

Bi-Monthly Writing Contest for Members

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Genre: Non-Fiction

The Reluctant Aeronaut

by

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The Reluctant Aeronaut

Oh my God! What am I doing up here? I become frantic. All of my training of the past six months evaporates from my memory. Silently I float, alone. She jumped out and left me! I knew it would happen but why did it have to be today? The altimeter reads eight hundred feet. The reproaching black finger of the rate- of- climb indicator holds steady at level flight, for now. What *am* I doing up here? I take a deep breath and look to the horizon. It slowly rises, I am descending. My right hand automatically squeezes the blast valve; one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, and release, a little heat to slow the descent and return us to level flight. I am really not alone. I am with her, the balloon, N112AP. She and I are making this flight together. Loaded with two hundred pounds of pet food for ballast, I am surrounded by weathered wicker and crowned in red, white and blue rip-stop nylon. I am not alone.

We launched just after 0700. The forecast called for a ceiling at twelve-hundred feet. The winds, light at two knots from the southeast, were typical for a fall day in the Pacific Northwest. No rain. A promising day to fly.... Crystal and I made a short hop to a nearby field where our chase crew met us and proceeded to load my ballast. I knew what came next, but why today? She jumped out. End of instruction. Well, this is it. Solo! I knew I could, but still.... With ballast onboard and launch sequence checked, all-hands released their restraint from the rim of the basket and I fired the burners. Effortlessly she rose, all ninety-thousand cubic feet of envelop, three-hundred pounds of wicker basket with full fuel tanks plus, me and my ballast. The black fingerlike needle flipped me off indicating a two-hundred feet-per-minute rate-of-climb. As her

momentum waned moments later, the burners blazed in short rhythmic bursts as we inched to eight-hundred feet.

What do I do now? Another wave of panic washes over me. I look down at the greens and browns of mowed lawns and plowed fields. The grey-black roofs of houses some lavish, gawk at me while horses spook and crane their necks to examine the approaching menace. Dogs bark, I spot one or two. There is my chase. I watch them spill out of the Tahoe and wave to me, encouraging me. How beautiful the ground looks.... The little black finger sags; I detect a slight sensation. Horizon check, I am descending. Pay attention! Three short blasts of the burners and we level off at five hundred feet; this is good. Not much remaining flying time. My fuel gages indicate 80% in one tank and 60% in the other, plenty of fuel; one tank to inflate and one to fly on. Yet, landing opportunities are dwindling. Bringing her down is inevitable but where? If we fly too far we will drop into the Lewis River wetlands making for a sloppy retrieval, or worse, end up over the Interstate Five Corridor where the wind flows with the Columbia River's drainage system; not good. I note how the fields and houses slip faster beneath me. It is fascinating how wind velocity and direction vary with elevation; faster here, slower there, right then left. Better prepare for landing..., where did I put the checklist! I spy my flight bag and touch it for reassurance. A sigh of relief escapes me. All of my documentation is in it, log book, regulations, extra maps, emergency phone numbers, including the Emergency Checklist. I pull the checklist from the bag and flip to Normal Landing Procedures.

Instruction on the ground and in the air, maps, instruments, proper telephony, checklists, fashion the pilot. My ground instruction came from John, an FAA Examiner. He prepped me for

my oral exam and check ride, and taught me the Federal Aviation Administration Regulations (FARs) and procedures for ballooning. The main thing I learned from him was, if you know your stuff and pay attention to your surroundings, more than likely you will have a safe flight. My flight instructor, Captain Crystal, one of the few female certified hot air balloon flight instructors, patiently drilled me in the art of flight and had endured numerous controlled crashes in these erroneously perceived “flimsy contraptions”. I learned enough to keep myself, and my passengers, as safe as possible. I was ready to solo and I knew it.

