# Anywhere is okay

Richard Bach

It was just as if somebody had thrown a hundred-pound firecracker, had lighted the fuse two hours after midnight, thrown the thing high in the dark over our airplanes, over us asleep there in the hay, and run like crazy.

A ball of dynamite fire shattered us alive, bullets of hard rain burst like hail across our bedrolls, black winds tore us like animals gone wild. Our three planes leaped frantic against their ropes, strained up hard against them, tugged and kicked and clawed at them mad to go tumbling in the night with that maniac wind.

“Get the strut, Joe!”

“What?” His voice was blown away in wind, drowned in rain and thunder. In the lightning flash he was frozen the color of ten million volts, as were trees, leaves flying off, and the horizontal raindrops.

“THE STRUT! GRAB THE STRUT AND HANG ON!”

He threw his weight on the wing in the instant the storm snapped branches from the trees—between us we held the Cub from taking both of us under its wings and cartwheeling across the valley.

Joe Giovenco, a hippy teenager from Hicksville, Long Island, from the shadow of New York City, whose total understanding of thunderstorms had been that they made faint rumblings beyond the city in summertime, clung to that strut with python strength, personally battling wind and lightning and rain, his hair blowing in fierce dark tangles about his face and shoulders.

“MAN!” he shouted a second before the next dynamite went off, “I’M REALLY LEARNING A LOT ABOUT METEOROLOGY!”

In half an hour the storm rolled by and left us a warm dark calm. Though we saw the sky flickering and crunching in the hills to the east, and though we looked warily west for other lightnings, the calm stayed and we snaked at last back into our ragged wet bedrolls. Moistly though we slept, there was not one of the six of us out there in the night who didn’t count the Invitational Cross-Country Adventure with the best wishes of his life. Yet it was nothing tried against great odds. All that brought us to it, or it to us, was that we shared a certain curiosity about the other people who live on our planet and in our time.

Maybe the headlines started the Adventure, or the magazine articles or the radio news. With their ceaseless talk of alien youth and generation gaps grown into uncrossable deep chasms and the only hope the kids have for the country is to tear it down and not rebuild at all … maybe that’s where it started. But considering all this, I found that I didn’t know any such kids, didn’t know anybody unwilling to talk to those of us who were kids ourselves, yesterday. I knew there was something to say to one who says “Peace” instead of “Hello,” but I didn’t know quite what that might be.

What would happen, I thought, if a man with a little cloth-wing airplane came down to land on a road to offer a knapsacked hitchhiker a ride? Or better, what would happen if a couple of pilots made room in their planes for a couple of city kids for a flight of a hundred miles or so, or a thousand miles or so; a flight of a week or two across the hills and farms and plains of America? Kids who have never seen the country before, outside their high school fence or expressway overpass?

Who would change, the kids or the pilots? Or would both, and what kind of change might that be? Where would their lives touch, and where would they be so far apart that there could be no calling across the gulf?

The only way to find out what can happen to an idea is to test it, and that is how the Invitational Cross-Country Adventure came to be.

The first day of August, 1971, was a misty dim day—afternoon, in fact, by the time I landed at Sussex Airport, New Jersey, to meet the others.

Louis Levner owned a 1946 Taylorcraft and liked the idea of the flight sight unseen. For a target we chose the EAA Fly-in at Oshkosh, Wisconsin, reason enough to fly even if everybody else canceled out at the last minute.

Glenn and Michelle Norman of Toronto, Canada, heard about the flight, and though they weren’t quite hippy kids they were strangers to the United States, eager to see the country in their 1940 Luscombe. And waiting there at the field when I landed were two young men who had labeled themselves Hippy for all the world to see. Hair down to their shoulders, headbands made of rags, dressed in faded dungarees, knapsacks and bedrolls at their feet.

Christopher Kask, thoughtful, nonviolent, almost non-speaking among strangers, had won a Regents scholarship out of high school, a distinction reserved for the top two percent of the student body. He wasn’t sure, however, that college is America’s best friend, and to get a degree for the sake of finding a better job did not sound to him like real education.

Joseph Giovenco, taller, more open with others, noticed everything with a careful photographer’s eye. He knew there was a future in video tape as an art form, and video tape he’d be learning, come fall.

