

# Floating Museum Showcases Naval Aviation and Space History

## Eighth ship to bear the name “Hornet” preserved

BY JACK MORRISSEY AND SHERRY DITMER

***Hornet: A large, strong wasp whose sting is severe.***

Everyone retains certain pictures that emerged from World War II, but one of the most striking we remember were the 16 B-25 bombers leaving the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Hornet (CV-8, the seventh U.S. Navy ship christened “Hornet”), on their way to bomb Japan for the first time. A wild and windy day! Strong, gusty winds whipped the waves to heavy whitecaps against a gloomy, overcast sky. There must have been at

least 40 knots of wind over the flight deck, as the B-25s were airborne before reaching the bow of the carrier. It was almost a suicide mission for the pilots and crews. But it was these few men and aircraft, leaving the pitching deck of the Hornet, bent on bringing the war to the Japanese mainland. This was April 1942. Japan was due for the surprise of its life!

That surprise was delivered in the seas around Midway Island by planes from the Hornet, Enterprise, and Yorktown. Three Japanese carriers were sent to the bottom on June 4, 1942, and an-

other, Hiryu, followed the next morning. The Hornet’s torpedo bombers (VT-8) were met with fierce resistance, and all were shot down. Only Ensign George Gay survived. During the pursuit of the retreating Japanese naval forces, the Hornet planes assisted in sinking the cruiser Mikuma and heavily damaging the cruiser Mogami.

By October 26, 1942, Hornet was battling the Japanese once again, this time in the Battle of Santa Cruz Island, where surface ships of the opposing forces never saw each other. Planes from the Hornet inflicted



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The Hornet's island framed against the San Francisco skyline.

heavy damage on the carrier *Shokaku* and the cruiser *Chikuma* and two other cruisers as well. The Japanese, however, scored hits on the *Hornet*, forcing her to be abandoned. American and Japanese destroyers attempted to send the *Hornet* to the bottom, and it wasn't until 1:35 a.m. on October 27 that the mighty carrier slid beneath the waves.

The eighth USS *Hornet*, CV-12, was commissioned just 16 months after laying the keel. After the necessary sea trials were completed, the *Hornet* set sail for the South Pacific where it was in action for more than 16 months. While the ship was under attack numerous times, it was never hit as it launched its F6F Hellcats, TBM Avengers, and SB2C Helldivers

against the Japanese. There were more than 3,000 sorties against the Japanese from the flight deck of this great aircraft carrier. After the war, the *Hornet* served the U.S. Navy until 1970. On July 24, 1969, a nation watched as helicopters from the USS *Hornet* scooped the Apollo 11 space capsule from the ocean, recovering the crew that just three days earlier had made history as the first humans to walk on the moon. The following year, the *Hornet* was decommissioned at the Bremerton Navy Yard in Bremerton, Washington. She lay in mothballs for the next 27 years, all but forgotten in the backwaters of the Pacific Northwest.

"Out of sight, out of mind" did not describe the mind of Capt. Carl

Seiberlich, who commanded the *Hornet* during her Apollo 11 and Apollo 12 years, was the ship's last commanding officer. Now a retired rear admiral, Seiberlich had a great love of naval history—and along with it the ability to generate a significant interest in the future welfare of this carrier. Sold as surplus by the U.S. Navy, the *Hornet* had been towed from Bremerton Naval Shipyard to the Hunters Point Shipyard in San Francisco, where she was destined to become a large heap of razor blades and scrap metal. Rear Adm. Seiberlich caught the ear of Capt. Jim Dodge.

Dodge was quick to capitalize on the historic nature of the ship in her original homeport community. During the months of July and Au-

USS Hornet as seen from the USS Wasp during the Marines' invasion of the Palau Islands.



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“See this wood?  
This is the same deck from  
World War II. They flew all  
those planes off of this  
very deck.”

