

## **Forward...to the Shipyard: The Case of the USS *Nimitz***

---

RICHARD J. NORTON

**C**ommander (Captain - Select) Hank Morgan, USN smiled as he watched the last F/A-18 of the evening launch go screaming off the starboard catapult and gracefully bank into the sunset. Hank knew what the pilot was feeling. As an F-14 pilot, (call sign "Cutlass") Hank had launched hundreds of times. As executive officer of the carrier *Nimitz*, he took a special pleasure in that it was his ship doing the launching. He took one last look before heading for his cabin. *Nimitz* and her escorts were three months into an around the world deployment and smack in the middle of the Persian Gulf. They had been sent here in a hurry, actually canceling a scheduled visit to Singapore to speed up their arrival. They had been here ever since and were now waiting for the *George Washington* to join them. Once *GW* was on station, it would at least be possible to arrange some port calls. It was late December 1998 and life in the Gulf was getting to be more than a little boring.

Hank felt a small familiar pang that meant he was missing the cockpit. He loved being a fighter pilot, but he loved carrier duty as well. Which was just as well as he had spent his career flying, teaching others to fly, or running flight operations on carriers. He was honest enough to admit that he wanted to command a carrier of his own, and if the Navy offered him an admiral's job one day he would not say no. He also knew he had a chance. There were no guarantees that he would get command of his own carrier, much less flag rank, but if people bet on such things, Hank's odds would be very good indeed. Hank didn't dwell on the issue, but he was aware of it. His promotion to captain was ten months away and he had more immediate things to be concerned with.

Hank automatically noted the cleanliness of the various passageways he walked through on the way to his quarters. *Nimitz* had the reputation for being the cleanest carrier in the fleet and it was justified. Every day the crew devoted an hour to sweeping, polishing and mopping. As XO, he was the person responsible for ship's cleanliness and keeping something the size of *Nimitz* spotless took a huge chunk of his time. The payoff was worth the effort. *Nimitz* personnel had visited other carriers and always reported that *Nimitz* was cleaner. It was now a point of pride among his crew.

But then morale on the *Nimitz* was high in general, Hank thought, as he opened his door and switched on the light. Many crewmembers had extended their tour of duty so as to be able to make the around the world cruise. Hank was a little bothered that individual sailors tended to identify more heavily with their departments than the carrier as a whole, but on the plus side every department exhibited a deep pride in their capabilities and skills.

When *Nimitz* had deployed into the Persian Gulf, the chance of going into combat had only increased morale. There had been a real feeling of excitement in the Operations Department and the air wing as planning for potential strike operations got underway. But that had been a month or more ago. Morale was still good, but the crew was ready for a port call. After all the “hurry up” nature of their initial tasking, the time in the Gulf had been anti-climatic. At first combat operations seemed imminent. Now, things seemed more like a drill.

*Nimitz* was a monster. Bigger than any other type of warship afloat, her crew consisted of 3,000 officers and men, assigned to sixteen departments. The air wing added an additional 2,800 sailors and eight squadrons of various aircraft. Her job was power projection and Hank was sure no carrier did it better.

Which was just as well. Rear Admiral Bonnet, commanding the *Nimitz* battle group, was a fierce operator and a natural warrior. In previous tours he had been both *Nimitz*'s XO and CO. He still loved the ship and used it as his principal “prop” in entertaining distinguished visitors (DVs). Of those there was no shortage, and it was Hank's personal job to be sure those visits went off without a hitch. The admiral and the CO had made that clear. Making it work took up a lot of his time as there were always DVs coming or already aboard, but Hank felt the ship had it down to a science. If there was going to be shooting, Bonnet would be in his element and certain to get as much DV presence on board as possible. At the present time there were no DVs on *Nimitz*, which was good, for Hank needed the time to deal with representatives from both the Newport News shipyard and commander, Naval Air Forces Pacific (AirPac—a Pacific coast three star admiral who administratively “owned” every carrier and airplane homeported from California to Japan).

