

Connie and Me

Much to my surprise, in the fall of 1967, I received a letter and a form from the Defense Department, informing me that I was now a participant in the “Berry Plan”, better known as the “Doctor Draft”. All male fourth year medical students were automatically inducted into military service. The future Medical Corps officer was given two choices:

#1. Choose the military service you preferred, and following your internship you would enter that service as a general medical officer.

#2. Choose the military service you preferred, and request a deferment to complete a residency in your selected specialty. Should you fail to return the form, you would still be inducted at the end of your internship, but as a private in the US Army.¹

Knowing nothing about the medical departments of any service, I called my father the Federal Sales Manager for a large pharmaceutical company based in Washington, DC, because of his close contacts with Medical Officers of all the services worldwide and he told me to pick the Navy. “They treat their medical officers much better than the other services, and you are less likely to get a bad station, like a winter in Minot, North Dakota”. I promptly returned the form, and received my Navy Commission and deferment for a surgical residency a few months later.

In the fall of 1974, six months before I was to go on active duty, I received a letter from the Navy welcoming me on board, and asking for my input on where I would prefer to be stationed. I was delighted they wanted me to be happy and

eagerly I gave them my only two requests. My divorce attorney once told me that I was refreshingly naïve. In retrospect, I would change that to idiot. I respectfully requested:

#1. To be on the East Coast at a Navy teaching hospital – Bethesda, MD, Portsmouth, VA, or Chelsea in Boston

#2. To definitely not be on an aircraft carrier.

Both sensible requests. I think you can envision 4 or 5 salty naval officers sitting around a conference table at the Pentagon, smoking cigars and reading my request out loud. You can see what's coming next. When my orders arrived, I had been assigned to a West Coast carrier, the **USS Constellation CV-64**.^{2, 3, 4,}

Notwithstanding her outstanding war record, for some sailors, Constellation or “Connie” was considered an unlucky ship. On December 19, 1960, during the final stages of her construction in the Brooklyn Naval Ship Yard, a forklift operator on the hanger deck accidentally sheared off the main plug of a tank holding 500 gallons of diesel fuel. The fuel cascaded through holes in the hanger deck, to the decks below. When the diesel vapors came in contact with “hot work”, likely a welder’s torch, the diesel fuel exploded and flames erupted setting a latticework of wooden scaffolding on fire. Fifty yard workers lost their lives and it took the New York Fire Department 17 hours to extinguish it.⁵ Then in 1972, during the waning days of the Viet Nam War, a time of racial polarization, aggressive Peace activists encouraging desertions, and the war stresses of long deployments with no liberty, the unrest followed the Connie. During 1972, the Peace lobby’s vicious agitation the “Stop our Ships/ Support Our Sailors” movement in Naval ports on the West Coast and in the Far East

resulted in 72 direct and serious acts of sabotage to a variety of naval ships, 50% of which were carriers. These acts caused a total engine break down of many line vessels at sea, and the loss of millions of dollars in repairs and down time.^{6,7,8,9} The Navy was not prepared to confront this increasing racial tension and outright physical violence. Afro-Americans frequently held the most menial and unpopular jobs on board and many lacked even an elementary education. There were few Black officers and even when there were some on board, they were not trained to deal with angry groups of lower deck sailors; fights between groups of blacks and whites escalated in frequency and viciousness. Thrown into the mix was uncontrolled drug usage. The first two weeks of November 1972 were critical for Constellation. Initially 60 Afro-Americans staged a sit down strike on the forward mess deck with a long list of demands. The following day the Captain formed a “beach detachment”, in his mind, to get the troublemakers off the ship. The group was now 144 including 8 whites, and they refused to return to the ship unless their demands were met. Negotiations over several days resulted in a few returning to the ship. Of the remainder, two thirds were given new assignments in the Navy, and the others were given honorable or general discharges. In early 1973, the Navy and the Congressional panel that investigated the episode called it a carefully orchestrated passive resistance. However Captain Ward testified that it was a mutiny, as did a future Secretary of the Navy, John F. Lehman. In late 1973, the Navy tacitly admitted that a mutinous element had indeed crept into the American Fleet, and announced that more than 3000 men, considered a burden to the fleet, were discharged.¹⁰

I reported on board Constellation in late September of 1975. At that time, “Connie” was in dry dock at the US Naval Shipyard Bremerton, WA. The Viet Nam War had officially ended on April 30, 1975, so it was very unlikely that we would soon be part of another war. Connie shared the dry-dock with the nuclear attack submarine USS Pintado. She was very noticeable with her huge jet-black hull and the large blue tarp draped over her bow. She was in the yards for extensive repairs after playing “chicken” with a Russian ballistic submarine in the approaches to a large Soviet naval base on the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Russian Far East. The collision resulted in smashing her sonar sphere, jamming the starboard torpedo tube hatches, and damaging one of her diving planes. She was able to stay submerged, and left the area at flank speed. The “Connie” was a Kitty Hawk Class Carrier just shy of 90,000 tons, with a flight deck 1088 ft. long, measuring 4.1 acres of armored steel. Fully manned, the crew numbered 5,630, which included 2,480 men of the Air Wing, essentially a small city with a 24-hour airport. On deployments, she carried nuclear weapons. Line officers and enlisted men call carriers “Bird Farms”, and “Connie” carried 85 of a variety of tactical aircraft, new F14 fighters, A6 intruders, S3 ASW hunters, and electronic and early warning planes.

