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Richard Bach

A Gift of Wings

Illustrated by K. O. Eckland

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Richard Bach

A Dell/Eleanor Friede Book

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Contents

It is said that we have ten seconds

when we wake of a morning, to remember what it was we dreamed the night before. Notes in the dark, eyes closed, catch bits and shards and find what the dreamer is living, and what the dreaming self would say to the self awake.

I tried that for a while with a tape recorder, talking my dreams into a little battery-powered thing by the pillow, the moment I woke. It didn't work. I remembered for a few seconds what had happened in the night, but I could never understand later what the sounds on the tape were saying. There was only this odd croaking tomb voice, hollow and old as some crypt door, as though sleep were death itself.

A pen with paper worked better, and when I learned not to write one line on top of another, I began to know about the travels of that part of me that never sleeps at all. Lots of mountains, in dream country, lots of flying going on, lots of schools, lots of oceans plowing into high cliffs, lots of strange trivia and now and then a rare moment that might have been from a life gone by, or from one yet to be.

It wasn't much later that I noticed that my days were dreams themselves, and just as deeply forgotten. When I couldn't remember what happened last Wednesday, or even last Saturday, I began keeping a journal of days as well as of nights, and for a long time I was afraid that I had forgotten most of my life.

When I gathered up a few cardboard boxes of writing, though, and put together my favorite best stories of the last fifteen years into this book, I found that I hadn't forgotten quite so much, after all. Whatever sad times bright times

strange fantasies struck me as I flew, I had written—stories and articles instead of pages in a journal, several hundred of them in all. I had promised when I bought my first typewriter that I would never write about anything that didn't matter to me, that didn't make some difference in my life, and I've come pleasantly close to keeping that promise.

There are times in these pages, however, that are not very well written—I have to throw my pen across the room to keep from rewriting *There's Something the Matter with Seagulls* and *I've Never Heard the Wind,* the first stories of mine to sell to any magazine. The early stories are here because something that mattered to the beginner can be seen even through the awkward writing, and in the ideas he reached for are some learning and perhaps a smile for the poor guy.

Early in the year that my Ford was repossessed, I wrote a note to me across some calendar squares where a distant-future Richard Bach might find it:

> *How did you survive to this day? From here it looks like a miracle was needed. Did the Jonathan Seagull book get published? Any films?*
> *What totally unconceived new projects? Is it all better and happier? What do you think of my fears?*
> —RB *22 March 1968*

Maybe it's not too late to appear in a smoke puff and answer his questions.

> *You survived because you decided against quitting when the battle wasn't much fun . . . that was the only miracle required. Yes, Jonathan finally was published. The film ideas, and a few others you hadn't thought of, are just beginning. Please don't waste your time worrying or being afraid.*

Angels are always saying that sort of thing: don't fret, fear not, everything's going to be OK. Me-then would probably have frowned at me-now and said, "Easy words for you, but I'm running out of food and I've been broke since Tuesday!"

Maybe not, though. He was a hopeful and trusting person. Up to a point. If I tell him to change words and para-

graphs, cut this and add that, he'll ask that I get lost, please, just run along back into the future, that he knows very well how to say what he wants to say.

An old maxim says that a professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit. Somehow, maybe because he couldn't keep any other job for long, the awkward beginner became an unquitting amateur, and still is. I never could think of myself as a Writer, as a complicated soul who lives only for words in ink. In fact, the only time I can write is when some idea is so scarlet-fierce that it grabs me by the neck and drags me thrashing and screaming to the typewriter. I leave heel marks on the floors and fingernail scratches in the walls every inch of the way.

It took far too long to finish some of these stories. Three years to write *Letter from a God-fearing Man,* for instance. I'd hit that thing over and over, knowing it had to be written somehow, knowing there was a lot that mattered, that needed saying there. Forced to the typewriter, all I'd do was surround myself with heaps of crumpled paper, the way writers do in movies. I'd get up gnashing and snarling and go wrap myself around a pillow on the bed to try it longhand in a fresh notebook, a trick that sometimes works on hard stories. But the religion-of-flight idea kept coming out of my pencil the color of lead and ten times heavier and I'd mutter harsh words and crunch it up as though solemn bad writing can be crunched and thrown at a wall as easily as notebook paper.

But then one day there it was. It was the guys at the soap factory that made it work—without the crew at Vat Three who showed up out of nowhere, the story would be a wrinkled ball at some baseboard yet.

It took time to learn that the hard thing about writing is to let the story write itself, while one sits at the typewriter and does as little thinking as possible. It happened over and again, and the beginner learned—when you start puzzling over an idea, and slowing down on the keys, the writing gets worse and worse.

Adrift at Kennedy Airport comes to mind. The closest I steered to insanity was in that one story, originally planned as a book. As with *Letter,* the words kept swinging back to invisible dank boredom; all sorts of numbers and statistics kept appearing in the lines. It went on that way for nearly a year, days and weeks at the monster circus-airport, watch-

ing all the acts, satchels filling with popcorn research, pads of cotton-candy notes, and it all turned into gray chaff on paper.

When I decided at last that I didn't care what the book publisher wanted and that I didn't care what I wanted and that I was just going to go ahead and be naive and foolish and forget everything and *write,* that is when the story opened its eyes and started running around.

The book was rejected when the editor saw it charging across the playground without a single statistic on its back, but *Air Progress* printed it at once, as it was—not a book, not an article, not an essay. I don't know whether I won or lost that round.

Anyone who would print his loves and fears and learnings on the pages of magazines says farewell to the secrets of his mind and gives them to the world. When I wrote *The Pleasure of Their Company,* one side of this farewell was simple and clear: "The way to know any writer is not to meet him in person, but to read what he writes." The story put itself on paper out of a sudden realization . . . some of my closest friends are people I'll never meet.

