

Its mission completed, this aircraft returns to the Nimitz, which carries a crew of 5,500 and has a top speed of 30 knots.

Nimitz: Self-contained city

by **Barbara Crane**
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O.K. I'll admit it now.

When the Navy's public relations office called to invite me to tour their aircraft carrier, the *USS Nimitz*, I wasn't all that thrilled.

After asking if I were free on June 29, Gene Romano came right to the heart of the matter:

"You're not bothered by motion sickness, are you?"

"Uh, gosh, no . . ." I mumbled as I mentally inventoried my medicine cabinet to decide whether I should stop on the way home for another case of industrial-strength Dramamine.

"That's good," Romano said. He informed me I'd be taking a

three-hour flight to and from the carrier, landing on and taking off from the pitching deck and spending five hours touring the many levels of the *Nimitz*.

"Sounds wonderful," I said.

"See you Thursday at 6 a.m.," Romano replied. "You'll have a great time. Now you're *sure* you don't get seasick?"

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• 'The pilots never watch the deck'

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Thursday morning was beautiful. Blue sky and already warm at 6 in the morning. TV, radio and newspaper reporters are usually fairly laid back people, but the dozen or so gathered for this trip were plainly excited by the day's adventure.

After a quick briefing we were led outside to board the plane which would take us to the *Nimitz*, still 775 miles southwest of Anchorage.

But first, we were introduced to the legendary "Gumby" survival suit, named after the rubbery cartoon character who stretches and bends to any size or shape.

The Navy requires that these fluorescent orange one-size-fits-all suits be worn while flying over water.

While struggling into my suit, I began to wonder whether it had been designed to fit King Kong without alterations, or whether "one-size-fits-all" meant that all 12 of us would easily fit into just one suit.

Crash helmets with goggles completed our attire.

With my feet where my knees should go and the attached gloves dragging on the ground, I bunny-hopped up the ramp and gratefully sank into my backwards-facing seat. Everyone else was similarly immobilized, so the Navy crew had to strap us into our seats.

Before takeoff, the loadmaster explained emergency procedures. He pointed out the overhead emergency exit, which I judged to be a good 8 feet above the floor.

"Right," I thought. "In this outfit, it would take a forklift to get me up there and out that exit." I decided not to think about it anymore.

The flight was a smooth one and enjoyable, despite the sweat trickling down my legs inside the survival suit. I started believing this might really be a great adventure after all.

As we approached the *Nimitz* — then located about 60 miles south of Cold Bay — the loadmaster again made sure we were firmly strapped in for what Naval aviators call a "controlled crash" on the deck of the *Nimitz*.

Imagine, if you can, what it feels like to decelerate from 105 to 0 miles per hour in only 2 seconds. That's what we did.

The only way to describe it is to say that my firmly strapped down body stopped, but it felt like my brain and stomach kept right on going.

After landing, we were hurried across the carrier's deck and into a briefing room whose floor just would not hold still. A glance around the room confirmed I was not the only reporter who looked a little queasy.

Rear Adm. Thomas Mercer, commander of the *Nimitz* Battle Group, welcomed us aboard the *Nimitz*.

A handsome man with a chestful of medals, bright blue eyes and a suntanned face, Mercer looked every bit like the standard Hollywood version of an admiral.

Cmdr. John Allison explained the Navy's increased interest in Alaska and why the five ships of the *Nimitz* Battle Group were making this visit.

"This is the only place where the United States and the Soviet Union face each other across a common ocean frontier," Allison said. "Located as they are, both Adak and Shemya would make tempting targets and require substantial protection."

According to Allison, the battle group's presence "demonstrates both our intention and ability to defend that territory closest to and therefore most threatened by the Soviet Union."

