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Event Horizon

How can you top celebrating your 85th birthday by skydiving? You celebrate your 88th birthday by levitating to the Navy's new carrier that bears your name.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATIE J. JOHNSON, WALKER'S POINT COURTESY DAVE CLEVELAND/ATLINE IMAGING, CVN-77 IMAGE COURTESY DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, ALL GEORGE H.W. BUSH EVENT IMAGES COURTESY USS GEORGE H.W. BUSH/US NAVY




OUT THERE

As summer rushed in to Kennebunkport, so did the Navy's newest nuclear carrier. Named for former President George Herbert Walker Bush (41), the \$6.2 billion warship, anchored barely two miles off Walker's Point, provided a startling backdrop for the lobster boats

dotting the coast here.

A decorated Naval Aviator during World War II, President Bush no doubt appreciates the crew's nickname for his namesake carrier: "The Avenger." Flying a U.S. Navy Grumman TBM Avenger, Bush was shot down after successful combat in the Pacific near the Bonin Islands, later to be rescued by the USS *Finback*, a submarine. He's acknowledged the event as a turning point in his life of public service. "I learned that a wing man does not pull away from his leader. That was true in





For the Navy helicopter pilot who flew President Bush to his namesake carrier, it was an...

Uplifting Experience



Imagine never having been to Maine before and having your first experience here be a touchdown on President Bush's green east lawn at his Walker's Point compound in Kennebunkport.

COMMANDER BRIAN PUMMILL is the squadron commander and Navy SH-60 Sea Hawk helicopter pilot who flew the former Presidents Bush and their families from Walker's Point to visit the **USS GEORGE H.W. BUSH, CVN-77**, the Navy's newest carrier, during the \$6.2-billion warship's memorable recent stop here, anchored barely two miles offshore.

You're in the cockpit with CDR Pummill now, descending to Walker's Point.

Can you tell us what you see?

It's an incredible experience. The helipad is

the lawn on the side of the buildings. I've never landed on somebody's lawn before. Ever. Just seeing the whole Walker's Point, taking in the scenery, and looking at how small the lawn actually was really took hold of me. We had the dimensions and photos beforehand, and I'd seen Walker's

Point so many times on television, news photos, and in my mind before this, but once we got there that little green spot got smaller and smaller.

The way the cup gets smaller and smaller for golfers near the end of a tight tournament?

Exactly. From our perspective it was an "unprepared confined area landing," a grassy surface, not concrete, and there are trees. The first approach we made for some Secret Service personnel. We took them ahead to the ship after dropping off one of our crewmen. He provided visual signals to the ground, like an LSE (Landing Signal Enlisted). He stayed on the ground and coordinated things for us.

Any other considerations?

There was a boat in the little inlet there we

obviously didn't want to fly over as we descended there to protect it.

You definitely didn't want to sink *Fidelity V* in your rotor wash!

Correct! The last thing we want to do is create an "incident."

If you didn't know it was President Bush 41, was there something about his manner or the clear gaze in his eyes that suggests he's a former Naval Aviator? Any Jedi bonding between the two of you?

Yeah, we didn't hop out of the front since we're flying the aircraft, but we got to see him getting escorted in and out of the rotor arc. Obviously I got a good clear view of him. You could see the pride in his eyes, his commanding stature, and you could see he was excited he was going out to see the ship named after him. It was impressive.

Everyone at Walker's Point knew what they were doing. They made sure the zone was clear to make sure there were no loose shingles or anything like that. The property is extremely well built and sturdy.

Of course, yours wasn't the only spinning rotor system on the lawn. There's President Bush's wind vane. Did it spin a little faster in your presence?

We saw the wind vane, but it wasn't that close to us and wasn't a factor.

In your warfare specialty, you've seen much more action. But Stateside, back home, this must have been a blast after coming back from deployment.

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It was one of the highlights of my career. The trust and confidence I was given to fly two presidents can't be understated. We're not HMX-1 [Marine One, which specializes in flying the President and other dignitaries], we're just the standard fleet aviators assigned to the carrier that got this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Especially because you're a helicopter parent, your family must be proud of you.