The other side of this farewell to secrets took some years to see. What can you say to a reader who walks up at an airport knowing you better than he knows his own brother? It was hard to believe that I hadn't been confiding my inner life to a solitary typewriter, or even to a sheet of paper, but to living people who will occasionally appear and say hello. This is not all fun for one who likes lonely things like sky and aluminum and places that are quiet in the night. "HI THERE!" in what has always been a silent unseen place is a scary thing, no matter how well meant it's said.

I'm glad now that it was too late for me to call Nevil Shute on the telephone, or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, or Bert Stiles, when I found that I loved who they are. I could only have frightened them with my praise, forced them to build glad-you-liked-the-book walls against my intrusions. I know them better, now, for never having spoken with them or never having met them at bookstore autograph parties. I didn't know this when *The Pleasure of Their Company* was written, but that's not a bad thing . . . new truths fit old ones without seams or squeaks.

Most of the stories here were printed in special-interest magazines. A few thousand people might have read them

and thrown them away, or dropped them off in stacks at a Boy Scout paper drive. It's a quick world, magazine writing. Life there has the span of a May-fly's, and death is having no stories in print at all.

The best of my paper children are here, rescued from beneath tons of trash, saved from flame and smoke, alive again, leaping from castle walls because they believe that flying is a happy thing to do. I read them today and hear myself in an empty room: "There is a lovely story, Richard!" "Now *that* is what I call beautiful writing!" These make me laugh, and sometimes in some places they make me cry, and I like them for doing that.

Perhaps one or two of my children might be yours, too, and take your hand and maybe help you touch the part of your home that is the sky.

—RICHARD BACH
August 1973

People who fly

For nine hundred miles, I listened to the man in the seat next to mine on Flight 224 from San Francisco to Denver. "How did I come to be a salesman?" he said. "Well, I joined the Navy when I was seventeen, in the middle of the war . . ." And he had gone to sea and he was in the invasion of Iwo Jima, taking troops and supplies up to the beach in a landing craft, under enemy fire. Incidents many, and details of the time, back in the days when this man had been alive.

Then in five seconds he filled me in on the twenty-three years that came after the war: ". . . so I got this job with the company in 1945 and I've been here ever since."

We landed at Denver Stapleton and the flight was over. I said goodbye to the salesman, and we went our ways into the crowd at the terminal and of course I never saw him again. But I didn't forget him.

He had said it in so many words—the only real life he had known, the only real friends and real adventures, the only things worth remembering and reliving since he was born were a few scattered hours at sea in the middle of a world war.

In the days that led away from Denver, I flew light airplanes into little summer fly-ins of sport pilots around the country, and I thought of the salesman often and I asked myself time and again, what do *I* remember? What times of real friends and real adventure and real life would I go back to and live over again?

I listened more carefully than ever to the people around

me. I listened as I sat with pilots, now and then, clustered on the night grass under the wings of a hundred different airplanes. I listened as I stood with them in the sun and while we walked aimlessly, just for the sake of talking, down rows of bright-painted antiques and home-builts and sport planes on display.

"I suspect the thing that makes us fly, whatever it is, is the same thing that draws the sailor out to the sea," I heard. "Some people will never understand why and we can't explain it to them. If they're willing and have an open heart we can show them, but *tell* them we can't."

It's true. Ask "Why fly?" and I should tell you nothing. Instead, I should take you out to the grounds of an airport on a Saturday morning in the end of August. There is sun and a cloud in the sky, now, and here's a cool breeze hushing around the precision sculptures of lightplanes all washed in rainbows and set carefully on the grass. Here's a smell of clean metal and fabric in the air, and the swishing chug of a small engine spinning a little windmill of a propeller, making ready to fly.

Come along for a moment and look at a few of the people who choose to own and fly these machines, and see what kind of people they are and why they fly and whether, because of it, they might be a little bit different than anyone else in all the world.

I give you an Air Force pilot, buffing the silver cowl of a lightplane that he flies in his off-duty hours, when his eight-engine jet bomber is silent.

"I guess I'm a lover of flying, and above all of that tremendous rapport between a man and an airplane. Not just any man—let me exclude and be romantic—but a man who feels flight as his life, who knows the sky not as work or diversion, but as *home.*"

Listen to a couple of pilots as one casts a critical eye on his wife in her own plane, practicing landings on the grass runway: "Sometimes I watch her when she thinks I'm gone. She kisses that plane on the spinner, before she locks the hangar at night."

An airline captain, touching up the wing of his homebuilt racer with a miniature paint bottle and a tiny brush. "Why fly? Simple. I'm not happy unless there's some air between me and the ground."

In an hour, we talk with a young lady who only this morning learned that an old two-winger has been lost in a hangar fire: "I don't think you're ever the same after seeing the world framed by the wings of a biplane. If someone had told me a year ago that I could cry over an airplane, I would have laughed. But I had grown to love that old thing . . ."

Do you notice that when these people talk about why they fly and the way that they think about airplanes, not one of them mentions travel? Or saving time? Or what a great business tool this machine can be? We get the idea that those are not really so important, and not the central reason that brings men and women into the sky. They talk, when we get to know them, of friendship and joy and of beauty and love and of living, of really living, firsthand, with the rain and the wind. Ask what they remember of their life so far and not one of them will skip the last twenty-three years. Not one.

"Well, right off the top of my head I remember chugging along there in formation with Shelby Hicks leading the way in his big Stearman biplane, heading for Council Bluffs, last month. And Shelby was flying and Smitty was in the front cockpit navigating—you know the way he does, real careful, with all his distances and headings just down to the exact degree—and all of a sudden the wind catches his map and pow! there it goes up and out of the cockpit like a big green ninety-mile-an-hour butterfly and poor Smitty grabs for it and he can't quite get it and the look on his face all horror and Shelby is sort of startled first and then he starts laughing. Even from flying alongside I can see Shelby

laughing so there's tears running down inside his goggles and Smitty is disgusted and then in a minute he starts to laughin' and he points over to me and says, 'You're the leader!' "

A picture burned in memory because it was wild and fun and shared.

