

In dread of a small floating deck

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A flight I took 10 years ago was unforgettable not only because it was my first time in an aircraft but because it was — unusually — in a Greyhound, a U.S. military helicopter. This was when the USS Nimitz , a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, had come to India for the first time since the USS Enterprise had tried to fish in troubled waters in the region during the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

And speaking of unusual, neither does it happen often that a journalist gets to go on the same international ship twice. When the opportunity came to visit the ship again last year during the Malabar Exercise, I was once again excited. Memories came flooding back to me when the Greyhound landed on the Nimitz . The most terrifying moment is when you land on an aircraft carrier. When the aircraft is pulled back by large chains, it gives the passenger the alarming feeling that it is crashing, since the runway is just a small piece of floating deck. If the aircraft does not land correctly, it could end up in a watery grave.

As the time came to board the Greyhound, I recounted anecdotes from my previous visit to my fellow journalists and told them what to expect when the aircraft lands. The spokesperson of the U.S. Consulate General in Chennai didn't seem too thrilled with my anxiety-filled, detailed description of how it felt like a crash landing the previous time.

This time, though, the landing wasn't as bad, and a few of my fellow passengers stared at me for passing on my fear to them.

Once on board, it was time to visit the flight deck, where the aircraft were stored, serviced, and maintained. On one side of the flight deck, you could go near the edge of the ship and see the ship speeding on the vast ocean. A woman officer asked the journalists to stay clear of a marking on the floor. "On good days, you won't go overboard. On bad days, you might go overboard and we might be able to save you. And if it's really bad luck, you may go overboard and we may not be able to save you," she said smiling. Seeing the dark waters below, many kept a fair distance from the mark.

As the interviews ended and we were all strapped up to return, I was asked if the take-off was going to be better than the landing. "Don't worry," I said. "Just put your feet up on the seat in front of you." Suddenly, the aircraft catapulted into the sky and my words drowned in the noise. "I don't remember this happening last time," I thought, even as I got stares once again from some on board.