



Retired naval officer Frank Warren quits his airline job and rejoins the defense department as a civilian. In the White House Situation Room, he challenges CentCom's plan to thwart Iran's naval forces in the Persian Gulf. Surprisingly, the president adopts Frank's alternative approach, but both sides' assumptions of the outcome are flawed.

Target: NIMITZ

by Gary Carter

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TARGET: NIMITZ

IRAN

STRAIT OF
HORMUZ



GARY CARTER

CAPTAIN, U.S. NAVY (RET)

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This is a work of fiction set in northern Virginia, Washington, D.C., and the Persian Gulf. The characters are a product of the author's imagination and do not represent any former or current persons. I have used actual ships, aircraft, and locations to add realism to the story. Historical events and related data are included to provide background and context.

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PROLOGUE

*Accept the things to which fate binds you,
and love the people with whom fate brings
you together, but do so with all your heart.*

-Marcus Aurelius

Spring, 2006

Tehran, Iran

The meeting took place in the House of Leadership, where the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran conducted state business. Ten people—all men—gathered around a well-worn wooden table in a tastefully appointed room. Four men to a side, one at each end, facing each other. Some smoked, some sipped tea; all wore beards, many tinged with touches of gray as was the hair of those who didn't wear a turban. The group comprised the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS)¹, Iran's highest national security body, charged with preserving the Islamic Revolution, territorial integrity, and the national sovereignty of Iran. Outside, a cold, rainy spring day enveloped Tehran's roughly nine million people, practically all unaware of the meeting. Inside, Iran's senior leadership enjoyed comfortable, well-lighted comfort.

Ayatollah Hamid Javad Ghorbani, Iran's Supreme Leader, sat at one end of the table and presided over the meeting. Selected by Iran's 88-seat Assembly of Experts² to be the Supreme Leader, he faced the other nine men, five of whom he appointed to this prestigious body. One of those appointees was Amin Sasani, secretary of the SCNS, a close confidant of the Supreme Leader. Marzban Pedram Mazdaki, the elected president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, sat opposite Ghorbani. The members of the SCNS gave the Supreme Leader their full attention as he spoke.

"I am tired of the Islamic Republic of Iran being the depository of the ceaseless sewage of ridicule and condemnation flowing from the mouth of our perpetual tormentor," claimed the Ayatollah.

All nine members around the table mumbled affirming views and energetically nodded their heads in support of the Supreme Leader's statement.

President Mazdaki spoke above the din of voices. "Supreme Leader, do you have some action in mind we might take against the incessant scourging from the West?"

Mazdaki's stock had started to rise in the minds of many Iranians when he addressed the United Nations—twice within a year's timeframe. He was held in high regard by many; no one's opinion of his standing and importance, however, exceeded his own. The discussions subsided as all heads turned toward the Ayatollah, who spoke slowly in a grave tone, conveying the seriousness of the moment. "I want to strike the imperial aggressors and make them bleed from their filthy nostrils. I want to blacken their eyes, scar their faces, and make them wince in pain and embarrassment. Our actions must be bold, swift, and severe, minimizing our exposure while maximizing our impact, and causing great discomfort, conflict, and confusion among the infidel's evil forces. We must show the imperialists, and the world, we will not be manipulated, threatened, or coerced by other nations, no matter their might. The will of our people and of our great country is undeniable and unyielding. It is time for direct, forceful action.

"Let me hear your thoughts about how to accomplish this righteous objective."

The group erupted into a cacophony of voices, each member convinced of the invincibility and superiority of his plan or idea. This greatly pleased Ghorbani, who, as the commander in chief of the armed forces, was the sole individual within the Islamic Republic of Iran who could declare war or peace, and who served as the final approval

authority for all military plans and operations. By addressing his SCNS, he empowered each of them by appearing to solicit their suggestions of possible courses of actions. It was an effective leadership tactic, to be sure, but an unnecessary one. He had a plan in mind. Now he subtly herded his advisors toward his solution, so they would ultimately feel ownership in a plan they thought to have conceived themselves.

After nearly ninety minutes of spirited debate, the SCNS settled on enhanced “swarming” tactics by the Iranian navy, maneuvers previously practiced on a smaller scale. This was Ghorbani’s desired concept all along. The Supreme Leader ordered his chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, Major General Ramin Basir Mokri, to be in overall charge of executing the plan, and appointed Rear Admiral Bijan Hashemi, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy commander, based in Bandar Abbas, as the officer in tactical command.

Ayatollah Ghorbani issued one specific order to the SCNS. “The primary target of the operation must be the zealot’s aircraft carrier *Nimitz*. The infidels launched their helicopters from the *Nimitz*, which landed on *our* soil, during their pitiful rescue attempt of American embassy spies³ after the November Revolution. Their pathetic plan ended in flames; the burnt and rusted carcasses of their helicopters and planes remain a potent reminder to us all of the depths of depravity the Zionist-loving people will stoop to in their continual attempts to denigrate and vilify our country and our people. Discover when *Nimitz* will next be in our waters and plan accordingly.”

Major General Mokri stood and replied, “It will be as you say, Supreme Leader, *Insha’Allah*” (God willing). Rear Admiral Hashemi nodded grimly in agreement.

Washington, D.C., United States

"Good morning, Sharon." U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Joseph Donaldson greeted Sharon Fleming, his former war college colleague, as they approached one another, coffees in hand, in one of the numerous corridors of the defense department's main headquarters, the Pentagon.

"Hey, Joe, good morning. How're things going this morning?"

Rear Admiral Donaldson oversaw the apportioning of naval aviation's slice of the annual budgetary pie, which included the development of the navy's latest fighter aircraft, the F-35. Sharon Fleming worked in the secretary of defense's policy division. The two first met years earlier at a White House social function when Joe Donaldson was a senior lieutenant and Sharon Fleming's husband, Ronald, was a freshman congressman from Ohio. Their careers later crossed paths again while students at the National Defense University, a military war college located at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C. Now both had jobs in the Pentagon.

