# Adrift at Kennedy airport

Richard Bach

When I first saw Kennedy International Airport, there was no doubt that it was a place, a great island of concrete and sand and glass and paint, and derricks tilting their steel necks and taking rafters in their teeth and lifting them through the air to new constructions, to alloy roof-trees in a burnt-kerosene sky. It never occurred to me to doubt that. It was a sterile dark desert before dawn, it was pandemonium and a vision of the next century’s rush hour, when the jets lined up forty or sixty in rows waiting for takeoff, and arriving flights landed five hours late and children sat on baggage and cried and once in a while a grownup cried too.

But the longer I watched, the more I began to see the fact: Kennedy isn’t a place quite as much as it is a cement-and-iron thought, with solid sharp edges at the corners; a proud stone idea that we have some kind of control over space and over time, and here within these boundaries we have all decided to get together and believe it.

Somewhere else is abstract wonder about shrinking worlds and five hours to England and lunch-in-New-York-dinner-in-Los-Angeles. But here there is no abstract, there are no vague discussions. Here it happens. At ten o’clock on our watch we walk aboard BOAC Flight 157 and we expect, by three o’clock, either to have been killed in a monster crash or to be hailing a taxi in London.

Everything at Kennedy has been built to make that idea fact. The concrete is there for that cause, and the steel and the glass, the airplanes, the sound of engines; the ground itself was trucked in and poured over Jamaica swamps to make that idea fact. No lectures here about cutting space-time into shreds, here’s where we do it. We do it with the sweeping blur of a wing in the air, with that ground-rumbling full-throttle blast of mammoth engines leaning hungry into the wind, round metal mouths open as wide as they’ll go, devouring ten tons of air a minute, attacking it cold, torching it with rings of fire till it’s black with agony, blasting it a hundred times faster out carbon tailpipes, turning empty air to heat to thrust to speed to flight.

Kennedy Airport is a fine act, by an excellent magician. No matter what we believe, London will appear in five hours before our eyes, and, finishing lunch, we’ll have dinner in Los Angeles.

Crowds. I don’t like crowds. But why, then, do I stand here at the rush hour in one of the biggest airports in the world, and watch the thousands of people swirling about me, and find myself happy and warm?

Perhaps it is because this is a different kind of crowd.

The rivers of people anywhere else in the world, pouring along sidewalks, pressing through subways and train stations and bus terminals in the morning and evening, are rivers of people who know just where they are and just where they are going, they have passed this way before and they know that they will pass this way again. So knowing, not much humanity shows in the masks they wear—that humanity lies within, struggling with problems, contemplating joys of past and future. Those crowds aren’t people at all, but carriers of people, vehicles with people inside, all shades drawn. There is not much to be said for watching a procession of curtained carriages.

The crowds at Kennedy Airport, though, do not come this way every morning and every evening, and no one is quite sure of just where he is or just where he should be. With this, a misty state of emergency invests the air, in which it is all right to talk to a stranger, to ask for directions and help, all right to lend a hand to somebody a little loster than we. The masks are not quite so firmly in place, the curtains not quite so fully drawn, and you can see the people inside.

It occurred to me, standing on the second-floor balcony, looking down, that these are the people from all over the world who are making their nations run, these are the ones directing the path of history. It was startling, the intelligence to be seen in that humanity, and the humor, and the respect there for others. These are the people in control of the governments, the ones who protest wrongs, and change them; these are the members of the final jury of their land, with more power than any court or military, who can overthrow any injustice that reaches their combined hearts, these are they whose ideals are appealed to by men who seek the accomplishment of any good thing. For these, newspapers are printed, things are created, films are made, books are written.

There must be criminals in the crowds at Kennedy, too, there must be petty small men, and greedy and cruel. But they must be greatly outnumbered, else why that warmth I know, watching them all?

Here in the currents of the International Arrivals Building, for instance, is a dark-haired girl in wine-colored traveling clothes, moving slowly through a packed crowd that she wishes to move swiftly through. It is eight-fourteen of a Friday evening. She works her way toward the automatic doors at the north wall of the building, perhaps arriving, perhaps leaving. Her face is not quite set, she is paying some attention to the problem of moving, but not a great deal; she is patiently forging ahead.

