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My Best Day at Sea (I Reminder Why We Do This)

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The weather today is much better than yesterday: clear skies, warm, light breezes, calm sea.

Yesterday, we had 14 hours of flight ops: helos came and went all day, moving Marines and supplies to and from their locations in and around Beirut, five miles to our East. Other copters came and went from Cyprus Tel Aviv. My second crew flew to Israel to retrieve some important. Today will be a welcome change.

On the catwalk, I walk to the ladder up to the flight deck, to our helo, so I can put in my flight gear, just in case we need a quick launch; we are the ready Search and Rescue bird today. If anything happens, none of the other helos can launch until we're in the air. I, my copilot Preacher, and our aircrew Crowbar, have just finished our flight brief. Those two are already at the helo performing the preflight checks. The maintenance crew is making sure everything is ready to go.

I take a minute to gaze East. I clearly see the outline of the once-beautiful coastal city. Recent years of civil war have almost reduced it to rubble. We and the Marines we carry aboard the ship are here to bring the peace. Our efforts haven't produced much encouraging. Not long before we got here, an attack on a barracks took away more than 200 U.S. Marines. Such a loss is not easy to forget.

Unless I look at a calendar, I can't really remember how many weeks or months we've been here. One day blends into the next, always on edge, afraid to relax even asleep. Our assigned "box" is fifteen miles long in a North/South direction, five miles wide. Being five miles off the coast keeps us away from small shore-based threats, and the USS Enterprise, with her escorts fifty miles out, keep the skies safe. On odd-numbered days, we

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sail in a counter-clockwise racetrack pattern within our box. To break up the numbness that comes from repetitive stress, on even-numbered days we sail in a clockwise pattern.

Today's an even-numbered day, so we would be sailing in a clockwise pattern; except that today is Sunday, when we really get radical and sail in a figure-eight pattern.

After our hectic day yesterday, the Powers That Be have declared today will be a stand-down day, with no regular flight operations. Stand down has many implications, among them the chance to do some much-needed routine maintenance on the helos; the grunt Marines can come topside for fresh air and burn off energy. If all goes well, we'll pull out the grills for a "steel beach" picnic. In theory, we can afford to let down our guard a bit.

Maintenance crews fire up the APE's on their helos. There are not enough power cables from the ship to go around to each helo for troubleshooting. Some crews must use the Auxiliary Power Engines since those can be started from a battery. Once running, the APE's provide electrical and/or hydraulic power to the whole helo, either for maintenance or to start the main engines. These small engines sound the same as the main engines, but not nearly so loud. I am actually feeling relaxed and don't want anything to interfere with my enjoyment of the nice weather. I'm glad to ignore the APEs and feel the sun on my head.

"Want to have some fun and fuck with the Marines?"

My Chief Petty Officer, our crew leader and head of maintenance, has come up beside me.

"Aren't we always fucking with them?"

"We should tell them we need their help to push start our helo."

"You can't push start a helo. It has no clutch to pop. It isn't a '62 Chevy."

“You and I know that. Those Grunts don’t.”

He might be on to something, and we all could use some fun. “Go on.”

“We’ll get them all pumped up to push the helo down the deck. Smitty will be in the cockpit, supposedly to pop the clutch. On my signal, he taps the brakes to make the helo lurch a bit and at the same time fires up the APE. The Grunts will think they did it.”

Anything, within reason, to break the monotony.

“This could work. You get the guys together, I’ll doublecheck with the Aircraft Handler. Then I’ll go snag one of those platoons to come help us.”

Chief goes to set up the prank. I move aft to where the Grunts are PT-ing.

“Lieutenant!”

“Yes, sir!” His attitude is attentive and respectful, but he’s annoyed with the interruption.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but we need your help. Our helo won’t start and all the power cables are being used. Do you think your guys could get it moving enough for us to push start it? It is a bit on the heavy side.”

The best way to get a Marine to do something is to suggest that he is unable to do it. No Marine ever shrinks from a challenge to show teamwork and strength. The platoon lights up.