"I remember the time John Purcell and I had to land my plane in a pasture in South Kansas because the weather got bad all at once. All we had for supper was a Hershey bar. We slept under the wing all night, and found some wild berries that we were afraid to eat for breakfast at sunup. And ol' John saying my airplane made a lousy hotel because some rain got him wet. He'll never know how close I came to taking off and just leaving him out there in the middle of nowhere, for a while . . ."

Journeys across the middle of Nowhere.

"I remember the sky over Scottsbluff. The clouds must have gone up ten miles over our head. We felt like darn ants, I tell you . . ."

Adventures in a country of giants.

"What do I remember? I remember this morning! Bill Carran bet me a nickel he could take off in his Champ in less runway than I'd need in the T-Craft. And I lose, and I can't figure out why I lose because I always win with that guy, and just when I go to pay him I see he's snuck a sandbag into my airplane! So he had to pay me a nickel for cheating and another nickel for losing the takeoff when we did it again with the sandbag out . . ."

Games of skill, with sneaky tricks unplayed since childhood.

"What do I remember? What don't I remember! But I'm not about to go back and live it over. Too much still to do now." And an engine starts and the man is gone, dwindling down to nothing against the horizon.

You reach a point, I found, where you begin to know that a pilot does not fly airplanes in order to get somewhere, although he gets to many somewheres indeed.

He doesn't fly to save time, although he saves that whenever he steps from his automobile into his airplane.

He doesn't fly for the sake of his children's education, although the best geographers and historians in class are those who have seen the world and its history in their own eyes, from a private airplane.

He doesn't fly for economy, although a small used air-

craft costs less to buy and run than a big new car.

He doesn't fly for profit or business gain, although he took the plane to fly Mr. Robert Ellison himself out for lunch and a round of golf and back again in time for the board meeting, and so the Ellison account was sold.

All of these things, so often given as reasons to fly, aren't reasons at all. They're nice, of course, but they are only by-products of the one real reason. That one reason is the finding of life itself, and the living of it in the present.

If the by-products were the only purpose for flight, most of today's airplanes would never have been built, for there are a multitude of annoyances cluttering the path of the lightplane pilot, and the annoyances are acceptable only when the rewards of flight are somewhat greater than a minute saved.

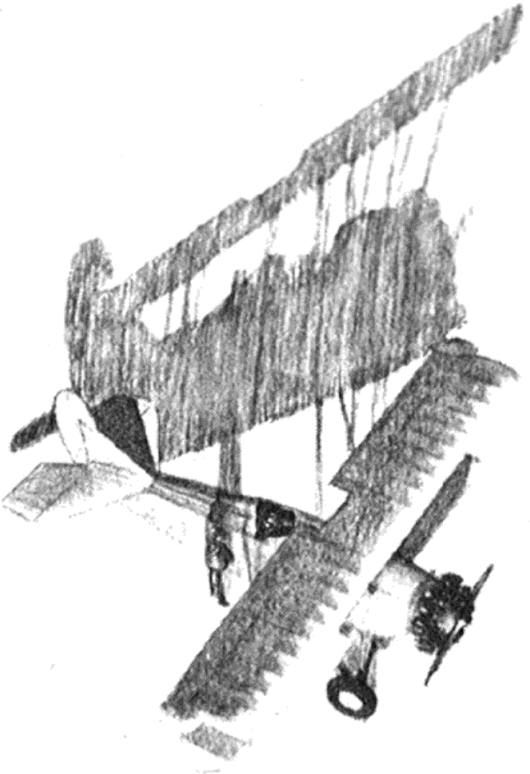
A lightplane is not quite so certain a piece of transportation as an automobile. In poor weather, it is not uncommon to be held for hours, days sometimes, on the ground. If an owner keeps his airplane tied down on the airport grass, he worries with every windstorm and scans every cloud for hail, much as if his airplane were his wife, waiting out in the open. If he keeps his plane in a large hangar, he worries about hangar fires, and thoughtless line-boys smashing other aircraft into his own.

Only when the plane is locked away in a private hangar is the owner's mind at rest, and private hangars, especially near cities, cost more to own than does the airplane itself.

Flying is one of the few popular sports in which the penalty for a bad mistake is death. At first, that seems a horrible and shocking thing, and the public is horrified and shocked when a pilot is killed committing an unforgivable error. But such are the terms that flying lays down for pilots: Love me and know me and you shall be blessed with great joy. Love me not, know me not, and you are asking for real trouble.

The facts are very simple. The man who flies is responsible for his own destiny. The accident that could not have been avoided through the action of the pilot is just about nonexistent. In the air, there is no equivalent of the child running suddenly from between parked cars. The safety of a pilot rests in his own hands.

Explaining to a thunderstorm for instance, "Honest, clouds and rain, I just want to go another twenty miles and



then I promise to land," is not much help. The only thing that keeps a man out of a storm is his own decision not to enter it, his own hands turning the airplane back to clear air, his own skill taking him back to a safe landing.

No one on the ground is able to do his flying for him, however much that one may wish to help. Flight remains the world of the individual, where he decides to accept responsibility for his action or he stays on the ground. Refuse to accept responsibility in flight and you do not have very long to live.

There is much of this talk of life and death, among pilots. "I'm not going to die of old age," said one, "I'm going to die in an airplane." As simple as that. Life, without flight, isn't worth living. Don't be startled at the number of pilots who believe that little credo; a year from now you could be one of them, yourself.

What determines whether you should fly, then, is not your business requirement for an airplane, not your desire for a challenging new sport. It is what you wish to gain

from life. If you wish a world where your destiny rests completely in your own hands, chances are that you're a natural-born pilot.

Don't forget that "Why fly?" has nothing to do with aircraft. It has nothing to do with by-products, the "reasons" so often put forth in those pamphlets to potential buyers. If you find that you are a person who can love to fly, you will find a place to come whenever you tire of a world of TV dinners and people cut from cardboard. You will find people alive and adventures alive and you will learn to see a meaning behind it all.

