

Lifestyles

"Among the Americans who served on Iwo Island uncommon valor was a common virtue."

- Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz



About 25 of us stood in line and donned our helmets and eye protection. Our adrenaline was pumping fiercely as the Navy CH-53 slowly hovered above before making its landing at the South Street helipad. We followed cautiously around the massive chopper as the force of the rotors kept trying to push us away. As soon as everyone was secured in their seats, we felt a slight jolt and the CH-53 was airborne, with New York City becoming smaller and more distant through the open cargo bay door.

For what can only be described as an adventure that few outside the military will ever experience, the United States Navy invited *The Boulevard* onboard the USS *Iwo Jima* LHD 7, a WASP Class amphibious assault ship, for an overnight stay as the ship arrived in New York City for Fleet Week. About an hour or so into our trip, the helicopter slowed down and started to turn. By now the ocean water was a crystal clear blue and we knew we weren't in Kansas anymore. Another jolt and the wheels touched

down on the 844-foot home to 1,897 Marines about 200 miles south of New York City.

The ship was overpowering and intimidating, everything you want in a U.S. warship. The crew was another story. As we were escorted into a room off the flight deck to return our helmets, no one knew quite what to say. It was noisy, hot, and filled with men and women in fatigues moving about, then disappearing behind a mysterious looking hatch. Then there was a smile; a hello; a "Welcome aboard, sir"; a "Pleasure to have you here"; and "Is this your first time"? Were these sailors or the concierge staff from a five-star resort? No, these were undoubtedly fine, sculptured sailors; kids who have become men and women overnight, protecting us without question, without judgment, and with nothing less than infinite courage. I wake up in the morning and make phone calls, take pictures, write and work on creating a magazine, but the 21-year-old woman next to me was getting ready to launch a





LCAC - Photo courtesy of US Navy



Amphibious LARC

harrier jet, load a missile, handle classified information or fight a fire, just some of the many jobs taking place around us.

We made our way through a narrow passageway, down a ladder and into the wardroom or, in laymen's terms, the commissioned officers dining room, where we were greeted and briefed by Naval personnel. Each group was assigned someone from the ship to escort them around. We were assigned ET1 (SW/AW), Keisha Gibbs, who was normally assigned to the slightly larger USS *Enterprise* aircraft carrier. Gibbs showed us to our staterooms. The VIP guests were lucky in that each stateroom had only six bunks in an 8' x 10' space and about one-and-one-half-feet of space between one bunk and the next, as opposed to the crew's berthing.



"So where would you like to go?" asked Gibbs, words that would haunt me the rest of the day and have me exhausted and asleep by 2000 hours (8 p.m.). The quickest route between two points is a straight line, that is, unless you are on a Naval warship. The *Iwo Jima* is a labyrinth of metal with watertight compartments, hatches and ladders. It was a 10-minute walk to the hangar bay, where we headed down a very steep ramp to where a group of 19- to mid-20-year-old Marines were setting up displays of their equipment for Fleet Week and were eager to

show off their amphibious assault vehicle, the AAVP7A1 (RAM/RS).

We were now two decks below the flight deck (decks are below the flight deck and levels are above). This is where the amphibious landing craft were kept, like the LCU (landing craft utility) boat that is able to come into two feet of water, drop its bow, and launch vehicles capable of forging or floating through

water, like the HUMVEE and LARC that were onboard. Behind the LCU was one of the coolest vehicles I have ever seen or wanted to see: the LCAC (landing craft air cushion), or as it's more commonly known, a hovercraft.

We were then invited to the bridge, which was about seven flights above us. Although exhausted, I refrained from sitting in the XO's empty seat as I caught my breath. The helm, which was steered by a woman who couldn't have been older than 19 or 20, was set back from the windows with a large electronic screen that detailed her every move.

