



USS NASSAU (LHA-4)
FPO NEW YORK 09557

IN REPLY REFER TO:

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1700
20 April 1981

Dear Families and Friends,

It was only a week ago today that we sailed from Norfolk. In some ways, the days have seemed to fly by with never enough time to do all the things that need doing! When I think of all that we've learned and accomplished it seems much longer. And then when we think of our loved ones now so many miles from us, it seems that weeks must have gone by.

As I write this to you, we are about 300 miles southeast of the Azores Islands in the eastern part of the North Atlantic. We'll be passing within about 50 miles of the Naval Base at Rota, Spain on the day after tomorrow, as we prepare to pass through the Straits of Gibraltar. Although we don't plan to stop in Rota, our ship's helicopter will be making a trip in to the base to pick up mail, a few supplies, and to deliver outgoing mail including this letter to the Fleet Post Office. You can imagine how much all hands are looking forward to mail call on Wednesday.

To bring you up to date, especially those of you who don't live in the Norfolk area, we did in fact sail on Monday April 13th as planned. For a while it looked like the repairs on the side of the ship might delay us a matter of hours or even an extra day, but Norfolk Naval Shipyard personnel worked 24 hours a day the weekend before our departure, and we sailed with a completely seaworthy ship (if a little wet paint doesn't matter...) For those of you who haven't heard, we damaged the port side about 6 feet above the waterline while pulling in to pier 5 on April 9th. A sudden and remarkably poorly-timed wind gust was more than we or our tugs alongside could correct for. The damage was minor, but still a bad enough bump to require repair before our Trans-Atlantic trip.

Speaking of our trip across the Atlantic, the miserable weather we had planned to leave behind in Norfolk managed to follow us almost all the way to Spain! Cloudy skies, periods of near gale winds and rough seas were the rule as we made our way eastward, with the flight deck pitching and rolling enough on two of those days that we had to curtail planned flight operations. Seasickness seemed to be at a minimum, as most of the crew found their "sealegs" by the second or third day underway. But there were good days too, and we've had our fair share of whales and dolphins...and even a rainbow in the moonlight one very early morning. And Easter was a very special day for us, starting with a beautiful sunrise service on the flight deck.

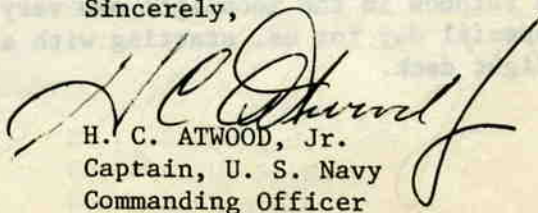
The time has been well spent. We've drilled at our General Quarters Watch Stations many times (the first time for many of our junior men) we've successfully fired our gun Battery several times and we've spent hours at various drills. Each time the weather has permitted, we've conducted flight operations so our embarked "Harrier" pilots could get some practice before we get into the Mediterranean. As those of you living in the Norfolk area have probably read or heard about, we did lose one AV-8A Harrier this morning when the plane was unable to either stop its launch or remain airborne after passing off the front of the flight deck. The pilot ejected as the aircraft disappeared over the bow, and suffered only a minor fracture to his leg. He was quickly recovered by our helo. We all took an extra minute tonight as Chaplain Young led in the evening prayer to offer our thanks for the pilot's safe recovery.

Since I wrote to you last, we've learned a little more about what we'll be doing while in the Mediterranean, but there are still a number of questions. We will be involved in extensive and very demanding "exercises" during the last few days of April and first two weeks of May, working with a number of ships from several NATO nations and with several of our aircraft carriers. We'll steam the length of the Mediterranean and from a distance, see some interesting places as we transit about, but we don't plan to get ashore until we arrive in Malaga on May 13th. I expect your husbands, sons and sweethearts will bring back some exciting sea stories.

As I mentioned above, our port visit to Malaga, Spain remains planned for the 13th through about the 20th of May. Malaga is on the southern Mediterranean coast of Spain, about 50 miles from the Strait of Gibraltar. It's an interesting city - full of history and very typical of southern Spain. Since it's not too far across the mountains from the Naval Base at Rota, we expect we will manage several incoming and outgoing mail runs via helo during that period. After the delivery this week and until our arrival in Malaga, mail service may be rather erratic, with perhaps one or two trips via helo to the Naval Air Facility in Sigonella, Sicily our best chance. Rest assured that your men are thinking of you, and based on the number of stamps our Post Office has sold, are writing to you as well. Please make sure they get letters from you, too.

I could not close without a special word or two about the men of Nassau. What they have done, and are doing, is almost unheard of. Less than a month after leaving the shipyard we were underway for the Mediterranean, doing things that no LHA has ever done before. The professionalism, the spirit of cooperation and the willingness to learn that I've seen in everyone during the past several weeks is truly remarkable. I expect you are as proud of them as I am, and we both have reason to be!

Sincerely,



H. C. ATWOOD, Jr.
Captain, U. S. Navy
Commanding Officer