The more I wander around airports across the country, the more I see that the reason most pilots fly is simply that thing they call life.

Give yourself this simple test, please, and answer these simple questions:

How many places can you now turn when you have had enough of empty chatter?

How many memorable, real events have happened in your life over the last ten years?

To how many people have you been a true and honest friend—and how many people are true and honest friends of yours?

If your answer to all these is "Plenty!" then you needn't bother with learning to fly.

But if your answer is "Not very many," then it just might be worth your while to stop by some little airport one day and walk around the place and find what it feels like to sit in the cockpit of a light airplane.

I still think of my salesman acquaintance of the airline flight between San Francisco and Denver. He had despaired of ever finding again the taste of life, at the very moment that he moved through the sky that offers it to him.

I should have said something to him. I should at least have told him of that special high place where a few hundred thousand people around the world have found answers to emptiness.

I've never heard the wind

Open cockpits, flying boots, and goggles are gone. Stylized cabins, air conditioners, and sun-shaded windshields are here. I had read and heard this thought for a long time, but all of a sudden it sank in with a finality that was disturbing. We have to admit to the increased comfort and all-weather abilities of modern lightplanes, but are these the only criteria for flying enjoyment?

Enjoyment is the sole reason many of us started to fly; we wanted to sample the stimulation of flight. Perhaps in the back of our minds, as we pushed the high-winged cabin into the sky, we thought, "This isn't like I hoped it would be, but if it's flying I guess it will have to do."

A closed cabin keeps out rain and lets one smoke a cigarette in unruffled ease. This is a real advantage for IFR conditions and chain smokers. But is it flying?

Flying is the wind, the turbulence, the smell of exhaust, and the roar of an engine; it's wet cloud on your cheek and sweat under your helmet.

I've never flown in an open-cockpit airplane. I've never heard the wind in the wires, or had only a safety belt between me and the ground. I've read, though, and know that's how it once was.

Are we doomed by progress to be a colorless group who take a roomful of instruments from point A to point B by air? Must we get our thrill of flying by telling how we had the needles centered all the way down the ILS final? Must the joy of being off the ground come by hitting those checkpoints plus or minus fifteen seconds every time? Perhaps

not. Of course, the ILSs and the checkpoints have an important place, but don't the seat of the pants and the wind in the wires have their places too?

There are old-timers with frayed logbooks that stop at ten thousand hours. They can close their eyes and be back in the Jenny with the slipstream drumming on a fuselage fabric; the exhilaration of the wind rush through a hammerhead stall is there any time they call it up. They've experienced it.

It isn't there for me. I started to fly in a Luscombe 8E in 1955, no open cockpits or wires for us new pilots. It was loud and enclosed, but it was above the traffic on the highways. I thought I was flying.

Then I saw Paul Mantz's Nieuports. I touched the wood and the cloth and the wire that let my father look down on the men who fought in the mud of the earth. I never got that delicious excited feeling by touching a Cessna 140 or a Tri-Pacer or even an F-100.

The Air Force taught me how to fly modern airplanes in a modern efficient manner; no covering the airspeed indicator here. I've flown T-Birds and 86s and C-123s and F-100s. The wind hasn't once gotten to my hair. It has to get through the canopy ("CAUTION—Do not open above 50 knots IAS"), then through the helmet ("Gentlemen, a square inch of this fiberglass can take an eighty-pound shock force"). An oxygen mask and a lowered visor complete my separation from possible contact with the wind.

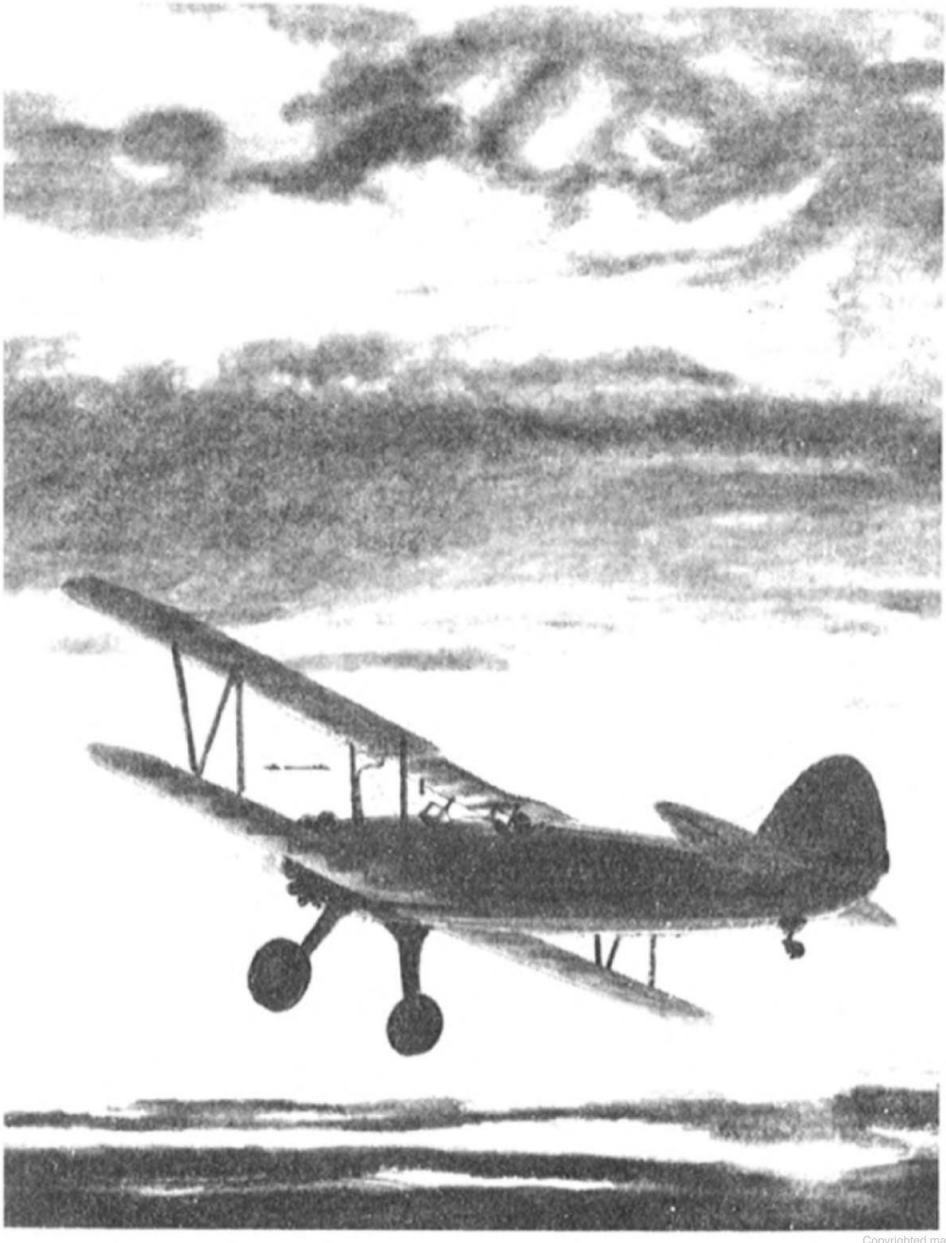
That's the way it has to be now. You can't fight MIGs with an SE-5. But the spirit of the SE-5 doesn't have to disappear, does it? When I land my F-100 (chop the power when the main gear touches, lower the nose, pull the drag chute, apply brakes till you can feel the antiskid cycle), why can't I go to a little grass strip and fly a Fokker D7 airframe with one hundred fifty modern horses in the nose? I'd pay a lot for the chance!