The shipyard was the reason that *Nimitz* was sailing around the world and changing homeports from Bremerton, Washington to Newport News, Virginia. Once in the Newport News shipyard, refueling and overhaul would begin. The process would take more than two years and would affect every aspect of shipboard life. Furthermore, AirPac was determined to see *Nimitz* return to the Pacific, swearing to avoid “the *Enterprise* disaster.” *Enterprise* had performed a similar port change and overhaul several years earlier. The overhaul went badly over cost and over time. As a result, convinced that the *Enterprise* overhaul had been badly mishandled, the CNO had directed AirLant (AirPac's East Coast equivalent) to assume command of the ship in order to get it through the yards. He did and then, once the overhaul was finished, AirLant had kept the carrier. The “Big E” never returned to the West Coast. AirPac lost a major asset, had to rearrange carrier schedules and had to bear the embarrassment of having another admiral fix “his” problem. The current AirPac had publicly sworn that such a thing was not going to happen again, especially as common wisdom held that *Enterprise*'s real problem had been a lack of advance planning. The AirPac representatives and the Shipyard people were pushing hard to start the planning process now.

The reactor officer (The CVN equivalent of the “chief engineer,” the senior ranking officer in the Engineering Department.) and the engineer officer (the reactor officer's principal assistant for non-nuclear engineering equipment, spaces, and so on) joined them in this

recommendation. The two of them had been pushing the XO about this for weeks. Captain John Rackham, the reactor officer, was a senior 0-6 surface nuke, as senior as Captain Wynne, *Nimitz's* CO and much more senior than Hank. Rackham had held 0-5 command at sea, served as a reactor officer on a different carrier and had voluntarily returned for a second tour when he failed to screen for major command. He ruled his department as if it were his kingdom. His junior officers feared his volatile temper as much or more than they respected his engineering knowledge. Commander Charles Vane, the engineer officer, had served in nothing but engineering billets since he was a junior lieutenant and knew his stuff. He and the reactor officer were natural allies, with little concern about the rest of the departments on the ship. That had been painfully obvious in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, although most of the ship's company had gone between the ship and the shore by using various commercial ferries and water taxis, the CO and the admiral had relied on their gig and barge (as their personal small boats are called). Luckily, the barge had worked fine, but on the first trip the gig broke down, stranding a very angry captain in the middle of the harbor. Commander Vane and Lieutenant Commander Bart Roberts, the *Nimitz's* First Lieutenant, who was in charge of the Deck Department had each immediately blamed the other's department for the breakdown. According to Roberts the engineers never gave proper attention to the boat engines. Vane had shot back that the Deck Department sailors simply did not know what they were doing and broke the boat. The wrath of the CO ensured that the repairs were quickly made, but the argument continued. Hank also knew the fix was temporary. The boat might work, but the cooperation was still broken. If they were this antagonistic now, Hank wondered, what would they be like in the shipyard?

The issue with the boats was but one of a dozen or more arguments relating to turf. All the departments were ferociously protective of their areas of responsibility and quick to perceive encroachment on "their" terrain. The most recent battle had occurred when the Information Department had become involved with the Combat Systems Department in a rather nasty fight over an electronics lab. Hank had ruled in favor of Combat Systems. The *Nimitz's* combat systems officer was CDR Anne Bonny, who was also the ship's first woman department head. But that had nothing to do with why her department got the lab space. The Information Department didn't need it and Combat Systems did.

Hank thought that gender integration seemed to be working. In addition to Bonny, three other department heads were women, as were at least six hundred of the crew. While there had been some disciplinary infractions, they had not been too serious. Punishment had been swift and consistent. Sure there was still the rare complaint about minor things like a swimsuit calendar but these were easily dealt with. Other than Lieutenant Commander Mary Read, the second senior chaplain, no one seemed to have any problems with the change. If you listened to her, the chaplain corps discriminated against women, sexism was rampant on *Nimitz* and the CO was sitting on a time bomb. The other two chaplains, both men, disagreed.

Another thorny problem was that four of the department heads (Hank thought of them as "the barons") on *Nimitz* were senior to Hank. Although Hank tried to act as though this

didn't make a difference, it did. They and several others had already completed an XO tour. They were never openly disrespectful or dismissive, but it was clear they were not as impressed by his position as more junior department heads were. And each of them had no problem seeing the CO anytime they wanted without going through him.

