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Witch 54 Flight

Marcy Atwood

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Witch 54 Flight Marcy Atwood

Witch 54 taxis over to the side of the hammerhead and we slide in behind her. Brakes set, yawns stifled, we run our pre-takeoff checklists. The copilot has the flight manual on his lap, recalculating the takeoff roll. The winds are dead, the night is pitch black, and the fog is thick in the California agricultural valley. My two-ship of tankers is the first of five aircraft to take to the wind to feed the Blackbird on its National Security mission. SR-71, Blackbird, Habu, and Sled are all names for her. The nickname Sled, and the way she darts up to take gas, reminds me of a bobsled running the slalom. I've done countless of these high priority missions with critical information as the target. Do we have to hear it every time to make us believe? For me, the pre-flight pep talk from the operations group colonel never ceases to make me push hard into my seat.

Even the talk that night couldn't stop me thinking, "The fog is too thick. We don't have takeoff visibility." Errant cows could be blanketed in the fog and we'd feel them slam into the gear before we'd see them. Then there was the rendezvous point. It was dead center of a line of thunderstorms moving up from Mexico to Texas. An altitude change or delayed timing would not make a difference. That storm was plowing down on the Gulf and she wouldn't stop until she hit Canada.

The cockpit is silent. New takeoff rotation numbers are posted. We're going to use all 13,000 feet of runway tonight; we are that pregnant. Cleared for takeoff. Lead, Witch 54, takes the runway as the colonel, in his suburban next to us, flicks the mic and says, "Good hunting."

I hit the stop clock; exactly two minutes between takeoffs. A voice in my head says, "Pray." Without hesitation I lay my gloved hands on the inertial navigation system on my right and the comm panel on my left. "Please, God, take care of this jet, this mission, and these crews." Witch 54 waddles onto the runway.

Witch 54 Flight Marcy Atwood

I key the mic after losing sight of lead just seconds after her throttle advance. “Fifteen seconds.” The fog swirling from the jet wash bangs on the windshield as we take the runway. The pilot applies the brakes too hard, slamming me into my harness creating bruise number six for the week. “Forty-five seconds.” Last minute switches are flipped. The radar is on with tilt full up straining to locate lead in the air. “One minute twenty.” The pilot calls for roll call. The Boom checks in, ready to roll. The copilot rogers up. I key the mic. “Let’s go.”

Witch 55 rumbles down the runway like a hippopotamus doing the Argentine Tango—executing sharp jerks as our weight fights the thrust. The copilot is straining to see the Christmas lights spaced like missing teeth on the right side of the runway that indicate we are still on it. The pilot stares at the mist with both hands on the yoke. My eyes are glued to the instrument panel in front of the pilots.

I announce, “Speed, 105 knots.” The commanding officer (CO) sees the 5,000 feet marker whip by. “Speed, 125.” We need 150 knots.

The CO yells, “8,000 feet.” The needle bounces on the airspeed indicator, hovering just under 150. The CO screams, “10,000 feet.” The pilot pulls hard, rotating us up through the cotton candy dream into the pitch-black night. We break ground as the hash marks at the end of the runway blur into a solid line.

We climb slowly through the cold air and the old gal strains, making creaky noises like grandma’s rocking chair on an old porch. We run checklists and I’m searching for lead on my radarscope. The sweep sees nothing. I’m greeted with a faded black scope as the neon sweep goes round, leaving a trail of green dust in its wake. Lead should be within fifteen miles, but there is no bullet-shaped blip showing her position. We climb through 10,000 feet and break through the fog. Another checklist runs automatically.

Witch 54 Flight Marcy Atwood

Passing 18,000 feet, we report into air traffic control. They respond, “Witch 55, your party is ahead twenty-five miles, 20 degrees right. Cleared to join.” I slam the scope up and extend the range to fifty miles.

The CO gets on the common frequency. “Hey, 55, slow down.”

Witch 55 comes back. “Bout time you all joined in.”

I locate the blip. “Pilot, Nav. Continue left turn to heading 120.”

“Roger.”

“Pilot, Nav. Range is thirty-four miles and closing in five minutes.”

Wojo is the lead navigator. She reported to the 343rd Air Refueling Squadron three weeks after I did. We were the first female officer crewmembers. The radio cracks. “Witch 55 flight, Oakland Center, cleared as requested.” I missed the flight change request from lead, but I check the routing and see Wojo is cutting off a corner to make up time. That’s the beauty of night flying; less air traffic means we can go direct rather than abide by the air corridor game.

We close to 45 degrees and one mile from lead. “Two’s in.” Now it’s flight following her tail on my radar, like stalking a girl in a bar. I take glances at the target azimuth I’ve set up every thirty seconds. Every fifth minute I spend twenty seconds checking waypoints and logging time, distance, speed, and heading to calculate a dead reckoning position. It only takes a couple of blinks to degrade 100 percent attention on the radar to make the reckoning really dead. I lean away from the seat, undoing my lap belt and unhooking three of the five harnesses to relieve the swaddling feeling.

The flight to the Gulf is calm. Lead is steady; the two aircraft commander pilots are skilled. The Boom is sleeping sitting up, a common talent among us. Two hours later we are over Texas. No lights are visible on the deck; it’s sparse open range. The pilot has a lock on lead,

Witch 54 Flight Marcy Atwood

staring out the window, head turned as if listening with his good ear to the kiddies in the back seat. I flip the radar to 200 miles. Instantly I begin to sweat. The solid white line of storms has no breaks. It crawls from the top of the radar down my spine in a mad dash to beat us to the notional may pole where we'll dance with the SR-71.

