



**By Russ Pankonin**

### **The Imperial Republican**

□ *Editor's note: Pankonin was among five Nebraskans who visited the USS Carl Vinson during training exercises in mid-September. Visitors got a rare, first-hand look at life aboard an aircraft carrier and were witness to the pride and professionalism displayed by the young men and women who serve our country. This is final story in the series.*

Many of us spent the Christmas holiday with family, gathering around the table for the annual Christmas dinner, sharing memories and making new ones.

But for the men and women aboard the USS Carl Vinson, they spent the day somewhere in the western Pacific, safe guarding our country on its latest tour of duty.

On Nov. 30, the Vinson left port in San Diego for a scheduled deployment. Typically, that deployment encompasses six months but unrest anywhere in the world could mean an extended tour for the crew of the Vinson.

This floating city carries a crew of more than 5,000 when on deployment. In Imperial, a total of 2,071 people call Imperial home. The crew of the Vinson represents nearly 2.5 Imperials.

The crew of the Vinson includes around 3,200 sailors. When the air wing assigned to the ship comes on board, add another 2,480 people, which includes both men and women.

Women on the ship account for around 18 percent of the crew. The biggest limiting factor to adding more women is simply the lack of more bathroom space, or heads, as they are referred to on the ship.



### **Young people the key**

During a briefing before leaving to board the ship, an officer showed a picture of young men hauling a missile on their shoulders.

"This is still how we load bombs today," the briefing officer said. While there are hoists for the 2,000-pound bombs, the smaller missiles and bombs are handled and loaded with manual labor.

The officer noted the biggest share of work done on the ship is done by young 18- and 19-year olds. "They are the heart of the Navy," he said.

"I will tell you that's what really makes the Navy go. Talking about all these aircraft carriers, carrier wings, naval air stations and all this good stuff, but it's young men and women."

He said it may be hot, cold, rainy, always noisy, always planes, always hazards, but they're marching on, doing this stuff day in and day out.

### **A city of its own**

The ship is self-reliant when it comes to its own fresh water. It has its own plant to turn salt water into fresh water.

But there's several things the ship can't go without—food and fuel for the planes.

Each week, a tender ship pulls up beside the Vinson and ropes are shot from one bow of the ship to the other. Then cables get pulled across to unload pallets of food and other supplies. In addition, hoses are pulled across to fill the ship's fuel storage tanks in the ship. The carrier can also supply fuel to other ships as well.

And when it comes to food, it's a 24-hour operation in the two main mess halls aboard ship. In addition to three daily meals, the mess also serves late night food, commonly referred to as mid-rats, for midnight rations.

As you might expect in any city, there's a doctor's office, dentist office, optometry office, hospital and surgery room. There just not quite the size of the accommodations in the city.

The hospital is equipped to handle up to 80 patients with bunks stacked two high in every nook and cranny imaginable.

It also contains an intensive care unit for patient care.

While the carrier operates at sea, it's usually never out of the 400-mile range of the C2 Greyhound, known as the COD for carrier on-board delivery.

The COD is used to bring important cargo and personnel to the ship, as well as take them off the ship. The land-based plane can be configured for cargo or personnel only, or a combination of the two.

With the primary mission of air support, the ship has its own jet repair shop, where engines can be repaired and rebuilt while at sea.

### **Sacrifices**

Serving on a carrier requires sacrifice, because once a deployment begins it will be at least six months before they see loved ones again.

It also means no alcohol. There's no alcohol allowed on the ships, which leaves port calls as the sailors' only outlet for a belt or two.

Each and every sailor on the ship has his or her own job to do, whether it be doing the laundry or flying an F-18 Hornet.

It's that support of more than 5,000 people who work in sync together to fulfill their ultimate mission— to be able to launch the 75 airplanes and choppers on a moment's notice.