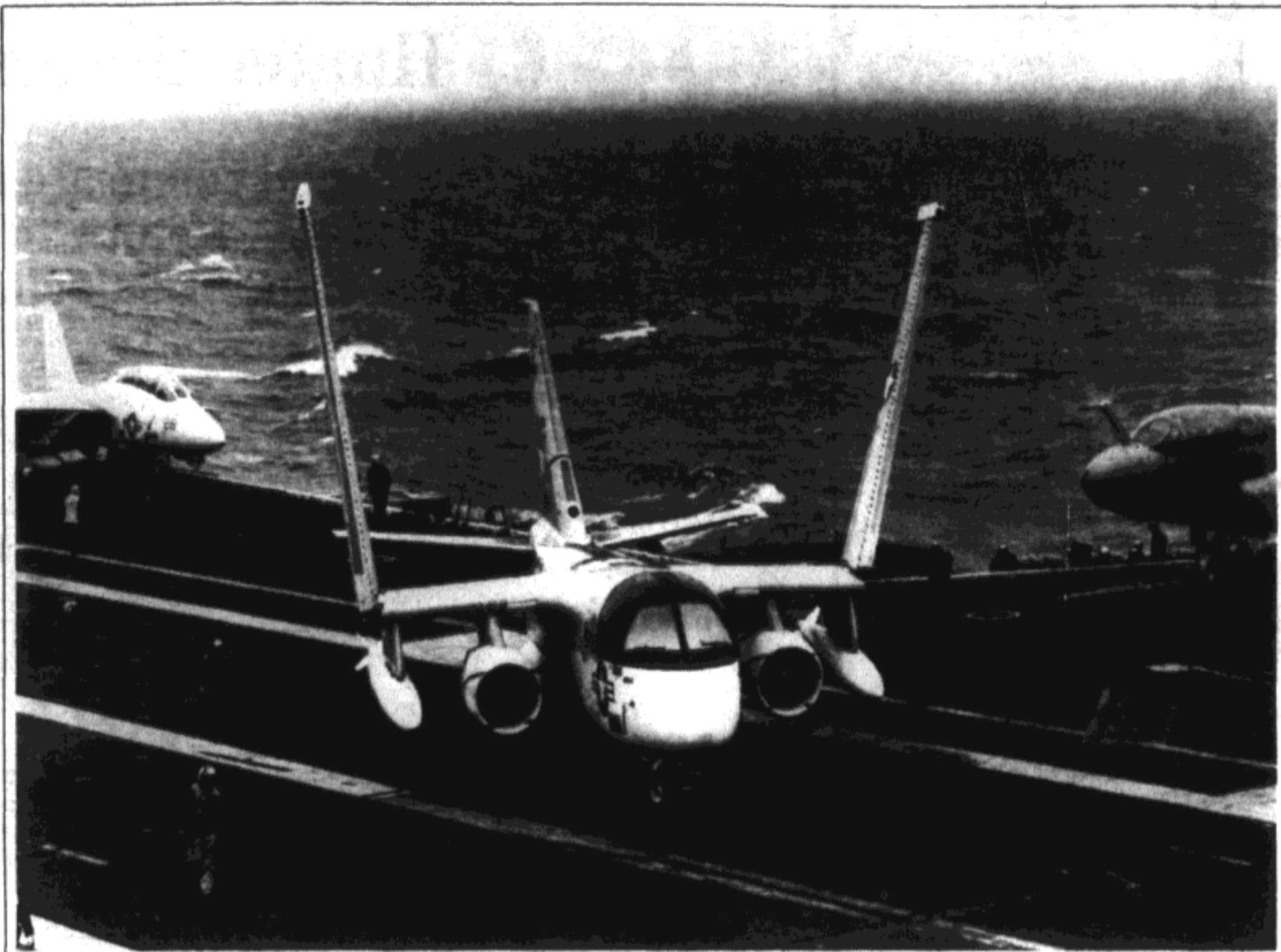


photo by Barbara Crane

Bremerton, Wash., is home port for the *USS Nimitz*, but with a top speed of more than 30 knots, it can travel from Bremerton to Anchorage in just a little over two days.

Joint training exercises also involved men and equipment from Air Force and Navy forces stationed in Alaska, as well as Alaska Air and Army National Guard members.

Following this briefing, we were treated to lunch. The crew claimed not to notice any rocking, but our group resembled a gospel chorus as we swayed right and left, attempting to find our sealegs.

Lunch was surprisingly good. The *Nimitz* carries enough food to feed its 5,500-man crew for 100 days, and its kitchens provide 18,000 meals a day.

There are a number of dining halls, including one known as "McNimitz." Hamburgers are the specialty here, and they have been christened

level Vultures Row because they say that from the deck we look like a row of vultures just waiting for a crash.

Four cables stretch across the landing deck, and the idea is that a hook extending from the back of each plane grabs one of the cables and is snapped to a halt.

The pilots made it look simple enough, but I was told putting 20 tons of airplane down on a heaving, rolling deck quickens the pulse of even the most experienced pilot. They are guided in by a pattern of lights off to the side of the deck.

"The pilots never watch the deck," Cmdr. Bill Brubaker explained. "If they watch the deck, they'll fly right into it."

"They land with full power so that if they miss the cables they will be able to get back up and come around for another try."

The pilots and deck crews are so

that soon I would find out just what it's like to be shot out of a cannon.

The size of the *Nimitz* is staggering. It stands 18 stories high from keel to mast and its flight deck covers 4.5 acres. It can carry up to 90 aircraft, their wings folded up like giant insects to conserve deck space.

Each of its two anchors weighs 60,000 pounds. Two nuclear reactors provide power for more than 15 years' operations between refueling.

It truly is a self-contained city with its own daily newspaper and several radio and television stations. NBO (*Nimitz* Box Office) broadcasts movies around the clock.

While touring the ship, I had a chance to talk with Herb Bailey, the crewman who maintains the cable which caught our airplane as it streaked across the deck.

Bailey, one of about 20 Alaskans assigned to the *USS Nimitz*, grew up in Fairbanks and graduated from Lathrop High School before joining the Navy. He was looking forward to spending his four-day shore leave with family.

"I've been asked if Alaska is part of the United States, if we live in igloos and whether we have automobiles and roads or just dog sleds," Bailey said.

Now it was time to get back into our Gumby suits and head back home.

Once again we donned crash helmets and were firmly strapped down by the flight crew. They instructed us to brace our feet on the seat ahead of us, cross our arms and tuck our heads down.

This was starting to seem like pretty serious stuff to me. Were all these precautions necessary because the human body just wasn't designed to go from 0 to 128 mph in 3 seconds? But there really wasn't any other way to get home.

No one talked as we listened to the engines strain against the chains that held us in place on the catapult, and then — SNAP! — we were flying.

Again, the sensation was almost indescribable, but I remember thinking that if my straps broke, they'd never be able to scrape me off the seat in front of me.

Three hours later we were back in Anchorage.



Herb Bailey, 22, maintains the cable that catches aircraft as they land.

"sliders" because, as I heard more than once, "they're so greasy, they slide right down."

I was told a crewmember recently claimed a record by consuming 22 sliders in 30 minutes, but I couldn't confirm this with any of the six doctors aboard the ship.

After lunch we went up to Vultures Row to watch takeoffs and landings. The deck crew calls the observation

well coordinated that under wartime conditions, a landing can be made every 30 seconds.

Takeoffs were even more spectacular. One immediately after another, the planes were loaded onto one of four catapults which would fling them off the deck and into the air.

Planes, pilots and passengers accelerate from 0 to 128 miles per hour in just three seconds, and I realized