# I’ve never heard the wind

Richard Bach

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!

