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STORIES AT SEA AS TOLD BY A USS MIDWAY SAILOR

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Resting in Downtown San Diego Harbor is one of the longest serving aircraft carriers in the United States Navy. The USS Midway, nestled in the dock between the United States Aircraft Carrier Memorial and the Unconditional Surrender Statue where couples flock to take kissing photos, is the length of three football fields and has the height of a 20-story building. This vessel served the U.S. naval forces from 1945 until 1992 when she was decommissioned, her home port being in Yokosuka, Japan. In 2004, the ship was brought back to the states and turned into a museum to commemorate her service and the service of her 200,000 crew members.

“We went from having no running water, no electricity and no way of getting people on the ship to being one of the most visited maritime museums in the world,” said Mac McLaughlin, president and CEO of the USS Midway Museum.

McLaughlin was hired in December of 2003, just before the Midway first arrived in port.

“From the museum, we hope guests gain an appreciation for the service and sacrifice of past Midway sailors and current military members who still serve us every day,” said McLaughlin.

One of the Midway’s 200,000 crew members was Petty Officer Second Class Tom Hines, who served as an Aviation Electrician on the Midway for three years. Whenever he visits the museum, Hines receives a “Crew” sticker, so guests can feel free to walk up and ask him questions.

“It’s a lot of fun going to the Midway museum and not working,” said Hines in a phone interview. “It’s fun to go through with people and describe what it’s like.”

The Ohio native is now 58 and lives in Castro Valley, California. It’s been over 30 years since his time spent in the Navy, but Hines remembers it like it was yesterday.



HINES IN THE COCKPIT IN THE MIDWAY HANGER BAY

“We went to Singapore, Africa, the Philippine Islands, Korea, Guam, Hong Kong, Australia and Thailand,” said Hines. “Thailand was where I got into scuba diving and kickboxing. When we pulled into a country, we wouldn’t be there for more than five days... But if you don’t have duty (work) in port, you do whatever you want to do.”

When Hines and the crew stopped in Perth, Australia, he and some of his navy brothers rented motorcycles and took off out of town. They rode out to the middle of nowhere and eventually stopped for gas. At the gas station, they made some unlikely friends.

“These people came up to us and were like, ‘You’re yanks!’ I had a California shirt on and they wanted to buy my shirt,” said Hines. “They actually ended up throwing a big barbeque for us and we stayed overnight there with them. It was wonderful.”

While Hines visited more than half a dozen countries and even worked with Paramount Pictures on the film set of *Top Gun* during his time stationed in Miramar, most of his stories come from the flight deck of the ship that became his sea-bound, steel home.

Hines' job was to fix and tend to the 136 aircraft that the Midway carried on its back. Dressed in a black and white checkered jersey, Hines spent day and night on the flight deck doing everything from electrical, mechanic, structural and safety, to IT work.

“When you are deployed at sea, you have flight operations that could last up to two weeks at a time,” said Hines. “I would stay on the deck during that time, so someone would bring me a box lunch and I would eat and take naps on the planes until flight operations were over. I'd normally get two to three hours of sleep per day.”



HINE'S SQUADRON AIRCRAFT ON THE USS MIDWAY

The Midway was known as the hardest working ship in the Navy and it was also known as the safest ship, according to Hines. The Midway was always deployed and, as a result, the sailors would remain on the ship for longer periods of time, gaining more experience and training the newly enlisted. The Midway won five Battle Efficiency Awards during its time in service.

“The way they trained and the way the teamwork worked on the ship was outstanding,” said Hines. “When I did training for my job, I had to go up into the crow's nest to see planes coming in and planes taking off. I had to watch for a week just to see how everything ran.”

He added, “You have to make sure you don't walk in front of a plane because it will either suck you in and kill you or it will probably hit you and kill you. If you walk behind it and the exhaust hits you, then it'll blow you down the deck and into another plane. So, when a plane is moving, you have to roll under it and come up on the other side.”

Most of this Hines learned being attached to his trainer's belt, playing the game of copycat.

"The flight deck is dangerous. If you blink and you're not where you're supposed to be, doing what you're supposed to be doing, you could get hurt or killed."



CROW'S NEST OF THE USS MIDWAY

The intensive training and experience came in handy when the crew had to pick up asylum-seekers fleeing their countries in tiny boats, rescue helicopters that had landed in the ocean and, yes, even fending off pirates in the Philippines who tried to commandeer the Midway.

"It didn't go so well for them," said Hines of the pirates.

Last week, the Midway museum held a "Salute to Serve" veteran's day celebration on the ship's flight deck with the same planes Hines spent his days tending to. McLaughlin said there was lots of food, great entertainment and storytelling between service members and their friends and families.

"It's really a family celebration," said McLaughlin. "It's a chance for people to thank a vet for all they've done for our country."



AIRCRAFT JET ON THE USS MIDWAY FLIGHT DECK

During his time on the midway, Hines learned a number of lessons: stay clear of flight cables that could cut you in half, never throw a washer and dryer overboard that says “Save,” and life is too short to *not* get hit with a fire hose. But the sailor recalled one of the most important lessons he learned spending time in the service.

“My commander once told me, ‘The Navy teaches you there’s a lot of things you don’t have any control over. But when you think of that, think of an anchor. Each anchor on the midway weighs four tons. Each loop in the chain is 300 pounds. That chain holds that ship in port or at sea. But with one flick of a button, one finger, you can release that ship, take it out to sea and control it. What you get from your Navy training, is the ability to flip that switch in your life.’”