

*Former naval officer Captain Gary Carter, U.S. Navy (Ret), recounts events from his over 40 years of flying in the U.S. Navy and Delta Air Lines. CHECKLIST COMPLETE provides a compelling voyage through one person's exciting life in aviation.*

**CHECKLIST COMPLETE:**  
**Stories from my life in aviation**  
By Gary Carter

**Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com**

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11717.html?s=pdf>  
**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

# CHECKLIST COMPLETE

A watercolor illustration of a Delta airplane flying over a carrier ship. The airplane is blue and white, with "DELTA" and "FOUR ZERO ONE" visible on its side. It is flying towards the left. Below it, a carrier ship is visible on the ocean. A rainbow is in the background.

Stories from my life in aviation

By the author of *Target: Nimitz*

**GARY CARTER**

CAPTAIN, U.S. NAVY (RET)

Copyright © 2021 Gary Carter

ISBN: 978-1-64719-422-2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2021

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Carter, Gary  
Checklist Complete: Stories from my life in aviation  
by Gary Carter  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2021903971

## Table of Contents

Beginnings.....	1
First Impressions.....	7
Gift Trap.....	19
Photo Op.....	35
A Moving Experience.....	43
Louisiana Lightning.....	59
Parts Run.....	69
This Is Personal.....	91
Close Call.....	105
Command at Sea.....	115
Night Flight to Helena.....	125
Charter Flights.....	151
Last Flight.....	165
The \$3,000 Lunch.....	171
Remarks at the retirement ceremony of Commander Bill McNerney, U.S. Navy Reserve Joint Base McGuire/Dix/ Lakehurst, New Jersey - January 12, 2020.....	181
Lifetime maxims.....	193
Acknowledgements.....	197

## **Beginnings**

I arrived on this planet in Detroit, Michigan, my parents' third and last child, two sisters having preceded me. I am told we soon moved to Stoneham, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, where my dad, a Coast Guard officer, was stationed on a ship. After his service in the Coast Guard, dad joined State Farm Insurance. As he advanced in his career, we moved to Cleveland, Ohio, then to Toledo, then Worthington, and finally to Newark, Ohio, about 30 miles east of Columbus.

In Newark, my life began to change. In high school, I dated a girl whose brother was a plebe (freshman) at the U.S. Naval Academy. I met him over the Christmas break of my junior year; we talked about his experiences at the academy and the nuances of the application process. That spring (1968), I applied for admission to the academy. Nearly a year later, in February of my senior year of high school, I received a rejection letter from the Naval Academy, citing below minimum SAT scores as the reason for my rejection. I thought I had a fair chance at being accepted at USNA but knew those SAT scores might hold me back. They did. (I was accepted at Southern Methodist University, Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and Grove City College in Pennsylvania.)

As I recall, it was a Thursday later that same month, when my high school basketball coach asked me, during practice, if I was still interested in attending the Naval Academy. He had heard I had been turned down, but he inquired anyway. In a gruff, dismissive tone, I said I still wanted to go, and I reminded him of the rejection notice I'd received. He nodded, and practice continued.

On Sunday afternoon, three days later, the USNA plebe basketball coach rang the doorbell at our house in Newark. I was confused by his presence. He, like my coach, did not seem to understand I had been turned down by the academy. I even held up the card that contained the letter "R" (rejected) under the SAT category and an "R" under final determination. It baffled me. My 18-year-old mind was so filled with thinking of rejection, I could not open it to the reality of the academy coach coming to Ohio, from Maryland, to talk to me.

Once I stopped arguing and listened, I realized I still had a chance. There was an alternate path to the academy through the Naval Academy Preparatory School (NAPS). It was a part of Bainbridge Naval Training Center (now closed) in Port Deposit, Maryland, on the bluffs of the Susquehanna River, between Baltimore and Philadelphia. (NAPS is currently located on the grounds of the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.) The plebe basketball coach explained the NAPS program and emphasized I would not lose any NCAA basketball eligibility at the academy by playing an extra year at NAPS. He was speaking to my heart.