It took me about 3 months of exploration to feel comfortable wandering around the ship and locating the escape passages and various departments. That was extremely important due to the constant fear of fire, an all too common event. My attention was heightened to the danger when I realized that we had at least two fire drills a day. Carriers are very dangerous places especially on the flight deck and especially at night. Inattentive sailors can be blown off the deck by jet blast falling

120 ft. to the water or sucked into a jet engine intake. A one and a quarter inch steel wire arresting cable can snap as a 25 to 50, 000 lb. aircraft attempts to land, creating a giant “crack the whip” severely injuring or killing anyone in its path.

There are 18 decks on a carrier. The Medical Department and my office were on the second deck right below the hanger bay. We had an ICU, a 50-bed ward, a major and minor OR, lab, pharmacy, and x-ray. I had 30 Navy Corpsmen to help take care of the mainly general practice type problems. Not a surgeons dream. When the Air Wing was aboard there were four MD’s aboard two Flight Surgeons, a Senior General Medical Officer, and the Ship’s Surgeon (me). The administrative enlisted man was a Senior Chief who began his career as a corpsman in the waning days of WWII. When he wore his dress blues, his gold hash marks, indicating years of service, on his left arm went from the cuff to above his elbow. He was a great guy and took me, a newly minted Lieutenant Commander, under his wing. As my father said, “If you have a problem or a question, ask a Chief Petty Officer. They have a vast collection of information and they are happy to share with you”.

By the end of March, we were ready to leave Bremerton and rejoin the fleet in San Diego. Since this was a change of Home Port, the crew was allowed to bring their vehicles on board as well as their families, adding 800 families to this voyage. I received a notice in my in-box stating that I should bring my car aboard 2 days before we were due to leave. I showed it to Senior Chief Neel, who told me **not** to do that, he was clear: bring it on board the day before so I would be parked in the hanger bay. Unfortunately, my naiveté took over again. As a new officer, I thought the Navy had a good reason for telling me when to board. So I did. The vehicles came

up a wooden ramp to the starboard aft elevator, which took them to the flight deck. As directed, I parked my 1974 gold Firebird forward of the island on the outer perimeter of the portside securing it in place with chocks and chains. On day two of our transit, I heard an announcement over the ships public address system, summoning all crew with vehicles parked on the flight deck forward of the island to report to the Master at Arms Shack. The Chief Master at arms escorted me to my car. My beautiful new Firebird was painted battle ship gray, as were all of the vehicles on the forward flight deck. The paint was so thick that I had to use a straight razor to get it off the windows so that I could drive it off the ship in San Diego.

This debacle was the result of some of the crew of the Pintado.¹¹ In the dark of night the eve prior to our departure they managed to get a small boat alongside the portside bow of the “Connie”, and paint two very large blue dolphins well above the water line. Dolphins flanking a submarine being the Insignia of the submarine service.¹² Early in the morning of our departure, one of our crew on the dry dock noticed the dolphins. He immediately reported it to the Captain, Gus Eggert. He was not amused, primarily because the portside position of the graffiti would be clearly seen by the Submarine Base and Naval Station San Diego as we entered the harbor and tied up at North Island. Everyone, especially the guys at the Sub Base seeing it would have gotten a hell of a laugh at Ship’s expense.

A Lieutenant was immediately ordered to spray paint over the dolphins. Obviously, the Captain couldn’t take a joke. When you spray paint an aircraft carrier, you do not head to Home Depot to get a couple of spray cans of Krylon. You get a barge, with high-pressure pumps, and lots of high pressure hoses with nozzles the

size of 8-inch pipe. In the process of getting the job done, our trusty Lieutenant noticed that the underside of the catwalk had become a bit rusty. At this point, he begins to remind me of Ensign Pulver from Mr. Roberts. Catwalks are relatively safe walkways along either side of the forward flight deck to be able to walk forward or aft on a carrier avoiding the dangers of the flight deck during air ops. The catwalk decks have 3-inch holes in them that allow seawater to drain in heavy seas. They are also places to throw yourself if there is a catastrophe on the flight deck like a crash, explosion, or fire. Seeing the rust, he directed his paint crew to spray the under side of the cat walk and didn't notice that the high pressure was forcing the paint through the holes allowing the breeze to waft it all away across the forward flight deck.

Steaming, I went to the Legal Department, where my friend Lt. Tim Kelly (I was a swordsman at his wedding) was the Legal Officer. He was sitting at his desk and with a broad smile he said "Commander McDonough how can I help you?" "Lt. Kelly I said, the Navy has painted my car." Ever the jokester, going to a file cabinet he responded "do you like the color?" "**No**, and I want to file a claim. "Remember this" he said holding up a sheet of paper which turned out to be the waiver I had signed weeks before. I said I would go to the Judge Advocate General in Washington. With a chuckle he wished me good luck. My plea to JAG Headquarters only resulted in another negative response 3 months later, but by that time; I had gotten a new paint job, for ninety-nine dollars at Earl Scheib in National City, California.

And that my fellow members, is an example of why Aircraft Carriers are so dangerous. Thank you.

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John J. McDonough, M.D.
Former LCDR, MC, USNR