But the biggest problem that Hank saw was the upcoming yard period and all its associated hassles. Some of these were going to involve personnel. Some sailors had left their families in Washington state, intending to move after the cruise was over. Other families had moved to the Norfolk area as soon as *Nimitz* pulled away from the pier. Some were already experiencing financial problems or domestic difficulties. Hank had just received an E-mail from his wife Kelly that morning. She reported that *Nimitz's* family problems were on the rise. Having a husband—no, a spouse—he corrected himself, gone on deployment was always tough. When you added the burden of trying to manage a coast to coast move it got worse.

Another yard-related problem was that a large number of sailors were going to be leaving *Nimitz* for good within three months of finishing the cruise. Losing a number of sailors was not unusual for most ships entering the yard, but it would be much worse for *Nimitz*, as so many of her crew had extended their tours of duty to make the big cruise. Shipwide, the loss would exceed 30% and in some departments it would be much higher. The Navy was not likely to put the ship's manpower needs at the top of the priority list until near the end of the yard period. By the time *Nimitz* was back at sea, probably about two years after entering the shipyard, Hank's relief would be lucky if 10% of the crew had been aboard for one day underway.

Once in Virginia the remaining crew would rapidly be scattered all over the Newport News area. Due to all the repairs, the ship would be uninhabitable and a lot of the work would be done in shops, labs and offices that were miles apart. *Nimitz* was going to have to maintain eight geographically separated installations, not counting the married housing areas and the quarters for the more than two thousand sailors who usually lived aboard the ship all the time. If they weren't careful some *Nimitz* sailors might go months without stepping foot on the ship. Maintaining crew unity was going to be more than a little challenging. It would be worst for the young sailors reporting from boot camp. Keen, eager and terribly green, they would be looking for travel and adventure. They would find an industrial work site dominated by noise, dirt and civilians. Their ship, the pride of the Navy's striking forces, would be a stifling steel box, with massive access holes cut into its decks and sides. It was about as far away from the recruiting poster image as you could get.

The results were predictable. Most ships in this environment discovered that discipline incidents ranging from drug usage to theft to spouse abuse rose. Morale fell. Crew cohesion was often strained past the breaking point. Relations between the shipyard workers and ship's force personnel required constant attention and care. Usually these problems intensified as a ship entered the second half of a shipyard stay. The pressure of the schedule, the requirement to test re-installed and new equipment, while at the same time re-stocking the ship and preparing for sea, strained tempers to the utmost. In some cases delays in meeting

deadlines had resulted in legal action. Such pressure often led supervisors to misreport the status of their jobs and to cut corners in a variety of ways. Everyone swore that without good planning, *Nimitz* was going to be a bigger debacle than the *Enterprise*. Hank grimaced. Nuclear overhauls were planned years in advance, required tremendous allocations of budget and personnel resources and their associated milestone dates were cast in stone. Some of the work on *Nimitz* would require months of lead-time.

It was true that there were already numerous plans, plans put together by many of the shipyard shops and some specialized overhaul teams, but these had to be integrated by the ship. In addition, *Nimitz* was going to have to be completely off-loaded in only 60 days after the traditional 30-day post-deployment stand-down period. Every piece of furniture, every spare part and technical manual—in short everything that wasn't welded down was going to have to come off the ship. Sixty days should be enough time—if the off-load was properly planned. But if planning the off-load didn't start soon, the off-load wasn't going to work. If the off-load didn't work, other time-lines would slip. The domino effect could wreck any master plan before the work ever really got started.

Hank found a blank page of his notebook and drew a visual representation of his “overhaul” problem.” (See Appendix One) It seemed simple. The challenge was to take *Nimitz* from the pinnacle of operational readiness, turn it into a repair facility, get good at being a repair facility, and then two years from now, turn it into an operational warship again. The problem was that the operational and repair environments were completely different from one another.

Hank had brought the matter up with the CO earlier that morning. He was surprised by the CO's reaction. “XO, what are you thinking? This is no time to get the crew looking at shipyard issues. We've been in the Gulf for fifty-six days straight. We've gone through two false alarms where we've been ready to launch and then been stood down. I'm really worried about complacency. You get people thinking about Norfolk, and you'll just increase the chance that someone will get sloppy and maybe killed!”