—Rick Thom



U.S. NAVY

February 16, 1945, while the Hornet was part of Task Force 58 raiding the Japanese homeland. Its 40-mm anti-aircraft guns are firing at enemy planes (note expended shells and ready-service ammo at right).



U.S. NAVY

View of the Hornet's collapsed flight deck from an escorting destroyer in the Pacific near Okinawa following 60-foot-high typhoon wave on June 5, 1945.

much-beleaguered carrier, for harsh weather, high humidity, and age had by now taken a toll on the paint and produced enough corrosion to keep a crew of scrapers busy for a long, long time.

Among the many things the Hornet was famous for was her pioneering role as a floating naval museum, incorporating both the carrier and the aircraft that served aboard her. Pier 3 at the former Alameda Naval Air Station, the site of her former home, was chosen as her final berthing place.

The museum project finally got underway in 1997 and was officially opened to the public in 1998. The museum's stated mission was to “Serve as an educational

and leaders of the world. Certainly a noble undertaking!

There are only a few U.S. Navy aircraft carriers that serve as museums today. Aside from the Hornet, the Midway is docked in San Diego, the Intrepid at New York City, and the Lexington in Corpus Christi, Texas. The Midway did not see action in World War II as did the other carriers. Midway's air groups participated in the Gulf War, but the carrier itself was never under enemy fire.

Currently there are more than 275 volunteers who work in some capacity with the Hornet. Aircraft are continually being restored as close to their original state as possible. Current aircraft on exhibit aboard ship include a TBM Avenger, an F8U Crusader, and an F-14 Tomcat.

The highlight is the actual Apollo command module. On deck, the astronaut's footprints are outlined, showing their walk from the capsule to their quarantine quarters while onboard the Hornet. The trailer they spent their quarantine period in is also among the exhibits. Since both the astronauts and NASA were generous with their lunar souvenirs, the Hornet boasts moon rocks, a flag from the face of the moon, and the baseball caps the astronauts wore on their return to Earth.

Restorations currently being completed include a TBM Avenger that's awaiting bomb bay doors; an FJ-2 Fury, of which only a few are currently flying; a Grumman F-11 Tiger, which is almost complete except for the nose section; and an SH-3H Sea King helicopter. As usual, parts are extremely

gust 1995, the city of San Francisco held a celebration honoring not only Veterans' Day, but also the Hornet, which had been towed back to her homeport of Alameda, at the former Naval Air Station's Pier 3. This effort proved instrumental in saving the

and community resource that would engage people of all ages and backgrounds, in exploring United States Naval history and technology on the sea, air, and outer space.” Further goals are to inspire its visitors, especially the young, to become productive citizens



The Hornet steaming at flank speed to the revised Apollo recovery area (thunderstorms at the main site) more than 1,000 miles south of Hawaii on July 23, 1969.

U.S. NAVY PHOTOS



Apollo 11 simulated recovery exercise several hundred miles south of Hawaii in mid-July 1969. Shows a simulated capsule and crew recovery exercise using all the ship's resources.



The Hornet approaches the Apollo 12 command module Yankee Clipper and Underwater Demolition Team (UDT) swimmers on November 24, 1969.



HS-4 Sea King helicopter hovers over the Yankee Clipper command module as UDT decontamination swimmer exits the helo on November 24, 1969, near American Samoa.



