# People who fly

Richard Bach

For nine hundred miles, I listened to the man in the seat next to mine on Flight 224 from San Francisco to Denver. “How did I come to be a salesman?” he said. “Well, I joined the Navy when I was seventeen, in the middle of the war …” And he had gone to sea and he was in the invasion of Iwo Jima, taking troops and supplies up to the beach in a landing craft, under enemy fire. Incidents many, and details of the time, back in the days when this man had been alive.

Then in five seconds he filled me in on the twenty-three years that came after the war: “… so I got this job with the company in 1945 and I’ve been here ever since.”

We landed at Denver Stapleton and the flight was over. I said goodbye to the salesman, and we went our ways into the crowd at the terminal and of course I never saw him again. But I didn’t forget him.

He had said it in so many words—the only real life he had known, the only real friends and real adventures, the only things worth remembering and reliving since he was born were a few scattered hours at sea in the middle of a world war.

In the days that led away from Denver, I flew light airplanes into little summer fly-ins of sport pilots around the country, and I thought of the salesman often and I asked myself time and again, what do I remember? What times of real friends and real adventure and real life would I go back to and live over again?

I listened more carefully than ever to the people around me. I listened as I sat with pilots, now and then, clustered on the night grass under the wings of a hundred different airplanes. I listened as I stood with them in the sun and while we walked aimlessly, just for the sake of talking, down rows of bright-painted antiques and home-builts and sport planes on display.

“I suspect the thing that makes us fly, whatever it is, is the same thing that draws the sailor out to the sea,” I heard. “Some people will never understand why and we can’t explain it to them. If they’re willing and have an open heart we can show them, but tell them we can’t.”

It’s true. Ask “Why fly?” and I should tell you nothing. Instead, I should take you out to the grounds of an airport on a Saturday morning in the end of August. There is sun and a cloud in the sky, now, and here’s a cool breeze hushing around the precision sculptures of lightplanes all washed in rainbows and set carefully on the grass. Here’s a smell of clean metal and fabric in the air, and the swishing chug of a small engine spinning a little windmill of a propeller, making ready to fly.

Come along for a moment and look at a few of the people who choose to own and fly these machines, and see what kind of people they are and why they fly and whether, because of it, they might be a little bit different than anyone else in all the world.

I give you an Air Force pilot, buffing the silver cowl of a lightplane that he flies in his off-duty hours, when his eight-engine jet bomber is silent.



“I guess I’m a lover of flying, and above all of that tremendous rapport between a man and an airplane. Not just any man—let me exclude and be romantic—but a man who feels flight as his life, who knows the sky not as work or diversion, but as home.”

Listen to a couple of pilots as one casts a critical eye on his wife in her own plane, practicing landings on the grass runway: “Sometimes I watch her when she thinks I’m gone. She kisses that plane on the spinner, before she locks the hangar at night.”

An airline captain, touching up the wing of his homebuilt racer with a miniature paint bottle and a tiny brush. “Why fly? Simple. I’m not happy unless there’s some air between me and the ground.”

In an hour, we talk with a young lady who only this morning learned that an old two-winger has been lost in a hangar fire: “I don’t think you’re ever the same after seeing the world framed by the wings of a biplane. If someone had told me a year ago that I could cry over an airplane, I would have laughed. But I had grown to love that old thing …”

Do you notice that when these people talk about why they fly and the way that they think about airplanes, not one of them mentions travel? Or saving time? Or what a great business tool this machine can be? We get the idea that those are not really so important, and not the central reason that brings men and women into the sky. They talk, when we get to know them, of friendship and joy and of beauty and love and of living, of really living, firsthand, with the rain and the wind. Ask what they remember of their life so far and not one of them will skip the last twenty-three years. Not one.

“Well, right off the top of my head I remember chugging along there in formation with Shelby Hicks leading the way in his big Stearman biplane, heading for Council Bluffs, last month. And Shelby was flying and Smitty was in the front cockpit navigating—you know the way he does, real careful, with all his distances and headings just down to the exact degree—and all of a sudden the wind catches his map and pow! there it goes up and out of the cockpit like a big green ninety-mile-an-hour butterfly and poor Smitty grabs for it and he can’t quite get it and the look on his face all horror and Shelby is sort of startled first and then he starts laughing. Even from flying alongside I can see Shelby laughing so there’s tears running down inside his goggles and Smitty is disgusted and then in a minute he starts to laughin’ and he points over to me and says, ‘You’re the leader!’ ”

A picture burned in memory because it was wild and fun and shared.

“I remember the time John Purcell and I had to land my plane in a pasture in South Kansas because the weather got bad all at once. All we had for supper was a Hershey bar. We slept under the wing all night, and found some wild berries that we were afraid to eat for breakfast at sunup. And ol’ John saying my airplane made a lousy hotel because some rain got him wet. He’ll never know how close I came to taking off and just leaving him out there in the middle of nowhere, for a while …”

Journeys across the middle of Nowhere.

“I remember the sky over Scottsbluff. The clouds must have gone up ten miles over our head. We felt like darn ants, I tell you …”

Adventures in a country of giants.

