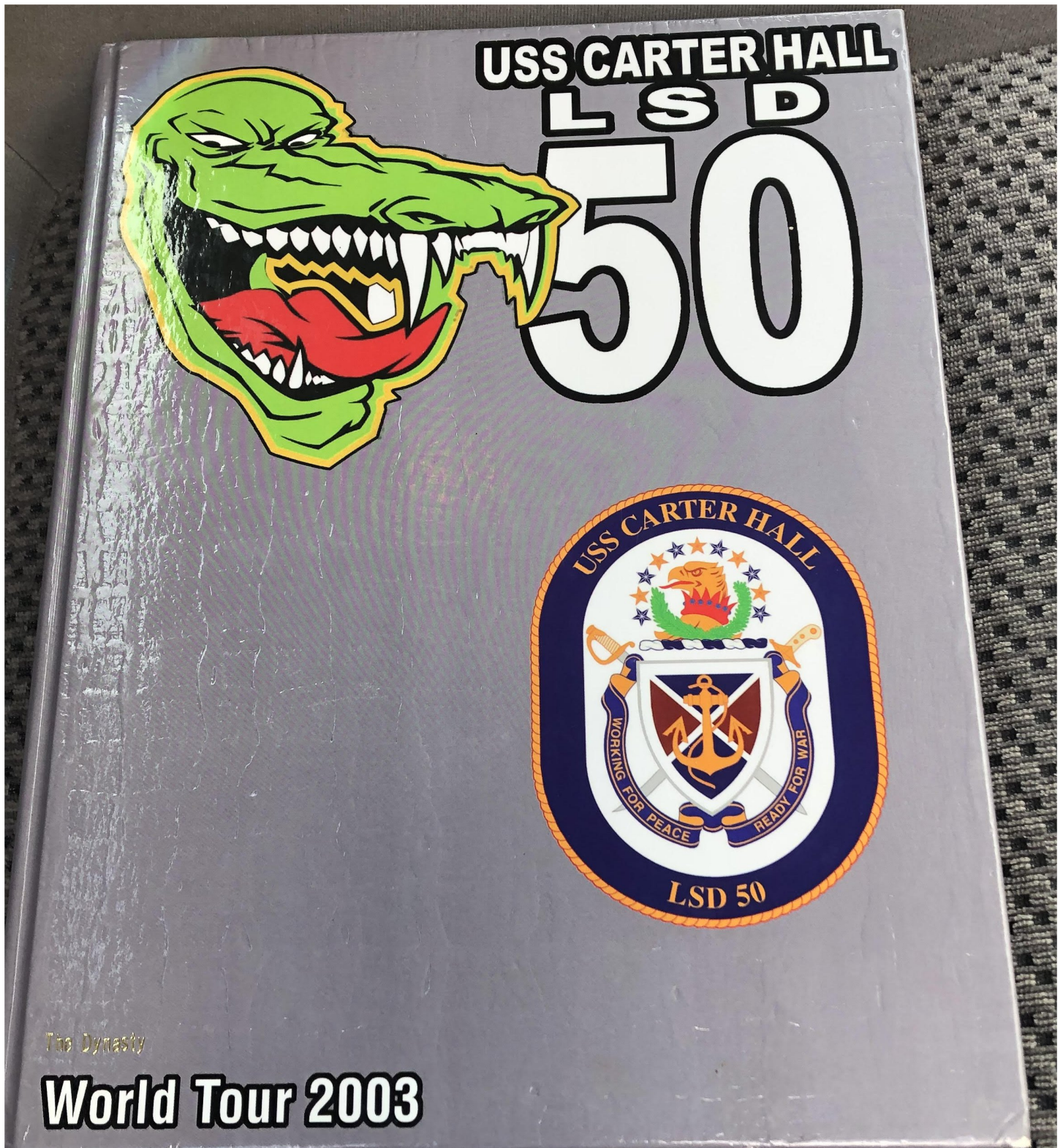


Contributed by Ryan McNiel





# 'World Tour 03'

**From the Mediterranean to the Arabian Gulf to the Horn of Africa, Carter Hall met and exceeded all standards.**

By LTJG Louis Pardo  
Carter Hall Public Affairs

It appeared to be a typical late winter morning for USS Carter Hall (LSD 50). Watch standers checked IDs as the new day sun washed away a sleepy sky. Daylight spread, blanketing the morning gray with the unmistakable energy of urgency and realization. The normal morning chatter of Sailors on their way to work would seem timid compared to this- the buzz of TV cameras, the jokes of comfort, the whispered promises, the sighs of sadness, the sliding of sea bags and the charge of excitement and anticipation all filled the morning air. It was March 4, 2003, a day that the crew of Carter Hall had anticipated, trained for, dreaded, welcomed and finally, realized. It was deployment day.

