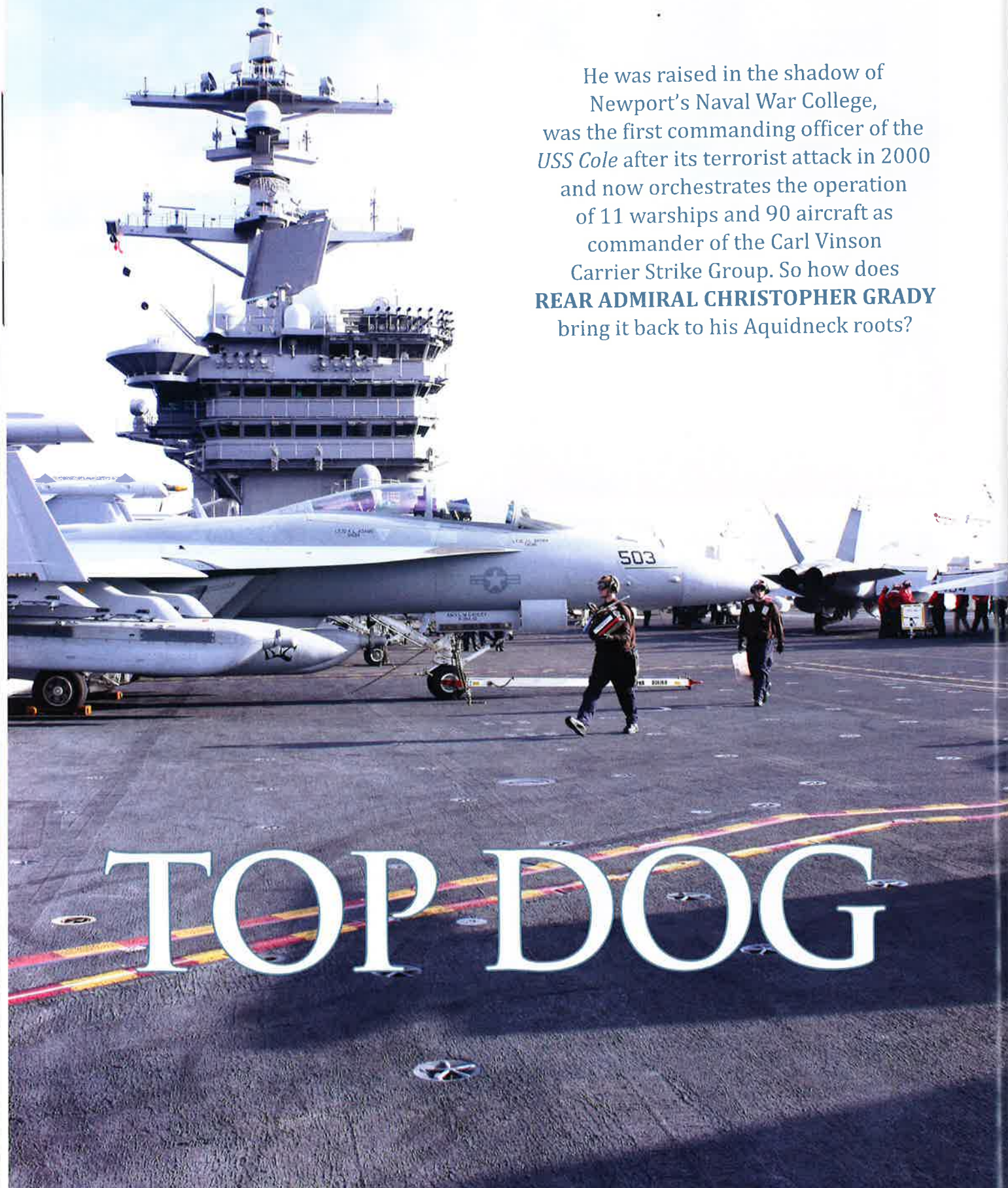


He was raised in the shadow of Newport's Naval War College, was the first commanding officer of the *USS Cole* after its terrorist attack in 2000 and now orchestrates the operation of 11 warships and 90 aircraft as commander of the Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group. So how does **REAR ADMIRAL CHRISTOPHER GRADY** bring it back to his Aquidneck roots?



More than 120 miles southwest of San Diego, California, aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* is full steam ahead. The ship and its 3,000 crew and 2,000 sailor embarked airwing are preparing for 10 months of deployment in the Arabian Sea this summer: practicing emergency drills on the 18 floors of offices, mess halls, gyms, living quarters and a hospital, and running flight operations atop the four-acre flight deck. It's a floating city, an ant farm of naval aviators, nuclear engineers, seamen and women navigating the windowless labyrinth of gray steel. One of the more than 65 aircraft, probably an F/A 18 Hornet jet, is taking off and landing a few feet above their heads. "Top Gun's" own reality show.