"As usual, I suppose. I need more money, everyone wants more money, and there isn't more money. There's hardly enough money for day-to-day flight operations in the fleet. The development of the F-35 Lightning has become a proverbial and perpetual sucking chest wound which we treat with costly band aids instead of the major surgery the program requires. Other than that, not much is happening. What's up in your world?"

"Besides all the issues in Iraq," Sharon replied, "Iran is making noise again; the dust never seems to settle over there." Sharon moved a little closer and lowered her voice,

nearly whispering, suggesting the following words were sensitive, perhaps even classified. "I read today about a major Iranian naval exercise being planned; it's uncertain when it'll happen. Sources suggest that every seaworthy Iranian vessel based in Bandar Abbas will be ordered to get under way—simultaneously. Every unit will target their favorite whipping boy, the bastards of the West—us. I think we're mutual pains in each other's rear end; not sure who has the edge in that comparison."

"So, ops normal in your world, just like mine. You know the Iranians: always up to something. Well, I have a meeting I'm almost late for. Nice to see you again, Sharon. See ya around the fort."

"Take care, Joe. Keep that aviation checkbook balanced." They smiled at each other with a slight shaking of their heads as they went their separate ways.

In the air near Reagan National Airport, Washington, D.C.

The day's flying route was Atlanta to Washington Reagan, back to Atlanta, then to Los Angeles (LAX). It was like any other day in the cockpit. But as we know, how we play life's cards determines our fate, our future.

"Delta Seven One Four, Potomac Approach, turn right, heading one one five, maintain 3,000 feet and report the river in sight." The air traffic controller's voice came in clearly through the pilots' headphones.

Delta Air Lines Captain Thomas Middleton could see the Potomac River out his left side window and straight ahead as his co-pilot, First Officer Francis J. Warren, complying with the directive from Air Traffic Control, slowly turned the 757 to a 115-degree magnetic heading and descended through 3,500 feet toward the assigned

altitude of 3,000 feet. It was a perfect flying day: sharp spring skies, light winds at Reagan National out of the south at seven knots, a temperature of 65 degrees. The outlines of the busy airport were visible through the right-side window as an aircraft approached on short final for runway one nine.

Twenty-five miles to the west lay Washington Dulles Airport, the area's primary international arrival and departure location. Some thirty miles north BWI, Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport, also handled long-haul flights in addition to U.S. traffic. Reagan National was designed for, and catered to, domestic air travel. With its closeness to the capital, it was the ideal destination airport for everyone connected to the government. Delta knew this and, like all other airlines serving DCA, charged higher fares on flights into and out of this convenient location.

Frank Warren was flying this leg of the trip. A former navy pilot, he had spent a career on active duty—25 years—before retiring at age 47. After flying for a regional airline based at Dulles and working as a flight instructor in off-hours, Delta had hired him a few months before his 49th birthday, giving him 11 years to fly before the mandatory retirement age for airline pilots of 60 years old.⁴

Frank glanced at his captain when Approach Control called and gave him an affirmative head nod and a thumb's up indicating he had the river in sight. Both pilots had visually acquired the Potomac River. Captain Middleton keyed his mic: "Delta Seven One Four has the river in sight," performing one of his pilot monitoring duties, while his co-pilot was controlling the aircraft.

Frank leveled off at 3,000 feet, 180 knots, flaps at 5, heading 115 degrees. He felt one with his airplane, his hands moving on their own as he made small, minute changes to the throttles and control yoke. Pressure flying, Frank used to tell his Cessna 152 students, involved scanning the instruments, listening to the airplane, thinking the corrections you want to make, and with tiny amounts of pressure you'd achieve the desired result.

"TRAFFIC, TRAFFIC." The unexpected voice from the TCAS (Traffic Alert and Collision Avoidance System) interrupted the tranquil atmosphere of the cockpit, alerting both pilots to search for the unknown aircraft that had entered a system-generated conflict area in front of the 757. The advisory alert required no action by the crew and produced a small, moving amber circle on each pilot's VSI (vertical speed indicator) and the radar display. Referencing the relative position of the airborne contact, they scanned outside, searching for the other airplane. Even in the pristine weather, neither pilot could locate it.

"CLIMB, CLIMB!" The TCAS commanded immediate evasive action, without coordinating with the controller, to ensure safe separation between the two aircraft. A red, square traffic symbol replaced the small, amber circle on their displays. Frank immediately added power and climbed, the two powerful Pratt and Whitney engines instantly responding. He referenced his VSI where a TCAS-generated green arc was displayed, depicting the required rate of climb necessary for avoidance with the other aircraft. He kept his climb rate in the green and adjusted his power to maintain a safe flying speed. The two planes' transponders were "talking" to each other, instructing their pilots to take different actions which would result in increased altitude separation between the two aircraft—

provided both pilots responded as directed. Apparently, only one of them did.

“DESCEND, DESCEND NOW!” For the first time in his career—either in an airplane or the simulator—Frank heard the TCAS change its mind and command an opposite action. The green arc on his VSI relocated to the descent area. Frank reduced power and firmly “pressured” the yoke forward, causing the cockpit crew and 180 passengers to rise against their seatbelts. The big Boeing’s nose eased below the horizon as the VSI needle swung to a descent indication.

Captain Middleton transmitted, “Delta Seven One Four is complying with Resolution Advisory commands.”

Approach Control responded, “Roger, Delta, we had a pop-up target for a moment in your general vicinity, and it went away. Did you get a visual on the guy?”

With Frank shaking his head “no,” the captain replied, “No, sir, we never saw him.”

“Roger that, Delta. Well, we show you clear of all traffic, and you’re now cleared for the River Visual approach to runway one nine. Keep your speed at 180 knots or greater until 5 miles from the airport due to following traffic. You can contact the tower now—good day.”

Captain Middleton replied, “Delta Seven One Four, roger, cleared for the River Visual, switching to tower—good day.” He flipped the switch to the tower frequency and put ground control in the standby window. On the other radio, he selected Delta’s Reagan Operations frequency which they would use to confirm their gate assignment once on the ground.