We're homeported in Norfolk, Virginia, and my family lives in the Hickory district of Chesapeake. I have two children—one's seven, the other's nine, and they were pretty excited and thrilled about the fact that their Dad got to fly these presidents. It's one of many stories I can tell.

You came back from your new carrier's first deployment in December in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Is there a new carrier smell (like a new car smell)? Can you tell us the ports you visited?

On the way over we went to Portsmouth, England. I made my way up to London. We stopped at Cartagena, Spain, and Naples, Italy. It was all it lived up to be in the respect it was dirty. We went to Rome and Pompeii and Sorrento. Then we went through the Suez Canal and did our flying in support of Operation New Dawn and Operation Enduring Freedom. Most of our flying was in support of Enduring Freedom—Bahrain and Dubai. We came back via the Suez Canal and stopped at Marseilles on the way home.

You've hovered over some pretty exclusive real estate. How does Maine stack up against the rest of the seven seas, and the world?

This was my first time ever in Maine. I was very impressed with the scenery. I thought, wow, this would be a great place to retire. Amazing countryside. My crew felt the same way. Kennebunkport is beautiful to fly over.

OUT THERE



President George H. W. Bush chats with LCDR Herlinda Rojas, CVN-77's Public Affairs Officer, aboard the ship. Rojas, along with 14 other crew members, joined the Bush family at Walker's Point after his visit and enjoying her first lobster roll. "They are really good!"



"It was particularly **exciting** to have the aircraft **carrier visit** Kennebunkport and to be able to **go aboard** and see our exceptional **crew members in action.**"

—President George H. W. Bush

combat. That should be true in politics..." in his biography, *All the best, George Bush.*

Says President Bush of the experience of looking up from Sunday bacon and eggs and seeing a flat top named for him moored outside his Walker's Point mansion: "It was enormously gratifying and overwhelming to have the honor of this

GEORGE H. W. BUSH PILOTING BARBARA: FILE PHOTO



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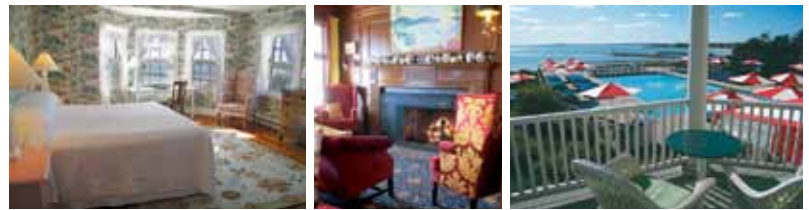
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OUT THERE

great ship named for me. And it was particularly exciting to have the aircraft carrier visit Kennebunkport and to be able to go aboard and see our exceptional crew members in action. Everything from the helicopter ride to the re-enlistment ceremony was done with overwhelming professionalism. It is always a pleasure to be able to spend time with members of our armed services."

"Thirty of our crew members went up ahead to a Saturday evening at Walker's Point, paying their own expenses," says LCDR Herlinda Rojas, public affairs officer for the ship. "Then on Sunday, after the Bush family left the ship, 14 of us, including our captain, shared a quick lunch with the Bushes at Walker's Point.

ONE FAN'S TAKE...

So the newest aircraft carrier, *George H.W. Bush* is three miles off the coast yesterday, the 41st POTUS is celebrating his 88th birthday with 43 and other dignitaries are in the state and the *Pingree Press Herald* gives it a couple of column inches buried inside the paper and NO pictures? The paper is a disgrace and just what we all expected now that Sussman owns it.

—Jeff Cole, Kennebunk

It was the first time I'd ever had a lobster roll. They are really good!"

During the carrier visit, "President Bush (41) asked me where I was from. When I said 'Texas,' he smiled. He asked where I went to school, and when I said 'Texas A&M Corpus Christi,' he liked that, too, because his presidential library is part of Texas A&M. Then his son [former President George W. Bush, '43'] said, 'I used to be Governor of Texas, you know.' I didn't know what to say, so I said, 'Yes, sir, I remember.'" ■

Walker's Point aerial image is courtesy of Dave

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namesake-extras.



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