

**To the Roof**

**By David Blue**

## To the Roof

Its 0500 in the morning, this is not my normal wake up time, but it seems that I have no choice of the matter. You see, on an aircraft carrier the only personal space you have is a small compartment where you sleep, which is also called a rack. This rack is a little over 6 ft. long by 3 ft. wide and no more than 2 ft. tall. Your rack is in a cubicle of 6. Stacked 3 high on each side with an isle in the middle that is only about 3 ft. wide by about 6 ft. long. There are about 20-30 cubicles per room which are called berthings. As I lay there and listen to all the alarms from who knows how many people, I contemplate just trying to fall back asleep because my alarm does not go off until 0530.

Light switches are flickering on and off from the inconsiderate early birds. I'm not sure if they realize they're being that way or they just don't care but I like my sleep, so I treat others as if they like sleep as much as I do. Dreading climbing out of my sleeping bag I take a deep breath and unzip the side down as far as I can reach. I slide open the curtains hanging over the opening of my rack exposing the cold air on the ship. The vibrant blue curtains are the only items that allow us any sense of privacy, plus they help block out the lights. I've learned a few lessons from my time onboard carriers, one is to always have a pair of shoes at the ready because you never know what might happen at any time, and two, have curtains. I place these shoes toes down between the mattress and the wall next to me because it is always a good idea to never walk barefoot anywhere due to the unsanitary nature of the floors. As I finish my morning routine, I clean up my area and head to the shop. Usually, I like to meet up with some of the other guys and go grab some breakfast but today I'm a bit ahead of schedule.

At 0520 I make my way to the shop down the narrow hallway inside the ship while I'm still trying to wake up. This "hallway", otherwise known as P-ways, is not even wide enough for two people to stand shoulder to shoulder. Every 20 feet you must step through a hatch, which looks like they just cut a huge oval in the wall, making sure that you step over the 12-inch-high

bottom step, they're called knee knockers for a reason. Being so early in the morning, there aren't many people out and about and most, if not all the night shifts are wrapping up what they're working on. I zigzag my way through the ship and when I get to the shop to find no one there I let out a huge sigh because that unfortunately means one thing, they're all out working.

Not only am I barely awake and technically at work way too early, now I must go relieve the night shift and finish whatever job they're on. Our shifts are 12 hours, and they do minimal flying at night, which only means that whatever they're working on has been giving them some trouble seeing how they've been on it all night. I grab my personal protective equipment (PPE), check the sign out sheet and proceed to start my search for the night crew. Just as I get ready to exit the shop, they come barging in the door toting giant bags of test equipment for checking the weapons systems. Night shift is as confused as I am relieved. Fortunately, we all know the daily routines; If someone shows up early then it either means they are early birds, or they were woken up and most of us are not early birds. Being a senior guy in the shop, I listen as they lay out the frustrations of their night. This didn't work or that didn't work, they kept moving the jet around, we had to wait for another shop, the typical excuses. I didn't care, them being back meant that I didn't have to go straight to doing work. The rest of day shift strolls in and with 15 people piled in a 10 x 10 space, it does not get comfy.

0645, the supervisor comes back from the daily morning meeting to give us the plan for the day. Four jets flying at 1000, four at 1200 and four at 1400 which immediately means I can go get breakfast and get to have an early lunch, I'm winning. With night shift gone, half of us go to breakfast and the other half stay behind. Maneuvering our way down the insanely steep ladder wells we run into the breakfast line. The only way we can stay is, if it is short, and most of the time, if we wait a bit after night shift leaves it gives them time to cycle through and the line goes quickly. Luckily today, there's only about 10 – 15 people in line, way better than the usual 50 – 60. Cycling through the line, you grab a tray and a plate, and hold your plate out for whatever you want which includes a typical breakfast of a small premade omelet filled with cheese and shaped like a taco and I'm pretty sure they were frozen at one point, a McDonald's

style hashbrown, some bacon which is also known on the boat as grease sticks and some bread for toast. If the people behind the food give you more than one of anything, it's a good day. We round this feast off with some white milk, grab a bit of fruit that isn't molded and scarf it down and head back to the shop as quickly as possible, so the other half can go eat.