Frank banked the airplane to the right and flew toward the David Taylor Research Lab located just east of the Potomac River, about ten miles northwest of the airport,

an oft-used landmark for commencing the River Visual. He called for flaps 15, both pilots confirming the selection by viewing the flap indicator needles.

Captain Middleton announced, "Frank, I'll be off the radios for a moment to talk to the passengers." Frank nodded, as his captain selected the aircraft's cabin announcing system. Middleton calmly reviewed the preceding incident and the reasons for the maneuvers, stressing that passenger safety was never in question. This was, for the most part, true.

The River Visual to runway 19 at DCA offers passengers some magnificent views of the DC area, especially for those seated on the left side of the aircraft. Today's perfect weather made for excellent sight-seeing. Frank snaked his way down the Potomac River toward Reagan National, monitoring his descent rate, airspeed, distance from the airport, and alignment over the river. To veer a little left toward the Lincoln Memorial and the National Mall, in the direction of the White House, would bring a number of unfriendly voices on the radio. Nothing good can come from being a little left or east of the river. It makes too many people uneasy since 9/11. But nothing bad happens if you cheat a little right, to the west, as you fly south down the river. Frank's approach briefing noted he preferred the right side of the Potomac so the captain, in the left seat, could almost see the western side of the river.

Frank dirtied up (extended the landing gear and flaps) at six miles and began slowing from 180 knots to approach speed at five miles. He called for the landing checklist and maneuvered for landing on one nine. Reagan Tower cleared Delta 714 to land as the gleaming jet flew over

folks playing soccer at Gravelly Point, located immediately north of the airport.

The 01/19 runway at DCA is only 6,800 feet long (the shortest runway at Dulles measures 9,400 feet). The target landing spot is 1,000 feet down the runway, leaving 5,800 feet of runway for the 757 to land and stop comfortably.

Frank landed the plane with a thump, put the engines into reverse thrust, and gradually applied the brakes. Captain Middleton took over, using the tiller (connected to the nosewheel) to steer the plane onto the yellow taxi line. First Officer duties after a landing are always the same: clean up the aircraft (retract the spoilers and flaps), handle radio communications, silently complete the after-landing checklist, but verbally announce its completion, and monitor the aircraft's movements.

At Gate 19, Captain Middleton stated, "Let 'em up, shut 'em down."

Frank turned off the fasten seatbelt sign, then moved each engine's fuel control switch to the "cutoff" position, positively stopping all fuel from getting to the engines.

The two pilots completed the shutdown checklist, and before they removed their headsets, Reagan Ground Control called. "Delta Seven One Four, are you still on frequency?"

Frank exchanged a surprised glance with his captain and replied, "Delta Seven One Four is here."

Ground Control continued, "Ah, Seven One Four, I wanted to let you know the intruder aircraft that caused your TCAS to activate is now on the ground at Leesburg. The pilot is currently engaged in a conversation with the FAA and the Secret Service. F-16 interceptors launched out of Andrews Air Force Base and escorted the twin aircraft to Leesburg. Just wanted to let you know."

Frank acknowledged, "Thank you, Ground, we appreciate the follow-up. Delta out."

The pilots removed their headsets and unbuckled their seatbelts and shoulder harnesses. They sat, motionless, reflecting on the past few minutes, each knowing that the area surrounding the nation's capital is the most highly controlled and regulated airspace in the United States; it nearly takes a note from the Pope for a private pilot to get clearance to fly there.

Captain Middleton looked at his FO and asked, "You ever see him?"

"Nope—never did."

"Me, neither."

"Oh, well ..."

Middleton added, "Well, excellent maneuvering, Frank." Grinning, he continued, "Now let's see if you made anyone sick!"

Frank stood near the aircraft's open exit door, thanking the deplaning passengers for flying with Delta and apologizing for the Six Flags experience. Captain Middleton's stomach was growling, so he scooted up the jetway toward the food court, through a sea of humanity, and past passengers lining up to board their flight to Atlanta, the crews' next leg.

This flight to Atlanta would be followed by their last leg back to LAX and the completion of their four-day trip. In Atlanta, their schedule called for a three-hour "rest and recovery" period before launching for LAX. Most pilots would prefer to keep going, particularly on the last day of a rotation. Such was not the case for this Delta crew.

First Officer Warren thanked the last departing passenger for choosing to fly Delta and received a compliment on his landing—both passenger and pilot

cordially smiled at each other, each knowing full well the landing had not qualified for any positive comment. Frank completed the external walk-around inspection of the aircraft for the flight to Atlanta, then strolled up the jetway toward the gate area. A Delta gate agent opened the door to the jetway and asked him if she could commence boarding for the Atlanta flight. Frank knew the cabin cleaners were still readying the aircraft, so he replied, "I'll take the flight plan and see if the flight attendants are ready for boarding." Frank and the gate agent stepped toward the counter where she retrieved the flight plan to Atlanta. She handed the papers to Frank and, with an on-time departure foremost in her mind, asked him to *please* let her know when boarding could commence. He said he'd be right back after verifying the cabin status. The whole event took less than 30 seconds. That was long enough.

In line, waiting to board the flight to Atlanta, was a tall, lean gentleman—nicely attired, unassuming, computer bag slung over one shoulder, carry-on roller bag next to him. His hair was slightly thinning and graying—like Frank's. Quiet and reserved, his face broke into an ever-widening grin as he chuckled to himself. Mr. William Stimson, known as Will to his friends and "Will Call" to his former navy buddies, caught a brief glimpse of his former close friend and fellow commanding officer (CO). Will Call was Captain William Stimson, U.S. Navy (retired), now working on Capitol Hill in his second career as a member of the House Armed Services Committee permanent staff. Will Call loved the political environment and thrived in the energetic atmosphere that surrounded the legislative branch of government.