Forward and to port (left) was the CO, Captain Jeffery Charles Amick, sitting very relaxed and looking casual. He told us about his schedule for the upcoming week in the city and commented on how proud he is of his crew. "The best part of



my day is at night," he said. "I get my final reports and look over everything. There is a seat outside the bridge that overlooks the flight deck. Once I'm finished, I go outside and sit back and look at the stars. It is one of the best parts of being here. Then I go inside to sleep and they wake me up five minutes later." He laughed. I thought of all the Naval movies I have seen to find the character Captain Amick reminded me of, but there was simply no one. He seemed like an uncle, you know, the one

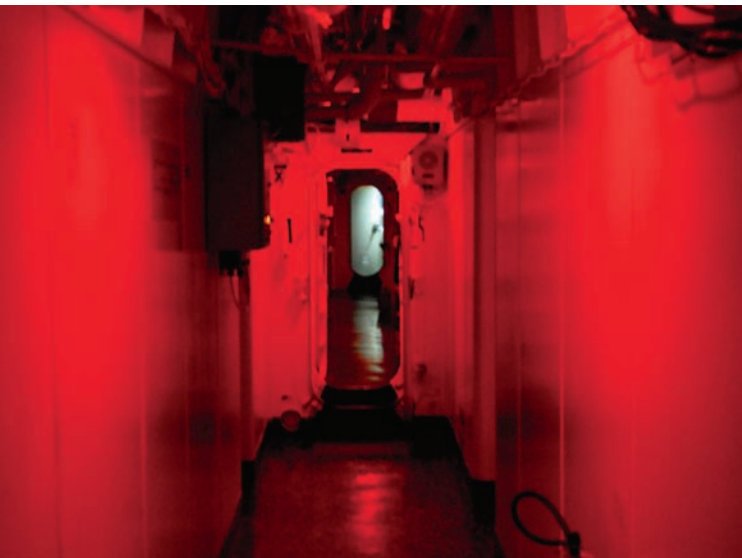
Lifestyles



who gave you the fun presents at Christmas. I think that is a fitting description. Captain Amick is responsible for the crew's protection and any crewmember would put himself between the captain and any danger imaginable, without question.

I remembered a line from *A Few Good Men*, when Tom Cruise asked Kiefer Sutherland, "Do you have a problem?" alluding to a problem a Marine might have with someone in the Navy, to which Sutherland replies, "No. I like all you Navy boys. Anytime we need to go somewhere to fight, you guys always give us a ride." Here we were firsthand on a Navy ship with 1,800 fighting sailors from both the Navy and Marines. There was no tension, no separation; it was all about teamwork. Teamwork – an understatement. This wasn't about winning so much as it was about making sure you all come home together, looking out for your crew, helping each other. Their mission: to fight for those who can't fight for themselves, to protect us.

By 1900 (7 p.m.) we had been all over the ship ... the forecastle that housed the immense anchor chains, the gym (which put Bally's to shame), the combat operations rooms, the



ship's store and even to a show put on by the USO, climbing up and down stairs, minding your head and watching your step. Suddenly 7 p.m. felt more like 11 p.m. I headed back to my stateroom only to find my bags missing with a note that said, "Sorry, we had to move your room." I can't complain. I was moved to a lieutenant's room that had TV. All I remember is watching *King Kong* and that was it. Throughout the night

I could hear footsteps, doors closing and voices calling over the PA. That's how the captain woke us at 0500. "Good morning, folks. It's almost sunrise and we've opened up the flight deck if anyone wants to see New York City as we head up the Hudson." I sprang to my feet and grabbed my gear. As I opened the door, I thought I was in the Twilight Zone – all the lights were red, which I later learned they do at night and when going to battle. As I walked onto the flight deck, I felt a cool breeze and saw the sun just starting to pierce through the buildings. We were surrounded by an escort of Coast Guard and Police boats and were welcomed by the Statue of Liberty, as if she were saying thanks. As we approached lower Manhattan, the sailors and marines started to line the starboard side of the ship. "Crew, attention!" Their right arms snapped into position as they saluted Ground Zero, followed by a moment of silence. Almost the entire crew manned the rails as the *Iwo Jima* was welcomed by



New York City. The morning news helicopters shadowed our every move, cars slowed down on the West Side Highway and the sun started to illuminate the decks. At 1000 we were tied up in port and it was time for us to depart. I looked back at this city of steel that glided us smoothly to our destination, the ship that participated in Operation Enduring Freedom and helped rescue and secure New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. I think of how fortunate we were to have met the young men and women who courageously protect us and to have experienced this once-in-a-lifetime honor. We salute you.●

Special thanks to Captain Jeffery Charles Amick, MCC (SW/AW) Public Affairs Officer Scott B. Boyle, ET1 (SW/AW) Keisha Gibbs, U.S. Navy, and all the sailors and marines on the USS Iwo Jima.

More photos and video are available online at www.boulevardli.com