This journey started when I at last listened to two basketball coaches who were trying to help me. The decision about my post-high school plans finally came to a choice between Grove City College, a well-respected school that expressed a mild interest in my basketball skills, and NAPS. In my teenaged mind, the rub against NAPS and USNA was the ten-year commitment I'd be making: one year at NAPS + 4 years at USNA + 5 years of required service after the academy. I would be 28 years old when I could first leave the navy if I chose to. My father, from whom I never received bad advice, noted, on the other hand, I would have guaranteed employment until age 28, I'd receive an excellent education from a prestigious institution, and I could serve my country, embroiled in the Vietnam War, in a noble cause. Both my parents tried to leave the decision in my hands, without tipping theirs. About NAPS and the Naval Academy, the most my dad would offer was, "You could do a lot worse." He failed to conceal the glint in his eyes as he considered the extraordinary opportunity I had before me.

NAPS was made to order for individual high school seniors, selected fleet sailors, and marines who showed promising aptitude. We would take five classes each day: 2 math, 2 English, and a science class. Math classes, for example, started with algebra 1, on the assumption everyone had experienced that level of mathematics. We ended the year well into calculus. We would also retake the SAT—four times, if I remember correctly. My test

scores improved each time, well above academy minimums.

Before any of that, however, I had to join the navy. One week after my high school graduation, my mother and I drove to a naval reserve center in Columbus, where I enlisted in the U.S. Navy. After boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, north of Chicago, I reported to NAPS for a year of academic classes, military life, basketball, and growing up. At graduation in May (1970), I received a Secretary of the Navy nomination to Annapolis, and a month later, on June 29, I took an oath as a member of the Naval Academy's Class of 1974. At the start, 39 individuals from various walks of life comprised my company at the academy. After four years together, 20 of us graduated on June 5, 1974. For my entire class of roughly 1,420 members, approximately 918 graduated. Later that month, I reported as an Ensign, U.S. Navy, to Pensacola, FL, my first duty station, to begin flight training.

I received my wings of gold, on August 29, 1975, at Naval Air Station Beeville, Texas, and reported to Air Anti-Submarine Squadron Four One (VS-41) located at Naval Air Station North Island in San Diego, CA, for S-3A Viking training. In April 1976, I checked aboard VS-29, one of several S-3A fleet squadrons based at NAS North Island, and in August we departed for an eight-month deployment as a part of Air Wing 14 onboard USS *Enterprise* (CVN-65). This was the first Western Pacific and Indian Ocean deployment for the S-3A Viking.

The narratives in this book start with an event that occurred at the beginning of my time at the Naval Academy and conclude with my remarks at the retirement ceremony of one of the most exceptional individuals and naval officers I have ever known.

These stories are primarily from years in aviation and thousands of flying hours (16,000+), both military and civilian, enjoying the uniqueness of a lifetime in aviation. As is often said about aviation, experience is a hard teacher. First comes the test, then the lesson. Enjoy!



## **First Impressions**

We have all heard the phrase, “There is no second chance for a first impression.” That is stating the obvious, and it suggests one should begin a new relationship, endeavor, or activity on a robust and positive note. People tend to remember their first encounter with someone. Of course, this cuts both ways; negative impressions cast a long shadow, too, maybe longer than positive ones.

The swearing-in ceremony of the new class of midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy culminates a hectic day of activity for new midshipmen. In just hours, one is transformed into and outfitted as a member of the brigade, and the oath one takes officially recognizes your status as a Midshipman, Fourth Class, U.S. Navy.

During the ensuing two months that comprise plebe summer, the days start early, and many demands are placed on the new midshipmen as they transition from individuals into one cohesive military unit. Besides the omnipresence of demanding upperclassmen, the heat and humidity of an Annapolis summer is an additional force with which plebes must contend, both then, and now.