Years before, he and Frank Warren served as CO's in the same air wing and developed a deep, abiding

friendship. While not unheard of, and certainly not unique, friendships between F/A-18 Hornet drivers and S-3 Viking pilots weren't all that common. Tactically the two aircraft had vastly dissimilar roles and missions; certainly, the "lawn dart," the F/A-18, was the far more prestigious and, in the minds of many, more career enhancing. There was, however, that one common bond: the F/A-18 burned a lot of gas on its missions, relative to the fuel-efficient S-3, which also served as an airborne tanker. The Vikings usually had lots of fuel to give to their thirsty Hornet brethren, and that link sometimes acted as a common thread between the two communities. Throughout their 15-month command tours, served nearly simultaneously, Frank and Will Call established an informal, friendly association which now, after many years, consisted mainly of annual Christmas cards. *But that may change*, thought Will Call Stimson, *that may change*.

After an uneventful flight to Atlanta, Will Stimson shuffled up the single-aisle of the parked 757, nodded at Captain Middleton and said: "Nice flight, Captain, thanks for the ride." The captain thanked him, and Will Call asked, "Your FO still around?"

Tom Middleton turned toward the flight deck and saw Frank getting their rollerboards out of the cockpit. "Yeah, he's right there. You know Frank?"

"He's a former navy buddy—we were CO's together in Air Wing 11. Mind if I say hello?"

Captain Tom Middleton, who, over the years, learned much about military friendships established by those who had served on active duty, stepped aside to allow Will to get by and greet his former fellow commanding officer. Frank instantly recognized his navy friend and greeted him with a strong handshake and admiring eyes. As cabin

cleaners scurried around them, the two former naval officers gathered their bags and proceeded up the jetway, exchanging pleasantries about kids, grandkids, work, their wives, and the current political environment. Will asked Frank how long he had before his next flight; then he asked if there was some place quiet where they could talk privately. They walked a few minutes in the concourse and found some seats at an empty gate.

After getting settled, Will looked Frank in the eye and said, "There's an opening in the Personnel and Readiness directorate at the Pentagon and they're—quietly—soliciting names of candidates to fill it. When I saw you today at Reagan, I thought you'd be perfect for the job. I'd like to get your name in the mix—see what shakes out—see who your competition is. I know a lot of people at DoD, Frank; I could call in a few markers if needed. But I probably wouldn't have to. I know who your immediate boss would be and the folks up the chain of command to SecDef (the Secretary of Defense). It would be a good entry-level job for someone with your experience, and there's obvious upside potential. So, my friend, what are your immediate thoughts?!"

Frank looked out the window, collecting his thoughts, as people do when they get surprising news. The implications of Will's comments were profound. Still processing, he replied, "Will, thank you for thinking of me, but I have a job—a damn good job—one that is highly competitive to get and tremendously satisfying. It pays well, has excellent benefits, I work with great people, and I'm getting paid to do the very thing I like to do: fly airplanes. I get to operate well-maintained aircraft and I'm with a well-established company that is competitive in the marketplace; I'm in a good place."

Will courteously listened to his friend's argument but held firm. "Let me e-mail you everything I know about the job—duties, responsibilities, who you would work for and who would work for you. I'll provide a detailed chain of command up to SecDef with background material on each individual; bios of the staff, folks you'd be working with and anything else I can think of. You and Mary can review the material and talk things over. By the way, don't your in-laws live west of DC? That'd be nice, particularly for Mary. You'll have it all on your computer before you land at LAX. Look at the data, and let Mary read it, too; discuss the transition and changes involved, and then we'll talk again."

Will pressed on with his pitch as Frank continued to process what he was hearing. "I know this is a huge step to take, especially at this stage of your career—and life. Frank, I know you—I know the passion and the patriotism you have. My guess is you'd still be in the navy if they'd let you serve until you were 70 years old. We both left active duty about the same time and made our career choices. I know how great a job you have and that you're very good at it. But I also know this about you: you care—deeply—about your country. I know you inquired about coming back on active duty after 9/11—even said you'd serve at a lower rank if they'd take you back. I sense the call you heard to serve others still resides in your head; indeed, it's in your soul. When I saw you today, there was no decision to make regarding this discussion—you are the right person for the job. Done. Easy. So here I am. Look over the material—talk with Mary. And, so you don't feel pressured or anything, I'll need to hear from you inside of 48 hours! The train's moving kind of fast on this one!"

Frank was stunned but tried not to show it. How did Will know about his attempt to return to active duty following 9/11? His wife knew, of course—but no one else. Will knew?

“Will, thanks again for thinking of me for this incredible opportunity. I am truly honored—and amazed. So, here’s what I’ll do: I’ll look over the information you send me, and I’ll review it with Mary when I get back home. I’ll let you know if I’m interested in throwing away a perfectly superb job and career in exchange for a lesser-paying, much more stressful, time-consuming job with longer work hours, more headaches, greater tension and little to no job security. To say nothing of the pure joy of getting to and from work every day in the DC area traffic!”

“And the opportunity to make a difference,” Will added, “to inspire others—to work with similarly motivated individuals—and to answer the call to service that I know you hear.”

“Yes, that, too,” Frank admitted. “Hey, let’s get our stuff and start heading toward your departure gate, which, conveniently, will take us past the food court, where I’ll break off. Chick-fil-A awaits my arrival.”

Off they went, back in the comfortable conversation of good friends, thoughts in alignment with each other, enjoying the kinship that previous service together brings. Following one more hearty handshake and a man-hug, they bid each other goodbye. Frank ordered the deluxe chicken sandwich and a chocolate chip cookie but didn’t taste a thing as he thought about the opportunity just presented.

After a trip Frank Warren used to face a two-hour southbound drive from LAX to San Diego on the 405 and 5 freeways to get home; now it was a one-hour flight to Sacramento followed by a 90-minute drive. Frank and Mary had moved to northern California and Frank willingly tolerated the inconveniences of the new commute to be near their grandchildren. At the end of his flying career when he walked out the door—out of the cockpit—for the last time, he and Mary would already be right where they wanted to be. That was the plan—until today.

