# Aviation or flying? Take your pick

Richard Bach

You look at aviation and you can’t help wondering. There is so much going on all at once, and the whole thing is so foreign and complicated, and there are so many roaring individualists there, all railing at each other over tiny differences of opinion.

Why would anyone, you ask, deliberately dive into that maelstrom, just to become an airplane pilot?

At the question, the tumult stops instantly. In the dead silence, the pilots stare at you for not knowing the clearly obvious.

“Why, flying saves time, that’s why,” says the business pilot, at last.

“Because it’s fun, and no other reason matters,” says the sport pilot.

“Dummies!” says the professional pilot. “Everybody knows that this is the best way in the world to make a living!”

Then the others are at it again, all talking at once, and then shouting for your attention.

“Cargo to haul!”

“Crops to spray!”

“Places to go!”

“People to carry!”

“Deals to close!”

“Sights to see!”

“Appointments to keep!”

“Races to win!”

“Things to learn!”

They are at each other’s throats once more, snarling over which part of the gold of flight gleams more brightly than any other. You can only shrug your shoulders, walk sadly off, and say, “What could I expect? They’re all out of their minds.”

You speak more truly than you might think. The government of pure reason departs when an airplane enters the scene. It is no secret knowledge, for instance, that a tremendous number of business airplanes are purchased because someone in the company likes airplanes and wants one around. Given the desire, it is a simple matter to justify the company’s ownership of the airplane, because an airplane is also a very useful, time-saving, moneymaking business tool. But the desire came first, and then, later, the reasons were trotted out.

On the other hand, there are still some company executives whose fear of airplanes is as irrational as the affection of others, and despite time or money, saved or earned, have it clearly understood that their company will positively have nothing to do with any flying machines.

For a great many people around the world, an airplane has a special charm that time cannot dissolve, and a simple test illustrates the point. How many things are there on earth today, dear reader, that you truly and deeply want to own, with that same intense longing-to-possess that you had for that metallic blue Harley-Davidson when you just turned sixteen?

So often, as we grow, we lose the capacity to want things. Most pilots are absolutely uncaring about the kind of automobile they drive, the precise form of the house they live in, or the shape and color of the world about them. Whether or not they have or don’t have any particular material thing is not of earth-shaking importance. Yet it is common to hear those very men openly hungering after one specific airplane, and to see them making huge sacrifices for it.

Rationally speaking, most pilots can’t afford to own the airplanes that they do. They give up a second car, a new house, gold, bowling, and three years lunch just to keep that Cessna 140 or a used Piper Comanche waiting for them in the hangar. They want these airplanes, and they want them almost desperately. More than the Harley-Davidson.

The world of flight is a world in its youth, that is ruled by emotion and hard impulsive attachments to airplanes and ideas about airplanes. It is a world that has so many things to see and do that it hasn’t had time for mature reflection about itself, and because of this, like any youth, it is none too sure of its own meaning or reason for its existence.

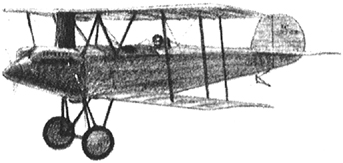
There is a tremendous difference, for instance, between “Aviation” and “Flying,” a difference so vast that they are virtually two separate worlds, with precious little of anything in common.

Aviation, far and away the largest of the two, comprises the airplanes and airmen who have interests beyond themselves. Aviation’s big advantage is the obvious one: airplanes can compress a very large distance into a very small one. If New York is just across the street from Miami, one might cross that street three or four times a week, just for the change of scenery and climate. The Aviation enthusiasts find that not only is New York just across the street, but so are Montreal, Phoenix, New Orleans, Fairbanks, and La Paz.

They find that after a very modest amount of training in the not-too-difficult mechanics of the airplane and the not-too-complicated element of the air, they can constantly feed their insatiable appetite for new sights, new sounds, for new things happening that have never happened before. Aviation offers Atlanta today, St. Thomas tomorrow, Sun Valley the next day, and Disneyland the next. In Aviation, an airplane is a clever swift traveling device that lets you have lunch in Des Moines and supper in Las Vegas. The whole planet is nothing but a great feast of delicious places for the Aviation enthusiast, and every day for as long as he lives he can savor another delicate new flavor of it.