As the last line was taken in and the colors shifted, as friends and family waved, something happened. A strange silence could be felt throughout the ship. A feeling of acceptance took over followed by a feeling of purpose. For a war was brewing and the Carter Hall, lead by her Commanding Officer, Commander Troy Hart, had just received a late invitation. Sailors cleared their eyes and their hearts with the thought that their nation had called upon and needed them.



After welcoming aboard two Landing Craft Air Cushion (LCAC) hovercrafts and the crew of Assault Craft Unit 4 and Beachmaster Unit 2, Carter Hall joined the company of USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7) and USS Nashville (LPD 13), forming the Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), and proceeded to steam south to pick up the last of its vital equipment- the Marines of

the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (MEU/SOC).

After a rapid onboard of the Marines, 14 Amphibious Assault Vehicles (AAV), six 155 mm Artillery Howitzers and four M1A1 Abrahms Main Battle Tanks, Carter Hall and the Iwo Jima ARG headed east at best speed.

Not two weeks later, with Spain to her left and Morocco to her right, Carter Hall transited the Straits of Gibraltar and entered the Mediterranean Sea.

Anticipation mounted on board Carter Hall as the situation in Iraq escalated and tensions in the Arabian Gulf soared. Carter Hall made her way at full speed towards the Eastern Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, eluding liberty port after liberty port, in hope of reaching the waters off Iraq before any conflict could start. However, on March 19<sup>th</sup>, the first bomb fell on Iraq signifying the beginning of OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM. Carter Hall and the Iwo Jima ARG were still five days away from the Suez Canal. This would be the first of a series of events that would test the crew of Carter Hall's flexibility and resolve.

On the evening of March 23<sup>rd</sup>, Carter Hall and the Iwo Jima ARG made visual landfall of Suez City, Egypt and the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal is a 150-mile scar torn across the Egyptian desert connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Suez. From the



Gulf of Suez vessels can transit to the Mediterranean. The Suez is extremely narrow, only allowing traffic flow in one direction and that flow reversing itself daily. At certain points, the canal narrows to 200 yards and crewmembers swear they can spit to the shoreline.

The strategic importance of the canal is significant. If a vessel were sunk in the canal, all traffic would stop, the canal would shut down and any vessel needing to travel between the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean would be required to travel south around the Horn of Africa, adding days, if not weeks, to the transit time. If a vessel were attacked in the canal, she would have nowhere to turn and would have to stand and fight. This was the thought foremost in the minds of the crew of Carter Hall as the hour approached for their midnight transit. However, on that evening, word reached Carter Hall that plans might be changing.

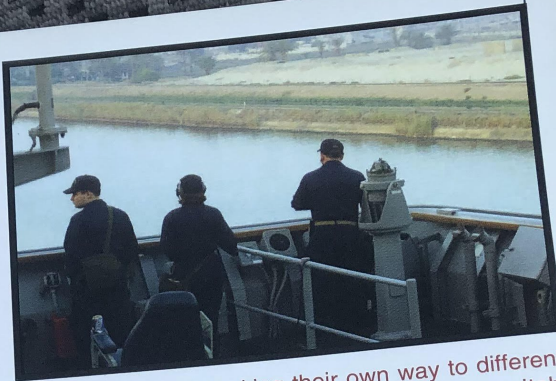
Somewhere, generals and admirals discussed how to implement the 26<sup>th</sup> MEU and the Iwo Jima ARG. Should the ARG transit through the Suez and head to the Gulf? Or should the Marines fly to Iraq from a Mediterranean based ally? In the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, as Carter Hall made her final preparations to enter the Suez Canal, the word came in- the Iwo Jima ARG would not transit the canal.