Now from her right the crowd has given way to a heavy steel baggage cart, a moving hillock of leather and plaid. She does not notice it coming, bearing down upon her. It is her turn to give way to the cart, and still she does not see it as she moves toward the door.

“LOOK OUT, PLEASE!” The porter shouts and tries to brake the cart in the last instant before it gently rams her. He does turn it slightly, and the iron wheels roll two inches in front of her.

The dark-haired girl in the wine-colored suit sees the cart at last, stops instantly, in mid-step, and without making a sound she grimaces “EEEK!”

The cart rumbles past as she smiles at herself for her drama, at the porter in apology for not watching out.

He says a word, “You be careful, miss,” and they go their way, smiling still. She is gone out one door, he out another, and I stand there and watch and somehow feel tender and loving toward all mankind.

It is like watching a fire, or the sea, this watching of people at Kennedy, and I stood quietly there for weeks, munching a sandwich sometimes, just watching. Meeting, knowing, bidding farewell in the course of seconds to tens of thousands of fellow people who neither knew nor cared that I saw, going their way about the business of running their lives and their nations.

I don’t like crowds, but some crowds I like.

The form said:

Lenora Edwards, age nine. Speaks English, minor traveling alone; small for her age. Address Martinsyde Road Kings Standing 3B Birmingham, England. She is arriving alone on TWA and is making a flight to Dayton, Ohio. Please meet and assist with transfer. Child is coming for three-week visit with her father. Parents divorced.

For one day I joined Traveler’s Aid, because I’ve always been curious about Traveler’s Aid, seen them at their little posts at train stations and never really aiding anybody, that I could see.

Marlene Feldman, a pretty girl, former legal secretary, was the one who took the form, handed me a Traveler’s Aid armband, and led the way to the International Arrivals Building. Our little girl’s flight was to have arrived at three-forty on a holiday weekend. At six o’clock we learned that by seven o’clock we might know what time it would be expected to land.

“She will probably not make her connection,” Marlene said in a voice that was used to preparing for the worst. She must have been a good legal secretary. Now she was unruffled and in control, grasping the threads of unraveled plans and trying to weave them back together, for the sake of Lenora Edwards.

“You can be around this every day, but every time you see a plane take off or land, it’s still fascinating. It’s just beautiful. And every time you see one go up, you say, ‘I wish I was on it …’ Hello, United? This is Traveler’s Aid, and we need a late flight from Kennedy to Dayton, Ohio …”

There was no late flight to Dayton.

By eight p.m. the flight with Lenora Edwards on board still had not landed, the airport was a choking swarming mass of passengers and passengers’ friends come to meet them, the sound of engines in the air.

Marlene Feldman, telephone in hand, was supposed to have finished her working at five p.m., it was now eight-thirty, she had had no dinner.

“Just a minute. One more call and we’ll go eat.” She dialed TWA for the twelfth time, and at last they had an expected arrival … Lenora’s flight would be unloading in twenty minutes.

“Well, there goes dinner,” Marlene said. Which wasn’t quite the truth. The restaurants at Kennedy were crowded, even the lines waiting at them were crowded, but the candy machines were almost unpatronized. She had a Sunshine Peanut Cheese Sandwich Lunchie for her dinner, I had a Hershey bar.

We found Lenora in the crowd by the Customs area, waiting for her one piece of baggage, a white suitcase.

“Welcome to America,” I said. She didn’t reply.

She did talk to Marlene, in a very clear little British voice, “I suppose I’ve missed my plane, haven’t I?”

“I’m afraid so, honey, and there’s not another flight going out till tomorrow morning. But don’t worry. We’ll get it all fixed up for you. Did you have a nice flight coming over?”

We breezed through Customs without even stopping at the desk, and I hoped faintly that the white suitcase I carried wasn’t packed with diamonds or heroin. It didn’t feel like it, but those things are hard to tell.

The crowd by now was a New Year’s Times Square crowd, and we wedged slowly through it to the office. Excuse us. Excuse us, please. Could we get through? What was the poor little girl thinking? All this chaos, met by two strangers, missed her flight, no plane out till tomorrow? She was calm as a teacup. If I were nine years old in that place, five hours late in a foreign country, I would have gone up in kind of green smoke.

