

Exhaust

It's now 30 years removed, but I live it nearly daily. That smell, that taste, that image of power and danger. Long ago, I had followed and succeeded with my boyhood dream. I flew. The road to my success was long and full of near failures, but I made it. Today, I smell the diesel exhaust. Filling my gas tank at some truck stop somewhere, I take in the smell, forgetting about my surroundings, and I key for the dangers no longer there. Keyed for the myriad of things I must accomplish, quickly and completely. Jet fuel exhaust fills my lungs.

I walked outboard and stopped at the dogged hatch. My helmet was on my head, the rest of my gear on and secure. My oxygen mask went into my helmet bag; I pulled out my knee pad and once again checked that I had all the data and pubs that I would need. I pulled on my gloves and dropped my visor. Through the hatch I went to the outside and the sun. Dog the hatch behind me and take in the immediate surroundings. Clear to walk forward, I proceeded on to 912, today's assigned aircraft.

I rounded the corner of the ship's island, stepping over cables and hoses. I glanced ahead in my scan and immediately slowed. I was incredulous. Walking towards me was a Navy Captain in his dress whites with his visored cap completing his correct uniform. But no eye nor ear protection. He was a rather short man, or was it the tall suit man who walked by his side that made the Captain look small?

The man in the suit was Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the UN. I would recognize that chiseled face anywhere. I didn't know he was aboard, but there he was. No head protection, his tie flapping in the strong wind, one hand in his pocket, the other waving in conversation. If it was me strolling the flight deck dressed like that, I wouldn't see the flight deck again for quite awhile. Rank has its privileges, I guess, especially if you are the Secretary of the UN.

Why was he here in this place of noise, power and extreme smells? I knew not, but this ship was the pride of American power in the Mediterranean Sea. Planes from our flight deck had shot down Libyan aircraft just months before. We steamed around with something called a "Show of Force" when Anwar Sadat was assassinated. We found and chased every Soviet ship and submarine in "our" sea.

If I didn't have this huge fascination with flight, I would have just run away from this crazy waste on human endeavor. But flight is what brought me here and kept me in intense rapture.

Today, I smell the exhaust and remember. I still look to the sky searching for flight. That boyhood dream rebounds in my head.

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