Meals were always an adventure, where getting something to eat seemed to be a low priority. Plebes were subjected to a barrage of questions from their squad leader and other First Class midshipmen (seniors, called Firsties) who administered the plebe summer training program. We

plebes mastered the technique known as “three chews and a swallow” as it seemed whenever we inserted any food into our mouths, a question came our way: “Carter, what are the movies showing in town?” “Sir, the movie at the Circle Theater is ...” All tables in the mess hall (now called King Hall) sat 12 people, two chairs on each end, and four chairs along the sides, facing each other. There were usually no more than two Firsties seated at the table during plebe summer, and often just one; plebes occupied the rest of the seats. Of course, plebes passed all servings to the First Class, and then we each took our portion and passed the item on.

When the brigade re-formed at the conclusion of plebe summer and after summer training activities for the upperclassmen, seating at meals took on a different look. Now there were two Firsties at one end, two second class (juniors) midshipmen sitting at the opposite end, four youngsters (third class midshipmen, or sophomores) on one side, and four plebes (the scum of the earth) facing them on the opposite side of the table. All in all, it was one big happy group of guys (this was the summer of 1970; women first joined the service academies in the summer of 1976), ready to feast on that meal’s offerings, in a manner of speaking.

Eight of the 12 midshipmen were relaxed and talking among themselves. No one knew us plebes, but the youngsters were also unknown, at least in their new company. At the time, after completing plebe year, newly promoted Third Class midshipmen started the next

academic year in a new company, to get a fresh start with different second and first class midshipmen. So the third class midshipmen observed us, looking over the “new meat” across from them, and introduced themselves to the second and first class gents with whom they would spend the next year. As brand-new upperclassmen, youngsters generally abided with the unwritten guidance to be seen but not heard from. We plebes stood at attention, our eyes “in the boat” (straight ahead), readying ourselves for the onslaught of questions from the upperclassmen. We had been issued “Reef Points” on induction day, a booklet that contained numerous items about the academy, historical events involving former naval leaders, “yard gouge,” or descriptions of the various monuments and fixtures arrayed throughout the academy grounds, and the like. Plebes were required to state verbatim certain portions of the text if requested by an upperclassman. Additionally, there was the standard, daily requirement to recite that day’s officers of the watch (5 of them), movies in town (at the time, four movie theaters), and the number of days to playing Army in football, Christmas leave, the Second Class Ring Dance, and First Class graduation. Of course, a plebe must also know the menu for the forthcoming meal and the one following; in this case, the dinner menu and tomorrow morning’s breakfast menu. (These were published and distributed weekly.) Also thrown into the mix, a plebe had to know three articles from the front page, and three articles from the sports page, of either the *Washington Post* or the *Baltimore Sun*, one of which (our

choice) was placed outside each room before reveille every morning. For example:

“Hey Carter, what’s going on in the world today?”

“Sir, Jose Velasco Ibarra was re-elected president of Ecuador.”

“Like I care—next!”

“Sir, Indonesian president Suharto visited the Netherlands.”

“Jesus, Carter, try something in the United States; how about some sports?”

“Sir, the new Ontario Motor Speedway opened in Ontario, California, with the first running of the California 500. Jim McElreath crossed the finish line two seconds ahead of Art Pollard.”

“Stock car racing? Are you sh..ting me? Next!”

“Sir, after playing a National League record 1,117 consecutive major league baseball games, Chicago Cubs outfielder Billy Williams asked to sit out.”

“You a Cubs fan, Carter?” [A no-win question; I’ll be wrong regardless of my answer.]

“I like to keep track of how they’re doing, sir.”

“You from Chicago, Carter?”

“No, sir. Ohio, sir.”

“Did I ask you where you’re from, Carter? No, I didn’t. I asked if you were from Chicago. Just answer the f..king question and don’t volunteer s..t. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Firstie paused, glanced away, shook his head, and muttered something. I'd testify I heard "stupid ass plebe," or some such comment. As the moment of exasperation passed, he returned his focus to me:

"Okay, Carter, where in Ohio are you from?" This question lacked any element of sincerity or interest.

"Newark, sir."

"Oh, that's interesting. *Never heard of it!* So why do you follow the Cubs?"