0800, everyone goes up on the flight deck for a fod walkdown. Fod, or foreign object debris, is the Achilles' heel of naval aviation. Anything that can fly through the air and get sucked down an intake, blown away, or shot across the flight deck is a hazard and it must be picked up. Almost half of the dayshift crew on the entire ship line up and walk the entire length of the ship picking up anything that doesn't belong.

At 0930, we prepare for the flight schedule. At least four people from our shop will go up to the flight deck as our requirement is one person from each shop per jet. Sometimes it takes a bit of persuasion to get the guys moving, and as the supervisor get frustrated from the lack of movement, he pulls out the infamous and hated phrase. When told to get to the flight deck he would say, "Poof poof to the roof", followed by a few expletives. It was a snarky do what I say because you're obviously not doing what I asked type of comment. He sends me up to the flight deck, not willingly though. I only go up there when the higher ups complain, mostly because I'm not up there, bit of a catch 22 if you ask me. As a 5-year veteran maintainer of the avionics shop, I guess the leadership felt more comfortable if I was on the flight deck as well. I never liked the initial getting up to go up there but once I'm up on the flight deck, I feel as though it's my playground because I know the dangers, and that's what makes it so intriguing. I can run around on my own and not be bothered, most of the time.

After all the jets from each squadron have been started, now begins the ballet of carefully navigating the hot exhaust. Jets move around, jets turn, and sometimes you get caught in the hot exhaust even when you are paying attention. "Keep your head on a swivel" has quite possibly been said over a million times and there is no statement truer. Finally, the moment I always look forward to, the catapult. The director taxis the jet up to the catapult, another troubleshooter and I quickly perform one last check before launch, each of us starting

at the nose going down one side while carefully avoiding the jet intake. I walk the perimeter of the wing strategically maneuvering around the live ordinance performing one last check for any obvious issues. Lastly, I duck into the landing gear wheel well, behind the wheel, and as the jet is rolling forward, I study the tail of the jet as it slowly travels forward above me

I bounce out from under the jet carefully avoiding the potential for injury by an accidental pilot stick bump which would move the horizontal stab and drop me to the surface. I take my place squatted down in line with the vertical tail and right out past the wingtip waiting for the jet to get locked in place. The launch bar goes down and the shuttle moves forward which locks the jet in. The shooter, which is the yellow shirt guy in charge right now, checks all personnel. He motions to the pilot to go up on power by “raising the roof” but with only one hand, at this point I’m 10 feet away from the exhaust of one of Americas premier fighter jets and it’s rattling my bones. My chest is shaking, I can’t hear a thing, and if my mouth was closed I’m sure my teeth would be rattling. Sweat is pouring down my face behind the goggles I’m required to wear and I’m loving every second of it, I just know it’s all going to end in about 3 seconds. I see my partners thumbs up, I give the thumbs up, shooter checks his people, squats down with his back leg out and gives the pointer finger and thumb gun style signal to let it rip sending the jet off at 0 – 170 mph in just 2 seconds. Steam fills the surrounding air from the launch, making that moment so much better solidifying why I love being on the flight deck.

1730, night shift is rolling in and I am so glad to see them, especially this time of day because it only means that it’s time to go soon. As the morning routine went, now we do the reverse. We gather our tools, turn them back in and prepare to force down whatever is on the menu for dinner. After we all go to dinner together, we disperse. While some go back to the shop and hang out others go to the berthing and relax. College courses are popular among sailors that are deployed. MI wait around for about an hour after dinner and go work out, which most of the time it consists of calisthenics in an open area in the hangar bay. After a workout session, it’s off to the berthing to shower and relax a bit before bed. The shower, the last battle of the day. It is a battle because you have no idea if you’re going to be taking a hot

shower or a freezing cold shower. One with pressure washer type force or like the trickle of a water fountain, I've experienced them all. Finally, back at my rack after a long 12-hour day, getting blasted by jet exhaust, scarfing down what looked to be food, and joking and having a good time while waiting around in the shop.

We make the best of each day and try to get past all the hardships because they always outweigh the easy times on a 9-month deployment. After all the ups and downs, the good times and the bad, and the praises and the ass chewings, we all must go through it together. The faster you become accustomed to the lifestyle, the faster you set a routine, ultimately means the faster you get home to see your loved ones.