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READY TO GO ON THE TOWN : Sailors get to enjoy free time on shore while serving on one of Navy's largest warships

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About a mile off the Santa Barbara coast, two Navy helicopters sat with engines running on the flight deck of the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier Friday morning. An air traffic control man stood before the lead chopper, extended his arms to the side -- signaling to the pilot -- and then thrust them upward to form a triangle.

Lift off.

The first helicopter soared into a clear sky and was soon followed by the second aircraft. A gust from the spinning propellers hit the flight deck and staggered some bystanders.

"This is our life," Navy intelligence specialist Chris Hopkins said to another crew member as the choppers headed south.

For the more than 5,000 personnel who live on board the USS Ronald Reagan -- which will be anchored off the coast until Monday -- this was business as usual. And although it is a military warship, the vessel must also tend to the various human needs of its crew after a work day.

"Everybody has a positive outlook," Lt. j.g. James Speitel, of Ventura, said of those on board. "You walk around these hallways and see a lot of smiles. A lot of people are working hard. They might be covered in paint, but they also have a smile on their face. They like what they're doing."



Sailors from the USS Ronald Reagan, in the background, head to the shores of Santa Barbara on Friday for liberty call.

MIKE ELIASON / NEWS-PRESS



Sailors from the USS Ronald Reagan got to visit Rancho del Cielo and enjoy a barbecue lunch on the lawn of the former president's home. Petty Officer Robert Davis, left, poses with the president's saddles in the tack barn as Petty Officer Darrin Davis takes a photo.

STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS

When it comes time for chow, meals are served in mess halls at various times throughout the day, as the ship is always in operation. Thursday and Friday, sandwiches, pasta, fries, pizza and many other choices were available. Simpler foods, such as cereal and fruit, were also waiting to be picked.

"It's nutritious, it's warm, it's mine," Mr. Hopkins said of the meals. "I mean, what more can you ask for?"

The vessel also features various ways to keep its crew entertained during free time. In one recreation area, several recruits were crowded around an LCD television and could be seen playing "Halo 3." There are also various movie channels -- with recent home releases, such as "Shoot 'Em Up" -- and satellite networks available to the crew.

For sailors who want to keep moving, there are gyms and even sports teams to be joined.

One way 25-year-old Kathleen Gorby stays active is through a crew member basketball team, which uses an on-board, fold-out court, and plays teams from various leagues.

"Every now and then, we play out little scrimmages," she said of competing on the ship. "We also play games, tournaments -- that kind thing. But we do a lot of our practices in port. When we're on board, we just make sure we work out, the team gets together to build camaraderie there (and) go over plays."

The spiritual needs of those at sea can be met at the ship's chapel, which offers Catholic and Protestant services every day, and is complete with pews and an altar. On Sundays at sea, services with enough seating for 200 are held elsewhere on the ship.

Many of the morale-boosting items and services on board, such as computers, are courtesy of the nonprofit Santa Barbara Navy League, which "adopted" the carrier.

"They've been a great partner with me in the leadership of this ship," USS Ronald Reagan Commanding Officer Capt. Terry Kraft said of the Navy League.

But one of the greatest morale boosters available to the crew is a visit to port, such as the trek many Navy men and women are making this weekend to Santa Barbara.

Friday morning, several sailors -- dressed in dark uniforms and shiny black shoes -- piled off the Reagan and into boats from Captain Don's Harbor Tours and headed for land.

Among them was 20-year-old Joshua Camacho, who was looking forward to "going out and eating, and just hanging out."

Planned weekend events include a barbecue put on by Bacara Resort & Spa for 500 under-21 sailors 4 to 6 p.m. today at Green Hills Software -- 30 West Sola St. At 8 p.m., Blues Traveler will take the stage at the Arlington Theatre during the "Rock the Reagan" concert. Sunday, several crew members will set out on a wine country tour with visits to Gainey Winery, Brander Winery and the Firestone Brewery.

While there are sure to be many sailors checking out the sights and restaurants, at least 30 personnel will be volunteering at Santa Barbara School Districts' campuses. They will be involved in projects such as landscaping at Dos Pueblos High School and painting at San Marcos High School. Others will be visiting Cottage Children's Hospital from 10:30 a.m. to noon Saturday to hand out coloring books that were created just for the event.

Although there will be no public tours of the USS Ronald Reagan, residents wanting an up-close peek can hop a ride on Captain Don's Harbor Queen, which will take several trips around the carrier from 10 a.m. until dark today and Sunday.

"Everybody wants to see the ship," Captain Don said.

For information on the perimeter tours, which will get about 400 yards from the carrier, visit Captain Don's at 219 Stearns Wharf, suite G or call 969-5217.

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