“What do I remember? I remember this morning! Bill Carran bet me a nickel he could take off in his Champ in less runway than I’d need in the T-Craft. And I lose, and I can’t figure out why I lose because I always win with that guy, and just when I go to pay him I see he’s snuck a sandbag into my airplane! So he had to pay me a nickel for cheating and another nickel for losing the takeoff when we did it again with the sandbag out …”

Games of skill, with sneaky tricks unplayed since childhood.

“What do I remember? What don’t I remember! But I’m not about to go back and live it over. Too much still to do now.” And an engine starts and the man is gone, dwindling down to nothing against the horizon.

You reach a point, I found, where you begin to know that a pilot does not fly airplanes in order to get somewhere, although he gets to many somewheres indeed.

He doesn’t fly to save time, although he saves that whenever he steps from his automobile into his airplane.

He doesn’t fly for the sake of his children’s education, although the best geographers and historians in class are those who have seen the world and its history in their own eyes, from a private airplane.

He doesn’t fly for economy, although a small used aircraft costs less to buy and run than a big new car.

He doesn’t fly for profit or business gain, although he took the plane to fly Mr. Robert Ellison himself out for lunch and a round of golf and back again in time for the board meeting, and so the Ellison account was sold.

All of these things, so often given as reasons to fly, aren’t reasons at all. They’re nice, of course, but they are only by-products of the one real reason. That one reason is the finding of life itself, and the living of it in the present.

If the by-products were the only purpose for flight, most of today’s airplanes would never have been built, for there are a multitude of annoyances cluttering the path of the lightplane pilot, and the annoyances are acceptable only when the rewards of flight are somewhat greater than a minute saved.

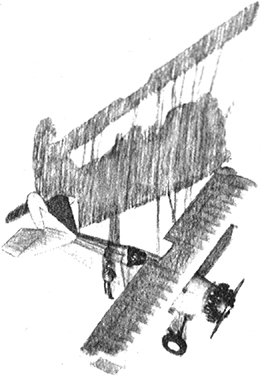
A lightplane is not quite so certain a piece of transportation as an automobile. In poor weather, it is not uncommon to be held for hours, days sometimes, on the ground. If an owner keeps his airplane tied down on the airport grass, he worries with every windstorm and scans every cloud for hail, much as if his airplane were his wife, waiting out in the open. If he keeps his plane in a large hangar, he worries about hangar fires, and thoughtless line-boys smashing other aircraft into his own.

Only when the plane is locked away in a private hangar is the owner’s mind at rest, and private hangars, especially near cities, cost more to own than does the airplane itself.

Flying is one of the few popular sports in which the penalty for a bad mistake is death. At first, that seems a horrible and shocking thing, and the public is horrified and shocked when a pilot is killed committing an unforgivable error. But such are the terms that flying lays down for pilots: Love me and know me and you shall be blessed with great joy. Love me not, know me not, and you are asking for real trouble.

The facts are very simple. The man who flies is responsible for his own destiny. The accident that could not have been avoided through the action of the pilot is just about nonexistent. In the air, there is no equivalent of the child running suddenly from between parked cars. The safety of a pilot rests in his own hands.

Explaining to a thunderstorm for instance, “Honest, clouds and rain, I just want to go another twenty miles and then I promise to land,” is not much help. The only thing that keeps a man out of a storm is his own decision not to enter it, his own hands turning the airplane back to clear air, his own skill taking him back to a safe landing.



No one on the ground is able to do his flying for him, however much that one may wish to help. Flight remains the world of the individual, where he decides to accept responsibility for his action or he stays on the ground. Refuse to accept responsibility in flight and you do not have very long to live.

There is much of this talk of life and death, among pilots. “I’m not going to die of old age,” said one, “I’m going to die in an airplane.” As simple as that. Life, without flight, isn’t worth living. Don’t be startled at the number of pilots who believe that little credo; a year from now you could be one of them, yourself.

What determines whether you should fly, then, is not your business requirement for an airplane, not your desire for a challenging new sport. It is what you wish to gain from life. If you wish a world where your destiny rests completely in your own hands, chances are that you’re a natural-born pilot.

Don’t forget that “Why fly?” has nothing to do with aircraft. It has nothing to do with by-products, the “reasons” so often put forth in those pamphlets to potential buyers. If you find that you are a person who can love to fly, you will find a place to come whenever you tire of a world of TV dinners and people cut from cardboard. You will find people alive and adventures alive and you will learn to see a meaning behind it all.

The more I wander around airports across the country, the more I see that the reason most pilots fly is simply that thing they call life.

Give yourself this simple test, please, and answer these simple questions:

How many places can you now turn when you have had enough of empty chatter?

How many memorable, real events have happened in your life over the last ten years?

To how many people have you been a true and honest friend—and how many people are true and honest friends of yours?

If your answer to all these is “Plenty!” then you needn’t bother with learning to fly.

But if your answer is “Not very many,” then it just might be worth your while to stop by some little airport one day and walk around the place and find what it feels like to sit in the cockpit of a light airplane.

I still think of my salesman acquaintance of the airline flight between San Francisco and Denver. He had despaired of ever finding again the taste of life, at the very moment that he moved through the sky that offers it to him.

I should have said something to him. I should at least have told him of that special high place where a few hundred thousand people around the world have found answers to emptiness.