My F-100 will clip along at Mach One plus, but I don't feel the speed. At forty thousand feet, the drab landscape creeps under the droptank as if I were in a strictly enforced twenty-five mile speed zone. The Fokker will do an indicated one hundred ten miles per hour, but it will do it at five hundred feet and in open air, for the fun of it. The landscape wouldn't lose its color to altitude, and the trees and bushes would blur with speed. My airspeed indicator

wouldn't be a dial with a red-line somewhere over Mach One, it would be the sound of the wind itself, telling me to drop the nose a little and get ready to hop on the rudders, for this plane doesn't land itself.

"Build a World War I airframe with a modern engine?" you ask. "You could get a four-place plane for the money!"

But I don't want a four-place plane! I want to fly!



I shot down the Red Baron, and so what

It was not a Mitty dream. It was no fantasy at all. That was a hard roaring black-iron engine bolted to the firewall ahead of my boots, those were real Maltese-crossed wings spanning out over my cockpit, that was the same ice-and-lightning sky I had known most of my life long, and over the side it was a long fall to the ground.

Now, down there in front of me, was a British SE-5 fighter plane, olive drab with blue-white-red roundels on the wings. He hadn't seen me. It all felt exactly the way I had known it would feel, from reading the yellow old war-books of flight. Exactly that way.

I stepped hard on the rudder bar, pulled the joystick across the cockpit and rolled down on him, tilting the world about me in great sweeping tilts of emerald earth and white-flour cloud, and blasting slants of blue wind across my goggles.

While he flew along unaware, the poor devil.

I didn't use the gunsight because I didn't need it. I lined the British airplane between the cooling jackets of the two Spandau machine guns on the cowl in front of me, and pressed the firing button on the stick.

Little lemon-orange flames licked from the gun muzzles with a faint pop-pop over the storm of my dive. Yet the only move the SE made was to grow bigger between my guns.

I did not shout, "Die, Englander pig-dog!" the way the Hun pilots used to shout in the comic books.

I thought, nervously, You'd better hurry up and burn or it'll be too late and we'll have to do this all over again.

In that instant a burst of night swallowed the SE. It leaped up into an agonized snap roll, clouting black from its engine, pouring white fire and oil smoke behind it, emptying junk into the sky.

I dove past him like a shot, tasting the acid taste of his fires, twisting in my seat to watch him fall. But fall he did not. Smoke gushing dark oceans from his plane, he wobbled half-turn through a spin, pointed straight down at me, and opened fire with his Lewis gun. The orange light of the gun barrel flickered at my head, twinkling in dead silence from the middle of all that catastrophe. All I could think was, Nicely done. And that this must have been just the way it was.

The Fokker snatched into a vertical climb in the same instant that I hit the switch labeled SOOT (*poof!* from beneath my engine) and the one next to it labeled SMOKE. The cockpit went dim in roiling yellow-black which I breathed in tiny gasps. Right rudder to push the airplane into a falling slide to the right, full back-stick to spin it. One turn . . . two . . . three . . . the world going round like a runaway Maytag. Then a choking recovery into a diving spiral, followed every foot by that river of wicked fog.

Presently the cockpit cleared and I recovered to level flight, a few hundred feet above the green farms of Ireland. Chris Cagle, flying the SE-5, turned a quarter mile away, rocking his wings in signal to join in formation and fly home.

As we crossed the trees side by side and touched our tailskids to the wide grass of Western Aerodrome, I counted that this had been an eventful day. Since dawn I had shot down one German and two British airplanes, had myself been shot down four times—twice in an SE-5, once in a Pfalz, once in this Fokker. It was a lively introduction to the way that a movie pilot earns his keep, and there was a month more of it to come.

The film was Roger Corman's *Von Richthofen and Brown*, an epic featuring a fair amount of gore, some sex, a tampering with history, and twenty minutes of aerial footage that several living pilots nearly stopped living to produce. The gore and sex and history were make-believe, but the flying, as flying always is, was the real thing. Chris and I learned that first day in the air what every movie pilot

is to fly right straight down the center of that Mitchell, rip the thing to a billion pieces over the countryside, then pull up and say, "There! Is that close enough? Is that what you guys want?"