"I'll find out, sir." [Plebes responded to questions with only specified, approved answers. We did not rate not knowing something. I had no allegiance to the Chicago Cubs, but I checked on them periodically.]

"Yeah, you do that. So, how *are* they doing?"

"They're 72-66, two games behind Pittsburgh in the National League East, sir."

"Oh, how exciting. So, how many days until we beat Army?"

"Sir, there are 83 days until we beat Army, sir."

[On November 28, 1970, at John F. Kennedy Stadium in Philadelphia, Navy beat Army 11-7. Navy had last won the game three years before, when the Class of 1971 (now First Class midshipmen during my plebe year) were themselves, plebes. This pattern would repeat, as Navy lost the next two football games against Army but won again on December 1, 1973 51-0 (still the largest margin of victory of the Army-Navy series) during my First Class year.]

"And when do I get out of this place?"

"Sir, there are 269 days until First Class graduation, sir."

"Can't come soon enough."

*"You got that right!"* (Said only in my mind.)

The entire brigade of midshipmen—around 4,200 of us—ate together in the mess hall three times a day. In the warm, humid days of early September, numerous large fans positioned throughout the immense, T-shaped room stirred the air but provided little cooling. [King Hall, like Bancroft Hall, the midshipmen dormitory (the world's largest) is now air conditioned.]

The privilege of rank clearly displayed itself at meals. The first class were always offered their choice of each menu item first, followed by the second class mids, then the youngsters, and finally us lowly plebes. Plebes facilitated the passing of servings, shuffling food from one end of the table to the other, to the youngsters across from them, and then picking among the remains for themselves. If pies or cakes were on the menu, plebes sliced the dessert into 12 equal parts, or nearly so, because you know who ended up with the smallest slices if they were not identical. Need the ketchup? Plebes passed it to you.

My classmates and I learned the art of food distribution during our summer of 1970 plebe training. With the new academic year about to start, the entire brigade assembled in the mess hall, and, after a few welcoming remarks by the brigade commander, he concluded with "Brigade, seats." We complied, sitting after

the upper classes took their seats. We sat at attention, using the entire chair seat but not the chair back. [This was a new policy; previously, a plebe could sit on only three inches of the seat.] This Sunday evening meal was our first with other upperclassmen present at the table. The brigade had returned. The real fun was about to begin.

When seated, the entire brigade burst into a cacophony of verbiage, like an out-of-tune orchestra, as over 4,000 midshipmen took their seats. But in truth, only around 3,000 of them (the upperclassmen) were talking (some would argue “barking” is a better term); plebes merely responded. The fans hummed and propelled warm, moist air about the vast mess hall, cooling no one, particularly plebes. It felt like the seniority system even applied to the air in the mess hall; nothing felt cool around me. Three perspiring classmates and I sat at attention, facing four youngsters, with two second class mids to our right and two Firsties to our left. I was on the left end, which meant I would be offering the menu items to the first class. Mess men appeared out of numerous places throughout the enormous mess hall, pushing large carts carrying trays of food, 12 servings on each. They placed the trays on the table or in the hands of eager plebes, who quickly passed it toward the first class end—toward me. I held the tray while the Firsties made their selections, then my classmates shuffled the offering toward the second class, who loaded their plates with the main course. The youngsters followed suit, then society’s lowest form of existence (we plebes) divvied up the remains. By now, the

Firsties were “encouraging” us to increase our rate of production, to speed the plow, to get the lead out, to remove our heads from our rectal areas; in short, just where the “heck” was the next course? “On its way, sir,” someone replied, as a large aluminum bowl of applesauce along with a serving spoon quickly came my way. Each First Class took a scoop, and the Firstie nearest me handed the bowl back for passing to the other end of the table. That is when all hell broke loose.