None of us knew just what would happen, but the flying sounded like fun. We met at Sussex and we cast anxious looks at the sky, at the mists and clouds there, not saying much because we were not yet sure how to talk with each other. We nodded at last, packed our bedrolls aboard, started engines, and rolled fast along the runway and into the sky. Over the noise of the engines, there was no way to tell what the kids thought, airborne.

My own thought was that we weren’t going to get very far in the first flight. Clouds swirled up deep gray broths on the ridges west, with chunks of fog steaming in the branches of the trees. Blocked to the west, we flew south for ten miles, for fifteen, and finally, with the soup boiling and thickening all about us, came down on a little grass strip near Andover, New Jersey.

In the silence of that place, the rain began ever so gently to fall.

“Not what you might call an auspicious start,” somebody said.

But the kids were undampened. “All the land in New Jersey!” said Joe. “I thought it was populated!”

I hummed the tune to Mosquitoes, Stay Away from My Door as I unrolled my blanket in the grass, glad that we weren’t all gloomed by the terrible weather, hoping that tomorrow would dawn bright and see us on our way over our horizons.

It rained all night long. Rain with the sound of gravel pouring on drum-fabric wings, thudding into grass dryly at first, then with splashings as grass became marsh. By midnight we had given up hope of any star or of any sleep in the marsh; by one a.m. we were huddled and folded into the airplanes, trying at least to doze. At three a.m., after hours without a word, Joe said. “I have never been in rain this hard in my life.”

Dawn was late, because of the fog … we had fog and clouds and rain for four days straight. In four days of taking to the air with every small break in the sky, in four days of dodging rainstorms and detouring them and hopping from one little airport to another we had flown a grand total of sixty-two miles toward Oshkosh, one thousand miles away. We slept in a hangar at Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania; in an airport office at Pocono Mountain; in a flying-school clubhouse in Lehighton.

We decided to keep a journal of the flight. Out of this, and out of our talks under the rains and amid the fogs, we began to know each other, ever so slightly.

Joe was convinced right off, for instance, that airplanes had personalities, that they had characters like people, and he didn’t mind saying that the blue-and-white one over there in the corner of the hangar made him nervous. “I don’t know why. It’s the way it sits there looking at me. I don’t like it.”

The pilots jumped on that and told stories of airplanes that lived in different ways and did things that couldn’t be done—took off in impossibly short distances when they had to, to save somebody’s life, or glided impossibly long ones with engines stopped over jagged lands. Then there was talk about the way wings work, and flight controls and engines and propellers, and then about crowded schools and drugs on campus, then of how it is that sooner or later what a person holds fast in his thought becomes true in his life. Outside, the black rain; inside, the echo and murmur of voices.

In the journal we wrote whatever we didn’t feel like saying aloud.

“This is really something!” Chris Kask wrote on the fourth day. “Every day is a string of surprises—some really unbelievable things have been happening. A guy lends us his Mustang, a guy lends us his Cadillac, everybody’s letting us sleep in the airports and really going out of their way to be nice. It doesn’t matter where we are or if we ever get to Oshkosh. Anywhere is okay.”

The kindness of people was something the kids couldn’t believe.

“I used to walk with Chris in a store or follow him down a street,” Joe said, “and watch people watching him. His hair was as long as it is now—longer. They’d pass him and they’d look, sometimes they’d even stop and make some face or some remark. Condemn him. You could see the distaste in their eyes, and they didn’t even know who he was!”

After that I took to watching people watching our hippies. Always there was a shock there, seeing them for the first time, the same startlement I had felt when I first saw them. But if either of them had a chance to talk, though, a chance to show that they were gentle people who did not plan to whip out bombs and blow everybody to pieces, that flicker of hostility vanished in something less than half a minute.

Once we were trapped by weather over the ridges of western Pennsylvania. We fell back from it, then circled and landed our planes in a long field of mown hay by the town of New Mahoning.

Scarcely had we stepped out onto the ground when the farmer arrived, his pickup truck rolling soft and crunchy on the wet stubble.

“Having some trouble, are you?” He said that first, and then he frowned when he saw the kids.

“No, sir,” I said. “A little. The clouds were getting a bit low and we thought it might be better to land than to maybe fly into a hill up there. Hope you don’t mind …”

He nodded. “It’s OK. Everybody’s all right, are they?”

“Thanks to your field. We’re fine.”

In minutes three other trucks and a car nosed down the dirt lane and onto the field; there was curious lively talk everywhere.

