

## Jellyfish threat to nuclear behemoth

*Starbucks?*

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THE USS Ronald Reagan can single-handedly take on a nation's armed forces but met its match in Moreton Bay's jellyfish.

The slimy invertebrates were being sucked into the 97,000 tonne ship at such a rate generators were constantly switched over and local fire crews placed on stand-by as the creatures disabled full on-board capacities.

In June 2004 a P&O cruise liner was stranded in Brisbane after a school of jellyfish also blocked the engines' water intake vent.

The world's largest aircraft carrier was due to leave Brisbane at 8am today after the 6000 crew enjoyed five days of shore leave.

The jellyfish have exposed the giant ship's weakness – a humble button, screw or piece of litter can bring the 332-metre behemoth to a standstill.

Under the FOD, or foreign object damage protocol, any alien object can ruin the ship's intricate workings or endanger the take-off or landing of one of the ship's 80 fighter planes.

So a general alert is activated for an all-hands-on-deck search, in the form of an emu parade, to ensure safety.

"It is really dangerous and everything is taken very seriously. If something is lost we call the whole crew up and make sure the ship is super clean," Photographic Mate Second Class (Air Warfare) Christopher Brown, 29, said.

PM2 Brown said the culture of the US Navy was for everything to be "clean and squared away".

Once a day the entire crew stop for an hour to scrub the already bleached white decks and bulkheads of the ship.

Every available space on board is used – the Reagan is huge but it is also home to about 6000 people.

"New sailors get lost, it is a city on the water after all. It takes a little bit to get used to and it is overwhelming for the new sailors when they come on board but we all help each other," PM2 Brown said. Colour-coded maps are displayed on the walls in an effort to help people find their way.

Private space is at a premium and given the cramped conditions of the sleeping dorm, friendliness is a must.

The tiny rooms sleep 21 and bunks are slightly over 2m long and have only about 90cm between the mattresses.

"When you have only a little bit of space you cherish it. We pretty much live without any privacy. You get to know hundreds of people here.

"Even though it is a big place, when it is out to sea it can get pretty small," PM2 Brown said.

The ship is a fully-functional city with its own currency designed to be used at vending machines selling peanut butter crackers and US confectionery, a post office and mini-supermarket.

There is also a medical operating theatre and a television and radio station.

Most on board work a 12-hour shift and have short breaks for dinner and lunch. Most meals feature various meats, potato chips, cold salads and fruit. A special kitchen in the bow of the ship serves only pizza, hamburgers and hot dogs.

In their spare time sailors hit the gym or the rack (bed), play cards or chess or watch a movie, many of which have only just been released in US cinemas.

In some ways it is a tale of two cities. While the non-commissioned sailors eat and play en masse, the commissioned sailors, or "khakis and anchors" squad, eat succulent meals in a diner and have separate, larger living quarters.

But the coffee is a shared passion. "Starbucks, it's all over the ship, we love it."

PM2 Brown has spent three years on the USS Ronald Reagan but he says he is "still in awe sometimes, like a kid watching Top Gun".

It is set to be at sea for seven months after leaving Brisbane.

And, just like in the movies, the pilots with nicknames such as Spill, Pyle, Animal, Bone Dry and Hole, are the most revered residents of the floating metropolis.