Instead of passing the bowl to my classmate beside me, I inexplicably reverted to the plebe summer routine: after the Firstie (or Firsties) at the end of the table had been served, the first plebe took a serving of the particular course and then passed the tray or bowl to the next plebe. Somehow, that night *I took a scoop of applesauce*, for some tragic and unexplainable reason, and *then* started to hand the bowl to my classmate beside me. I’d barely returned the serving spoon to the bowl when the heavens parted, the world erupted, fire and brimstone engulfed me, lightning and thunder rumbled from the ceiling (from the “overhead,” to be more nautically precise), and I entered a deep, dark hole from which there was no escape. For the briefest moment, I thought I could rectify the catastrophe by returning my serving of applesauce to the bowl. My right arm muscles flinched ever so slightly when I considered moving the spoon back toward my plate, but I thought better of it, thinking I would just make a bad situation worse. Eight “impartial” observers, eyes nearly popping out of their heads and jaws dropped to their

chests in disbelief, saw the reflex, and simultaneously raised their incredulous voices in a chorus of “No,” and “Don’t do it.” The youngsters then sat in stunned silence, gasping for air, trying to fathom the incredible display of stupidity they had just witnessed. They looked at each other and then back at my plate, convincing themselves that yes, plebe Carter had stepped in it with both feet. The two second class midshipmen at the other end of the table exploded into anger, angst, and resentment, chastising me for usurping their rights to be served next, after the Firsties.

The two First Class midshipmen, closest to me at my end of the table, simply could not believe their eyes. Briefly, they seemed to find my brazen disregard for the rights and rituals, established over the 125 years the Naval Academy had existed, to be slightly comical. I thought they tried to stifle a snicker at my extraordinary display of insubordination. My assessment laughably missed the mark. They *had* to react more strenuously than their second class brethren; thus, they loaded and fired both barrels in righteous indignation, tag-teaming me in a stunning and unrelenting personal assault. I rated it; I caused it; I was solely responsible for it.

Food distribution around the table had temporarily halted during the onslaught, and thankfully growling upper class stomachs overcame the momentary pause in food disbursement. I couldn’t stop sweating; it felt like a heat lamp had been turned directly on me. As the meal wore on, there was a subtle decline in the questions,

insults, invectives, slights, personal denigrations, disparagement of my parents for producing such an idiot, and inquiries into whether I could confirm the true identity of my biological father. It was unrelenting—and well it should have been. I'd broken one of the school's time-tested institutional norms and figuratively thrust my middle finger at the upperclassmen at the table, and by extension, the entire Brigade of Midshipmen, the U.S. Naval Academy, all Academy alumni, and the U.S. Navy in general. I thought that was stretching things a bit, but I was in no position to debate the issue.

All of this, one might ask, *over a scoop of applesauce?* Oh, yes—this was too blatant, too egregious, too glaring an error not to expand and expound on its effects on all of humanity and civilization as we know it. This transgression was of epic, even biblical proportions, with connotations and consequences commensurate to the crime.

Not surprisingly, I was the topic of conversation and the center of attention for weeks to come—precisely the antithesis of what a plebe wants. One of the Firsties ordered me to “come around” for “the rest of my life.”

A “come around” was an order to appear at an upperclassman's room, in an inspection-ready uniform, before the formation that precedes each meal. The plebe knew he would be grilled on all required knowledge. Evening “come around” was at 1800 (6:00 p.m.); evening meal formation was at 1830 (6:30 p.m.).

The laws of thermodynamics applied to my mealtime classmates: if I was garnering all the heat, they were not, and they knew it. I had created an unfortunate situation for myself, and yes, while that was too bad, they thought, better him than us. Gradually, time moved on, as it always does, and the spotlight slowly shifted among the other plebes. But for several weeks, three times a day, in the sweatshop known as the mess hall, I sat with the same upperclassmen, the same classmates, at the same table, in the same seat, going through the constant ritual, meal after meal.

Plebe year is a challenge on its own, and it is harder if one creates an opportunity for extra scrutiny. That night felt like the first day of hunting season, with every hunter (the upperclassmen) amazed at their prey's unconscionable actions. I weathered the storm of my own making, an easily avoidable error that, even today, some 50 years after the event, I get a slight twinge of uneasiness in my body whenever applesauce is on the table.

