# Found at Pharisee

Richard Bach

It happened on a Tuesday, at Pharisee, Wyoming. I remember that I had just grounded myself for a week, because the approved mechanics were busy and wouldn’t be able to change my airplane’s oil till Tuesday next. I had logged twenty-four hours fifty-seven minutes since my last twenty-five-hour oil change, so of course I couldn’t fly.

As I turned to leave the FAA-approved repair station, there was a great thunder in the sky, and a dozen lightplanes landed suddenly on the grass, where it was forbidden to land, and, I later learned, without radio. They converged upon the FAA-approved repair station like multiple lightnings, and a dozen masked, black-clad men leaped from the cockpits and surrounded us, .44s drawn and cocked.

“We’ll take all your technical files, right now,” the outlaw leader said in a low, calm voice. A black silk cape hung about him, and from the cool manner in which he pointed his revolver, it was plain that he had done this many times before. “Everything you have, anything written about any airplane, any engine, bring it out here, please.”

It was preposterous, incredible, in this day … a holdup! I started to cry out, but the FAA-approved inspector, without moving a muscle, said, “Do as he says, boys; give ’em the tech data files.”

Three of the approved mechanics backed toward the office, covered by the outlaws.

“What’s going on here?” I asked. “What is this?”

“Quiet, over there.”

“What do you mean, quiet? This is illegal! HELP! F.A.A.! OUTLAWS!”

When I woke up, I was lying on a cot in a cave of rock, well lit and apparently part of a vast complex, a hidden community. My airplane was chocked in a stone T-hangar cut opposite a huge sliding wall, and a black-clad outlaw had just changed the engine oil. He was removing a magneto contact-breaker assembly now, and it jarred me to action.

“Stop! You can’t do that! You’re not a licensed mechanic! Put that back on!”

“If I’m not a licensed mechanic, I can’t put it back on, can I?” He spoke quietly, without looking at me. “Sorry we had to bring you along, but Pharisee had more data than we planned on taking, and we had to borrow your airplane to help carry the load. We figured you wouldn’t want to be left behind. And your left magneto dropped fifty rpm on run-up.”

You don’t reason with people like that, but I was still confused, not thinking clearly. “What’s the matter with fifty rpm? I can have a seventy-five rpm drop and still be legal.”

“Sure you can, but being legal doesn’t make it right.” He was quiet for a moment. “Just like being right doesn’t make it legal. This magneto misses fire every minute and a half in the air. You never noticed that?”

“How could I notice it? I never fly on one magneto in the air. I check them both before takeoff and if there is less than a seventy-five rpm drop …”

“… you go ahead and fly.”

“Of course I do. I learned by the book and I fly by the book.” I have always been proud of that.

“Heaven help us,” was the only reply from the outlaw.

A few minutes later, as he worked, I gathered courage, and spoke. “What are you going to do with me?”

“Let you go. As soon as we pay you for the use of your airplane. Price of replacing this breaker spring will just about cover it.”

“Pay me? But you’re outlaws! That’s not a legal repair! Who will sign it off in the logbook?”

The black-clad desperado laughed, low in his throat. “That’s your problem, friend. All that matters to us is that an airplane works as it was designed to work. The paperwork is up to you.”

“What about all that technical data you took?” My words cut like razors. “Were you so noble as to pay for that?”

“Overpaid, if you ask me. But that’s the way Drake has to have it. We left a zero-since-major engine at Pharisee … tolerance to a ten-thousandth all the way through, all our own best work. Drake’s personal guarantee for three thousand hours flying. Man. The things we give to get more technical information …”

“But if you outlaws overhauled it here, it has no logs, it hasn’t been signed off!”

He laughed again, setting a timing disc on the propeller shaft. “You’re right. It hasn’t been signed off. We have left them the best-overhauled engine in the world today, and it isn’t legal. They’ll have to tear it down, won’t they?… change the tolerances, break the guarantee. When they get it back together, it will be just another engine, with a fifty-hour warranty. But legal, friend, legal!”

He touched a set of buttons beneath a dial on the wall. “Looks as if you might be staying the night. Wind’s twenty miles per hour on the north strip here. Twenty-three on the south.”

The finality of his words frightened me. “There’s nothing wrong with twenty miles per hour,” I said. “That’s less than half the stalling speed of my airplane, and according to the book, if the wind is less than …”

“That much wind in these mountains will blow you to pieces with what you know about your airplane.”

“If you had taken the time to examine my logbook,” I said icily, “you would have seen that …”

“… that you have 2648 hours and 29 minutes total flying time. Our computers have analyzed the kind of flying you’ve done. A thousand of your hours are logged on autopilot, and the rest of it was spent trying to fly like one. You have the equivalent of sixteen hours and sixteen minutes real flying time, our kind of flying time. That’s not enough to fly out of here safely in a twenty-mile breeze.” He turned the propeller slightly.