On this occasion, the best option to Sacramento was a Southwest Airlines flight and Frank was now on the road, driving in darkness with the speaker activated on his cell phone. Mary Warren had read Will Call's e-mail and she knew a lengthy discussion was forthcoming. An essential element of their marriage was their ability to honestly talk things through, each firmly believing the other's ideas, plans, and desires were equally important as their own.

They talked during his drive home and continued their discussion late into the night. They listed on paper the pros and cons of another change of careers and assigned point values for each. Tallied up, the lopsided count favored staying right where they were, both with Frank's job and where they lived. But what number does one assign to a definite and persistent call of duty and service? He'd had it since grade school, when he read through some files located in the basement of his house that contained Coast Guard correspondence about his father's attempt to remain on active duty following the end of the Korean War. The Coast Guard was reducing its officer ranks following the war and his dad was let go—against his desires. Frank had wanted to fulfill his dad's desires. Now, Will Call Stimson presented him an opportunity to serve once again

when he'd always thought that once he left active duty, that was it, as had happened with his father. What would his dad think about this? Frank admitted he'd have stayed in the navy to at least 60 years of age (not 70, like Will Call had suggested) if he'd been allowed to serve that long. However, as an O-6 (with no realistic chance at promotion to admiral), he was limited to 30 years of service, an up-or-out policy he understood and supported, but didn't like.

Mary knew her husband well and suggested he apply for the DoD position, to see if he was even competitive for the job. If selected for an interview, he could then make a more informed assessment of what the assignment offered—and demanded. The interview went well, and Frank accepted DoD's offer of employment, never knowing if Will Call had any influence in the selection process. With the decision made, it was all ahead flank as he and Mary returned to the Washington, D.C. area and the familiar environment they had previously known when Frank was on active duty.

Midway through their first January back east, Frank Warren, late on a Friday evening, told his wife he needed a few hours at work the next morning to tie up some loose ends. "This is a holiday weekend," she replied. "You're going in on Saturday?"

"Just this one Saturday, Mary," he assured her.

1

Written in Chinese, the word crisis, is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.

-John F. Kennedy

Saturday
January 13, 2007

The Washington cold always finds its way through the layers of clothing arranged to thwart its assault. Ohio native Frank Warren, softened by numerous San Diego winters, bristled in the early morning breeze, head bowed, gloved hands thrust deep into the pockets of his overcoat, trudging toward his bus stop over hardened snow in the shadowy glow of occasional streetlights. Perhaps it felt colder since it was a Saturday, a three-day holiday weekend (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday was on Monday), and his presence at work was his own doing, a voluntary effort rather than his expected appearance on a normal work day.

There was an odd appeal to the prospect of uninterrupted work and quiet solitude, an atmosphere he expected this morning at the puzzle palace—the Pentagon. Mary had nodded knowingly when he'd informed her of his plans for this morning. She understood—and quietly admired—the ever-present determination to serve that

drove, even possessed, her husband. Temperatures that would cause the Michelin Man to shiver and the possibility of a snowstorm were minor inconveniences that failed to deter his drive.

The darkness and raw, threatening conditions could dampen the spirits of the most ardent of government employees. Frank's current mood and perspective were similarly impacted, as his thoughts drifted to Hawaiian beaches on a January layover, ankles deep in the warm sand of gently swirling Pacific waves rather than cold, icy snow and toes quickly losing their sensation.

The usual routine was to bus to the Vienna Metro station and ride the train to the Pentagon. It could take 45-55 minutes to get to work, including a change at the Rosslyn station from the Orange line to the Blue line. Driving to work was a non-starter; far too many type-A personalities lived in this area, all trying to cover too many miles in too many cars. They say your commute defines your life and lifestyle in the Washington, D.C. area; whoever "they" are, they are correct. Frank thought the DC area would be a wonderful place to reside if one could live wherever one wanted. The problem, of course, was most people could easily exceed their financial means with each step closer to Capitol Hill; the closer "in" one lives, the higher the cost of real estate. Since one's commute is so important, a common first subject when introduced to someone is where you live, and how you get to work. You'd think this was classified information the way people harbored the details of their commute to work. They believe the word will get out and "their" route will get saturated with more cars. Once the word "Metro" gets mentioned, there's no threat to them, and they revert to

normal, polite conversation. But you must get the commute thing settled first.

On this dark, cold, holiday Saturday, the usual commuters were at the Vienna station but in fewer numbers, which meant getting a seat should be no problem. All had the DC stare—a version of a zombie look—the government worker trudging off to the “salt mines.” The look reflected the routine of going to and from their government job, of filling a role within the hierarchy of the massive government machine. It could be seen in everyone—from GS-5s and -7s (General Schedule, the predominant pay scale for federal employees) all the way through the SESers (Senior Executive Service, equivalent to a general or admiral) to the political appointees and even the elected officials on Capitol Hill. They stand on the station platform waiting for the Metro train to arrive; when it does, the doors open, and there’s a great flourish of activity as all board and quickly scout out their favorite seat, which for Frank, is any seat. Then it’s off to the next station where the process repeats itself. When you arrive at your destination or a change station like Rosslyn, you’re a part of a mass movement as you head toward the next segment of your commuting experience. It’s the same every day: keep up, move with the flow, stay to the right on the escalators, maintain your game face, and be ready at the ticket scanner. You will be the subject of universal ire and disdain if your card fails at the scanner and the barriers do not open. Everyone is in a hurry, and these are influential people who have prominent issues to resolve. Keep your commuter face on and physical mannerisms under control: the burdens of keeping our free, democratic society operating smoothly weighs on each and everyone. Cubicles await with emails, faxes, reports, to-do lists, all

needing attention and resolution. Even on a Saturday, in January, on a three-day weekend.

WTOP is a Washington, D.C. area news and traffic talk radio station that usually ranks either number one or two among the most listened-to radio stations in the metro area. It competes with local easy listening stations but is the go-to station when traffic updates are a must. This morning, like most, Frank had his earbuds in and his iPod tuned to the station. The news updates included domestic and international events with traffic reports given every 10 minutes. Frank found that once at work, the traffic reports often provided a common topic of discussion with the staff and co-workers, easing the transition into the challenging issues of the day. Today, he pondered what the president faced each morning when he arrived at work, starting with the PDB, the President's Daily Briefing, prepared and personally delivered by the office of the Director of National Intelligence.⁵ Talk about issues to consider! On the other hand, there's someone with a great commute.

