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WEEKEND

The little space between dreams and awake

// BY JORDAN EPPING

I rest my head on the pillow and cast my gaze towards the window. Little snowflakes are falling against a black sky. The brutal New England winter rages on. Out there, it's below zero degrees, but inside I'm cocooned under my down duvet while my hissing radiator works overtime to keep me comfortable. My eyes close.

Comfortable. I'm very comfortable right now. Sometimes, at the end of a long day like today, I think about where I am. I think about how crazy it is that I'm at my dream school. No matter how taxing my day was, or how hot the afterburners were firing, I still smile when I remember my unreal reality. It makes me more comfortable. It makes me more comfortable to think back to the times that I wasn't.

Images start to come and go, like I'm clicking through a View-Master. Some are frequent offenders, some are current and acute anxieties and some are memories I'm dusting off for the first time in years. I find myself in the little space between dreams and awake.

I'm 18. Fresh out of boot camp and acclimating to summer in the Florida Panhandle, where I'm stationed for training. It's my first week. I'm nervous. "What's the last really hard challenge I've faced and didn't quit?" I ask myself. "Will I make it, or will I find out I'm weak and drop out of the program like half of the other candidates here?"

This first week, my head rests on the pillow, but I'm not so comfortable. I'm filled with nerves for each coming day. My alarm is set for 4:15 a.m. The iPhone "Constellation" alarm jolts my eyes open at its first note. I'm out of bed and in my uniform without delay. The adrenaline from the urgency fends off any hint of fatigue.

I'm outside and in formation by 4:30 a.m. The pale morning humidity drapes me like a blanket. I'm not used to such a meteorological phenomenon — in Oregon, it doesn't matter how hot it is during the day. It always gets cold at night.

Once accounted for in muster, I proceed to my first watch-standing duty. I stand on the quarterdeck of the Naval Aviation Schools Command headquarters in my spotless new dress whites to check the ID cards of all entrants. Maybe they can't tell, but I'm brimming with excitement to be part of such a storied institution: the United States Navy.

It's nearing 8 a.m. now and almost time for the morning colors ceremony, where all of the flags on base are hoisted up, and every service member stops to salute the ensign as "The Star-Spangled Banner" plays. I follow the lead of another sailor on duty who's a few weeks my senior. He is going to show me how to hoist the flag and conduct the ceremony. We grab our neatly folded American flag and exit headquarters. I see an older man in a khaki uniform walking toward us. What's that silver insignia on his collar? Is he actually a captain or just a regular enlisted petty officer? I can't tell the difference and hesitate to salute him. I look to follow the lead of my duty partner, but he is indolently dragging his feet and staring at the ground.

The gentleman sees that I'm holding back a hesitant salute, with my knife hand stalling at my side. He goes to salute me first, and I follow suit. It's the commanding officer. Ready to be chewed out, I'm relieved when I hear him say, "Looking sharp, boys!" I mutter back, "Thank you, sir."

Once we're at the flagpole, I attach the flag to the clips on the halyard, and at 8 a.m. sharp, my partner hoists the flag up the staff. Once the "carry on" bugle horn is sounded at the end of the anthem, we start heading back to HQ. A jumpy, small man in a flight suit with two bars on his shoulder is intently striding toward us. I salute first this time, and he returns it.

"What's the matter with you?" he barks. His name patch indicates that his callsign is "squirrel." "That flag is to be hoisted smartly to the top of the ensign staff per Naval regulation!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" I reply. "What was that s---?"

He scolds, "You hoisted it slowly and lazily! Do not let that happen again."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The View-Master clicks forward one month. It's our command picnic. After a game of kickball, the captain, dressed in civilian clothes like the rest of us for this day of repose, commences the calling of the raffle. He grabs the first prize and reads it off through the microphone.

"What do we have here? A Subway gift card! Alright, folks, a little Subway action! The winner for the $25 Subway gift card is..." I grin. It's amusing to see the captain dressed like the rest of us, working the raffle with middle-aged dad humor. High-ranking officers like that are akin to gods to 18-year-old me.

The View-Master clicks forward. I'm stationed in Virginia now. We hear reports of an active shooter on Naval Air Station Pensacola. A foreign national enrolled in flight training to become a pilot had decided to embrace jihad and enter the Naval Aviation Schools Command building with Al-Qaeda's backing. Instead of presenting his ID to the watchstander, he'd presented his Glock and shot the watchstander along with his oncoming relief. Three people were killed and eight injured. I think back to when I stood that watch with bright eyes and spotless dress whites. I'm lying in my comfortable bed.

Later on, my new coworkers with whom I'm training confide in me about that day. One was in charge of scheduling the watchbill. He revised the watchbill at the last minute because someone was sick. He briefed the newly scheduled young watchstander on how to stand his first watch. He felt responsible for his death. He'd seen his lifeless body behind the police tape as the FBI conducted its investigation. I think about the captain who saluted me. How does he pick up the pieces after a tragedy like this and continue the mission of supplying the Navy with its aviators?

The View-Master clicks forward. Three months after the harrowing attack, in March 2020, COVID-19 makes landfall in the United States. I think about the captain who saluted me. He was working to pick up the pieces from the shooting then. He had to navigate two unprecedented challenges to supply the Navy with aviators.

The View-Master clicks forward three months to June. The front page of Navy Times reads "Naval Aviation Schools Command Commanding Officer killed in private plane crash." The captain had been flying a civilian single-engine propeller plane with his coworker when his engine failed over Alabama. He faced all of those recent trials — the shooting that killed three of his sailors, the pandemic, a thirty-year career in the United States Navy with 4,300 hours as an aviator in military planes in war theaters — only to be brought down in a civilian propeller plane over Alabama.

I lie here in New England under my down duvet, radiator hissing, snug as a bug in a rug, unscathed after my Naval flying career, thinking about the captain's last minutes. Was he frantically trying to restart his engine, to try to right what was wrong? Did a strange acceptance wash over him in his final moments? Or maybe he started pulling old memories from the file cabinet, finding himself in the little space between dreams and awake.

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