To the Aviator, then, the faster and more comfortable his airplane, and the simpler it is to fly, the better suited it is to his use. The sky is the same sky everywhere, and it is simply the medium through which the Aviator moves to reach his destination. The sky is nothing more than a street, and no one pays any attention to the street, as long as it leads to far Xanadu.

The Flyer, however, is a different creature entirely from the Aviator. The man who is concerned with Flying isn’t concerned with distant places off over the horizon, but with the sky itself; not with shrinking distance into an hour’s airplane travel, but with the incredible machine that is the airplane itself. He moves not through distance, but through the ranges of satisfaction that come from hauling himself up into the air with complete and utter control; from knowing himself and knowing his airplane so well that he can come somewhere close to touching, in his own special and solitary way, that thing that is called perfection.



Aviation, with its airways and electronic navigation stations and humming autopilots, is a science. Flying, with its chugging biplanes and swift racers, with its aerobatics and its soaring, is an art. The Flyer, whose habitat is most often the cockpit of a tailwheel airplane, is concerned with slips and spins and forced landings from low altitude. He knows how to fly his airplane with the throttle and the cabin doors; he knows what happens when he stalls out of a skid. Every landing is a spot landing for him, and he growls if he does not touch down smoothly three-point, with his tailwheel puffing a little cloud of lime-dust from his target on the grass.

Flying prevails whenever a man and his airplane are put to a test of maximum performance. The sailplane on its thermal, trying to stay in the air longer than any other sailplane, using every particle of rising air to its best advantage, is Flying. The big war-surplus Mustangs and Bearcats, moaning four hundred miles per hour down their racing straightaways and brushing the checkered-canvas pylons on the turns, are Flying. That lonely little biplane way up high in a distant summer afternoon, practicing barrel rolls over and over and over again, is Flying. Flying, once again, is overcoming not the distance from here to Nantucket, but the distance from here to perfection.

Although he is in a very small minority, the Flyer is allowed to walk both his own world and the world of Aviation. Any Flyer can step into the cabin of any airplane and fly it anywhere that an Aviator can. He can overcome distance any time it strikes his fancy.

An Aviator, however, isn’t capable of strapping himself into the cockpit of a sailplane or a racer or an aerobatic biplane and flying it well, or even flying it at all. The only way that he can do this is to enter the same long training that ironically transforms him into a Flyer by the time he has gained the skill to operate such airplanes.

Far from the relatively simple process of learning to aviate, Flying rears itself a gigantic towering mountain of unknowns to the fledgling, so that where Flyers are, one often hears the cry, “Good grief, I can never learn it all!” And of course it’s true. The professional aerobatic pilot, or air racer or soaring pilot, practicing every day for years, is never caught saying, even to himself, “I know it all.” If he stops flying for three days, he can feel the rust when he flies on the fourth. When he lands from his very best performance, he knows that he still has room to improve.

Bring these two worlds together in any but the same man, and sparks fly. To the distance-conquering Aviator, the Flyer is a symbol of irresponsibility, a grease-stained throwback to the days of flight before Aviation came to be; the very last person one would exhibit to the general public if one would wish Aviation to grow.

To the skill-seeking Flyer, the unskilled world of Aviation has already grown too much. The poor Aviators, he says, don’t really know their airplanes when they are performing any maneuver but level flight, and they are the ones who, not caring to study their machines or the face of the sky, turn themselves daily into stall-spin statistics. They are the ones who press on into bad weather, not knowing that without the ability to fly on instruments, those clouds are just as deadly to them as pure methane gas.

“No one is so blind as the man who refuses to see,” the Flyer quotes in ill-concealed distaste over any pilot who does not share his own zeal to know and to completely control any airplane he touches.