“Now just a minute. I don’t know what kind of screwy computer you have, but I know I can fly my own airplane.”

“Sure you can. You have logged 2648 hours in your little book.” He turned so suddenly I jumped, and his words slammed rapid-fire into the rock walls. “How much altitude do you lose in a one-eighty downwind turn, if the engine stops on takeoff? How long does it take your gear to extend on battery power only? What happens when you land with the wheels only partly down? How do you make a minimum-damaged forced landing? If you have to fly through power lines, where should you hit them?”

It was quiet for a long moment. “Well, you never turn back to the runway if the engine stops on takeoff; that’s in the book …”

“And the book lies!” He was immediately sorry for his outburst. “Excuse me. Let’s say that the engine stops on takeoff after you have climbed to five thousand feet and circled so that you were over the end of the runway?”

“Well, of course. I could turn …”

“One thousand feet?”

“That’s plenty high enough to …”

“Five hundred feet? Three hundred feet? One hundred feet? Do you see what I mean? Our instructors teach that a pilot should know his turn-around altitude for every takeoff he makes.”

“Then you have outlaw instructors, too.”

“Yes.”

“And I suppose they teach spins and lazy eights …”

“… and prop-stop glides and forced landings to touchdown and aerobatics and flying without trim or flight controls and … and a lot of things you’ve never even thought about in your hours on autopilot.”

I replied with penetrating sarcasm. “Your students, I suppose, all get their licenses in the minimum thirty-five hours?”

“Our students never get a license. We’re outlaws here, remember? We judge our ability by how well we know ourselves and our airplanes, day to day. We leave the paperwork and the licenses to people who live by regulations instead of knowing.” He finished with the magneto, and removed the timing disc. “Let’s go eat.”

The dining hall was a gigantic underground cavern, lighted by tall bright panels printed with diagrams and cutaways of engine and airplane components. The hall was half filled with black-clad men, and rows of black hats and black gun-belts hung from the black hat-racks. I noticed, with a shock, that a black silk cape hung from the first rack.

“Drake would like the pleasure of your company.”

The last thing I wanted then was to sup with the leader of this outlaw band, but I dared not say so. I followed my guide to a corner table, at which sat a lean, square-jawed figure, clothed all in black.

“Here he is, Drake. We made up a new breaker spring for his left mag, and our debt to him is paid.”

“Thank you, Bart.” The voice was low and sure, obviously the voice of a madman, and a man to be treated as such.

“I demand my rights,” I said firmly. “I insist that you release me at once, and allow me to leave this robbers’ roost.”

“You have your rights,” he said, “and you may leave whenever you wish. You know, of course, that at the moment our downdrafts exceed your ability to make your airplane climb. We’ve also found that your number four connecting rod is cracked, and may fail at any time. If it fails within fifty miles of this room, you do not have the ability to land your airplane without destroying it. Knowing these things, if you still wish to leave, you may leave. You might be lucky in the wind, and the rod might not break immediately.”

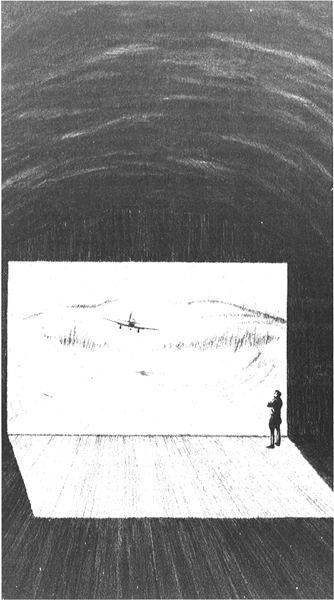
He was obviously a crazed gunman, and I destroyed his point at once. “I have flown over fifteen hundred hours in that very airplane, Mr. Drake, and I certainly ought to be able to fly it safely in this paltry wind. And if you had not been so hasty to kidnap me, you would have seen that my engine has only fifty hours since major overhaul by a reputable firm, for which I paid $1,750, and for which I have a receipt and an inspector’s signature in the logbook.”

The meal was silently served, and during the serving Drake looked at me with the hopeless, slightly sad look of a craven criminal.

“The connecting rod of your number four cylinders does not even know what a logbook is. Will it comfort you to read your logbook and trace the inspector’s signature when your propeller stops turning and there is no place for you to land?”