At the center of this maze is RDML Christopher Grady, a Middletown native who followed three generations of his family straight into the Navy. His eldest son Nick is a naval officer too. His dad was a Destroyer School graduate, Naval War College dean and built the Newport Athletic Club in 1981. "I was 9 when my dad was an XO (executive officer) on the *Newman K. Perry* in Newport. I spent a night aboard: shot guns, ate ice cream and got the bug for this life," Grady remembers. "When my dad commanded the *USS Fiske*, the same thing happened and I never thought about being anything else."

Graduating with Middletown High School's class of 1980, with a naval ROTC scholarship to the University of Notre Dame, where he was captain of

the fencing team, he was well prepared for the discipline and leadership needed for the military life. It has served him well now that he's in charge of the Navy's Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group, one of the largest concentrations of fire power in the world: 11 warships, including *USS Carl Vinson*, destroyers, cruisers and frigates, 90 aircraft and thousands of personnel. He's the highest-ranking officer aboard this ship, and accordingly, his leather aviator jacket is covered in naval patches and there's not a single person aboard who didn't stop to let him pass by with a salute.

"This is smack in the middle of the top deadliest jobs, the carrier flight deck," he says proudly from his office aboard the *Vinson*, a high-tech hub of radar screens and live video feed from the flight deck. From this cocoon he can see where the ship is headed, what obstacles or enemy ships might be in their way and which of his aircraft are training. There's no doubt that flight ops are running now: It's between 11 am and 11 pm, and the ship vibrates every time a jet turns on its after burner, every 50 seconds when a group takes off or lands. "How could this get old?" he jokes.

And this is just a dress rehearsal. The real thing starts when they're deployed to foreign waters to "support and protect the American dream." International terrorism is one element of this profession's deadliness, which Grady experienced after taking command of the *USS Cole* after it was



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The call sign for USS Carl Vinson, CVN 70, is "Gold Eagle;" from the flight bridge aloft, all air traffic is directed by the air boss and his team (and is where "Top Gun's" air boss spilled coffee during Maverick's fly-by); everyone on the flight deck wears a different color jersey depending on their job — this shipmate, wearing a white jersey, is a landing signal officer; on the hangar deck one level below the flight deck/runway, mechanics are hard at work repairing and maintaining some of the 65 aircraft on board, including this FA18 Hornet Jet; planes and helicopters take off and land for 12 hours a day six days a week on the 4.5-acre flight deck (also p. 24); missiles are stored safely during flight operations training; this mural, painted on the inside of the hangar deck by some of the crew, represents the ship's call sign; from the radar screen-filled navigation room, communications crew maintain surface and air safety.



bombed on October 12, 2000 in Yemen. Grady was the first commanding officer once the ship was repaired and returned to duty, and he led its first deployment in the Mediterranean. "The fact that it didn't sink was a stunning testament to the ship building industry, and the crew who saved her," he says. "Any other ship would have gone to the bottom." Nearly 20 percent of his crew was aboard during the attack, all of whom Grady says were a resilient group of sailors. "We always respect and remember, but constantly look forward," he says. "The 17 shipmates who were lost on the *Cole* would want it no other way."

Multiple other deployments, including two Iraq and Afghanistan War operations, two masters degrees, plus work in the foreign service as well as two years as deputy executive secretary for the National Security Council at The White House completes Grady's 30 year tour of duty. He even escorted President George W. Bush a few times aboard Air Force One. "He recognized me but I'm not sure he knew my name," Grady laughs. "He was engaged and fabulous to work for, always asking about my son Nick's baseball games."

But amid the fighter jets, air bosses and heads of state and country, he says he'll never forget his roots, and surfing Ruggles Avenue when the waves were high. During the Blizzard of 1978, school was cancelled for the better part of a week, so he and his friends took off on cross-country skis from his home on Green End Avenue. He spent lots of time at Second Beach, and worked as a dock hand at the Newport Yachting Center through college. "Once I showed I wouldn't screw up they gave me the reins," he remembers. He even learned to ride his bike on Grenada Terrace, behind "where McDonalds used to be" on West Main Road. "Newport is a positive case study in reinventing itself. It had one culture when active Navy were there, and there was visionary thinking from town leaders, about tourism and sailing for the future," he says. "They could have thrown in the towel, but they didn't, and it's still a great place to raise a family."

In the meantime, says Grady, "The 'Top Gun' character is pretty accurate."

Annie Sherman spent 24 hours aboard USS Carl Vinson as part of the Navy's Distinguished Visitor program. Learn more on p. 6.

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