

Bringing It All Home

You couldn't go ashore if your gonorrhea wasn't cured.

After six months in the war zone, the aircraft carrier was making its way back from the South China Sea to Virginia's Chesapeake Bay—cruising at 30 knots, 24/7. We crossed the equator. Twice. Heading south, then north. It looks exotic on paper, but it was all water. It'd be a long month of nothing but water.

Riding low, like a car with a trunkful of contraband. The scuttlebutt, and I think this is true, was that the souvenirs everyone had bought were the cause. The low prices for electronics in Asia were irresistible: Pentax cameras, Nikon lenses, Sanyo boom boxes, Sony reel-to-reel tape decks, enormous Pioneer speakers. Months of shopping, 3000 men, made for a significant load.

Families anticipated our arrival. We'd be standing in neat formation, lining the edge of the flight deck in our dress blues, at parade rest, legs slightly apart, hands locked behind our back as the ship neared the pier. You'd never know from seeing us from afar how badly we'd all wanted to cross that plank to shore, how we could barely stand upright.

Hundreds of girlfriends, wives and kids would be onshore waving flags and holding up welcome signs like *Make Love, Not War* on huge banners. Nailed it. It was on everyone's mind. Definitely on mine.

Many of the men journeying home were healing from the clap. Syringes emptied into buttocks; four inches of needle and antibiotic.

Limping sailors with sore butts were a familiar sight for a week after any of our ports-of-

call. It took two weeks for the medicine to work its magic. The voyage home would allow plenty of time for most cases. Most, but not all.

The route to our home port in Virginia took us east from Vietnam across the Pacific Ocean and around the southern tip of Argentina. Cape Horn is the sea lane between South America and Antarctica, the meeting place of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, a nautical passage notorious for its dangerous combination of strong winds, huge waves, wild currents and even icebergs depending on the season. Glad I didn't know that beforehand.

The first two weeks traversing the Pacific were idyllic. Most of the men were done with wartime duties. Flight deck became a sand-less beach littered with spent sailors sunbathing on blankets in between the A-1 and A-4 attack planes securely tied down. Recently-purchased sound systems taken out of boxes and tested. Warriors reading, dancing and day-sleeping to make the best of the monotony. Recounting drunken nights, bragging about port romances. Laughter. The recovery process, decompressing.

I was propositioned more than once on that drive home—"Haven't you ever heard of male love?" being my favorite. Even stumbled upon an intimacy in progress in a top bunk while passing through an otherwise empty berthing compartment. I'd later call bullshit on The Village People when they denied their song *In the Navy* was about sex.

Vacation conditions ever-so-gradually morphed, ship rolling and lurching with building intensity as we approached the Cape. It was enough to make a man turn green, which I did. Cold, overcast air materialized. Sailors in color-coded shirts rolled fifty jets off the flight deck, one at a time, onto elevators and crammed them securely into the hangar bay like puzzle pieces, one deck below.

The flight deck was fifty-five feet above the water line which meant the waves crashing

over the bow onto the now-barren deck were seventy, eighty, ninety feet high. For one risky moment, I ventured to the middle of the flight deck, a lone figure in the fierce wind, up in the face of mortality, surfing on the world's largest surfboard, longer than two football fields. Legs planted, arms out, keeping balance, defiantly in full view of the ship's captain on the bridge. It was a break in the tedium, a foolhardy move birthed by deep depressive boredom.

As we sailed on, the carrier was thrashed like a forty-foot sailboat in a mean squall. For twenty-four hours, the hull slapped the waves, twisted and moaned like it might break apart and be swallowed by a roiling monster. Fear, seasickness rampant. With freedom only a week away, the ironic possibility that we could become yet another Cape Horn shipwreck intruded into my happy anticipation.

It passed.

Time for the final pee tests—for some, a far more precarious storm.

The hundreds of men who'd reported to sick bay for penicillin shots three weeks before were once again standing in hour-long lines, this time to find out if they were clear.

Word went round that there once was a guy who wasn't one hundred percent sure all his symptoms had disappeared. His wife and kids would be waiting on the dock to welcome him home, so he asked his healthy friend to pee in the cup for him just to be safe. He needed this insurance policy. His friend's pee tested positive. He gambled and lost. How he explained that to his family is a mystery. Reckless infidelities coming home to roost.

We entered the final stretch, ghost ship heading up the East Coast of both Americas. Lingering were memories of pilots who hadn't returned from their missions, men who'd jumped

overboard and tons of bombs dropped from jet wings.

Anticipation of freedom and happiness prevailed—neither of which would ultimately match the impending reality lying in wait. But only those of us who'd walked the plank before were aware of that.

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