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The View Never Got Old

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The view never got old.
But pre-flight. Pre-flight got old.
Cabin top. The gust lock and the main transmission. “Check.”
Interior cabin with its APU accumulator pressure gauge and survival gear and mission equipment. “Check.”
Tail pylon. “Check.”
Tail rotor. “Check.”
Tail rotor gear box – check oil level. “Check.”
Each time. Everyday. Check. Check. Check.

Climbing into the aircraft. You don’t put your seatbelt on first.
No, co-pilot’s collective – extended and locked.
That’s step one.
Best not forget. It’s a bit of a jerk flying 500’ above the trees when you realized you missed this.
Try to pull it out on the sly. But never as sly as you want.
You say, “Oh, we must have hit a little bit of turbulence.”

It’s step two that awakens the butterflies.
They stir from their slumber, preparing to take flight.
Shoulder harness locks – Check.
It’s as exciting as it sounds.
Really.
You’re locked in now.
The only difference between this seat belt and the one you put on a million times as a kid - as a kid in that living room with the rust carpet and mustard wallpaper - the only difference was that in those days the kitchen chair was on its back, you right along with it, staring up at the ceiling.
Clicking in the seatbelt that would secure you,
safe and sound while you launched.

Through the APU generator switch – ON.
Past the Stabilator – Check.
On to the Engine Fuel System Selectors – As Required.
(Crossfeed for first start of the day, of course).
Around the Backup Hydraulic Pump Switch – Auto and
to Engine Power Control Levers – Fly.
That beautiful fan now beating down on all below it.
A rocket ready for launch.
Almost.

There's still the check to ensure Torques 1 and 2 are matched within 5%
And that the Fuel Boost Pump Control Switches are On.
And a dozen steps in between.
All of which you could do from memory at this point.
But you put your finger on the checklist and read it aloud.
Read each and every step so your junior co-pilot would
see what right looked like.

But you could have done it with your eyes closed.
And on the blackest of nights in the middle of the desert,
In the middle of nowhere,
With but the dimmest light of a few stars
You did do it with your eyes closed.
Your fingers had learned that the first switch on the left was for APU.
Not the first switch on the right.
That's the Fire Extinguisher. They do very different things.
One lights a fire, the other puts it out.
Through your fire-retardant gloves, you felt the middle console and knew
which was the SAS 1 and which was the AFCS.
And the bird, well, she would tell you if you happened to get it wrong.
But she didn't have to tell you too many times.
You knew.

You had to slow down your reading.
Slow your cadence.
Your young co-pilot was still on Should Harness locks.
But your fingers, your brain, your training
already had you five steps ahead.
It was important to stay 'ahead of the aircraft.'
Anticipate, not react.
Pay attention to clues that could lead to a major event.
Making decisions that didn't need to be made for a few more minutes.
yet needed to be made now.
It was essential.
It was life or death.

You called the tower for taxi,
conducted the final Before Takeoff Checks.
Engine PCLs to fly.

Systems check.
Avionics as required.
Crew, passengers, and mission equipment. Check.

Those butterflies were at the starting line.
Ready like an Olympic runner crouched in that moment, just as he shifts
his weight from his hands to his front leg. All muscles ready for the gun.

“Clear for take off.”
The gun goes off.

Only a newbie pulls in all the collective and jerks it off the ground, drooping the rotors.
We were all rookies once.
We were horses at the gate.
Not butterflies.
We leaned so hard against the fence that we stumbled out when it finally opened, unable to
catch ourselves – the only way to recover was to pull everything we had.

Today the butterflies keep you gentle on the flight controls
for that nice smooth takeoff.
A little increased collective.
A touch of thumb to caress the cyclic forward.
Give her a little right pedal.
And she gladly goes where you ask.
You dance.

She outweighs you by 11,440 pounds even
when she’s empty.
But the two of you balance each other, requiring small
adjustments to level the other out.
Physically.
Mentally.
Emotionally.

A bank to the left and all you can see below are trees.
A green canopy pretending to be a blanket.
A bit of aft cyclic and you point her nose to the sky.
Towards the deepest blue you have ever seen.
Deeper than the layers of Red Sea.

Deeper than the thousands of years that constructed Artic glaciers.
Even deeper than the cave where you've tucked away your thoughts.
Your thoughts of the brothers that you will not see for a long time,
except in your dreams. The blue is that deep.

And she is inviting.
And she asks you to come closer.
So you keep flying. Keep climbing.
Trying to reach the edge of her expanse.
Trying to knock at her door.

But the depth, oh
the depth
It would be too deep.
You would run out of fuel before you could get to her.
So you have to turn back.
Back towards the ground.
With all its gravity.

But you can try again tomorrow.
Go through the pre-flight and the run-up,
take off and fly about.
And climb and climb and climb.
All to reach them.
To see them again.
For real this time.
Because that view would never get old.