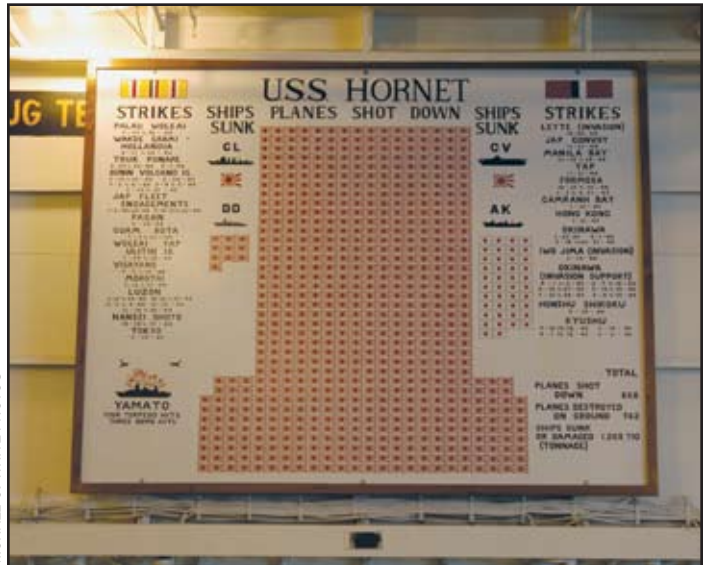
Apollo 12, which carried a crew of all-Navy astronauts: Bean, Conrad, and Gordon. They prepare to enter the MQF on November 24, 1969, aboard the Hornet.



President Nixon addresses Apollo 11 astronauts Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins on July 24, 1969, in the Hornet's hangar bay 2, where the Mobile Quarantine Facility (MQF) was located.



**The Hornet's National Historic Landmark plaque (#1029), granted in 1991.**



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**Scoreboard of the Hornet's World War II action posted on the hangar deck.**

hard to come by, and some must be fabricated from scratch. When these projects are completed and on static display, they will make the collection invaluable. Those who have been involved in restoration projects know the many hours of frustration that can go into working on some minute part. It can take the patience of a saint to keep your cool when it seems the solution will never come. But these volunteers are moving slowly and surely to complete their work, which will only delight those who get to see these aircraft on display.

Randy Tully, chairman of the Aircraft Carrier Hornet Foundation, the nonprofit corporation that governs the operation of the museum, and Rick Thom, director of Aircraft Restoration and Recovery, point to some large photos that chronicle the lingering results of an early NASA experiment on the Apollo command modules. During the prehistoric era of NASA engineering, no one really knew what would happen to a command module if it descended onto dry land instead of splashing down into the ocean as planned. After its recovery in the ocean, NASA engineers did what seemed reasonable at the time—they pushed the command module off a several-story-high platform to see what would happen. The pod landed on its edge, and a large

gash remains to this day.

In keeping with its mission to serve as an educational and community resource that engages people of all ages and backgrounds, the Hornet museum offers an absolutely brilliant series of educational programs, which can be accessed from its website at [www.USS-Hornet.org](http://www.USS-Hornet.org). If ever there was a well-laid plan for how to educate and prepare a group before coming aboard a ship in order to get the most out of it, the museum has done it. Programs are tailored to adults, as well as elementary-, middle-, and high school-aged visitors. Teachers and youth leaders have all the resources they need in place. The program provides an educational syllabus that supports California standard educational requirements, and shows how the museum relates to science, physics, history, economics, and other topics. It even spells out the focus of the trip and the manner in which the study is laid out, e.g., chronological history, cultural diversity, and social responsibility, among other topics. Currently, the museum offers three programs, with a fourth in the works: Pathways to History: 41,000 Tons of Fun (available for Grades K-5 and Grades 6-12); Pathways to Science: Apollo Mission; Pathways to History: Jr. Crewmember Live Aboard; and soon, Pathways to Science: Cool Machines.

At the museum's website, visitors can also download the aviation and radio merit badge syllabus and requirements for the Boy Scouts of America. A space exploration merit badge program is also in the works. When a Scout over the age of 11 signs up for one of the programs, the Hornet museum covers all of the necessary criteria to obtain the badge. Dates and times for classes are available through the museum's website. But this isn't just work; the program caters to learning and fun—at the same time.

Former F-14 aviator Tully came aboard as a visitor one day. After striking up a conversation with one of the retired chief petty officers (something that one cannot help during a visit aboard the carrier), Tully, who is also a certificated flight instructor, was asked if he would be interested in helping with the Scout's program. A casual "Sure" changed the next three years of his life.