The man, I had to admit, was uncanny. Actually if such an impossible thing as a fifty-hour engine quitting in flight could happen, it would be a comfort to read the inspector’s name again, but the way he said it made the idea of depending on a signature sound silly. I set him straight.

“One chance in a million, my dear Drake, and I am not that one. As long as a pilot is legal, he is safe. Furthermore, anything that breaks the regulations of the Federal Aviation Agency is unsafe. Surely a government agency should know what is safe and what is not.” To my amazement, the madman laughed. Not scornfully, but as though he had thought of something that he found humorous.



“You are priceless,” he said, laughing still. “Or perhaps I misunderstand. When you speak of this infallible government agency, do you mean the same government agency that removed training in spins from its pilot requirements? The same agency that now says it is well merely to teach approaches to stalls rather than full stalls, when the stall-spin is a major cause of modern pilot fatality? Do you mean the same regulating body that sets a brand-new mechanic to work on an old-style radial engine, while it brands ‘outlaw’ the unlicensed owner who knows more about the engine than the mechanic will ever learn? The same agency that requires itself to hire ten blind paper shufflers for every able man it has?”

He laughed again, setting down his fork. “The same agency I wrote so long ago for information, that told me, ‘It is not considered essential to flight safety for a person to know the actual design load factor of his airplane,’ and refused to send me information from public files?”

“I mean the Federal Aviation Agency,” I said, and I spoke with solemn dignity. The brigands round about clearly had no respect for authority, for they looked at me and smiled, as though they could hear what I said and as though they too had thought of something humorous. I decided then to destroy their leader’s position in front of them all, and raised my voice so that all could hear.

“Then you feel that the Federal Aviation Agency is all bad, Mr. Drake, and should be abolished?”

“Of course not,” he said quietly. “Some kinds of aviation, airlines, for instance, need central coordination to fly efficiently, to serve their customers and the country.”

“Well, if you don’t think it should be abolished, why are you not a law-abiding man, a follower of regulations?” I had destroyed the man by his own logic, and I had to smile. I awaited his abject concession.

“Just because I say I enjoy a steak from time to time, my friend, does not mean I want a cow stuffed down my throat. We outlaws fly and maintain our own airplanes for fun, we don’t fly DC-8s on international airways.”

Curse him. “The rules, man, the rules! They are made by the FAA for our own safety!”

“Ah, my honored guest,” the outlaw said, and leaned forward across the table, “you seek your god in rule books and idols made by men, and all the while that god is within you. Safety is that which you know, not what somebody else thinks it would be nice for you to comply with. Ask your FAA agent for the approved definition of safety. There is none. How can any agency guide toward that which it can’t even define?”

“You poor lonely outlaws,” I said, with as much pity as I could feign for the lunatic. “There are so few of you …”

“Think so?” my captor said. “Open your eyes. In the cities, with hard-surface runways and FAA offices crowded in the terminals, we are few. But come away from your executive transportation centers someday and see what is going on in the other ninety-nine percent of the country. Outlaws. It is not only impossible to fly daily without breaking Federal Air Regulations, but following them blindly can kill a man.”

“An empty slogan, my good fellow.”

“Is it? Fly in two-mile visibility into a controlled airport, sometime, with no radio. It isn’t legal to land, is it? If you are seen landing and the FAA isn’t in the mood to overlook the law that day, a violation will be filed against you.

“So you keep flying, hoping for an uncontrolled airport nearby. The weather goes bad around you, but you’ve never landed in a pasture—that sort of thing is considered dangerous and is not in the flight training requirements. It is now raining hard and you can’t find an airport, so you decide that with your five hours of instrument hood training you are able to climb through the cloud to on top in uncontrolled airspace. What is instrument training for, if not for use in an emergency? By evoking the emergency prerogative section of the General Operating Rules, you can even do this legally. But your chances of coming through alive are zero.

“Just one instance,” he said, “one logical everyday instance in which blind obedience to law will kill you. Want more? Plenty more examples, and lots and lots of outlaws. We’re content to let the FAA live in its little dreamworld, as long as it doesn’t make us try to live there, too. And it doesn’t. I used to be an editor for an aviation magazine, and I had the chance to talk to many an official agent of the FAA. I found that the experienced men agreed with the outlaws right down the line, as long as I promised not to quote them on it. One of them said, ‘There are more outlaws in the FAA than out of it!’ Word for word, my friend, from a high-ranking regional official of your agency.”

At my command, the man obediently passed the salt.