All my classmates and I wanted to start strong when the brigade returned and get off on the right foot; we sought to create a positive and lasting first impression. I doubt any of them could top the impact I made that evening, and none of them would want to. In aviation jargon, I lost situational awareness for a moment, which can be costly, even fatal, when flying. In some cases, that is true on the ground, too.



## **Photo Op**

Following my first fleet tour in VS-29, I served as a pilot instructor from 1978-1981 in Air Anti-Submarine Squadron Forty-One (VS-41), the navy's S-3A Viking Fleet Readiness Squadron, located at Naval Air Station North Island in San Diego, CA. One day my boss, the operations officer, returned from a meeting with the squadron's commanding officer (CO) with a massive grin on his face and announced, "The skipper wants pictures of VS-41 S-3A aircraft with Mount Rushmore in the background." The CO tasked Ops with developing a plan to fly S-3s to Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota, near Mount Rushmore. The sole purpose of the trip was to conduct a photoshoot of S-3s in formation: a four-plane diamond (à la the Blue Angels) and a two-plane section, flying by the famed monument. Prints would then be made available for sale to all squadron personnel.

The CO was not floating an idea or thought; this was an order. Dismissed were any attempts to voice reasonable and obvious objections to such an excursion, i.e., costs, appropriate use of assets, personnel, and taxpayer money. (Admittedly, we junior officers didn't protest too much!)

Ultimately, we decided to fly 5 S-3s to Ellsworth: four aircraft for the formation fly-bys, and one plane to haul the enlisted photographer who would record the event. I had

to assume the sailor handling the camera in the front right seat of the S-3 was ejection seat qualified, but that issue was handled far above my lieutenant paygrade.

Concerns over fuel costs for five aircraft to complete this roadshow were discarded with comments like, "We'll find the money somewhere," and "Don't worry about it." So, the occupiers of the lower rungs of seniority's ladder—like me—didn't. However, pilots would have to pay for one night's lodging at the air force base and pay their meal expenses. With these conditions in force, we solicited volunteers from the squadron's cadre of pilot instructors for this "training mission." Pilots inundated the Schedules office volunteering for the mission. I worked in Schedules, so naturally, I made the cut.

On a warm summer day, five S-3A Viking jets launched out of North Island and joined up for the flight to Ellsworth. We had received permission from the U.S. Park Service to conduct our operation in the vicinity of Mount Rushmore the next day, a Friday, from 9-9:30 a.m. All aircraft landed safely at Ellsworth, and after shutting down our engines and securing the aircraft, we started to walk toward base operations.

Everyone's eyes were drawn to a nearby air force B-52 Stratofortress, a vast, high-altitude bomber that has been in the air force inventory since 1955. This immense, impressive airplane is 159 feet, 4 inches long (football fields are 160 feet wide). The wingspan totals 185 feet. There are eight Pratt & Whitney engines, grouped in four pairs of two. Each engine produces 17,000 pounds of

thrust; our S-3 engines generated 9,275 pounds of thrust. It has an unrefueled range of well over 8,000 miles, but with aerial refueling, range is limited only by crew endurance. The B-52 can carry 70,000 pounds of ordnance; the maximum takeoff weight of an S-3 Viking was 53,500 pounds. It is no wonder this beast captured our attention, so much that someone suggested we stroll over and take a closer look. And why not? How many more times in our lives would we be this close to such a breathtaking aircraft? With mouths agape and eyes bulging, we all started toward the enticing bomber, flight gear loosely hanging on our bodies and overnight bags in hand.

As we began to take in the technological and engineering marvel parked before us, none of us looked down at the tarmac; why would we? All we'd see were acres of cement and all kinds of painted lines in various colors arranged in meaningless, abstract forms. Navy eyes, we soon realized, see things differently than air force eyes.