“… saw them flying low over Nilsson’s place there, and I figure he was in trouble. Then the two others come around and they went down and it got quiet and I didn’t know what was going on!”

All the farm people with haircuts, all of them smooth-shaven, they flickered their eyes over the long hair and the headbands and they weren’t sure what they had, here.

Then they heard what Joe Giovenco was saying to Nilsson.

“Is this a farm? A real farm? I’ve never seen a real … I’m from the city … that isn’t corn is it, growing out of the ground?”

Frowns vanished in smiles like slow candles lighting.

“Sure that’s corn, son, and that’s the way it grows, right there. Sometimes you worry. This rain, now. Too much rain, and then a big wind right after, and the whole crop gets knocked flat and you’ve got troubles, sure enough …”

Somehow, that was a good scene to watch.

You could see the thoughts in their eyes. The hippies a fellow sets his jaw against are the sullen ones that don’t care about the rain or the sun or the land or the corn … the ones that don’t do anything but cut the country down. But these kids, now, they’re not that kind—a man can tell that right away.

When the ridges cleared, we offered rides in the airplanes, but no one was quite ready to go up. We started engines, then, and bounced up from the hay into the sky, rocked our wings farewell and went our way.

“Amazing!” Chris wrote in the journal that night. “We landed in a field and talked to farmers with Swedish and Irish accents—I didn’t know this existed in Pennsylvania. Everybody is so nice. Friendly. It’s really opened my eyes. A lot of my natural defenses are broken down. Just don’t worry and trust things to work out. All my little plans for the future have really been shaken. I’m just not sure of anything anymore and that’s good because it teaches you to go with the flow of things.”

From that day we wafted west in pure blue air over the pure green land and farms like sunlight growing.

After all our explaining on the ground, Chris and Joe were ready to take the controls themselves. Their first hours of dual instructions were given in formation flying.

“Small corrections, Joe, SMALL CORRECTIONS! You want to hold the other plane just about … there. OK? You’ve got it, you’re flying. Small corrections, now. Add a little power, close it in a little. SMALL CORRECTIONS!”

Before many hours were gone, they could actually hold the airplanes in formation with each other. It was hard work for them, they made it much harder than it had to be, but still they soaked it in and waited like vultures after takeoff to pounce on the controls and practice some more.

Next they began making takeoffs themselves … squirrely weaving panic-stricken disasters at first, leaping in the last instant over runway lights and snow markers along the sides of the strip. When they got smoother, we practiced stalls and a spin or two coming down from formation, and at last they began making landings, learning, absorbing like sponges dropped in the sea.

Every day, too, we learned of their life and their language. We practiced talking Hippy, my notebook becoming a dictionary of that tongue. Joe insisted that I had to slur my words much more carefully—we practiced saying “Hey, man, what’s happening?” over and over again, but it was harder than formation flying … I never did get it right.

“ ‘You know,’ ” Joe said, “means ‘Um’ or ‘Duh.’ ‘Right on’ means ‘I agree emphatically,’ said only to obvious statements and usually said by dummos.”

“What is it,” I asked, “when you ‘make the scene’?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never made it.”

Though my dictionary had much about the language of drugs (marijuana is also Mary Jane, grass, pot, stuff, smoke, and Cannabis sativa; a ‘nick’ is a five-dollar bag of grass, ‘spaced out’ is how one feels while smoking it), neither of the kids had brought any along on the Cross-Country Adventure. This puzzled me, since I thought that any hippy in good standing had to smoke a pack of marijuana a day, and I asked about it.

“You smoke mostly out of boredom,” Chris said, which explained why I missed seeing them with any drugs. Fighting storms, landing in hayfields, learning formation and takeoffs and landings—boredom was not a problem that we had to face.

In the midst of my language practice I noticed the kids had begun to pick up flying jargon without any dictionaries at all.

“Hey man,” I asked Joe one day, “this word ‘rushing,’ you know, I don’t quite dig it. How do you, you know, use it in a sentence?”

“You can say, ‘Man, I’m rushing.’ It’s the feeling you get on smoke when the top of your neck feels like it’s going into the back of your head.” He thought for a while, then brightened. “It’s exactly like how you feel pulling out of a spin.” I suddenly understood about rushing.

