

Pete Rasnick



CDR Pete Rasnick served 21 years as a pilot in the U.S. Navy. Flying the A-6 Intruder and the F/A-18 Hornet, he is a veteran of Operation Desert Storm and Operations over Bosnia. He served on the USS Theodore Roosevelt Battle Group Staff during the initial months of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He retired in December 2005 and is now employed as a pilot for FedEx Express.

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Richlands native is a frequent 'visitor' to Iraq

By MIKE STILL

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ABOARD THE USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT -- Iraq has been a constant in Pete Rasnick's life since 1991.

The 42-year-old Navy commander and native of Richlands flew combat from the Roosevelt's flight deck in the opening night of Operation Desert Storm as a 30-year-old A-6E Intruder attack pilot.

Twelve years later, Rasnick is an operations planner for Rear Admiral John C. Harvey Jr.'s Carrier Cruiser Destroyer Group 8 -- a formation centering on the 1,092-foot Nimitz-class aircraft carrier and consisting of the Aegis-class cruisers USS Anzio and USS Cape St. George; the guided-missile destroyers USS Arleigh Burke, USS Porter and USS Winston Churchill; the guided-missile frigate USS Carr; and the combat support ship USNS Arctic.

In addition to her escorts, the Roosevelt also carries approximately 80 aircraft of Air Wing 8; three squadrons of F/A-18C Hornet strike fighters; one squadron of F-14 Tomcat dual-role fighter and attack aircraft; one squadron each of S-3B Viking anti-submarine and anti-shipping jets; E-2C Hawkeye airborne early warning turboprop planes; EA-6B Prowler electronic warfare jets; and H-60 Oceanhawk/Seahawk helicopters.

Rounding out the Roosevelt's presence in the Mediterranean is its pairing with an almost identical battle group centered on her sister ship, the USS Harry S Truman.

Rasnick said last week that he and the group's officers and sailors have done well despite weeks of uncertainty since the carrier left Norfolk on Jan. 6.

"I see a sense of relief," Rasnick said via e-mail last week before missile strikes in Baghdad Wednesday night heralded the beginning of operations. "Waiting around, not knowing what is going to happen is tough. Although morale has remained high, it is difficult to focus on a task that has no start time."

Rasnick coordinates the group's Main Planning Cell, which consists of representatives of all parts of the group. That cell, he said, continually receives and evaluates a range of information to decide how ships are positioned, how to react to a range of emergency situations and how to carry out combat operations if ordered.

"Our daily routine or 'battle rhythm' consists of a series of planning meetings that feed into each other," Rasnick said. "We also have a video teleconference with our boss every day. The routine has not changed since the president's speech. We try and maintain the same battle rhythm no matter what the circumstances to avoid making big changes when we are actually involved on combat operations."

Rasnick said his current routine is a more complex and broader responsibility than when he was an attack pilot with VA-36 "Roadrunners."

"Twelve years ago, I was a young lieutenant," Rasnick recalled. "My focus was purely on the flying aspect. After the war started, all I did was plan, fly, eat and sleep. I knew very little about how the battle group operated, and how I fit into the big scheme."

"Now, it's almost the opposite," Rasnick added. "I'm on the other end of the spectrum, looking at the big picture."

Recounting his first operational flight over Iraq in 1991, Rasnick called it "surreal" as he went over final checklists with his bombardier/navigator before attacking bridge targets at night.

"Time seemed to stand still as I approached the target with my heart pounding, not knowing what to expect," Rasnick said. "After dropping my ordnance and turning away from the target, I saw a lot of flashes in my mirrors and thought I was the flashes of bombs going off on the ground. It turned out to be anti-aircraft artillery."

As the Navy phased the Intruder out of service, Rasnick moved with his family from Virginia Beach to Jacksonville, Fla., and converted to the F/A-18C Hornet. Eventually joining VFA-131 Wildcats aboard the USS George Washington, Rasnick flew several missions over southern Iraq in 1994 and 1995 as part of Operation Southern Watch to enforce one of two no-fly zones over Iraq.

"It was very strange flying over the same ground I had visited only a few years before in Desert Storm," Rasnick said. "The craters were still visible in some areas. There was little to no Iraqi activity in the no-fly zone during that period, and most flights amounted to a sight-seeing tour of endless desert."

After tours in the Navy's Hornet conversion squadron and at the Pentagon, Rasnick joined the Roosevelt battle group this past January in time for her current deployment. He said that he has seen two major changes in shipboard life between his two tours on the Roosevelt.

"Communications is a big one," Rasnick recounted. "On my previous deployments, the only contact I had with home was mail, which took 10 to 14 days, or to call when we pulled into port. Now I can sit at my desk and e-mail family and friends any time I want."

"The other big change is having women on Navy ships," Rasnick added. "The Roosevelt has more women than any other carrier -- over 800 out of about 5,500 total crew."

In terms of weapons, Rasnick said that improvements in guided weapons since Desert Storm also have made a major difference for pilots.

"They allow us to hit targets with pinpoint accuracy, avoiding collateral damage and saving innocent lives," Rasnick noted. "It's hard to say what we can expect from Saddam. He is capable of trying almost anything, so we have to be ready for anything."

In addition to communications, getting news has improved for the crews in the battle group, Rasnick said. Sailors can watch 10 different U.S. channels, including CNN.

"A couple weeks ago, we took aboard about a dozen professional reporters to live with us indefinitely," Rasnick added. "The Department of Defense feels it is essential for them to tell the factual story -- good or bad -- before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions."

Rasnick said the current deployment will be his last.

"My next assignment will be to NAS Pensacola, where I will serve as a flight instructor for two to three years, then retire. Otherwise, having only been here for two months, nothing stands out about this deployment. We have been completely focused on the task at hand. I'm sure there will be lots of standouts when it's all over."

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