In a flash, air force personnel, in numerous vehicles with sirens blaring and lights flashing, descended on us, sidearms drawn and pointed at us, barking orders for us to cease and desist from our intrusive tactics. The eleven of us (10 pilots, 2 per aircraft, plus the photographer) stopped walking and stood motionless. When it was obvious we posed no threat, one of us asked, "What's the problem?" Thus commenced the dress-down of a lifetime, similar to the scolding of children. Every one of the ten to twelve Air Force military policemen (MPs) began talking at

once. They were gesturing and sweeping their arms and weapons at us, pointing at the lines on the tarmac and toward the nearby colossus—the B-52—the source of our admiration and awe.

This aircraft, unknown to us, happened to be in alert status. We ascertained from snippets of their collective tirade we had violated the standoff perimeter surrounding the B-52. Soon we realized this particular air force plane was a part of the United States' strategic defense force (a triad: submarines, land-based missiles, and air assets), which is always on guard. This B-52, as luck would have it, was a designated go-bird, like other B-52s stationed elsewhere; it was preflighted and loaded with armaments with a flight crew nearby, ready to launch if needed. We had stepped inside some invisible (to us) minimum protective boundary surrounding the Stratofortress; if we'd studied watercolors more closely when we were younger, the artwork displayed on the tarmac might have made more sense!

The scene might have been humorous if the military police had not been so galvanized, threatening, and energetic. They wore reflective sunglasses; all had bloused trousers tucked neatly into perfectly shined boots (I swear you could eat a meal on them, they were so clean and shiny). Their starched shirts and pants contained stiff military creases, and regular visits to the gym were evident in their physical appearance. We silently absorbed the onslaught, waiting until their barbs began to dissipate. Once they had spent their emotional ammunition, our Ops

officer, the senior pilot and officer in charge, apologized profusely for the intrusion.

Duly cautioned and chastised, we, the offending naval aggressors, began retreating from our wayward ways—we stepped back at most five feet—and started a more circuitous route toward base operations. Then, an odd transformation began to occur. One of our group asked one of their group a question about the B-52. All of us, still wearing our flight gear, slowed to listen to the MP. He holstered his weapon and began what could now be called a civil discourse between military professionals about the B-52. Interest mounted, we asked more questions, and with the threat marginalized and order restored, military brothers in arms were soon sharing experiences about their chosen professions. This information free for all culminated with what we hoped for all along: an invitation to go onboard the B-52, escorted by the very people who threatened our lives earlier. It turned out *our* B-52, technically in alert status, was not in any imminent launch status, and our tormentors of moments before became our tour guides. We climbed aboard and looked in amazement at the combination of a 25-year-old aircraft (at the time) upgraded with state of the art (at the time) avionics and navigation equipment. We had great difficulty comprehending the size and scope of the aircraft. The unanimous conclusion: the B-52 was, and continues to be, an amazing aircraft.

That night the navy delegation, including the enlisted photographer, had dinner and adult beverages at the base

officer's club. We found a photograph display of various high-ranking air force "bubbas"—arrayed along a corridor—too tempting a target, so we removed many of them for safekeeping in our rooms. Not surprisingly, air force brethren dining at the same facility failed the humor test and demanded we return them, which we did—the next morning. First, it's multi-colored lines on cement, then missing pictures on walls; kind of an excitable crowd, the air force.

After returning the framed photographs Friday morning, we reviewed our flying plan, previously briefed in detail at North Island, and manned our jets. On a picture-perfect morning (no pun intended; it really was), all five aircraft received approval for takeoff, and we joined up near the Mount Rushmore monument. At 9:00 a.m., with no radio clearance but possessing a letter of permission from the park service, we commenced numerous flybys, first in a four-plane, diamond formation, followed by two-plane sections. Everyone flew in a circular pattern: the photo bird placed itself at just the right spot, allowing one to two seconds of photo opportunity with each pass the S-3s made. The photo pilot radioed positioning guidance to the formation planes, and formation pilots offered their suggestions as well. Everyone became an expert on formation flying and proper positioning: "#2, you're too far forward;" "#3, back up a little;" "slot, you're too close;" or "you're too far away." And so it went. Unfortunately, no one, except the lead pilots, had the opportunity to embrace the monument's

magnitude and greatness, especially given our unique vantage point. The wingmen's eyes were always locked onto the lead aircraft, trying to maintain a perfect position. I was surprised at how quickly 30 minutes passed. Soon we were all back at Ellsworth, and with engines shut down, we refueled our aircraft and conducted a debriefing. The photographer was confident he captured some good shots, but who knew? (There were no digital cameras in 1980!)