The only one who gave in to temptation was Chris Cagle. He came at the camera in anger, from below the tower, and climbed full throttle, splitting seconds, into the lens. Pulling up at the very last quarter instant, he got the grim pleasure of a millisecond view of the camera crew diving for the deck. That was the only time in the month that they thought the airplanes might be real, after all.

Most of the air-to-air photography in *Von Richthofen and Brown* was shot from a jet helicopter, an Alouette II. The helicopter cameraman wasn't visited with quite the same death-wish as the tower crew, but a helicopter is an unnerving thing to fly with. Just because the machine is pointed forward, of course, doesn't mean that it is moving forward—it could be stopped, or going straight up or down or backward. How does a pilot judge where to aim, to come a safe distance from an object of unknown velocity?

"OK. I am hovering," the pilot would tell us. "You can come in any time." But closing rate on a stopped helicopter is just the same as closing rate on a cloud, and that can be alarmingly fast, in the final seconds. One keeps thinking, too, that the poor souls inside the Alouette don't have parachutes.

Bit by harrowing bit, though, we made the film. We got used to the airplanes, for one thing. Most of the replicas

did well to climb two hundred feet per minute after takeoff, and on some days were pressing their luck to clear the canvas hangars at the end of the field. In the immortal words of Jon Hutchinson, "I have to keep telling myself, 'Hutchinson, this is marvelous, this is lovely, you're flying a D-7!' Because if I don't, it feels like I'm flying a great bloody pig."

The four miniature SE-5s were not only at full power to stay with the other airplanes, they were at more than full power. On one flight I chased the Fokker Triplane with a camera mounted on the cowl of a mini SE, and just to stay in the same sky with the Fokker, eighty miles per hour, I was pulling 2650 rpm on an engine red-lined at 2500. Out of that fifty-minute flight, forty-five minutes were spent on the other side of full throttle. The film, like a war, was a mission that had to be accomplished. If an engine blew up that was just too bad . . . we'd have to land somehow and take up another airplane.

Odd, but one gets used to this kind of flying. In time, even on the tower at Pigeon Hill, caught in propwash and rolling out of control thirty feet in the air, one thinks, I'll save it. She'll recover at the last second. She always has . . . all the while pouring the power of Charles Atlas into the controls, fighting to pull out.

One day I saw an Irish pilot all alone, wearing a sprig of heather in the lapel of his German flying jacket.

"Flying kind of low, aren't you?" I said, by way of a joke.

His face was gray; he didn't smile at all. "I thought I had had it. I am lucky to be alive."

It was such a somber voice that I was caught in morbid curiosity. The leaves in his lapel came from the downslope at Pigeon Hill, and he had harvested it with the undercarriage of a Fokker.

"The last thing I remember was the propwash and all I saw was the ground. I closed my eyes and pulled hard as I could on the stick. And here I am."

The tower crew confirmed it that evening. The Fokker had rolled and dived as it passed the tower, bounced off the side of the hill and back into the air. The camera was pointed the other way.

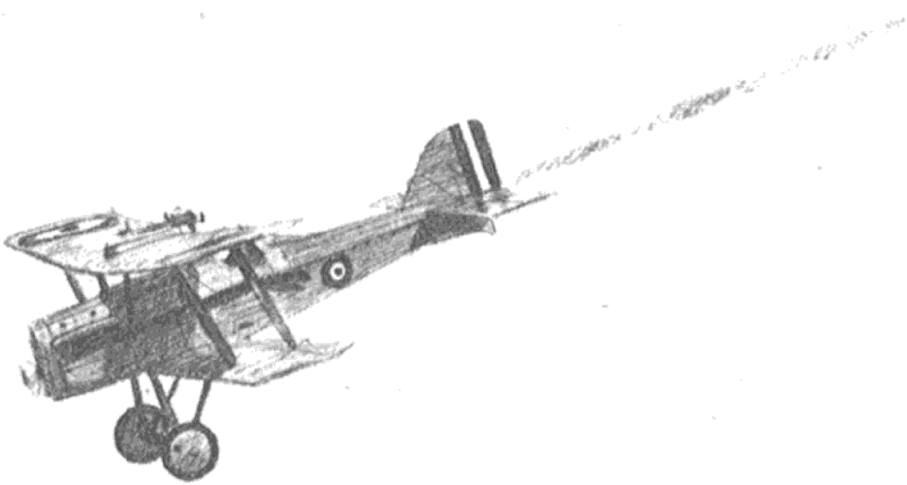
One of the airplanes at Weston was a two-seater, a Caudron *277 Luciole,* which was translated for us as *Glowworm.*

It was a square sluggish biplane with a Lewis gun mounted in the rear cockpit in such a way that there was not quite enough room for the gunner to wear a parachute. Hutchinson, just down with the machine as I was about to take it up, described it for me in his pure British tones: "It's a fine luciole, actually, but it will never be an airplane."

Thinking that over, I fastened myself into the front seat, started the engine, and took off for a mission in which I was to be shot down by a pair of Pfalzes. It was not an enjoyable scene at all. It was much too real.

The poor Caudron could barely stumble out of its own way, much like the great majority of real two-seaters of the First War. It could neither turn nor climb nor dive, and the pilot sits directly between the wings so that he cannot see up and he cannot see down. The gunner blocks the view behind and the pilot gets what's left over: a slice of sky ahead, and, sieved through the struts and wires, to the side.

I thought I had understood that two-seater pilots lived a hard life in 1917, but I hadn't understood that at all. They couldn't fight, they couldn't run away, they could hardly tell that they were being attacked until their little fabric coffin burst into flames and then they didn't have parachutes to bail out with. Perhaps I was a two-seater pilot in another life, for in spite of myself, in spite of saying, "This is a movie, Richard, this is only a movie that we are taking pictures for," I was frightened when the Pfalzes came in. Their guns sparkled at me, the director shouted, "SMOKE, LUCY, SMOKE, SMOKE!" I hit both smoke switches, slumped in the seat, and wallowed the *Luciole* into a low-speed spiral dive.



That was the end of the scene for me, simple as that, but I dragged back to Weston like an exhausted snail.