I never really expected to fly.... My dream ignited one quiet spring morning in Tucson, Arizona. The barking of neighboring dogs awakened me. They responded to a low-pitched swooshing. The kids slept. I finished tying my robe in my backyard and stepped onto the dewy grass. There, not a hundred feet above the scrubland desert, beyond my fence, was a “real-live” hot air balloon. I had ridden in a tethered one at a county fair years prior, but here was a “real” one, in free flight. I recall a man and a woman in the basket. I could hear them talking, their voices sailed to my ears on the gentle morning breeze. They softly called good morning and I waved. They returned my wave. I was awe-struck. The burner blazed, a delayed roar echoed. The balloon rapidly approached and they climbed, floating over the sleeping houses. As a mother of two young children, and the wife of a pilot whose job frequently took him away, I longed for the freedom I beheld. As they disappeared behind the houses, I stood and listened to distant dogs bark, the burner roar dissipate to a whisper, and silence return. I vowed to do that, someday....

There is my landing site! The freshly mowed yard of a large house beckoned. The radio’s crackle breaks the solitude. An identifiable voice squawks over the two-way radio. I had

temporarily forgotten my link to humanity. I pick up the radio and instinctively place my right hand on the burner valve and pump three short bursts to stabilize level flight. We discuss landing options; I decide. The burner coils begin to tick, tick, tick, tick as they cool and condensation droplets dot my denim jacket. The rig and the trailer are below and they quickly pull away to our planned rendezvous. What had Ted said about landings? Ted. It was his fault I was here.

I first saw him hovering over the early summer meadows one morning while bicycling; I renewed my vow to fly. The old adage, “Be careful what you wish for”, never crossed my mind. Yet, my dream persisted. Shortly after the encounter, I found myself making inquiries regarding the cost of hot air balloon flights for a friend. How I obtained Ted’s phone number evades my recollection. Having asked him the question, he responded, “Meet in the super market parking lot at six AM, bye (click).” Well, OK.

When I arrived at the lot, a man and woman untangled lengthy heaps of multicolored nylon fabric attached, via cables, to a large overturned, wicker basket. What had I gotten myself into? Ted shook my hand, casually introduced me to Carol, and immediately assigned me to hold open the “throat”. Carol stood, braced opposite me, smiled, and held up an opening in the folded mass. Ted gave several robust tugs to a large gasoline powered fan. It buzzed to life, assaulting us with a deafening, chilling gale. As we struggled to maintain an opening, the “envelope” inhaled great gulps of air, filling its belly. Ted towed apart great handfuls of material, causing the supple fabric to flutter. He continued to bustle from top to bottom, pulling nylon, adjusting the fan’s angle, checking cables and connecting fuel lines to the toppled basket. Over the din, he yelled to us if we were OK. Carol nodded. Even though I fought for my grip and balance, engaged in a tug-of-

war, I nodded too. Seeing this, Ted readjusted the positions of my feet and hands. The fan screamed and raged. The envelope billowed outward, allowing me to spy Ted at an opening in the top or “crown” where he gathered together the edges and secured them with a “pin”. Once sealed, he disappeared. The envelope swelled in response. Rejoining us, he slid off his boots and carefully stepped into the cavernous bag. Dwarfed in this stained glass realm of the balloon’s interior, he proceeded to separate a throng of lines, clearing them to move freely. Task completed, he slipped on his boots, did a final walk-around to his satisfaction and crawled into the overturned basket. Igniting the pilot jet, he then gave an all-clear signal and firmly depressed the burner controls. Just as God breathed life into Adam, Ted breathed life into the balloon. Heat and flame thundered into the throat. The power of the hot blast caught me off guard; I faltered. Then, the memory from that Tucson morning flashed to mind and I welcomed the warmth. The heat, trapped at the top of its vibrant snare, began to rise. The barrage of wind and fire continued and the envelope’s upward momentum increased. Ted motioned for us to release our hold and put our weight on the basket as it came upright. I gazed upward to make out a vibrant mosaic pattern that swayed high above our heads. Ted ordered Carol to cut the fan and tranquility returned. A mist fell, the flight was postponed. No time to ask questions for the aircraft had to be packed away and kept as dry as possible. With a quick explanation, Ted ordered us back from the basket. It had to come down, now! He sought out a line and grasping it with both hands, gave a firm yank, releasing the pin at the top allowing the hot air to escape. Nimbly he climbed atop the basket to fend off any fabric that threatened to touch the hot burner coils and melt. The colorful nylon cascaded around him and we scrambled to rid it of air and stow it into its storage bag.