With the mission complete, we were ready to return to North Island. Except we didn't. One crew wanted to go to McCord AFB near Tacoma, Washington. Another crew said they wanted to fly to Pensacola, Florida. A third said they were going east somewhere. The Ops Officer shrugged his shoulders and ordered everyone to return to North Island by Sunday evening. Two aircraft and crews (me included) decided to return to San Diego.

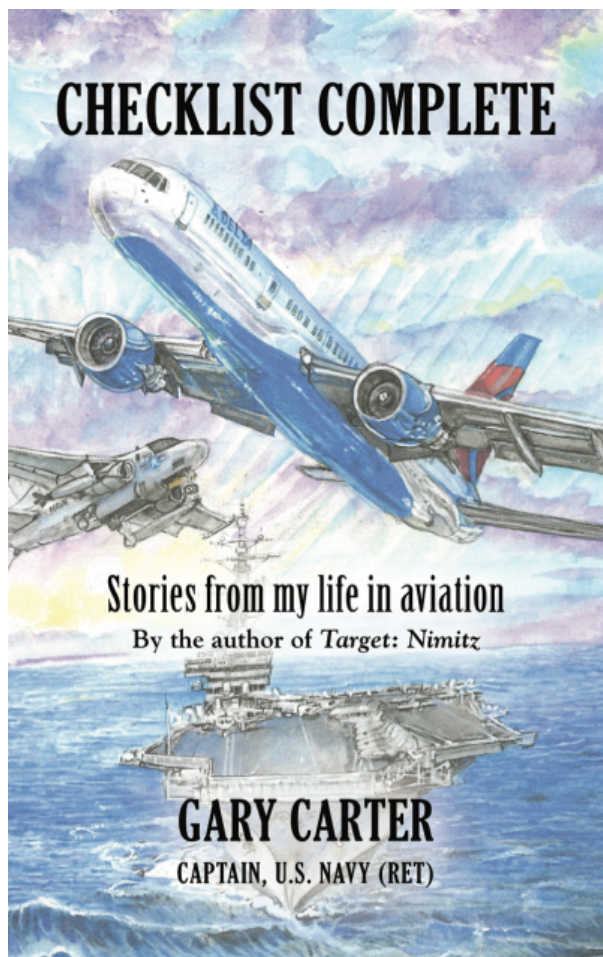
In retrospect, I question the wisdom of conducting this event. Words like pretentious, ostentatious, and foolhardy come to mind as we accomplished no student training, VS-41's core purpose of existence. We used assets and fuel to achieve what was arguably a frivolous objective. We removed ten instructors and five jets from the squadron's inventory for days; certainly, syllabus training had to suffer. I did not feel that way then, and I, like everyone else, had a great time. The photos turned out beautifully, and my parents, in-laws, and countless others—in and out of the navy—were exceedingly grateful for our efforts.

I no longer have an I-love-me wall or a wall of fame where I mounted various military-related certificates,

### *Checklist Complete*

diplomas, and pictures. However, my 20x24 inch framed photograph of four S-3s in a diamond formation (I'm number 3, the left wingman) flying by Mount Rushmore rests comfortably in my basement, inviting my grandchildren's questioning gaze. I am ready with a story when they ask!





*Former naval officer Captain Gary Carter, U.S. Navy (Ret), recounts events from his over 40 years of flying in the U.S. Navy and Delta Air Lines. CHECKLIST COMPLETE provides a compelling voyage through one person's exciting life in aviation.*

**CHECKLIST COMPLETE:**  
**Stories from my life in aviation**  
By Gary Carter

**Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com**

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11717.html?s=pdf>  
**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**