

## **TALK Competition – Neerja Bhanot**

Hijackings are sporadic, but when they do occur, they can either be minor incidents or disasters that claim the lives of many; the latter is disconcertingly true for most. Many hijackings have devastated communities and left an everlasting impact on the people whose friends and families chose the wrong road to walk through. In this essay, I will be discussing the prodigious role Indian flight attendant Neerja Bhanot had in preventing the potential deaths of almost 400 in a calamitous airplane hijacking.

Neerja Bhanot was born in the Punjab region of northern India, while she spent her childhood in Mumbai. While at college, she was offered a remarkable modelling opportunity, which would lead to the megacity's inhabitants' daily view of Neerja on huge billboards and the most pre-eminent of magazines. After graduating, she spent two years in Miami, Florida, where she trained to become a flight attendant with Pan Am. She subsequently began flying in 1985.

Neerja was acclimated to her early morning flights from Mumbai to New York, with stopovers in Karachi and Frankfurt, on a weekly basis. The 5<sup>th</sup> of September 1986's journey seemed no different from every other week preliminary to it. Sadly, this was not the case, as four armed men forcefully entered the aircraft while it was preparing to depart from Karachi airport in Pakistan. The men were part of a Palestinian terrorist group called the Abu Nidal Organisation, who wanted to fly the plane to Cyprus to free their colleagues from prison.

A pilot is trusted to be the leader of an aircraft, someone who will help their passengers and keep them safe. Contrary to this belief, both the pilot and the co-pilot of the hijacked aircraft, as well as the in-flight engineer, escaped through a hatch in the roof of the cockpit as soon as they received the news of the hijacking from the cabin crew. This cowardly and heartless decision is what seemingly fuelled Neerja's fight against the hijackers.

In a situation as precarious as this, you would want to obey all instructions you are given in order to come out of the ordeal safe and unharmed. This, however, was not what Neerja was thinking at the time. As the most senior crew member of the flight, she knew that the 384 passengers' lives were in her hands. The hijackers demanded they get everyone's passports, and revealed that anyone who possessed an American passport would immediately be killed. Neerja picked up the announcement phone and instructed her

colleagues to put any American passports underneath seats or down garbage chutes while collecting everyone's passports, using the language barrier between the crew and the hijackers to her advantage. Moreover, she importuned the hijackers to let her hand out glasses of water to the passengers, as well as calming and reassuring them on multiple occasions.

It dazzles me as to how she was able to be so selfless and self-sacrificing while being under so much pressure, especially since she was the senior-most flight attendant. From the beginning she ensured that she would take care of these passengers, these strangers that she knew nothing about; and in the end, she decided that she would not leave the aircraft until she knew that the passengers were safe, which fatally led to her death.

The strength, determination, and compassion that Neerja Bhanot displayed throughout the horrifying 18 hours of trauma is what inspires me today. Not once did she give up; she put her life at the edge for her passengers. She pushed her own life off the edge for her passengers.