Hank tried to explain about the potential long-term impact if the shipyard preparations were delayed too long, but the CO cut him off. “Look Hank, I understand why you're worried and that you're trying to do your job to your usual high standard. But, I've got a weapons system to run. Going into the shipyard is like being tied to a train track with a locomotive coming at you. It's going to run you over. You can't plan that away. I know. Remember, I was *Enterprise's* XO. We did all the planning and held all the meetings and in the end, it was still a nightmare. So, let's focus on what we can control — keeping the crew ready to take another poke at Saddam Hussein.” As Hank rose to leave, Captain Wynne motioned him back down in his seat. Frowning, he began talking. “Hold on XO. I know you've got a point.” He paused for a moment, obviously struggling with himself. “Okay, here's what we'll do. You take care of the yard preparations. After we leave the Gulf, whenever that is, I'll probably have time to get more involved. But while we're here I can't give the shipyard my personal attention. So you do it. Keep my involvement to the absolute minimum.”

Hank sighed as he headed away from the meeting. He and Captain Wynne had a good relationship. Wynne had begun his career in an ancient fighter called the F-8. He had transitioned to F-4s when the F-8 was removed from service. He had gone nuke, served as XO in *Enterprise*, had command of a large surface ship, been a senior branch chief in the Pentagon and now had *Nimitz*. Hank knew the CO was pleased with *Nimitz* and with him, although Hank had been required to find that out for himself. When he reported to *Nimitz* Hank had expected to spend some time discussing command philosophy with the CO, but the only guidance the boss gave him was short and to the point. "You keep things running, you let me keep focused on making *Nimitz* the lethal machine she is. Morale is high, the ship is clean and we have a great deployment schedule. The admiral loves us and so does AirPac. If anything changes, I'll let you know."

The CO communicated with the crew in a variety of ways. When it came to policy he used "CO-Memos." These were consecutively numbered and dealt with ship-wide issues. *CO-Memo One* explained what he wanted from the ship. *Nimitz* was going to be known for honesty and integrity, a total lack of double standards, and the highest levels of cleanliness. *Nimitz* was going to be the standard by which all carriers would be measured. Based on Hank's interaction with the ship's crew, he felt pretty sure the sailors understood the CO's views. Although his schedule was tight, the CO routinely managed to visit most of the main areas of the ship in person every so often.

The families at home were also kept informed. *Nimitz* had e-mail and a web page

Hank knew the change of homeport would have been much more difficult without the web page. Keeping the families plugged in was another way the Navy had changed. The CO liked the web page and used it to communicate with the families. Unfortunately that meant the families used it to communicate with him. He directed that every message he received had to be answered. The administrative officer was in charge of that job, but Hank was responsible for making sure it was done right.

But that wasn't so bad. Hank was comfortable with the ship's routine. The admiral was delighted with his flagship and the CO gave Hank a lot of room to do his job. Wynne was, however, inclined to jump into things at times, so much so that Hank had learned to be careful in discussing personnel and other matters, lest the CO go charging off at full tilt. Hank never hid anything from the boss, but he did take some care in how information was presented. If Wynne had a weak area it was that, in Hank's opinion, he was prone to let the senior department heads cut the XO out of the loop at times. The reactor officer was the worst offender, but the ops and air boss were also guilty. When Hank called them on it, there would be apologies, assurances that it wasn't on purpose and a brief period of improvement, followed by a return to the old way of doing business — unless the CO was in a bad temper. Then the 'barons' suddenly remembered there was a chain of command. (See Appendix 2)

Coming back to the question of the shipyard, Hank was still puzzled. Wynne was said to be up for selection to flag rank. Hank knew the flag board was going to be held during the

first half of *Nimitz*'s overhaul, so if things went really sour Wynne's chances for promotion would be hurt. The CO was currently scheduled to be onboard at least a year after reaching Norfolk, so he wasn't foisting off future problems on the next guy.. Hank wondered if Wynne thought his promotion was a sure thing, and thus didn't have to worry about the overhaul. If he did believe that, whether it was true or false, it could complicate things.