Marlene was on the telephone again, calling the girl’s father, collect to Dayton. “Mister Edwards. Traveler’s Aid, Kennedy Airport. We have Lenora here, she missed the flight to Dayton, so do not go to the airport. She’ll stay here tonight, we’ll arrange for that. I’ll call you back just as soon as I know what’s happening.”

“How are you doing, honey?” she said, dialing again on the phone.

“Just fine.”

It was arranged. Lenora would stay that evening at the International Hotel with a TWA stewardess from the flight on which she arrived, who would bring her to the United Air Lines Terminal in the morning.

The telephone again to the father, to give him the name and number of the stewardess and the hotel. “Lenora will be arriving Flight 521, into Dayton at ten twenty-six in the morning. That’s right. Yes. Yes. Of course I will,” Marlene said. “You’re quite welcome.”

“OK, Lenora,” she said when the telephone was still at last, “I’ll meet you at the main information desk at United at eight-fifteen tomorrow morning, and we’ll get you on that flight, OK?”

The TWA stewardess stopped by for the girl, and as they disappeared into the crowd Lenora put the small book she had been reading back into her purse. Woodland Animals was the title.

“I didn’t think you were supposed to come to work till eight-thirty, Marlene,” I said. “And don’t you get to sleep late if you’ve stayed five hours over, the night before?”

She shrugged. “Eight-thirty, eight-fifteen. For fifteen minutes it’s not going to kill me one way or the other.”

“Eighty percent of the people in Kennedy Airport this minute,” the information girl told me, “are lost. Some people get so nervous that they don’t really think. And they don’t know where they are going. And there are plenty of signs, but they don’t read the signs …”

