

Saluting our Armed Forces

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I had an incredible experience recently that left me with even greater respect and appreciation for the men and women who serve in our nation's armed forces. I was able to participate in a U.S. Navy VIP tour, spending 24 hours on an active, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier off the San Diego coast. The Navy Public Affairs office occasionally arranges these tours, with the groups consisting of a mix of business leaders, teachers, congressional staffers, and sometimes, celebrities. Our group would be flying to the USS *John Stennis CVN 74*, a state-of-the-art Nimitz-class carrier with a crew of 5,000 on board.



Our group of 12 met at the San Diego Naval Air Station early in the morning. After several informative briefings, we loaded up in safety gear and boarded a Navy C-2A, known as a "Cod." This plane had no windows and the seats faced backwards. When a brave soul in our group asked why the seats faced backwards, the officer logically explained, "It's safer that way, in case of a crash." Ah...okay...I feel better—I think. No one dared ask, "How often do they crash?"



We took off from the Naval Air Station and flew approximately 120 miles off the coast to the USS *John Stennis CVN 74*. After circling for 15 minutes (which wouldn't have been so bad if the airplane had windows), the cabin officer announced we would be starting the approach, and that he would wave his arms in the air when we were 15 seconds away from landing on the carrier. A few minutes later he waved his arms, and the next 15 seconds seemed like 15 years. After a thunderous roar and violent shaking of the airplane, we stopped before my brain could process whether everything was okay.

When we arrived on the carrier deck, it was abuzz with activity. Planes were landing and taking off from multiple catapults. Planes were being moved around the flight deck and being serviced. More than 200 crew were scurrying around the deck in different colored outfits, which designated their respective jobs.

We were ushered below the flight deck for a very informative welcome speech/briefing by the Stennis Executive Officer (XO) and the Rear

Admiral in charge of the entire eight-ship Stennis strike group. The Stennis had just started a rigorous two-week training mission at sea. A new flight wing had been assigned to the carrier and intensive flight operations were taking place to "carrier certify" the pilots. Each pilot is required to make five successful both day and night landings.

By mid-afternoon it was time to view flight operations up close. We returned to the flight deck and spent the next couple of hours watching countless landings and take offs—from less than 20 yards away. Steam-powered catapults propelled planes from 0 to 150 mph in 2 seconds to provide the planes enough speed to take flight once off the carrier deck. Watching the planes land that close was remarkable. The ship was rocking in all directions, yet pilot after pilot landed their aircraft smoothly on the crowded flight deck. They made it look extremely easy, although the carrier deck must look like a postage stamp on approach.

When pilots land on a carrier they hit "full throttle" just as they touch down, so if their tail-hook misses the arresting cables that stop the plane, they have enough speed to take off again. But when the tail-hook attaches properly, it is remarkable that the cable is strong enough to stop a plane at full throttle. It was equally impressive to see the airplane's suspension take the severe abuse of rapid deceleration without damaging the aircraft. Lastly, it was extremely impressive to witness hundreds of flight deck crew service and jockey airplanes around the 4.5-acre flight deck. With approximately 30 planes on the flight deck at any given time, it looked like some type of crazy aviation circus, but in reality, the crew knew exactly where everyone and every plane should be at all times. Crew members, whose age averaged 20-years-old, were directing \$40-million-dollar aircraft around the flight deck with greater ease than a hotel valet service!

Next we went to the flight deck traffic center, where there was a surprising mixture of high tech computers, flat screen monitors, and a low tech, but fail proof, miniature flight deck where staff moved model planes around by hand to keep track of the flight deck traffic flow. Putting



a purple nut on the plane meant it was being fueled. Placing a screw on the plane meant it was being serviced. It made me a believer that sometimes simpler is better.

The flight operations center has more than 20 large LCD screens that keep track of an astonishing amount of information. Among other things, it tracks every plane in the air, keeps score of every landing and take-off, tracks every plane of any kind in the air in a 1,000-mile radius, and monitors weather, not only near the carrier, but at alternate landing sites. Nothing is left to chance.

The next stop was the bridge, where we met Captain Johanson, who gave us a guided tour and a terrific overview of bridge operations. He was extremely sharp and also very personable. All aircraft carrier captains and XO's are required to be former pilots to ensure their ability to view their jobs from a flight operation's perspective.

After a memorable dinner with the XO and other officers, we returned to the deck to view nighttime flight operations. In regard to lighting, I had pictured a Wal-Mart parking lot at night, but boy, was I wrong! It was very dark with only faint lighting providing minimal illumination to the carrier deck. Nevertheless, the crew and pilots executed the same flight operations we witnessed earlier in the day. A few



landings were waved off and a few tail-hooks missed the arresting cables. Seeing the jets use their afterburners to get back into the air was something I'll never forget.

Thoroughly exhausted but still running on adrenaline, we were adjourned for the evening at 11:30 p.m. to our small sleeping compartments situated one floor below the flight deck and specifically below catapult #1. The only problem was flight operations were to continue until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. Every time a plane took off, it must have been over 100 decibels in the room and our beds shook like a 6.0 earthquake. Our liaison officer said, "Don't worry, you'll get used to it." We couldn't tell if he was serious or joking. Not one person in our group came close to sleeping until after flight operations ceased. That was part of the fun, however.

The 5:30 a.m. wake-up call came shortly thereafter. After a quick shower we went to breakfast in one of the general mess halls. We spread out and ate with the enlisted crew, which was a wonderful experience. I had breakfast with several young men and women who were eager to share who they were and what their job responsibilities were. They are clearly proud to serve our country and are extremely committed to their jobs. That level of commitment and maturity for kids in their early 20's is remarkable.

The next few hours was an amazing whirlwind of touring different areas of the ship such as pilot headquarters, medical facilities, the aircraft maintenance department, missile defense control, and the arresting cable control area. One incredible thing we learned is that the arresting cables' tensions must be readjusted for each different aircraft given the different airplane weights.

Many of us have a sweet tooth and I couldn't help but be amazed by the ship's bakery. Two shifts of three people run a compact bakery that produces more than 25,000 cookies, doughnuts, pastries, and cakes every day. There are few creature comforts on board for the crew given the limited space, but quality food is a high priority. Because morale is extremely important on a ship, all the chefs are a vital part of the team.

My, how 24 hours flew by! It was now time to reboard the "Cod" and be catapulted off the carrier. We climbed into our safety gear and then boarded the windowless plane with the seats facing backwards. Similar to the landing (which seemed like a year ago at this point), the very relaxed flight crew told us it would take some time for us to taxi onto the catapult, but they'd give us some warning before we were to assume the take-off position (arms folded against chests). After what seemed like an eternity, the officer yelled "15 seconds." I told myself not to panic, then BOOM! The catapult impact was nearly 10 times that of any roller coaster I'd ever been on. Jerking our bodies during this tremendously loud sound, we went from 0 to 150 mph in 2 seconds. What really startled me was then it became eerily quiet. I thought the next sound I might hear would be hitting the water, but of course everything was okay, and we ascended for a smooth flight back to San Diego.

My time aboard the USS *Stennis* was exciting, enlightening, but most of all inspiring. The vast majority of the ship's 5,000 crew members had enlisted after September 11th, stepping forward to confront the dangers facing our nation. Thank you to all the men and women who are serving, or have served, in our armed forces to keep our nation safe. •