At the time, the "Ready Room Two," a ship compartment where pilots would prepare for their mission, was an obscure seafoam green room. Yet help seemed to materialize from all corners. Significant and small events, a lot of sweat equity, and financial contributions from Tully, Jeff Phelan, Daniel Pollini, and a host of volunteers brought the ready room to



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**A-4A BuNo. 139929 wears a modified Blue Angels paint scheme. This aircraft never flew with the Navy's aerial flight demonstration team, although it did sit on a pole outside Encinal High School in Alameda for a number of years.**

life. The former storage room is now the U.S. Navy NAVAIR/VFA-41 Black Aces Ready Room. The Black Aces are an operational F/A-18F Super Hornet squadron based out of Naval Air Station Lemoore in central California.

There is nothing else like it—especially in the San Francisco Bay area.

Packed inside the room is a surround-sound system that plays recordings of USS Nimitz flight operations. Authentic ready room chairs are modeled after those used on the Nimitz, while authentic fighter pilot memorabilia hang from the walls. Computer workstations use a cur-

riculum designed by Tully for the aviation presentation and link to U.S. Navy educational and operational websites. Frankly, you probably won't see a grown man act more like a kid than when you see Tully in the Black Aces Ready Room. The trio does a lot to add to the true focus and sacrifice of naval aviation. The program is supported by computer graphics, music, video segments on the latest activities in NAVAIR and VFA-41 in particular, a syllabus, and the coolest environment on the planet—a fighter pilot-



**Above: A Boy Scout troop raises the flag on the flight deck to mark the 35th anniversary of the Apollo 11 recovery.**

**Left: View down the Hornet's starboard catapult. The distance just doesn't seem long enough to get an aircraft airborne.**



**U.S. Marine Corps exhibit occupies the MarDet office, which controlled Marine operations on the ship.**



**TBM Avenger torpedo bombers such as this flew from the USS Hornet during World War II. This aircraft has been restored by museum volunteers. An upper turret has been installed, and the group is trying to locate bomb bay doors for the aircraft.**

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equipped, state-of-the-art ready room aboard a historic aircraft carrier. Once you have Tully or any other volunteer's enthusiasm going, you'd better just hold on for the ride, because history isn't boring when you're aboard the Hornet.

After a tour of the F-14 cockpit, we climbed atop the turtleback of the aircraft to explore the Tomcat's unique design while Tully did what

any volunteer would do: asked questions to get you thinking. Why did the F-14 have two vertical stabilizers rather than one? Even a sharp Scout gets that one after a trip to the computer to discover for himself the principles of basic aerodynamics and carrier space requirements.

When Rick Thom and Randy Tully get together, there is just no end to what one will learn about aircraft,

restoration, educational programs, and more. One flight simulator occupies a space on the interior flight deck, while the nose section of an F-11 Tiger is on its way to becoming a cockpit display after a long stint of nothingness under vines and mud in some forsaken climate. "This is going to be part of our next flight sim display," Thom explains. The F-11 had just received a coat of primer and looked nothing at all like the old photo that Thom displayed with parental pride.

The two picked up the pace as they headed to the level above the hangar deck that would soon house F/A-18F Super Hornet partial task trainers. After stepping into another section of the carrier, I stood in a small circle of light thrown by a flashlight into the dark recess of the ship. There was a "click," and history burst to life. The Combat Information Center had come alive before my eyes—the heart of strategy in carrier warfare and history in the making. It was exactly as it was before the Hornet was decommissioned—the same glass board where a seaman would write in reverse in grease pencil to chronicle ships and aircraft in the theatre of engagement; equipment, radios, radar displays, and the red phone that could call anywhere in the world at any time of the day or night; and the raised deck for the battle manager. All of these had been left in a virtual time warp. Sailors who see these sights and sounds again smile when they breathe in the unmistakable smell of a carrier. Many of them get misty. It is exactly the same as it was decades ago. And somehow this spot is precisely where history goes from something "out there" to an event in real time. It is a jarring, exhilarating, and memorable moment.