Hank thought about the engineers. Captain Rackham was a pain, but for all his abrasive nature, he had consistently made telling point after telling point at their most recent meeting with AirPac's people. "XO, if we don't get a handle on this now, we will never be able to deconflict shipyard work from ship's force work. That means we'll have high-paid contractors sitting around doing nothing, or our troops will have to work nights and weekends to get our stuff done. There's also no way we'll be able to intelligently manage people going on leave and to school. You've got to get the CO looking at this. I don't care if he hates the shipyard." The AirPac rep chimed in, "I'd hate to have to report back that what happened to *Enterprise* is likely to happen to *Nimitz*." Hank recognized the implications of that statement. And, he admitted, Rackham's point was valid.

Hank also knew the CO had a valid point about focus. There was every chance of prolonged Persian Gulf operations—and possibly even of combat. Hank knew that if there was going to be shooting *Nimitz* was going to shine. But there was no guarantee that there would be shooting, and the way things were going it didn't look like there would be. He remembered similar deployments after the fall of the Shah. Carriers had spent months planning strikes, preparing to fight and maintaining a high level of combat readiness. In one cruise, Hank had been in his plane, on the catapult, ready to fly a combat operation no less than twelve times. Each time the mission had been scrubbed. That could happen again. Still, if there was a chance of combat, didn't he owe the ship, the crew, the CO, even the country, one hundred percent of his attention on fighting the ship? The current high-pitched Navy OPTEMPO was taking a toll on the carriers. There never seemed to be enough of them to meet demand. The result was a dramatic need for increased flexibility and responsiveness. It was surprising in some ways. Hank didn't remember things ever being so unsettled, even during the Cold War. Wasn't the CO simply focusing on the mission? Not that such an argument would carry any water with the powers that be if *Nimitz* wasn't ready for the shipyard.

The refueling and repair dates were simply not going to slip. As the first of her class to be refueled, *Nimitz* was going to be blazing an important pathway. It was also plain that AirPac wanted his favorite carrier back as fast as he could get it. Delay at this end could lead to huge problems on the other side of the Atlantic. And a carrier held over in the shipyard was a long way away from being a national asset. The engineers kept making that point too.

Unlike the reactor officer, the other department heads were focused on the present. A few of them did not have previous shipboard operational tours and that was a problem at times. For instance, the CO wasn't entirely sure he could rely on the combat systems officer (CSO) if it came to war. He told Hank that it was nothing personal, but Commander Bonny was a naval flight officer (NFO) who had commanded a recruiting district. On a cruiser, the CSO would be a master tactician, and given the tumultuous 90s, likely to have combat

experience. That was the type of CSO Wynne wanted, but one that was an aviator of course. Commander Bonny was clearly a competent and committed officer, but she and the Air Intermediate Maintenance Department (AIMD handles aircraft repair) officer were operational “unknowns.” It wasn’t such a big deal with the AIMD boss. His job was to fix things - and while combat would increase his stress levels, it wasn’t going to change the nature of his existence. The same might not be true for Combat Systems. Hank was absolutely sure the CSO would be fine but he would continue to unobtrusively pay extra attention to the combat systems department. It was another chunk of his time taken away, but it had to be done.

There was never enough time. Hank delegated everything he could, but there was still a great deal left over. He had to spend a certain amount of time both formally and informally inspecting the ship—or at least parts of it—every day. He had to handle most disciplinary matters and de-brief all officer fitness reports. Some COs kept that job to themselves, but Wynne had gladly handed this to Hank. There were daily department head meetings, berthing and messing inspections, eight o’clock reports, zone inspections, material reports, classified material handling issues, damage control, battle and engineering drills to coordinate, a slew of watch standing and functional qualification boards to oversee, preventive maintenance programs, weekly planning meeting and a host of other jobs he was required—usually by instruction or even law—to do. If the CO had been fully active in shipyard preparations, Hank still would have had a major increase in workload. Without the CO, there was no way to guess how much more time he was going to have to commit. And, Hank admitted to himself, the demands of the day were eating him alive as it was.