BOARDING AREAS 1 THROUGH 7 INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS OBSERVATION DECK FLY THE FRIENDLY SKIES OF UNITED EXIT LOS ANGELES AIRPORT BUS STOP NEW YORK AIRWAYS HELICOPTER SERVICE FOR INFORMATION RESERVATION AND COURTESY BUS USE PHONES BEHIND DOOR DO NOT ENTER ARRIVING FLIGHTS DEPARTING FLIGHTS SPECIAL SERVICE FUTURE TICKETS NOTICE SNEAKERS ON ESCALATORS ARE DANGEROUS PERSONAS SIN BOLETAS NO MAS ALLA DE ESTE PUNTO METERED TAXI CABS LICENSED BY POLICE DEPARTMENT INTERAIRLINE COACH SERVICE TO ALL AIRLINES AT KENNEDY 25¢ LIMOUSINE AND CAR RENTALS INQUIRE AT COUNTER BETWEEN DOORWAYS A AND B FREE CONNECTION SERVICE FROM EAST SIDE AIRLINES TERMINAL STAIRWAY TO UPPER LOBBY LOCATED BY TICKET COUNTER UNCLAIMED BAGGAGE WILL BE REMOVED TO THE BAGGAGE SERVICE OFFICE TO BOARDING AREA 1234567 STOP TAKE TICKET TICKETED PASSENGERS CHECK IN HERE FOR FLIGHTS 53, 311, 409 SE PROHIBE FUMAR DESPUES DE ESTE PUNTO HANGAR BUS ONLY RENTAL CAR PARKING USE EXTREME LEFT LANE NEW YORK BROOKLYN LONG ISLAND AND PARKING KEEP LEFT CLEARANCE 10′ 5″ SHELTER AREA PUSH GROUND TRANSPORTATION PULL DINING ROOM OPEN TILL 3 AEROFLOT MOCKBA TERMINAL CONNECTION BUS STOP EXPRESS TO LAGUARDIA SALA DE VISITANTES UNITED SKYPORT CINEMA TELEPHONE AHEAD FOR RESERVATIONS DISCOVER FLYING COCKTAIL LOUNGE OPEN FROM 1030 TILL MIDNIGHT US POSTAGE STAMPS COMPARE YOUR CLAIM CHECK SINCE MANY BAGS HAVE IDENTICAL APPEARANCE PLEASE COMPARE YOUR CLAIM CHECK WITH THE TAG ON YOUR BAG THANK YOU OFFICES TICKETS INFORMATION AND TICKETS TO MAKE FREE DIRECT CALLS 1. DEPRESS DESIRED NUMBERED BUTTON 2. LIFT RECEIVER, CONNECTION WILL BE COMPLETED IN CASE OF FIRE BREAK GLASS OPEN DOOR PULL HOOK TAXI CABS TIMES SQUARE $9 GRAND CENTRAL STATION $9 LAGUARDIA AIRPORT $4 POINTS OUTSIDE NEW YORK CITY FLAT RATE ONE TO 4-5 PERSONS BUS SERVICE TO GREENWICH RIVERSIDE STAMFORD DARIEN NORWALK WESTPORT BRIDGEPORT MILFORD NEW HAVEN MERIDEN AND HARTFORD FOR INFORMATION USE THIS DIRECT LINE NEW JERSEY LIMOUSINE SERVICE TRENTON WOODBRIDGE PRINCETON BERGEN COUNTY BRUNSWICK NEWARK AIRPORT WESTCHESTER LIMOUSINES TO NEW ROCHELLE WHITE PLAINS TARRYTOWN AND RYE ROCKLAND COUNTY TO NYACK AND SPRING VALLEY TRAVELERS AID PLEASE ENTER LOST AND FOUND FLIGHT INSURANCE JFK GROUND COMMUNICATIONS COCKTAIL LOUNGE OFFICES PLEASE STAND IN CENTER OF TREAD AND STEP OFF LAST STEP PLEASE HOLD HANDRAIL VISIT OUR HORIZON ROOM FOR COCKTAILS LUNCH AND DINNER WEATHER INFORMATION FLIGHT INFORMATION EXIT EXIT EXIT PARKING LOT NUMBER 3 ARRIVING PASSENGERS ON UPPER LEVEL CROSSWALK PRIVATE PROPERTY NO UNAUTHORIZED PARKING TOWAWAY ZONE WALKWAY DID YOU LOCK YOUR CAR? PUBLIC STENOGRAPHER NO SMOKING BEYOND THIS POINT COIN CHANGER SHELTER AREA PUSH AUTOMATIC GATE PEDESTRIANS KEEP CLEAR LANES OPEN DO NOT ENTER CONCOURSE AIRPORT EXIT BANK CURRENCY EXCHANGE INFORMATION CASHIER ENTER STANDBY ABC PASSENGERS FROM FLIGHTS MARKED ARRIVE IN CLAIM AREA LOWER LEVEL NO STOPPING THIS IS NOT A PICKUP AREA MOTOR STAIR SNACK BAR EMERGENCY STOP TIMES SHOWN ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE: INDICATED PM FLIGHT INFORMATION IS FURNISHED BY THE AIRLINES FOR FLIGHTS NOT LISTED SEE AIRLINE ON FIRST FLOOR HEAR PILOTS TOWER RADIO 10¢ ONE DIME OR TWO NICKELS SWITCH TO YOUR CHOICE AFTER CLEARANCE PASSENGERS EXIT TO LOBBY FIRST FLOOR INFORMATION DEUTSCH ESPANOL FRANCAIS ITALIANO WALKWAY TO AIR CANADA NATIONAL TRANSCARIBBEAN AUTHORIZED BUSSES ONLY 2 INTERNATIONAL ARRIVALS BUILDING 3 LOADING LAS VEGAS LISBON LONDON ROME PARIS CLEVELAND LOS ANGELES SAN FRANCISCO MADRID CHICAGO OAKLAND BOSTON ST LOUIS TEL AVIV ATHENS CINCINNATI OUT OF ORDER AUTOMATIC GATE TAKE TICKET TAX FREE GIFTS ALL AIRLINES MAIL POSTE TAX FREE LIQUOR 322 323 PARKING AT ANY TIME STOP YIELD TO DEPARTURES ARRIVALS NEXT LEFT 150TH ST. CARGO AREA NORTH PASSENGER TERMINAL TAXI HOLD AREA TAXIS ONLY FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE WE ARE EXPANDING THE INTERNATIONAL ARRIVAL AND WING BUILDINGS THE PORT OF NEW YORK AUTHORITY UNAUTHORIZED VEHICLES WILL BE TOWED AWAY AT OWNERS EXPENSE RESTRICTED TO TWA PASSENGER UNLOADING NO PARKING CURBSIDE CHECKIN BAGGAGE CHECKED HERE TELEPHONES TO PLANES PASSENGERS WITH TICKETS AN EXHIBIT OF ARTS AND CRAFTS BY NEW YORK BASES TWA CABIN ATTENDANTS ON THE BRIDGE LEVEL GATES 8-15 PLEASE PASSENGERS ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT LOCKERS BOOTBLACK NEWSPAPERS OF THE WORLD EMPLOYEES SHUTTLE SERVICE LOT NUMBER 7 PARKING FIELD REFLECTING POOL CONTROL TOWER DON’T WALK USE CROSSWALK TO PARKING LOTS AND QUICK PICKUP AREAS OUT ENTER BUS STOP NO STANDING EAST WING BUILDING DEPARTURES MERGING TRAFFIC Q-10 PUBLIC BUS WALKWAY PUSH BUTTON FOR WALK SIGNAL CAR LOADING SABENA LOFTLEIDIR CAUTION TRUCKS MEN AT WORK BUS TO NEW YORK CITY PASSENGERS WITH TICKETS ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT.