Words like “tail-dragger,” “rag-wing,” “touch-and-go,” “loop,” “hammerhead” popped up in their talk. They learned how to pull a propeller through by hand to start an engine, they followed us on the dual controls through every slip, skid, short-field landing, and soft-field takeoff we made. Even details, they picked up. Joe had his hands full flying formation one morning and called to me in the back seat of the Cub. “Could you give me a little up trim, please?” He didn’t hear, but I had laughed at that. A week earlier, “trim up” had been something you did to a Christmas tree.

Then one evening around the fire, Chris said, “How much does an airplane cost? How much do you need to fly one for a year, say?”

“Twelve hundred, fifteen hundred dollars,” Lou told him. “Fly it for two dollars an hour …”

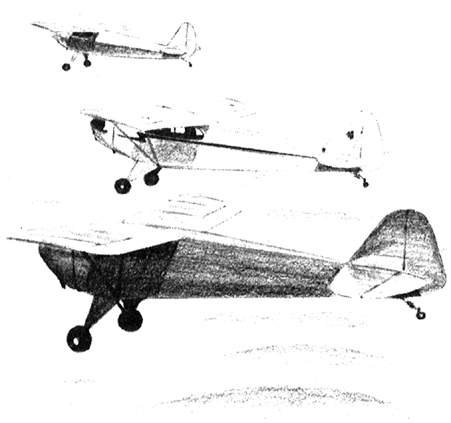
Joe was astonished. “Twelve hundred dollars!” There was a long silence. “That’s only six hundred apiece, Chris.”

The fly-in at Oshkosh was a carnival that left them unimpressed. They had not been caught by airplanes as much as by the idea of flight itself, by the idea of riding some airborne motorcycle up off the ground, leaving roads and traffic lights behind, and setting out to discover America. More and more this began to occupy their thinking.

Rio, Wisconsin, was our first stop homeward. There we carried thirty passengers on joy rides over town. The kids helped the passengers into the planes, explained flying to those just come to watch, and found that it was quite possible for a fellow to break even this way, if he had a plane of his own. That afternoon we earned fifty-four dollars in contributions and donations, which bought us gas and oil and suppers for a few days to come. At Rio, the town treated us to a picnic complete with salads and hot dogs and beans and lemonade, balancing out those nights lost to wet bedrolls and hungry mosquitos.

Here Glenn and Michelle Norman left us to fly farther southeast, to meet friends and see farther into the USA.

“There’s nothing more poetic or joyful-sad,” Chris wrote in the journal, “than seeing a friend fly away in an airplane.”



South we flew, four of us now in two airplanes, south and east and north again.

For crowded skies, that Monday afternoon, we saw a total of two other airplanes in all Chicago’s metropolitan airspace.

For 1984, we saw the horses and buggies of the Indiana Amish on the country roads below, and three-horse teams hitched to plows in fields.

Our last evening out we landed in the hayfield of Mr. Roy Newton, not far from Perry Center, New York. We talked with him for a while, asking his permission to stay the night on his land.

“Course you can stay here,” he said. “Except you won’t light any fires, will you? The straw around …”

“No fires, Mr. Newton.” we promised. “Thanks very much for letting us stay.”

Later, it was Chris who spoke. “You can sure get away with murder, in an airplane.”

“Murder, Chris?”

“Suppose we had come along with a car, or on bikes, or walking. What are the chances he’d be so nice about letting us stay here like this? But with airplanes, because it’s getting dark, we’re welcome to land!”

It didn’t sound fair, but that’s just the way it is. That is a privilege one has, as a pilot, and it was not lost on the kids.

Next day we were landed back to Sussex Airport, New Jersey, and the Invitational Cross-Country Adventure was officially finished. Ten days, two thousand miles, thirty hours of flying.

“I’m sad,” Joe said. “It’s all over. It was great and now it’s all over.”

It wasn’t till late night that I opened the journal once more, and noticed that Chris Kask had made one last entry in it.

“I learned a tremendous amount,” he had written. “This has opened my mind to a whole bunch of things that exist outside of Hicksville, L.I. I’ve got a new perspective on things. I’m able to stand back from everything a little more and see it from a different viewpoint. Something I’ve felt on this is that it’s an important thing not only to me but to everyone along and to everyone we met, and I realized this while it was happening, which is a very heady feeling. It caused many tangible and many intangible changes in my mind and emotions. Thanks.”

There was my answer, there’s what we can say to the kids who say “Peace” instead of “Hello.” We can say “Freedom,” and by the grace of a secondhand rag-wing lightplane, we can show them what we mean.