If the captain wasn’t focused on the shipyard, the command master chief was. Master Aviation Boatswains Mate Chief Kidd was a 28-year Navy veteran and the undisputed lord of the Chief’s Mess. He had invited Hank to the Chief’s Mess for a cup of coffee after lunch. “XO, the master chiefs and I have been talking about the yards.” Hank nodded. “We think the ship can go to eight section duty once we’re home—at least until we’re half-way through the yard period when the workload will increase.” Hank’s eyes widened. A portion of the ship’s crew was always aboard in port, twenty-four hours a day, usually in four watch sections. Usually that meant most sailors—even those with families who lived off the ship—were spending one of every four days onboard the ship for twenty four hours straight when in home port. In most ships getting to five sections was a major achievement. “Wow. How do we manage that?” The master chief pulled out a Palm Pilot and consulted some notes. “Well, the first thing we do is make sure that there is a really aggressive qualification program so that we have the numbers of trained people we need. The Training Department thinks they can make that happen if everybody cooperates. Then, we need to scour the ship to make sure everyone is assigned to a watch section. I’m going to need your help with that, because we’re going to have to go after all the “sacred cows” who claim they don’t or can’t stand watch in port. That means the doctors and the dentists, the chaplain’s assistants, the supply types, in short everyone.” Hank thought about it and slowly asked, “Will those departments go along with the idea?” “Only if we force them. But I think we can. Once we do, the quality of life for the crew will get better.” Hank promised he would sincerely think about it. If the master chief was willing to push hard on this idea, it could probably be made

to work. But Hank wasn't sure if the idea was good or not. For one thing, he thought it would further decrease the sense of command unity when in the shipyard. But eight sections would be wildly popular with the crew and their families. He resolved to discuss it further with the master chief.

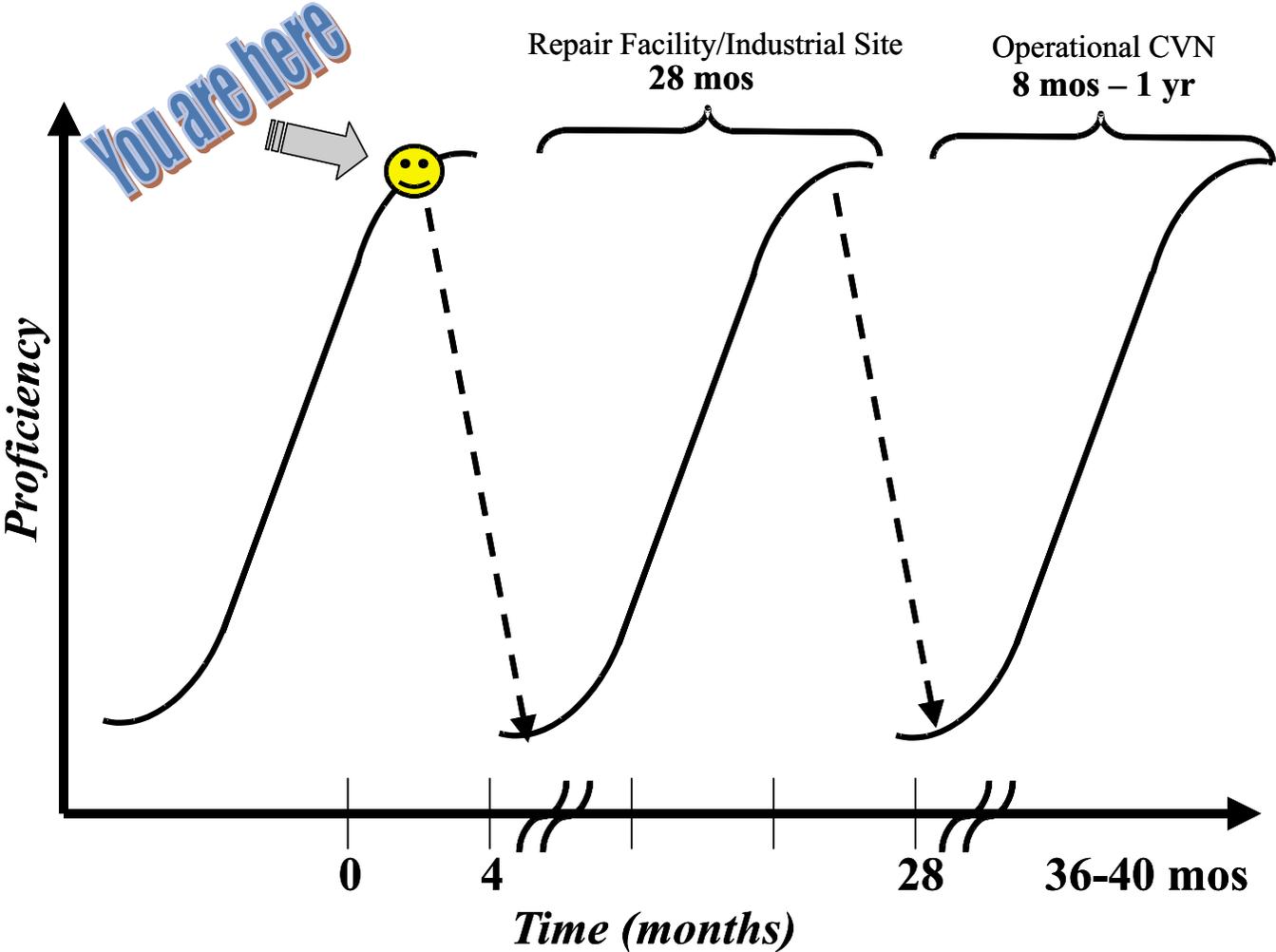
The phone rang and Hank answered. It was the supply officer. Captain Worley was a perpetually optimistic man who thought *Nimitz* was more like a family than any ship he had seen. Hank teased him about wearing rose colored glasses, but understood the supply officer's point of view. First, Worley really was an optimist. He was almost unnaturally cheerful. Second, he saw himself as a resource provider and the other departments as customers. He had trained his department to act the same way and the response from the rest of the ship was positive. Finally, the department heads needed to be on the good side of the supply officer and took pains to cultivate a positive rapport. Worley had been at the shipyard meetings that day and now wanted to get on Hank's schedule to talk about some ideas he had to make things easier. Hank penciled him in for a 0930 meeting. Based on past experience, he expected most of Worley's ideas to be impractical, but not all of them would be.