Among the news stories that morning, one grabbed Frank's attention. He listened carefully:

Reports from numerous sources indicate unusual activity by Iranian naval forces has been observed in the vicinity of the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Intelligence reports state several patrol boats and an Iranian submarine stationed at Bandar Abbas, on the southern coast of Iran, left early Friday morning, and are apparently headed to an area

west of the Strait. Additionally, the U.S. Navy's nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz*, currently operating in the eastern portion of the Persian Gulf following a recent port visit to Jebel Ali in the United Arab Emirates, is scheduled to transit the Strait of Hormuz sometime today or tomorrow, according to a navy source at the Pentagon. We'll have more updates on this situation as events unfold. Now with traffic on the 8's, here's WTOP's Jamie Anderson with your morning commute.

Frank switched off the iPod to consider what he'd just heard. He wondered what SecDef and the chiefs (members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) would think about this little development. As this thought crossed his mind, a familiar figure boarded the car.

Ah, yes—Joe 2-star. Frank had mixed feelings toward this naval officer, resplendent in his Navy Blues, adorned in his bridge coat with an admiral's gold shoulder boards, white scarf, admiral's hat situated squarely atop his perfectly groomed hair and shoes gleaming (most likely corfams; wipe them off with a moist cloth, and you're good to go). He possessed excellent posture, square shoulders, and that ever-present look of self-importance combined with natural grace and command. The whole package transmitted a clear message of ease and confidence with the problems and challenges of the world, which told everyone: you can relax—I'm here, I am in control, everything will be okay.

Rear Admiral Joseph Donaldson, United States Navy, former F-14 Tomcat squadron commanding officer, Air Wing 11 commander, and Battle Group commander. He was now the navy's director of air warfare, known in navy parlance as OPNAV N98, an unquestionably excellent job in the DC/Pentagon arena due to its important responsibilities and visibility. N98 bore responsibility for "resourcing the current vision for the future of naval aviation while also sustaining near-term readiness, modernizing the current aviation force while simultaneously advancing naval aviation's future capabilities" (per the navy's job description). In layman's terms, this naval officer scours the budgetary process for as large a share of the monetary pie as possible and then helps to decide where, in naval aviation, that money goes. There is never, ever, enough money to go around; no department ever has enough and never gets all it requests. It seems budgetary battles are always being fought in government—a part of daily life in the five-sided wonderland known as the Pentagon. How do you budget for a new aircraft—say, the F-35 Lightning—that takes years (approximately 20 years for the Lightning) from concept to IOC (initial operating capability) when your portion of the defense budget will be different each year? N98 is one of those positions that requires skill, knowledge, tact, experience, and the right disposition. One must have the ability to work through endless challenges, setbacks, funding shortfalls, and performance irregularities as new systems are developed and tested. Understating, it is a tough job.

Rear Admiral Joseph Donaldson was well suited for it. The guy was good, very good. He deserved his rank and current assignment; he'd earned them both. His call sign—

many pilots have one—coming up through the ranks, started with “Shooter.” While training in the F-14, Donaldson had a particularly good day in a 2-vs-1 dogfight. An ensign at the time, Donaldson “shot down” two aggressor aircraft during a syllabus event and subsequently earned that moniker. Later, however, while in the fleet, some thought his call sign should be changed to “2 chutes” after his second trip up the rails, when he ejected out of his Tomcat during a mission in his fleet squadron. Stories, some critical, circulated in naval aviation circles about those two ejections, but there was no hard evidence to back up the rumors. Donaldson, as far as Frank knew, was still called “Shooter” by his closest associates. Warren, while on active duty, had had his own personal associations with Joe 2-star.

Frank was the commanding officer of Air Anti-Submarine Squadron 29 (VS-29) when his initial experience with Donaldson occurred. They were on cruise in the Persian Gulf as part of Air Wing 11 embarked aboard USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN-72), *Lincoln's* first full deployment following her commissioning. Donaldson was, by that time, a lieutenant and a seasoned F-14 junior officer (JO) with one previous cruise under his belt. Warren was the pilot and aircraft commander of an S-3A Viking flying as the night recovery tanker during what turned out to be an eventful ten-plane recovery. Not only did the weather and sea state adversely affect flight operations that night, but the ship also had to contend with multiple surface vessels in the vicinity.

An aircraft carrier is not easy to identify at night by other ships due to its unusual shape and the location of its navigation lights. Carriers display international signals during flight operations—shapes (day) or lights (night)—

to indicate they are restricted in their ability to maneuver. The aircraft carrier steers the required course and plows through the water at the appropriate speed that produces approximately 25 knots of wind down its angled deck. Mother Nature, therefore, plays a significant role in the direction and speed of a carrier when conducting flight ops. The nighttime aircraft holding pattern—called the marshal pattern—can be established anywhere the ship desires, irrespective of the ship's course and speed, but the last 20 miles of the approach are aligned with the ship's angled deck. If the ship changes course, usually due to surface traffic but also if the natural winds change, aircraft on the straight-in final approach must adjust accordingly.

On this night, the factors that influence carrier flight operations—weather, sea state, and surface traffic—were all in play. A broken-to-overcast ceiling existed at 800 feet with cloud tops at about 3,500 feet; not that bad—more a nuisance and a distraction. The ship, however, had to make several course changes due to uncooperative surface traffic. That night other vessels were either confused by what they saw, or they chose not to give way when the rules of the road dictated they should. There were several wave-offs, or go-arounds, issued by the LSO's (landing signal officer) because some aircraft couldn't realign themselves in time with the changing final bearing (the magnetic alignment of the angled landing area). Everyone understood the drill—the safety of the ship always comes first. No aircraft carrier bridge team ever changes course when a plane is nearing for landing—unless it must. When that happens, it often leads to a wave-off commanded by the LSO. The pilot adds power, climbs, levels off at 1,200 feet, flies straight ahead of the ship and gets vectored around for another approach. The plane flies upwind, then

crosswind, downwind, and base leg, and is then vectored to the final bearing for another try, all of which consumes fuel.