The Aviator believes that air safety is the result of proper legislation and strict enforcement of the rules. The Flyer believes that perfect safety in the air means the ability of a pilot to perfectly control his airplane; that any airplane, perfectly controlled, will never have any accident unless the pilot wishes to have one and controls the airplane into it.

The Aviator tries his level best to obey every regulation he knows. The Flyer is often airborne when regulations forbid it, yet just as often refuses to fly under other conditions that are quite legal.

The Aviator trusts that the modern engine is very well designed and will never stop running. The Flyer is convinced that any engine can fail, and he is always within gliding distance of some suitable place to land.

It is the same sky over both, the same principle keeps both men and both machines aloft, yet the two attitudes are so different as to be farther apart than miles can measure.

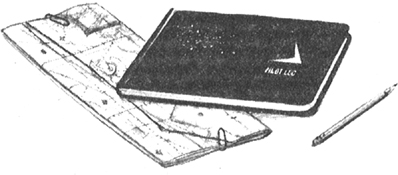
So the newcomer, from his very first hour in the air, is faced with a choice that must be made, though he may be unaware that he is making any choice at all. Each world has its own special joys and its own special dangers. And each has its own special kind of friendships formed, that are an important part of any life above the earth.

“Well, we defied gravity one more time.” Reflected in that common after-flight saying is a hint of the tie that binds airmen together, each in his own world. Airborne, the airman is matching himself against whatever the sky has to offer. The sky and the airplane combine in a challenge, and the airman, Aviator or Flyer, has decided to accept that challenge. The far-traveling Aviator has friends of similar thought and decision all over the country; his circle of friends has a radius of a thousand miles. His counterpart, the Flyer, makes his own fierce friendships, bound as he is in a defensive minority which is convinced of the Tightness of its principles.

Why fly? Ask the Aviator and he will tell you of faraway lands brought right to where you can see and touch and hear and smell and taste them. He will tell you of crystal blue seas waiting in Nassau, of the bright clattering casinos and the smooth quiet river at Reno, of the horizon-wide carpet of solid light that is Los Angeles after dark, of marlin leaping up from the ocean at Acapulco, of history-soaked villages in New England, of blazing desert sunsets as you fly down through Guadalupe Pass into El Paso, of Grand Canyon and Meteor Crater and Niagara and Grand Coulee from the air. He will urge you into his airplane, and in moments you’ll be covering two hundred miles per hour to some favorite place with a magnificent view and where the chef is his special friend. Back at the airport after a night flight home, locking his airplane, he’ll say, “Aviation is worth your while. More than worth your while. There is nothing like it.”

Why fly? Ask the Flyer and he will pound on your door at six a.m. and whisk you to the airstrip and buckle you into the cockpit of his airplane. He will bury you deep in blue engine smoke or in the soft live silence of soaring flight; he will take the world in his hands and twist it all directions before your eyes. He will touch a machine of wood and fabric and bring it alive for you; instead of seeing speed from a cabin window, you will taste it in your mouth and feel it roaring by your goggles and watch it fraying your scarf in the wind. Instead of knowing height on the dial of an altimeter, you will see it as a tall, wide air-filled space that begins at the sky and drops right straight down to the grass. You will land in hidden meadows where no man or machine has ever been, and you’ll soar upslope on a mountain ridge from which the snow sifts downwind in long misty veils.

You’ll relax in soft armchairs after supper, in a room whose walls are covered with airplane pictures, and feel the thunder and shock of ideas and perfection surge like a hurricane sea over the faces of skill around you. The sea calms near sunup, and the Flyer drops you off at home in the morning ready only to fall into bed and dream of airfoils and precision flying, thermal-sniffers and racing in the ground effect. Great suns roll through your sleep, and colorful checkerboard land drifts below.



When you wake you might be ready to make a decision one way or another, for Aviation or Flying.

Rare is the man who has been exposed to the intense heat of a pilot’s enthusiasm, without being in some way affected by it. The only reason that this can be is the unreasonable itself, that strange distant mystique of machines that carry men through the air.

Aviation or Flying, take your choice. There is nothing in all the world quite like either one of them.