**FRF: The Rockets’ Red Glare**

No matter how many times you’ve seen the pictures and the videos from previous tests and launches, there is nothing that prepares you for the splendor of witnessing a Space Shuttle event firsthand. Until last Wednesday’s Flight Readiness Firing (FRF), we had been awash in the technical minutia necessary to sustain a two-and-a-half year countdown fraught with frustration and false starts. For us, the Big Picture had faded more and more with each new setback, with each new revision of the milestone schedules. The FRF changed all that.

Arriving in Florida during the murky predawn hours, the weary first-time visitor’s impression of Orlando is one of humidity, of air that is so rich with moisture, it can almost be chewed. Closer to the Kennedy Space Center (KSC), America’s space program begins to present itself in road signs for establishments like Cape Canaveral Cleaners and the Liftoff Lounge.

It was at the Howard Johnson’s Hotel in Cocoa Beach that the real buzz began. An incendiary burst of pride on seeing the banner “The Journey Continues” festooning the building’s face and flagpole and the lapels of the staff wiped away the jet lag. There was something of great moment at hand, and indeed, the whole world was watching.

KSC at a dark 4 a.m. on test day was like a visit to the future. Massive structures jutted into the sky, illuminated Rembrandt-syle in pools of light that revealed a bustle of activity. The disembodied voice of NASAS’s Hugh Harris on the PA system echoed calmly throughout the area, far belying the sense of anticipation as he gave running status reports and the countdown. Reporters in the domed media rotunda made last minute checks on the most arcane of details.

At about 6 a.m., the sunrise gave the Shuttle Discovery a celestial salute as the countdown slowly but inexorably distilled 100 years of flight technology into one white-hot millisecond.

“We have main engine start. The motors are up and running.”

The sight arrived before the thunderous sound at the viewing bleachers, but that didn’t deter the assembled newspersons and technicians from collectively dropping their pens and headphones to applaud, hoot and whistle. For a scant 22 seconds, the Shuttle Discovery strained against its launch tower to “slip the surly bonds of earth.” Not this time would the craft be set free to reach for the sky, but spirits soared as America got back on track in its return to space flight. It was a proud moment for all who had worked so hard and for their countrymen. It was “America’s Pride: The Journey Continues.”

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