Carter Hall received new tasking and headed north towards Greece. The Iwo Jima ARG was ordered to stand by off the coast of Souda Bay, Crete, an island of Greece, and wait for a possible insertion of the 26<sup>th</sup> MEU into Northern Iraq. Uncertainty turned to frustration as the ARG loitered off the coast, waiting, as days turned into weeks, for further orders. Then, on April 12<sup>th</sup>, as the tension peaked, the word finally arrived - the Marines of the 26<sup>th</sup> MEU were going to Iraq.

Frustration turned into determination and what remained of the month became a blur of moving parts, rolling machinery, cascading anchor details and tired Sailors and Marines. With time, the offload proved successful and the Marines found themselves in Iraq defending an airfield and conducting routine patrols. However, with the swift victory of U.S. and Allied troops, the Marines were sent back to the Iwo Jima ARG within two weeks.

Once back in Souda Bay, Crete, the Marines were able to join their blue-side counterparts for some well-deserved liberty. While the liberty was short and limited, all were appreciative of the early-May weather and a little time off the ship for some rest, relaxation, shopping, fine local food and sleep.

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, the Iwo Jima ARG got underway from Souda Bay, Crete. It was time for some real liberty. The ARG split up, with Iwo Jima, Nashville



and Carter Hall all making their own way to different liberty ports. Carter Hall steamed for Southern Italy and the city of Taranto. In Italy, the Sailors and Marines of Carter Hall enjoyed first class liberty by walking the streets, shopping the shops, seeing the sights and dining on some real Italian pasta. A few Sailors and Marines ventured to Rome for a tour of its ancient wonders. After four days of recharging their batteries, the men and women of Carter Hall were ready to head out to sea.

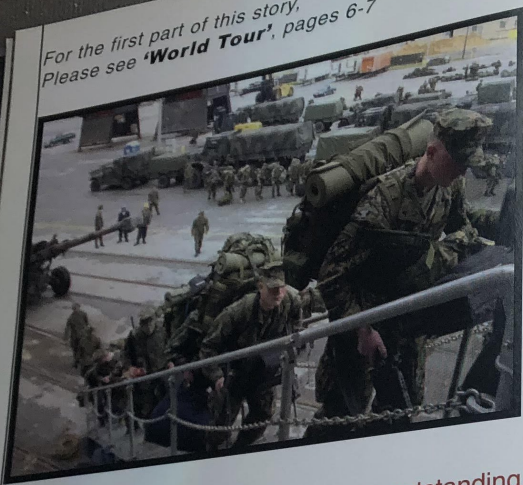
With liberty behind them, the Iwo Jima ARG reunited and headed for the Adriatic Sea and Albania for some always-welcome training. For the Marines, this was a chance to hit the beach, taste the dirt and hone their skills as war-fighters. For Carter Hall and crew, it was time to get some needed maintenance done. After unloading the Marines in Albania, Carter Hall made way for Rijeka, Croatia. During this five day stop Deck Department completed crucial repairs to the ship's boat davit, a system vital to several ship's missions. While Rijeka was technically a liberty port,

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Sailors managed to enjoy some outstanding after-hours fun in this beautiful Central Mediterranean city.

After five days of pier side work and maintenance, it was time to get underway again. Carter Hall headed south to Albania to pick up her Marines. Iwo Jima ARG must hurry; there is a new task at hand- head to the Eastern Mediterranean and await further instructions. Talk of the Suez is at hand once again. As the realization of what is likely around the corner blanketed the crew, a new attitude emerged. It was time to go to work and leave all this liberty behind. In reality Carter Hall and the Iwo Jima ARG had been hard at work ever since leaving for deployment almost three months ago; however, what potentially lay ahead could make the last three months seem like a day at the park.

And then it happened. On June 6<sup>th</sup> Carter Hall and the Iwo Jima ARG entered the Suez Canal and embarked on a 15 hour, hair-raising transit through the Egyptian desert. More significantly, the transit through the Suez represented a trying phase of the deployment. The days were marked by blinding sun, 120-degree heat and long, relentless operations.

While en route to the Arabian Gulf, Iwo ARG patrolled the coast of Djibouti, Africa for a show of force mission in support of Commander Joint Task Force, Horn of Africa. Five days later, on June 16<sup>th</sup>, the Iwo ARG began its transit through the

Straits of Hormuz. This was an exercise in bravery, as Iran lies only two miles to the north and Oman two miles to the south.