The Lieutenant barks, “No problem, Sir! Follow me, Marines!”

They jog in formation to our helo. Chief thanks them for their help, organizes the pushing, and away we go. To preserve the illusion, most of my crew joins in; the rest

encourage everyone to get it going just a little faster. Thirty feet down the deck, Chief signals Crowbar to tap the brakes and fire up the APE.

When the APE comes online, pandemonium erupts in shouts, OooRah's, and high-fives. Other maintenance crews have figured out what just happened and enjoy the joke, too. Instead of laughing and gloating, my guys have been drawn into the celebration, though they are the perpetrators of the prank.

For a moment, we are all one. The ruined city with all its problems is not there; the loneliness that comes from leaving families behind is suppressed; the weariness of long days is overcome. We are not Sailors, Squids, Grunts, or Marines, just brothers-in-arms taking a respite from the pressures that so often dominate our days. We acknowledge a small sense of accomplishment. Insignificant, but when combined with all the other little victories, they collectively underscore our sense of purpose.

We all sense it. We don't have to say it. If any of us sailors were to find ourselves in that city, there is no other group we'd rather have around than these Grunts. Each Marine knows that if they found themselves in trouble in that city, my guys and our helo would hope to be first in line to bring help.

The lieutenant approaches with a salute. "Glad to help, Sir!"

Salutes are not normally rendered on the flight deck, but being a ground-pounder, he doesn't know that. Anyway, now's not the time to be picky. I return his salute and initiate a handshake. From his grin, I suspect he's figured out they were played.

"Many thanks. And maybe go easy on the PT. Your Marines have been awfully busy lately."

“I’ll consider it, Sir. We’ll see how they do in the next thirty minutes. Gotta’ stay ready.”

Chief directs our crew to return the helo to its ready state. The Marine platoon forms up to jog back to their PT, but with a bit more energy and pride. When they pass, I recognize a face. These guys are some of the Marines we pulled out of the city yesterday during our long day of flight ops. They were at the end of their 3-week rotation, and were back aboard to get some rest.

I remember watching one of them as he filed off the helo and started toward the ladder leading down to the hangar deck. Filthy, he just looked worn out. Passing one of the flight deck yellow-shirts, the sailor extended his hand. The Marine paused only long enough to grab it for a quick shake.

I don’t know what, if anything, they said to each other above the sound of flight ops, but I suspect it went something like:

“Welcome back Grunt. Go get some decent chow, a shower, and some rest.”

“Thanks, Squidly. Will do.”

On the coast, a smoke plume rises from somewhere in the city; black haze signaling an oil or fuel fire. A vehicle or storage tank of some sort has crashed, or exploded. I offer a quick and silent prayer that the Marines we took there yesterday will be coming back in three weeks for their rotation; all of them.

I don’t care how long we’ve been here, or if the weather is good, bad, or horrible. I don’t care if we’re making right-hand or left-hand patterns. Personal reasons for what we do vary, from love of country to a sense of duty to the desire to protect home and family.

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Today, what matters most in this grand scheme of things is the knowledge that we can count on each other when it gets real. Only with such a certainty can we do what we do.

That smoke isn't letting up; the sight of it snaps me back to the present. I go below just to check on things. An uneasiness borne of experience stirs inside me. As I start down, I hear the unmistakable sound:

"General Quarters! General Quarters! All hands, man your battle stations!"

The flight deck explodes in a flurry of activity. Each man sprints to his well-rehearsed place in all of this. Preacher and Crowbar run to the helo. Chief has the maintenance team breaking down chains and tie-downs to make final preps. I trust all of them with my life. They can fire it up and get ready. As planned, I'll head below to the Helo Direction Center to see what our mission is before joining them.

I run down the passageway, careful to duck under the frames and pull my feet high over the knee-knockers. I shout, "Make a hole!" The others in the p-way slam their bodies tight against the bulkheads to let me through. Gone are thoughts about nice weather, good-natured pranks, picnics. All that matters is that somebody somewhere, or even the ship itself, is in danger or needs help.

I am proud to be the first in line to get in the air and go face it.