The purpose of the educational program is to capture this same feeling, particularly for young visitors. And this is achieved most effectively through the Live-Aboard Program. Live-Aboard is the highlight of the museum's programs for the commu-



**Museum volunteers restored this F8U Crusader cockpit and now take it to air shows and other events to teach youngsters about aviation and the Hornet.**



**This F8U-1 was also restored by the museum's volunteers and is complete down to the gun installations.**



**Recently arrived F-14 Tomcat BuNo. 162689 sits on the hangar deck. This aircraft is occasionally lifted on the carrier's elevators for visiting guests.**



**This F9F Panther jet will soon get its turn in the museum's restoration shops.**

nity at large. For \$60, people ages 5 and up can sleep in restored berthing compartments where the crew lived, and have dinner and breakfast in the crew's mess. Yet the bulk of their time is spent exploring the ship and airplanes; riding the flight simulator; playing shipboard games, such as the Battle of Midway, watching historic movies; and listening to the infamous ghost stories for which the Hornet has achieved some notoriety.

Activities are on a strict military-style schedule, beginning at 6 p.m. until lights out at 11 p.m., which is also when the first night shift begins. The 7 a.m. reveille awakens campers prior to the museum opening to the public at 10 a.m.

The Live-Aboard Program is the museum's top source of income, followed closely by public and corporate events, like the Hornet's Big Band dances, Fourth of July and Fleet Week events; and donations. The museum operates on a shoestring as it seeks to successfully operate and build an infrastructure to provide for the future of the ship. Donations can be made to: The USS Hornet Museum, P.O. Box 460, Pier 3, Alameda Point, Alameda, CA 94501. Phone: 510/521-8448; fax: 510/521-8327; or visit its website at [www.USS-Hornet.org](http://www.USS-Hornet.org).

I asked Tully if he ever expected so much to occur when he first came to the Hornet. "Volunteering has given me back tenfold of what I've put into it. Who would have thought that I'd

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the job." Looking around, he notes, "How many people can say that they work on a historic aircraft carrier sitting in the middle of San Francisco Bay? This is the Hornet. This carrier is history. The views from the flight deck are some of the most beautiful views in the world. It's the most satisfying job I can imagine."

*Jack Morrissey flew PBVs during World War II. Sherry Ditmer is a freelance writer, A&P mechanic, and pilot flying in the Bay area.*



**The museum has acquired this US-2B Tracker as well as a HUP-1 Retriever and a TA-4J Skyhawk.**

sit here in the NAVAIR ready room and speak to Dick Gordon about flying over the dark side of the moon, or to the Tuskegee Airmen about their battles and the trials they went through, or Adm. Carl Seiberlich, the commanding officer of the Hornet during the Apollo 11 recovery? Or embark on USS Nimitz when George Lucas' company Skywalker Sound volunteered to get the sounds from that nuclear aircraft carrier?"

Dick Gordon, an astronaut aboard Apollo 12, was asked what it was like when he reached the dark side of the moon, when Houston couldn't contact him and he was alone in space for about half an hour. Gordon said, "Space is the most beautiful, soft black velvet. There's no atmosphere to obscure your view, so you just see stars upon stars, and galaxies upon galaxies that go on and on. I loved it. I had space all to myself."

Rick Thom walks atop the flight deck and notes the wood planking that peeks from beneath the tar cover. "See this wood? This is the same deck from World War II. They flew all those planes off of this very deck." I ask Thom if the kids ever have that light bulb go on, that time where they make that connection that bridges the past and now.

Thom stops what he is doing and grins. "Yes, I've seen that." He beams. "It's the most satisfying thing about

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things don't always go  
according to plan!*



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