Turning downwind to land, I suddenly saw a flight of Fokkers turning toward me, and went cold in shock. It took seconds to remember that this was not 1917 and that I was not going to be incinerated in my own traffic pattern. I laughed, then, nervously, and got the airplane on the ground as fast as I could. I had no wish to fly the two-seater again and I never did.

Nobody was killed in the time I flew with *Von Richthofen and Brown;* nobody was even injured. Two airplanes were damaged: an SE with an axle failure while taxiing, a Pfalz in a groundloop. Both were flying again within a week.

The cameras rolled through thousands of feet of color film, hours of film. Most of it looked pretty tame, but for every time that a pilot was truly frightened, certain that he was going to be a mid-air collision, positive that this time the plane was not going to recover at low altitude, there was another exciting scene caught in celluloid.

We gathered in tight little knots to watch the previous day's action on the six-inch screen of the Movieola. No sound save the whir of the projector; quiet as a small-town library. Occasional comments: "Move it in!" "Liam, was that you in the Pfalz?" "That's not too bad, there . . ."

As the filming went into the final week, painters con-

verged on the drab German airplanes and brushed them into the flying rainbows of the Richthofen Circus. We flew the same airplanes as before, but now it was a point of fun to fly the all-red Fokker that would appear on the screen as Von Richthofen himself, or the black Pfalz that would be Hermann Goering's.

I drew the red Fokker once for the ignoble scene of having one of my wingmen shot down by the Englander. Then once again as the Red Baron to come roaring to the rescue of Werner Voss, shooting an SE off his tail.

The next day I was Roy Brown, chasing Von Richthofen (a red Fokker Triplane, now) and shooting him down for the final scene of the film.

I tried saying it when I climbed out of the cockpit after that flight, carrying my parachute through the quiet evening to our trailer. "I shot down the Red Baron."

I thought about that. How many pilots can make that statement? "Hey, Chris," I said. He was stretched out in his half of the trailer. "I shot down the Red Baron!"

His reply was incisive. "Hm," he said. He didn't even open his eyes.

Which was to say, So what? So it's just a movie we're flying for, and a B movie besides and if it wasn't for the flying scenes, I wouldn't cross the street to see the picture, at home.

That's when it occurred to me that it's the same in a real war as it was in ours of make-believe. Pilots don't attend wars or films because they like the blood or the sex or the B-level plots of the things. More important than film is the flying; more important than war is the flying.

It's probably a shame to say: neither films nor wars will ever lack for men to fly their airplanes. I am myself one of a great many who volunteered for both. But surely someday, a thousand years from now, we can build a world where the only place to log combat time is in the lens of some director shouting, "SMOKE NOW, SMOKE!"

All we need is the will to do it, some replica MIGs, some antique Phantoms with dummy guns, sawdust missiles . . . If we wanted to, a thousand years from now, we could really make some great films.

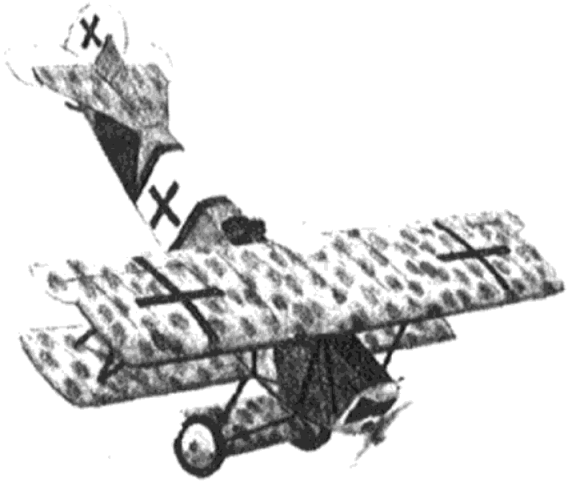
I took one step that offered itself to be taken. A year later he needed two American pilots to join the group, in Ireland, flying the Fokkers. When he called, I was ready to finish the path I had begun with the first article, that first prayer about the D-7.

From time to time, when I was barnstorming the Midwest a few summers ago, a passenger or two would say, "What a great life you have, free to go wherever you want, whenever . . . Sure wish I could do it." Wistful, like that.

"Come along, then," I'd say. "You can sell tickets, keep the crowds behind the wing, strap the passengers into the front seat. We might make enough money to live on, we might go broke, but you're invited." I could say this, first because I could always use a ticket seller, and second because I knew what the answer would be.

Silence first, then, "Thanks, but you see, I've got my job. If it wasn't for my job, I'd go . . ." Which was only to say that each wistful one wasn't wistful at all, each had prayed harder for his job than for the life of a barnstormer, as the New York girl had prayed more for her tenement than for the grass of Wyoming or for any other unknown.

I consider this from time to time, flying. We always get what we pray for, like it or not, no excuses accepted. Every day our prayers turn more into fact; whom we most want to be, we are. It all sounds like justice to me; I can't say as I mind the way this world is built, at all.



Return of a lost pilot

We had been flying north, low-level formation in a pair of F-100 day fighters out over the Nevada desert. I was leading, that time, and Bo Beaven's airplane was twenty feet away at my right wingtip. It was a clean morning, I remember, and we were cruising three hundred feet above the ground. I was having some trouble with the radiocompass, leaning down in the cockpit, resetting a circuit breaker, clicking the control from ANT to LOOP to COMP, to see if the needle would show any life. Then about the time I thought that the problem was in the antenna itself, and that maybe I shouldn't plan on having any help from the radio at all, there came Beaven's voice filtered in my earphones. It was neither a command nor a warning . . . it was a simple calm question: "Do you plan on flying into this mountain?"

I jerked my head up, startled, and there angled in front of us was a rugged little mountain, all brown rock and sand and tumbleweed, tilting, flying toward us at something over three hundred nautical miles per hour. Beaven said nothing more. He didn't loosen his formation or move to break away. He spoke in the way that he flew his airplane . . . if you choose to fly straight ahead, there will be not one hole in the rock, but two.