Ted tightened the final strap when a black Explorer, towing a black trailer, pulled up. A tall blonde, slender woman jumped out of the passenger seat and came to help us, followed by her husband. Ted introduced me and, to my surprise, proclaimed me a desirable student. They grinned at me; meet them at the school grounds tomorrow, Easter Sunday, 0600. Reluctantly, I agreed.

My training floods back to me and I read down the checklist: lines available, check; equipment secure, check; passengers prepared, I chuckled. Yeah, I am ready. I am certain I can land her but there is such a thing as finesse. I was known for my “firm plants”. This was my solo flight. Crystal signed my log book to do so and I am determined to achieve some semblance of “skill”. I radio the crew my landing check list is complete. My husband’s voice acknowledges and gives me wind speed and direction. Good, slower on the ground. I glance down to confirm his report. I am the one responsible for this flight, the pilot. I am calling the shots. What *was* it that Ted said about landings...? Oh yeah. They don’t have to be pretty, just safe.

Lined up on approach; switch to main fuel tank in case an emergency ascent is necessary; lines free, good. The control vent line allows me to open the control vent at the top of the envelope, releasing hot air and enabling me to descend. The longer it is open, the more air escapes and the faster the descent. I grab the line and put my full weight on it for a count of five and release. The line flies through my hands and unfurls like a skinny serpent halting with an abrupt jerk as the vent reseals itself. The horizon speeds upward in my line of vision. I check our decent rate, the black needle indicating one-hundred feet per minute. I wait. This is what it is all about, a waiting game; patience, timing and judgment. Always check direction, altitude and speed, things can

change at the last second. Any pilot knows to anticipate. Easy girl, I give her two short bursts of heat and peer over the basket. It is difficult to perceive the ground coming up to meet you until its close. I can tell by our line of travel I am right on, at the moment. One hundred feet above the ground and several more blasts slows the descent. Not too much or she will climb and overshoot the field. With my landing opportunities decreasing, I want this one. My hand stays on the burner controls. Wait. Good, the wind is slower here and I begin to slow down but the momentum will carry me farther than I wish if I don't do something. I can see in front of me an obstacle that unnerves every pilot, electrical lines. They are a quarter-mile from where I choose to land and I want to keep it that way. We drift over the house to fifty feet above the ground. I am dropping a little faster than I like. If I time this right two blasts should slow the descent rate and I can pull the vent to end this flight. The heat catches. We arrest at twenty feet above the grass then slowly begin to rise. Damn, too much! She wants to fly! I must cajole her to land. I let her cool and she acquiesces, and hesitantly lowers ten feet. I grab hold the control vent line and throw all my weight on it. She drops but graces me with one short skip and settles onto Mother Earth's green breast. We are down!

The chase crew runs to capture us by putting their combined "weight on" the basket. Cheers and whoops go up around me. My duty is incomplete. The property owner must be contacted to grant us permission to land so we can retrieve the aircraft. I hope he is friendly. I see the property owner wave and smile as he approaches and for the next half-hour Captain Crystal gives him and his family a tethered flight. Good PR. There is excitement while we disassemble and neatly pack our equipment and load it into the awaiting trailer. We all pile into the Tahoe. It is my turn to buy breakfast.

Post Script: Two days after soloing, John and I take to the air for my private pilot check ride. I nail an exquisite, no bounce landing dead-center in a vacant horse paddock. I impressed him. With my oral examination completed and passed, he signs my log book and my private pilot ticket. Captain Crystal presents me with a set of balloon wings and gives me a hug; hugs all around. I look at my newly pinned wings and realized, reluctantly, I am a real Aeronaut.