“There are quite a few old-time pilots in the FAA who know us well,” he went on, “and who know that our kind of safety works better than the official kind, and so don’t apply the law to us, or bend it sharply for us. We’ve all agreed to be very quiet about the fact that a great number of regulations are ridiculous violations of common sense, and we’ve agreed that no one will rock the boat. We’re grateful that the old-timers are there, of course. If anyone seriously tried to enforce the regulations on maintenance, for instance, virtually every owner of a low-cost lightplane would have a price on his head, and would have to counterattack for his very survival as an airplane owner. The magnitude of that counterattack would destroy a great many people in the FAA, and it would reform the law. The end result would be good, certainly, but the process would be so painful that none of us has the courage to begin it. We are happy as long as we’re left alone. The FAA is happy as long as no one shatters its dreamworld about the law-abiding little guy.”

My patience came to an end, I had had enough of this self-righteous prattle. “Admit it, Drake,” I said. “You’re looking for a license to fly recklessly, to do whatever you wish, whether it be safe or not. You don’t care whether you live or die, but how about the innocent people on the ground who are snuffed out when your reckless nonsense pays you in full?”

He laughed. “My friend, you do a lot of flying at night, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. An airplane is for transportation, day and night. What’s that to do with your recklessness?”

“Do you wear a parachute when you fly at night?”

“Of course not. What a juvenile thought!”

“What do you do, then, if your engine stops at night?”

“I have never had an engine failure in flight, Mr. Drake, and I do not intend to have one.”

“Isn’t that interesting!” He was silent for a moment, studying the engine diagram woven into the tablecloth. “There is not an outlaw here who would fly an airplane at night without a parachute, unless the moon was so bright that he constantly had a landing place in sight. We don’t believe that engine failures never happen, and if we can’t see to land, and if we can’t carry a parachute, we don’t fly. There’s not a pilot here, except yourself, who would fly over an undercast of fog, or over a ceiling lower than he can shoot a forced landing from.

“Yet no-parachute night flying is perfectly legal, and flying on top of any amount of fog is FAA-approved. Our rule says that pure safety is pure knowledge and pure control. Whether our airplane has one engine or two is immaterial. If we can’t see to land, and if we can’t carry a parachute, we don’t fly.”

Naturally, I didn’t listen to a word the man said. The only safety that wildman would ever know would be the safety of a prison cell.

“Your connecting rod,” he went on “is legal right now. It is FAA-approved and it is all signed off. But it is cracked and it is going to break soon. If you had the choice, would you rather have the crack in the rod or that signature in your log?”

I could only be firm with him. “Sir, the mechanic and the inspector are responsible for their work. I am entirely within my rights to fly that airplane exactly as it is.”

He laughed once more, a curiously friendly sound, as though he meant me no harm. At that moment I knew I would escape his lair, and soon.

“All right,” he said, not knowing my thoughts. “The inspector is responsible, and you are innocent. All you have to do is let your airplane be destroyed in these mountains because you are not required to know how to survive in any land that you fly over. Everyone else is responsible, you are just the guy who does the dying. Is that it?”

That is it, of course, but again he made it sound foolish and wrong. But who can believe a band of outlaws, living in the badlands, flying and maintaining their airplanes without licenses just because they happen to know how an engine works or how an airplane flies? Radicals and extremists all, and there should be a law against them. Well, of course, there is a law.

Outlaws is what they are, and when I return to a law-abiding city, I’ll see that the FAA files serious charges against them all, and revokes their … and comes out here and puts them in prison. They think they’re so much better than everyone else, just because they know how to hold a wrench and land without power. But do they know about approach control? What do they do in the traffic pattern if the tower doesn’t give them permission to land? They’d sing a different tune, then, and I’d reach over when they beg me to save them and I’d ask the tower, “Respectfully begging your permission to land,” and then I won’t have to know my airplane or how it flies because the tower has cleared me number one.

I abruptly took leave of Drake and his unsavory fellows, and neither he nor his men made any move to stop me. They no doubt saw my anger, and thought it much safer to hold their peace in my presence.

Back in the rock hangar, I found the button that slid the wall away, and since the outlaws were now clearly afraid of a law-abiding man, I took time to write this all down, every word we said, to use as evidence in the FAA hearings that will send these men to prison. Those wonderful, simple hearings, in which the FAA, because it knows what is best for us, can both prosecute us and judge us fairly. Fortunately, these wild ones are surely the only men of their kind in the country.

Note to myself: Type all notes following, since ruf air makes pencil words hard for prosecutor to read. Wouldn’t have thot wind 20 so ruf. Save this paper, tho, show outlaws they wrong. Can fly out of their mountains with one hand, make notes with other.

Downdrafts bad. 1500 fpm down, tho full power and climb speed. Must hit updraft soon.

There. Worst is behind, and outlaws soon to justice. I see Pharisee airport, and I could almost stretch glide from here unless—chance in a million … chance in billion—the engine qui