pond-like Gulf, so the pitching of the carrier made landings a bit...

exciting, to say the least. (In fact, on one flight, my wingman's rate of descent coming in to land was too great as the stern of the ship rose up on a swell. Fortunately, the landing signal officers, who monitor every landing, were as professional as ever and waved him off in time. He barely missed hitting the back of the ship and recovered uneventfully on the next attempt.)

After several weeks in the Indian Ocean we all hoped the ship would not be ordered to return to the Persian Gulf but that is exactly what happened. So, by mid-August we wrapped up another Dubai visit—my eighth over three deployments—and made our way back to the "NAG" (Northern Arabian Gulf).

When we arrived, the bosses needed someone who had been-there-done-that to return to Qatar for the short time we had remaining on station. Either because I didn't get it right the first time (or because I did such superb job—you decide) I got the nod and returned to Qatar for ten days. I was mildly annoyed at first but soon got over it. If nothing else I had an opportunity to visit the capital city of Doha, which was interesting.

FALL

September brought excitement to the ship as we were finally released from our tether to the Gulf and allowed to start heading in the general direction of home. After numerous port calls to desert locales in the Middle East, our visit to the lush tropical setting of Singapore was like a dream come true. It was almost comical to listen to my shipmates point out the liberty bus windows while leaving the carrier pier exclaiming, "*whoa, check out those trees!*"

Vegetation is something I once took for granted but now appreciate dearly. I suppose it comes down to symbolism: rain-soaked green plants signify thriving life, whereas the oppressively hot and barren desert is akin to death. Ironically, many inhabitants in each location seem to generally reflect that in their attitudes and behavior.

Our orders were ambiguous after the first Singapore visit. We were required to stay within a certain distance of the Gulf until relieved by another carrier and so spent late September into early October operating in the Andaman Sea near Thailand. After another visit to Singapore in October, our relief checked in from the Suez Canal and we were at last cleared to return home.

You could almost hear the collective cheer rise throughout the ship that night the Captain announced over the 1MC that we were headed home. Although we were not necessarily war heroes—we had stood our watch, done our duty, and now we were coming home. It was a wonderful feeling.

The Nimitz stopped by Pearl Harbor on the way back just as we had on the way out; however, this time the atmosphere was much more festive. Waiting for us there were 1,300 "Tigers" who would return to San Diego with the ship. Each sailor aboard the Nimitz was allowed to invite two family members or friends (aged 8+/ no spouses, of course) who

would live on the ship for the final trek home to experience a small part of what the Nimitz crew endured during deployment.

My brothers Kai and Rocky were natural choices and are on the ship with me now—we are having a great time. I take pride in showing them what we do out here and I know they are thrilled by this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It is an experience none of us will ever forget—a perfect ending to an imperfect deployment.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

In a few short days I will land my F/A-18 at NAS Lemoore and taxi up to the very hangar from which I said goodbye to my wife 246 days ago. I'm sure the 'tough guy' image will be difficult to maintain when I see her and my son for the first time in what feels like eternity.

I fully realize there is no way I would have been able to get through these past eight months without her. Beth has been amazing—since I left she has sold a car, bought a car, sold a house, built a house (not with her own two hands, granted), held two jobs, looked after my boy, and gestated another. She has also written countless e-mails of support and sent hundreds of photographs. Beth is a trooper. I consider myself the luckiest man alive to have a wife like that and a job like this. It just doesn't get any better.

Looking back, it has been quite a journey. While this deployment was a disappointment in many ways, it was also an experience I will always relish. The opportunities I was afforded, the flying, and the friendships I created (or strengthened) are all invaluable. This is what I do and I love it. However, I find it difficult to balance the joy I feel about my impending family reunion with the sadness over the end of yet another life chapter. But I've had enough of this for a while—it's time to get back to family.

But you know what? Despite the separation, despite the loneliness, the danger, and cravings for home these past 246 days... despite it all, if the call came in that we would have to do it all again in three more days I would answer that call and proudly stand the watch again.

Call me crazy, but I have a calling that cannot truly be explained in words. I am a sailor—a Naval Aviator—who has voluntarily obliged himself to defend and protect those who cannot do so for themselves. I cannot accurately explain why I do what I must do.

God willing, that call will not come, but if it does—*when* it does—I will be ready. And I, and thousands of others like me, will do it all again, just as others are doing right now at this very moment.

Thank you for all your love, prayers, and support these past 246 days. See you at home very soon...