After a meeting with the Commander of Fifth Fleet, Iwo Jima ARG headed to Jebel Ali, United Arab Emirates for a quick port brief. While the crew was not allowed to leave the port facility it did enjoy any time that it could get off the ship. Before anyone could get comfortable, Carter Hall got underway and headed for the Qatari oil fields in another show of force mission.

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, only two weeks after entering the Arabian Gulf, Carter Hall and Iwo Jima steamed south through the Straights of Hormuz, took a right turn and proceeded south for Africa. Nashville remained in Jebel Ali to effect repairs to their engineering plant.

On July 7<sup>th</sup>, Carter Hall and Iwo Jima arrived off the coast of Djibouti for a Djibouti Unilateral Exercise. This exercise was a practice in crew flexibility and sleep deprivation, with nearly two weeks of all-night amphibious operations, sending Marines and machinery to and from the beach.

While the crew and Marines were busy in support of the Djibouti exercise, word trickled in about the civil unrest, chaos, murder and the humanitarian disaster that was developing in Liberia. Just as the exercise in Djibouti was coming to a close, tasking was in the air for Iwo Jima and Carter Hall to transit to Liberia. Liberia is on the west coast of Africa and Djibouti is on the east coast of Africa- an almost three thousand mile transit.

The race was on. Iwo Jima and Carter Hall had to get to Liberia as soon as possible. Stability in the region was in a downward spiral and the Iwo ARG was the closest U.S. presence. In a demonstration of true professionalism and technical ability, the engineering department managed to keep the ship going at top speed continuously, for two weeks.

After the two-week transit up the Suez Canal, west through the Mediterranean, out of the Straights of Gibraltar and south through the Atlantic Ocean to the west coast of Africa, Iwo Jima and Carter Hall arrived off the coast of Liberia on August 1<sup>st</sup>. Almost as soon as Iwo Jima and the Carter Hall arrived, the situation in Liberia took a turn for the better. To ensure that the troublemakers ashore have received the message, Iwo Jima and



Carter Hall close to within visual range and patrol the coast. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, Nashville rejoined Iwo Jima and Carter Hall.

Soon the decision was made to expedite progress and on August 14<sup>th</sup>, portions of the 26<sup>th</sup> MEU were inserted into Liberia. The majority of the next two months were filled with assistance operations in and around Liberia. Soon, UN sanctioned merchant vessels arrived carrying food, medicine, shelter and supplies. With the help of Iwo Jima ARG, order was restored and thousands of lives saved. After a successful completion of this mission, the Iwo Jima ARG left Liberia and headed north for Rota, Spain.

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, after 100 days at sea, Carter Hall pulled into Rota. In Spain, Sailors and Marines are busy off loading vehicles for a thorough cleaning and sanitization before they are inspected by agricultural inspection and returned to the States. While in Spain, Sailors managed to get a little time off the ship and enjoy some local shopping, food and culture.

After completing the wash down, Carter Hall got underway for Lisbon, Portugal for a real, no-work, liberty call. This was only the second time



leaving Portugal. The crew was sad to leave such a tremendous port but excited knowing that the next stop was North Carolina, U.S.A.

Carter Hall, its crew now revitalized, headed west across the Atlantic Ocean. Moral was high and the crew continued to push hard to accomplish all that was necessary before pulling in to Little Creek, Virginia. The end of Commander Hart's tour as the Commanding Officer punctuated the end of the deployment. During the Change of Command ceremony, on October 20, in which Commander Brian Peterson assumed command, Commander Hart addressed the crew as the Commanding Officer for one last time, "..."

While the end of the deployment marks the end of a great and distinguished tour, the crew of the Carter Hall knows that Commander Peterson will continue to lead them to great accomplishments as a driving force in OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM and the global war on terrorism.

CONGRATULATIONS,  
CARTER HALL AND MARINES OF

26 MEU, AND WELCOME HOME!

Carter Hall had seen a work-free port call during the deployment; the first was in Taranto, Italy, almost five months earlier. Lisbon turned out to be a premier liberty port. The crew rated the shopping, sight seeing and nightlife as world class. It was a bittersweet day