Hank had one more chore to finish before he could catch a few hours sleep. He wanted to be up at 0230 to visit the Combat Direction Center and some of the other warfighting spaces. Although all indications were that the ship was combat ready, Hank wanted to reassure himself, and the early hours were times when attention was prone to slip. But now he needed to see Commander Walt Kennedy, the new assistant air ops. The billet had been empty for months and Kennedy had been scheduled to catch the ship in Singapore. He had flown in that morning with the mail and some critical parts.

"Welcome aboard! Sorry we weren't able to meet you in Singapore." Kennedy smiled, "That's okay XO. I've seen Singapore. I was afraid I was going to miss the ship and any action in the Gulf." Kennedy was a pilot, but Hank knew his experience had been in the Navy's land-based, four engine P-3 aircraft. "I see you were at Naval Air Systems Command. What did you do there?" Kennedy shrugged, "Pretty much hated life. I failed to screen for command and the shore duty environment was a bit stifling. You couldn't do anything big because no one wanted to start anything new. About the only fun thing I got to do was fix some of the command's internal distribution and communication problems." When Hank asked for more information he learned that Commander Kennedy had wound up coordinating major communications upgrades, while at the same time ensuring that no office was disrupted. "That was a tough job," Hank said. "Not really," Kennedy answered, "It was actually a neat challenge. But after shore duty I'm looking forward to working in the real Navy again. Directing the installation of computers and secure phones is nothing compared to keeping flight ops going." Hank signed the check-in sheet and sent Kennedy on his way.