I key the mic. "Crew, Nav. It doesn't look good at the rendezvous point. Strap in." The CO checks off for a head call. My midnight snack, peanut butter and jelly on white bread, sits on the floor untouched in its flimsy white cardboard box.

We begin the race around the air track waiting for the rendezvous time. Our chariot is bouncing ten feet up and fifteen feet down as if losing a wheel. The violence of the shaking increases and the radar backscatter noise is getting so thick I begin to lose the Witch 54 blip a half a mile away. The main frequency is silent because lead has switched to secure comm with the Blackbird, who is descending in the blind with no radar and no visual, just the insides of bed sheets shrink-wrapped around their space suited eyes. Lead is trying to stay on course.

I'm breathing deeply while repeating my mantra, "I'm not getting sick." I check my stopwatch. The final turn in front of the Blackbird is in two minutes. "Pilot, Nav. Stand by for the turn, heading 330. Lead should be turning in five, four, three ... Nav. I've lost them."

The lightning hits on the pilot's side, just in front of the window. All my instruments go dead. The static electricity reaches a finger up my back as it gallops down the inside of the aircraft to the boomer. My ears mute all sounds except the pilot yelling for emergency checklists.

I pray, "Please give me power to the instruments, please." I check my scope, nothing. I check the rendezvous time; the Blackbird is always on time. But we've flown an additional ten seconds in the wrong direction. Since we were 500 feet above lead, and the wingspan is fifty feet, I key the mic. "Pilot, Nav, Turn NOW. Heading 330 on the whiskey compass, give me an

Witch 54 Flight Marcy Atwood

approximate 35-degree bank until I call it.” I am banking on lead not being near us. My heart pounds loudly during the two minutes it takes to turn a tanker 180 degrees. I know this pilot; he’s like the school nerd when it comes to asking the girl to dance. I know we are out of position and hope I can make up the space to account for his actions when the girl says no. The power blinks three times. I hold my breath.

The power comes on, steady. “Standby, to reduce turn angle. Ready, ready, now, give me 30 degrees.” I search the radar for any sign of lead. We hit a massive updraft, the jet lifts up, kite-like for a minute in no gravity. I can’t reach my stopwatch to re-hack the time. Mental note: subtract two seconds or was it longer? My mantra comes out as a whisper, “I’m not going to get sick.” Lead is gone and I have no idea where she is. They didn’t call the turn. “Crew, who heard the turn?”

The Boom interrupts me. “Crew, Boom. I got her, Sled approaching, Boom coming down.” Then the Boom announces, “Contact.” Lights on the overhead blink on and the CO reaches up to start the pumps.

The Boom interphone cracks as the Sled driver says, “Who ordered this whipped mocha meeting place?” We weren’t supposed to be the first to offload gas. No time to check damage.

The CO yells airspeed as the pilot steadies us on 225 knots. I note the lightning strike in the log as I identify lead on the scope.

“Crew, Boom, this is dicey, struggling to keep the Sled in the envelope.”

The pilot says, “Call a breakaway if you need to.”

The CO keys the mic. “Nav, tell lead where we are.”

I pull the Boom mic close to my mouth. “Witch 54, 55. We are 27 41.5N, 94 34.13W. Heading 330, airspeed 227, altitude 25, 450 feet.”

Witch 54 Flight Marcy Atwood

“Roger, pulling up and back to cross over onto the right wing,” the pilot announces to the Sled driver. We are starting a slow decent back to 25,000. I know Wojo is orchestrating an air show maneuver as if we were two bi-wing aircraft doing barnstorming. The turbulence is letting up slightly. I’m still talking myself out of throwing up. Lead slides into 95 degrees, ½ mile and 500 feet above us off our right wing.

The Sled drinks all we’ve got and before disconnecting asks where lead is. I say, “55 is bouncing on the right wing, you should see her when you move 15 degrees right.”

We hold our airspeed as I advise the pilot that we are running out of air refueling space. The CO calls center, requesting an extension. The Sled is latched onto Witch 54’s tit. I am breathing easier but refuse to let my mind wander to what had to be God’s grace in keeping us from blowing up in mid-air. We run our emergency checklists and separate from Witch 55. We fly home at 39,000 feet to conserve fuel. We gave too much to the Sled and now we have to limp home. It is dead quiet going home. I’m lost in my own thoughts. As we near the base, I radio into the Command Post, “Marlin Control, Witch 54.” I hear the mic key as belly laughs in the background die down. Every hair on my back, still tingling from the electricity, lifts as I narrow my eyes in disgust. It was the call sign and the female voice that set them off.

I report the lighting strike. That is enough to quiet them down and they call the operations group commander, waking him up at 0430.

He meets us on the runway. “Guys, when I tell you good hunting, I don’t mean for you to come back with a chunk of your tail missing. The SR lost rivets and has a bent pitot tube. I’d say you took the brunt of it when you both entered the same thunder cloud.” The sun is up before our debrief is over. We troop over to the hospital for a checkup by the flight surgeon. Only a ringing

Witch 54 Flight Marcy Atwood

in my ears bothers me. Cleared by the doc, I drag myself to my truck and sit there, tears welling
as I murmur, but for my prayer on the hammerhead. I make it home before I puke.