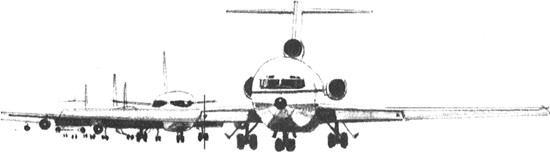
There are plenty of signs, but they don’t read the signs.

Kennedy Airport is an aquarium. It has been built at the bottom of an enormous ocean and we come to it in little air-filled vehicles and quickly enter air-filled chambers, completely self-sufficient undersea; each with its own coffee shops, restaurants, bookstores, resting places, viewing places out upon the sunken plains of a watery universe.

In from that universe come the fish of this ocean, sifting down from upper levels—turning, settling, iridescent hues shimmering in the liquids about them. Gold and silver, red and orange and green and black, salt-water tropicals grown a thousand times, hundred-ton angelfish, half-million-pound demoiselles angling in front of our view-ports, different sizes and shapes and colors, each family of fish clustering at its own feeding place.

Longer than locomotives, most of them, monstrous swept fins fifty feet, seventy feet high, they move ponderous and slow, infinitely patient, each to its own special grotto. They are gentle maneaters all, that can swallow a hundred or three hundred Jonahs more or less fearful of destiny, trusting the great fish to remain friend for just one more journey.

The fish themselves are unafraid. Giant leviathan noses loom right to our glass and we can look into the eyes and see purpose and motion there, we can watch the fish thinking, making ready another ocean-spanning continent-leaping voyage.



When the last Jonah is sealed inside, gills breathe, flukes move. The creatures scull ever so gingerly, turn, showing their colors and markings, and drift out to a place where they know there’s room for the long arrowing thrust of their lift from the ocean floor.

We see them small in the liquid distance begin their push, bring their aquatic minds to focus on this drive, forget all else, force, blast their way into torrents of sea wind, surge free of the bottom in a cloud of rolling silt, curve bright-flashing toward the top of the sea, choose their turns, find their ways, settle up toward their far horizon and out of sight in the blue.

Coming, going, carefully releasing the world’s Jonahs and carefully taking them aboard, the deep-sounding planet-traveling fish come to be known in time, by the people who watch. Some of the watchers are expert, having memorized Latin names, habit and habitat.

Others know only that these are mighty big fish, hope to tell you.

It used to be, years ago, before airplanes had radios and when the first control towers were built, that each tower had its “biscuit gun” with which a controller could shoot a colored beam of light to a pilot in his airplane, to advise him of what the tower man thought he should do. Flashing green: cleared to taxi. Steady red: stop. Steady green: cleared to land.

Today all that communicating is done by some cracker-jack radio equipment, which all works very well. After an airline has spent three thousand dollars on a radio, naturally, they expect that it will work very well.

Nevertheless, the first sight that caught my eye as I climbed the last flight of stairs to the glass aerie of the control tower at Kennedy Airport was the biscuit gun, suspended by a pulley wire from the ceiling. It hung there perfectly still, and there was dust on it.