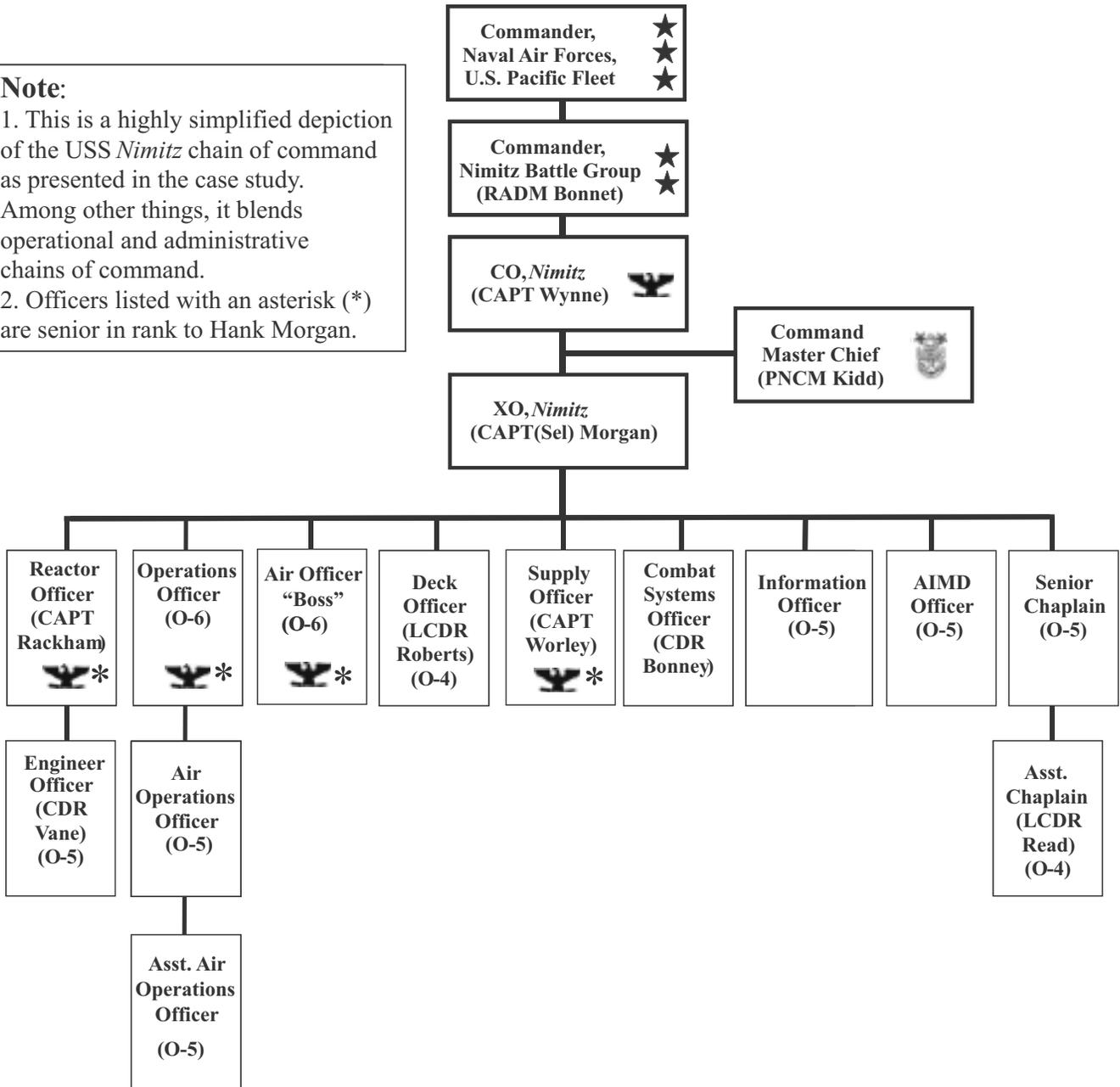
Enjoying a quiet moment, Hank thought briefly about reviewing the proposed plan for next week's training but decided to catch a shower and some sleep instead.

**APPENDIX 1**



## APPENDIX 2

**Note:**  
 1. This is a highly simplified depiction of the USS *Nimitz* chain of command as presented in the case study. Among other things, it blends operational and administrative chains of command.  
 2. Officers listed with an asterisk (\*) are senior in rank to Hank Morgan.



*Simplified Command Structure*