I eased the control stick back, wondering where the hill had come from, and it flicked a hundred feet beneath us and was gone, silent as a deadly dark star.

I never forgot that day, or the way Beaven's airplane faced the mountain wing to wing with mine, not clearing the peak until we cleared it together. It was our last flight in

formation. A month later our time had run out in the peacetime Air Force and we were civilians again, promising, sure, we'd meet again, because people who fly always meet again.

Back in my home town, I was sad to be gone from high-performance flying only until I found that the same tests waited in lightplane sport flying. I discovered formation aerobatics, air racing and off-airport landings, all in little planes that can take off and land five times in the distance it takes an F-100 to get off the ground once. I thought, as I flew, that Bo would be making the same discovery, that he was flying just as I was.

But he wasn't. He was no sooner out of the Air Force than he was lost, no sooner established in business than he was dead, the agonizing death of the pilot who turns his back on flight. He suffocated slowly, the blue-suited businessman had taken over, had mortared him into an airless corner behind a wall of purchase orders and sales charts, golf bags and cocktail glasses.

Once, on a flight through Ohio, I saw him long enough to be sure that the man who controlled his body was not the same man who had flown my wing that day toward the mountain. He was polite enough to recognize my name, to wish me good day, but he heard without interest any talk of airplanes, wondered why I looked at him strangely. He insisted that he was indeed Bo Beaven and quite happy as an executive for a company that made wringer washers and plastic products. "There's a great demand for wringer washers," he said, "a lot more than you might think."

Way far down in his eyes I fancied I saw a faint little signal of despair from my friend trapped within, fancied I heard the smallest cry for help. But it was gone in a second, quickly masked by the businessman at the desk, behind the nameplate *Frank N. Beaven.* Frank!

It used to be, when we were flying, anybody who called Bo by the name "Frank" advertised he was no friend at all. Now the clumsy business executive had made the same mistake; he had nothing in common with the man he had sealed up to die.

"Of course I'm happy," he said. "Oh, sure, it was fun to fly around in the '100, but that couldn't go on forever, could it?"

So I flew away and Frank N. Beaven went back to work

at his desk, and we didn't hear from each other again. Maybe Bo had saved my life with his cool question in the desert, but when he needed me to save his, I didn't know what to say.

It was ten years from the day we had left the Air Force, then, that I got a note from Jane Beaven. "Thought you'd be pleased to know that Bo made his move and is at last returning to number one love, the flying business. With American Aviation in Cleveland—is like a new man . . ."

My friend Bo, I thought, forgive me. Sealed away for ten years and now you come crashing through the wall. You're a tough one to kill, aren't you?

Two months later I landed at Cuyahoga County Airport, Cleveland, and taxied to the American Aviation factory, with its pond of bright-painted Yankees awaiting delivery. And out across the ramp came Bo Beaven to meet me. He wore white shirt and tie, to be sure, but it was not the businessman Frank, it was my friend. There were just bits of the Frank-mask left about him, bits that Bo had allowed to remain because they served a purpose in his job. But the man who had been walled away from the sky was now alive and well and in full charge of the body.

"You wouldn't have any of these planes to deliver east, would you?" I said. "Maybe you and I could ferry one out."

"Who's to say? We just might have one to go." He said it with a perfectly straight face.

His office now is the office of the Director of Purchasing, a mildly cluttered place with a window overlooking the factory floor. There on a filing cabinet stands a scratched and battered company model of an F-100, pitot boom missing, decal shredded, but proud and there, banking into the indoor sky. On the wall is a photograph of a pair of Yankees in formation over the Nevada desert. "That look familiar?" he asked shortly. I didn't know whether he meant the desert or the formation. They were both familiar, to me and to Bo; the businessman Frank had never seen either one.

He showed me around the Yankee plant, at ease in this place where the seamless sport plane comes to life out of metal as he had come to life out of grounded flesh. He talked about the way the Yankee is bonded together instead of riveted, about the strength of the honeycomb cabin section, about problems in sheet planning and the shape of a

control wheel. Technical business talk, for sure, but the business now was airplanes.

"All right, fella. What was it like, what has it really been like for you, the last ten years?" I said, relaxing in the car while he watched the road home carefully, not looking at me.

"I used to think about it," he said slowly, "the first year out of flying, wandering to work in the morning when there was a bit of cloudiness. I'd think of the sun, up on top. It was awfully hard." He took the turns fast, keeping his eyes on the road. "The first year was bad. But by the end of the second year, I almost never thought about it; but occasionally I would maybe in the corner of my ear hear an airplane above an overcast or something, and give some thought. Or maybe for business reasons I'd take a commercial flight to Chicago and have occasion to go on top, and then I'd remember all these things. 'Yes, I used to do this frequently, that was fun, that was enjoyable, that made you feel clean and all that sort of stuff.' But then I'd land, get to the business of the day, and maybe sleep on the way back, and I wouldn't have that thought, I wouldn't think of it tomorrow, or the next day."

Tree-shadows flickered over the car. "I was unhappy, with that company. It had no relation to a product that I knew about or was interested in. I didn't care if they ever sold another wringer washer or another ton of reclaimed rubber or another carload of diaper pails. I didn't care at all."

We stopped at his house, a white-painted lawn-surrounded picket-fence place in the shade of Maple Street, Chagrin Falls, Ohio. It was a moment before he left the car.

"Don't get me wrong, now. I don't think that at any time, other than just flying alone, tooling around, did I ever give any thought to things like breaking through the overcast. When I saw the sun, it was what I expected to see. It was very nice, pleasant to see all the clean tops-of-clouds where underneath there were all the dirty bottoms-of-clouds. But I don't think I had any lofty godly-type thoughts when I was flying, that sort of thing.

"It might have been very casual, I might have broken out and said mentally, 'Well, God, here I am up here looking at it the way you're looking at it.' And God would say, 'Roj,' and that'd be all there was to that. Or he'd click his mike