Waist-high around this room, which is about twenty feet square, are radio and radar consoles, banks of switches to control the runway lights, communications to air traffic control rooms, telautographs for weather sequences, dials for wind speed and direction. (It has always seemed odd to me that a hundred-ton airliner still arranges itself in the sky so that it will land into the wind. One might expect that we’d become indifferent to a spirit so insubstantial as the wind, but not so.)

In this room stand five men, four of them young men and one old-timer, the watch supervisor, sitting back at his desk while the others stand, looking down on their kingdom Kennedy.

It is just before noon of a murky day and the mist has settled in a gray bowl over us. Just visible to the east is Jamaica Bay, same to the south, beyond runway 13 Right. To the north and west we can see to the edge of the airport and no farther.

The tower is the peak of a maypole, with airliners taxiing in a circle around it on the curved perimeter taxiways—clockwise on the south, counterclockwise on the north side of the tower, all converging on a path that leads to the end of 13 Right, the takeoff runway. Its sister, runway 13 Left, is for landings only, and for now there is practically nobody landing; 13 Left is a deserted wallflower of a runway, and looks lonely out there in the fog.

The airplanes blazing by on takeoff bellow up into exaggerated steep climbs, and I can’t help but wince, watching them claw for altitude. That is maximum performance, the pilot is earning his keep on that kind of takeoff, and the planes disappear into the murk with their noses forced unnaturally high.

There is a twenty-minute delay for departure now, a twenty-minute wait in line for takeoff, but there is no tension in the tower. There is time for the younger ones to talk of who will be taking vacations when, time for yawning, time for the lighting of cigarettes in this air-conditioned cube.

Way down on the ground the fountains of the reflecting pool have been turned off. There are spaces in the parking lots. Along the ring of terminal buildings surrounding us I count a sparse forest of construction derricks at work: three in the new area north of BOAC, four at National, three at TWA, two at Pan American as they add extensions for their big new airplanes. In all there are fifteen cranes at work, lifting concrete in buckets and steel in beams.

The supervisor, the old-timer, opens a crinkly white bag and lays out three large ham-on-rye sandwiches on his desk. The ground controller, who talks to all the airplanes taxiing, calls across to him.

“Eastern wants to know the delay outbound. Got a new figure?”

“Well, there’s six …” says the supervisor to himself, then, “Tell ’em half an hour.”

The ground controller presses the button of his microphone. “Eastern 330, it’ll be a half an hour approximate delay.”

Each of the controllers wears earphones tuned to his own radio frequency, so I couldn’t hear what Eastern 330 said to that. “Ah, roj,” he probably said.

“That’s a good sandwich,” the supervisor says reflectively, for the quiet consideration of all. His words open a discussion on the construction of sandwiches, on lunches in general, on Chicken Delight, on franks and beans.

There are four radar screens in the tower.

And a copy of the New York Post.

And the door opens below and a man saunters up the stairs, unhurried, chewing a toothpick.

“There you are, Johnny,” says the ground controller. “Thought I was going to go without lunch today.”

The lunchward-bound takes a moment to tell his relief which airplanes are where, and hands him the microphone. The relief nods, opens a soft-drink can, chewing all the while on that toothpick.

Way off at the edge of the mist, there’s a 707 touching down on 13 Left.

From here, the TWA terminal looks like the head and eyes of an enormous wasp, mandibles open, wings and body buried in the sand. It is watching the tower.

There are twenty airplanes waiting in line for takeoff.

“Here you go, Johnny-baby,” says the departure controller, handing a strip of paper marked with numbers.

“Hm. Another Hugenot,” Johnny-baby replies, looking at the numbers. “They’re gatherin’ at the gates.”

“Say, Bob, we’re going to run out of room here, with all these Hugenots … American 183, sir, you’ll have to turn around here, that portion of the taxiway is all closed.”

Down on the outer perimeter a 727 Trijet slows to a halt, then turns in cramped slow motion. A hundred yards ahead of him the taxiway is a rilled mass of bare earth, with graders combing it back and forth, back and forth.

“I wish they’d give us the airport back,” Johnny says.

