



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Going solo

One of the more reliable signs of spring is the return of the redwinged blackbirds. No matter what the calendar says, it's only when I see them down in the meadow below our place, the males singing on a fenceline, or ganging up on ravens to chase them off the nesting territory, that I'm ready to call it spring and actually believe it. Redwings are a migratory bird, and can travel up to 800 miles from their summer homes to winter in better climes.

Lucky bastards.

Last week my wife and I completed our own migration of sorts, travelling south to watch my daughter's first airplane solo at Stead Airport, near Reno.

As parents, there may be nothing finer than watching our children consumed by fruitful and productive passions at a young age, and to watch their confidence and maturity grow as they commit to excellence and mastery of a study, or a skill, or a task. This is especially true if they can build a career around it, and find a lifetime of rewarding challenges, experiences and relationships in the offing.

My daughter's passion for aviation is perhaps genetically inevitable, and it has infected her with something of the same irreverent zeal enjoyed by the infamous Mme. Pancho Barnes, legendary barnstormer, stunt pilot, and patroness of the Happy Bottom Riding Club, who told the world that "Flying makes me feel like a sex maniac in a whorehouse with a stack of \$20 bills." Pilots are nothing if they aren't colorful, vibrant, and understandably impious. My daughter is becoming all of those things, and I couldn't be happier.

Stead Airport, which is home to the famous Reno Air Races, is also an airport I have flown out of countless times with my father, who kept a hangar there, and where ultimately, on a perfect day for flying, he

unexpectedly, and tragically, drew his last breath. Seven years after his death on the same airfield, it was difficult to avoid the notion that his Quiet Birdman soul was in a pattern somewhere overhead, his chest filled with pride as his granddaughter — who he took on her first airplane ride as a small child — kicked her instructor out of the plane and greased an extended series of solo touch-and-go's.

Those thoughts, which I indulged to some length as we stood out on the tarmac anchored with joy and memories and cameras, engendered a kind of deeply rooted emotional migration. Watching my daughter lift off into the sky alone, I thought — and it was something more like a revelation — that it was only after my father died that I ever truly soloed as a man in the world. My accomplishments were my own, as were my failures, but he had always been there, his hands and expertise not exactly on the controls, but somewhere reliably near them, and then suddenly he wasn't there at all, and I was flying truly alone for the first time.

That's brutally honest. Maybe too much so. But it's also at the heart of relationships, particularly when they

are good ones, the kind we don't celebrate enough when they are active, and mourn deeply when they are lost.

My father had a long running obsession with World War II heavy bombers and, in joyful coincidence, there happened to be a B-17 on the ramp. It was the Aluminum Overcast, which is a kind of airborne living-history museum, and makes numerous stops around the country each year so that pilots and history buffs can fly in it, or tour the aircraft's storied compartments on the ground. Delivered to the U.S. Army Air Corps in May, 1945, the Overcast didn't see action in World War II, but flies on today informing the imagination of thousands.

After the solo, I jumped in the backseat of the little Cessna 172 and flew with my daughter and her instructor back to Reno, sharing the sky for a moment with that B-17, which departed just before us, and finally landing beautifully on runway 1-6-Left, where my own father and I had also landed hundreds of times, in all kinds of weather.

Taxiing back to the hangar, and frankly, gloating, I felt somehow that I had just been through an emotional and invisible change-of-command ceremony, as if I

had taken the unit's colors from my father, saluted him and his memory smartly, and handed them over to my daughter, who will now carry them forward into the future.

What I felt was pride. Immeasurable pride, but also, inescapably, an abiding sorrow that the old man wasn't around to see his granddaughter, whom he loved, take up the standard.

For now, it's allegedly spring, though yesterday it was snowing at our place. The redwings aren't here yet, but when I close my eyes I can see them, somewhere between south and north, winging their way in our direction. They are flying back to the meadow down below the hill, where they will spend the summer. They will lay their eggs down there, in that perfect Cascade habitat, and a mere 15 days after they hatch, those newest birds will take to the sky by themselves, truly alone for the first time in their lives.

And while we are busy doing what we do into the fall, one day they will fly up, mostly unnoticed, enter the pattern, and continue the timeless cycle, drawn inexorably to their own migrations.

And may it ever be so.

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