Flying at 1,200 feet, in and out of thick clouds over the Persian Gulf, on the last recovery of the night, with multiple go-arounds, an occasional bolter (where the aircraft's arresting hook misses all the arresting wires) and an always-decreasing fuel state, a pilot might notice a slight involuntary flexing of the sphincter muscle and an ever-increasing grip on the control stick. Topping it off, someone "shits" in the wires, meaning a pilot fails to promptly clear the landing area following his "trap," or arrested landing. That pilot fusses about, trying to follow the directions of the yellow-shirted flight deck director frantically giving hand signals to raise the tailhook, now lower it to get free from the arresting wire, stay off your brakes, now raise the tailhook again, fold your wings, come straight ahead, turn slightly to the right, add some power, add some more power (indicated by the stomping of a foot) for a faster taxi speed. Then everyone on the radio hears the command: "Wave off, wave off," and the taxi director resumes a controlled, methodical manner, because there's no longer any need to expedite clearing the landing area. The plane about to land screams over the flight deck at full power in compliance with the LSO's wave off command. In this case, that aircraft, an F-14 Tomcat, was piloted by Lt. Donaldson.

Donaldson's was the last aircraft, other than Warren's, to be recovered, and due to his low fuel state, Warren was ordered to "hawk" the next approach: to maneuver the S-3 Viking, the airborne fuel tanker, to be in a position, relative to the F-14, that if a wave off or bolter occurred, the pilot (Lt. Donaldson) should be able to look up to his right—to

about the 2 o'clock position—and see the tanker to join on. The idea was to create a situation where a join up could be accomplished quickly, and in-flight refueling could begin immediately. It works like a champ in clear, daylight conditions. It's more challenging at night and in marginal weather conditions. Time is never your friend in these situations.

In this case, they caught a break as the ship sailed into a small clearing; the ship claimed it was intentional, but the pilots knew better. Warren hawked the Tomcat during his approach but it was ordered to wave-off due to a course change by the ship. Lt. Donaldson added power, started to climb, raised his landing gear, looked up and to his right and saw the S-3. He cautiously joined up, and as they climbed, they immediately went into some clouds.

Warren radioed, "212, I'll keep climbing to angels 4 (4,000 feet); we should be in the clear up there."

Donaldson acknowledged, "Roger that."

Passing 3,500 feet, they were out of the clouds, and leveled off at 4,000 feet. The Tomcat stayed on the left side of Warren's plane, which extended the refueling hose out of the buddy store hanging under its left wing. All S-3s had been plumbed with the necessary fuel lines to become airborne tankers; the buddy store was the device which contained the hose and basket that the receiver aircraft plugged into to receive gas.

The ship confirmed with Warren how much "give" they had: how much fuel the S-3 could transfer and still have enough for its own safe landing, maintaining a reasonable reserve. The Viking had 2,000 pounds to give and was ordered to transfer that amount to the F-14. The Tomcat lined up behind the tanker, added power and plugged in on

his first approach. Warren started a gentle left turn back toward the ship and fuel commenced flowing to the fighter.

Everything looked good; about 500 pounds had been transferred when, on the tanker's second radio, which had the squadron common frequency dialed in (not monitored by the ship), the call came, "Tanker, this is 212, you up?" The S-3's CoTac (copilot/tactical coordinator, a naval flight officer [NFO] strapped in the right seat) and Warren exchanged surprised looks with raised eyebrows. He replied, "We're up."

Tomcat 212 came back, "We're a little low on gas tonight; can you spare more than 2,000 pounds?" Shooter was asking for more gas than had been directed and was attempting to avoid any discussion on the topic, keeping the ship in the dark. More gas on board equals more options. Shooter had been waved off once and had bolted once (later, after a discussion with the LSO, changed to a hook skip, avoiding a negative input on his overall landing grades). Give him a few more pounds of gas? The tanker could oblige.

"We'll give you a little more—no problem." But that's where things got dicey. The S-3 planned to provide an extra 500 pounds of gas but miscalculated their fuel and gave Shooter 1,000 pounds of additional fuel—3,000 pounds total. Refueling complete, the controller vectored the Tomcat into the approach sequence, and the carrier's Air Ops requested an update of the tanker's fuel on board—and they fudged a bit, reporting more gas on board than actual. In the end, Shooter finally trapped aboard, following one more wave-off for what was leniently called a pitching deck (no adverse impact on his landing grades). The S-3 followed, by what most would say was more a coincidence than a landing. As the Viking started to cross

over the arresting wires, the bow of the carrier pitched downward, the stern raised up, and the entire ship seemed to rise upward. The combination of forces raised the 4th and final arresting cable up just enough to snag the tailhook of the S-3 and pulled them back to the flight deck, averting what they thought was a sure-fire, ugly looking bolter.

The LSO called out on the radio, "Gotcha, Viking—welcome aboard!"

"Thanks, Paddles, it's good to be here!" Warren eked out, his heart pounding as he viewed the aircraft's fuel totalizer. It registered the lowest amount of fuel he'd ever landed with, on land or an aircraft carrier. His CoTac sat in disbelief and silence, having never experienced anything resembling an arrestment like that.

As it turned out, Shooter had misrepresented his fuel state that night. He landed with much more fuel on board than he reported, and around an aircraft carrier, that was the height of unprofessionalism.

Frank kept mum about Shooter whose career continued to blossom. Donaldson had a kind of Teflon exterior to him—negative things didn't stick. Something about that bugged Frank.