“Let’s call it forty minutes. Forty minutes delay …”

By the time I left the tower there was an hour’s delay, and the line for takeoff stood forty planes long.

Two quite separate kingdoms, this land of Kennedy. One is the Kingdom of the Passenger, wherein the customer rules and all bend to his wish. The passenger reigns over the ground outside, the concourses, the shops and services, Customs, ticket counter, airline offices, and the aftermost nine-tenths of every airplane, where stewardesses ply him with refreshment and confidence.

The other tenth of that airplane is the Kingdom of the Pilot. And pilots are fascinating stereotyped people. They are almost exclusively men who like flying more than anything else in all the world, who work on the flight decks of jet transports not out of a wish to help passengers reach their many ports but because they like to fly and they’re good at their job, most of them, and they wouldn’t be much use in any other job anywhere. The exceptions to the generality, the ones who could do well at other work, don’t make the best pilots. They can follow the numbers, all right, but when real flying skill is required (as it is at rare intervals nowadays and getting rarer), they are foreigners in the sky.

The best pilots are the ones who began flying when they were boys, who come to their gold-braid caps from turbulent histories of failure and distress in the ground-bound affairs of men. Not having the temperament or ability to bear the discipline and boredom of college, they failed or quit and took to flying full-time, enlisting in the Air Corps or making it the hard way—sweeping hangar floors, pumping gas as apprentice aviators, dusting crops, flying passenger rides, instructing, knocking about the country from one airport to the next, at last deciding to try the airlines since there’s nothing to lose, trying, and glory be, getting hired!

All pilots live the same sky the world around, but airline pilots have more trappings and live more rigidly than do any other kind; than even military pilots. They must shine their shoes, wear neckties, be kind to all passengers, follow each comany rule and Federal Air Regulation, never lose their temper.

In return for this, they receive (a) more money for less work than any tradesman anywhere, and, most important, (b) the privilege of flying excellent airplanes, without having to apologize to anybody.

Today the major airlines require college training of their pilot applicants, and so lose the best stick-and-rudder airmen to the nonscheduled airlines (who need better pilots anyway, to cope with a wider range of problems), to agricultural and corporate flying concerns. Why the college requirement, is unclear, since all that a zoology-trained pilot has to fall back upon is Ichthyology 201, while the life-trained pilot, whose ranks are legion but diminishing, flies his airplane home on knowing born of interest and love instead of company requirement.

The path between the kingdoms at Kennedy is at best one-way … no one walks the pilot’s kingdom who is not a pilot. And the path is very nearly no-way. The best of airmen is notoriously ill-at-ease on the ground, unless he is talking about flying, which he usually is and so makes do.

You can see it in the pilots coming off duty at Kennedy, all conservative uniforms and round-billed caps, whatever nation their airline. You’ll see them awkward, self-conscious, most of them, looking straight ahead, in a hurry to get out of the passengers’ kingdom and into somewhere more comfortable.

Each is painfully aware of his alien status in the concourses and decorated halls. To each there is nothing so indecipherable as the man who could choose to be passenger instead of pilot, the one who would choose any life but flight, who can stay away from the airplanes, not think about them even, and yet be happy. Passengers are a different race of humans, and pilots stay as far from them as courteously possible. Ask a pilot someday how many real friends he has who are not pilots themselves, and he will be hard-pressed to think of a single one.

The pilot is blissfully unaffected by anything that happens at the airport which does not directly bear on his flying—as far as he is concerned, the passengers’ kingdom doesn’t really exist, though occasionally he will look at the people with a benign sort of paternal affection. His world is very pure, without cynics or amateurs, and it is very simple. Its realities center on his airplane and fan out to include wind speed and direction, temperature, visibility, runway conditions, navigation aids, air traffic clearance, destination- and alternate-airport weather. That about locks it up. There are other elements: seniority, the six months’ physical examination, flight checks in the aircraft, but those are ancillary to his kingdom, not the core of it. If ground traffic is bumper-locked in ten thousand automobiles, if there is a construction workers’ strike, if organized crime is sordid and everywhere, stealing millions annually from the airport, he is completely untouched. The pilot’s only reality is his airplane and the forces that affect it in flight. That is why airline travel is the safest transportation in the history of man.