Frank felt the Metro train slowing for another stop as the first rays of sunrise fought their way through the overcast skies. The doors of the car opened and, along with a penetrating shot of icy air and, —snow flurries! —in walked Sharon Fleming, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ASD for ISA). Sharon reported to the under secretary of defense for policy (USD(P)) through the principal deputy under secretary of defense (policy) PDUSD(P). Her work focused on matters regarding international security strategy and policy issues

related to the nations and international organizations of Europe (including NATO), the Middle East and Africa, and their governments and defense establishments. She also had oversight for security cooperation programs, including foreign military sales, in those regions. Her husband, Ronald Fleming, was a fifth-term congressman from Ohio's 12th district, located in the central part of this perennial swing state in presidential elections.

Sharon, from Worthington, Ohio, and Ron, from Newark (Ohio), met on the campus of The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, while pursuing their master's degrees—she in international relations and he in political science. Both had obtained their undergraduate education from Ohio State and became acquainted while taking a common graduate course. Sharon was hard not to notice, with cover-girl looks, a friendly, engaging personality and a razor-sharp mind that could easily assess competing issues and then formulate clear, uncomplicated policies. Ron Fleming, for his part, enjoyed some notoriety peculiar to the state of Ohio. On a freezing, overcast, late November Saturday afternoon the visiting University of Michigan Wolverines football team was playing the Ohio State Buckeyes in Columbus. Late in the fourth quarter, Ohio State was marching toward a possible game-winning touchdown when they fumbled deep in Michigan territory. The Maize and Blue, ahead by a score of 20-14, recovered the ball on their own 22-yard line, and the chill in the Horseshoe suddenly became more severe. Michigan called two running plays to milk the clock, netting two yards. On the second play, an Ohio State defensive back twisted an ankle and was helped off the field. Journeyman and perpetual second string and special teams player Ron Fleming was dispatched to replace the

injured Buckeye. The Michigan coaching staff, noting the substitution and inexperience of the replacement player, called a play-action pass play on third and eight from their own 24-yard line, a decision which fooled over 100,000 people in the stadium, millions more watching on TV, and especially Ron Fleming. However, the wide-open Michigan receiver turned his head a moment too soon and the tight spiral bounced off his chest into the waiting arms of the substitute defensive back. He scampered untouched into the end zone, the extra point kick was good, and Ron Fleming became the most well-known name in Ohio and throughout the sporting world. ESPN reruns of the play went on for days and included Fleming's after-game parade around the field on the shoulders of his ebullient teammates and adoring fans. After four years of near obscurity and one, single moment of glory—in a football game—Ron Fleming could have become governor of Ohio had an election occurred shortly after the win. The incumbent, along with the rest of the state, would have voted for him. In Ohio, if you shine in a victory over Michigan, you're each party's favorite person.

Sharon and Ron Fleming married after receiving their master's degrees, and Ron immediately ran for state senator and won. Sharon was also interested in politics, both at the state and federal level, with the Middle East a specific area of her concentration. Through her work on the Ohio governor's Economic Development staff, she sought to expand Ohio's reach into domestic and foreign markets. She traveled widely; several heads of state considered her a friend. When her husband won Ohio's 12th congressional district seat in Congress, Sharon continued to work on policy issues, first at the State Department and then at the White House. Staff associates

were amazed when Benjamin Netanyahu, who'd been Israel's prime minister and was, at the time, the leader of the opposition in the Knesset, phoned Sharon directly to thank her for her insights at a recent Oval Office meeting with the president of the United States.

Congressman Fleming, a seasoned, knowledgeable, well-liked and respected gentleman, listened to people and left one convinced he was interested in your opinion and point of view. There were not many of his kind still around. His wife, on the other hand, outwardly warm and gracious, harbored a caustic, even egotistical drive to continually prove her policy successes were due to her abilities and insights, not because of her physical attractiveness or her congressman-husband's standing. She was her own woman and was continuously intent on proving it.

From the rear of the Metro car, Frank noticed that Sharon sat beside Joe Donaldson. Frank reflected on the peculiar and sometimes propitious social and professional dynamic that existed among the political and military spheres in Washington, D.C. Years earlier, freshman Congressman Fleming and his wife attended a White House social function held in honor of Great Britain's first sea lord and chief of naval staff. Guests included senior U.S. military officers, especially from the navy, plus selected members of Congress, including Congressman Fleming, one of the newest members of the House Armed Services Committee. Great Britain's ambassador to the United States and his wife desired to bring their single, mid-20s aged daughter to the event and asked the White House to provide an escort.

White House Military Social Aides, a cadre of 40-45 volunteer, single, male and female, mid-grade (O-2 through O-4) officers, stationed locally, assist the president with

diplomatic protocol at state and social events. As a lieutenant, Joseph Donaldson was assigned to the staff of the vice chief of naval operations and as a member of this prestigious and thoroughly vetted group, was selected to accompany the British ambassador's daughter. The pair immediately hit it off and mingled naturally among the many senior guests, especially with the new congressman from Ohio and his wife. Sharon Fleming and the ambassador's daughter exited the White House arm-in-arm at the conclusion of the evening followed by the congressman and the navy's rising star who were engaged in close conversation.

Years later, early in Frank's tenure as a civilian in the defense department, Sharon Fleming warmly greeted her former war college colleague when they ran into each other on the Metro en route to the Pentagon. They quickly reviewed their respective personal and professional activities during the intervening years since they'd last talked and discovered, due to their assignments, they'd occasionally see one another at work. A month or two later, a Pentagon Starbucks provided the setting where Frank and, now, Rear Admiral, Joe Donaldson renewed their acquaintance.

All three were headed to work, each with a similar objective in mind: in the (relative) quiet of a Saturday morning, make a dent in the never-ending parade of issues that required their attention. Frank assumed that neither Sharon Fleming nor Joe 2-star noticed his presence on the Metro that morning. He was wrong.



Retired naval officer Frank Warren quits his airline job and rejoins the defense department as a civilian. In the White House Situation Room, he challenges CentCom's plan to thwart Iran's naval forces in the Persian Gulf. Surprisingly, the president adopts Frank's alternative approach, but both sides' assumptions of the outcome are flawed.

Target: NIMITZ

by Gary Carter

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