# Return of a lost pilot

Richard Bach

We had been flying north, low-level formation in a pair of F-100 day fighters out over the Nevada desert. I was leading, that time, and Bo Beaven’s airplane was twenty feet away at my right wingtip. It was a clean morning, I remember, and we were cruising three hundred feet above the ground. I was having some trouble with the radiocompass, leaning down in the cockpit, resetting a circuit breaker, clicking the control from ANT to LOOP to COMP, to see if the needle would show any life. Then about the time I thought that the problem was in the antenna itself, and that maybe I shouldn’t plan on having any help from the radio at all, there came Beaven’s voice filtered in my earphones. It was neither a command nor a warning … it was a simple calm question: “Do you plan on flying into this mountain?”

I jerked my head up, startled, and there angled in front of us was a rugged little mountain, all brown rock and sand and tumbleweed, tilting, flying toward us at something over three hundred nautical miles per hour. Beaven said nothing more. He didn’t loosen his formation or move to break away. He spoke in the way that he flew his airplane … if you choose to fly straight ahead, there will be not one hole in the rock, but two.

I eased the control stick back, wondering where the hill had come from, and it flicked a hundred feet beneath us and was gone, silent as a deadly dark star.

I never forgot that day, or the way Beaven’s airplane faced the mountain wing to wing with mine, not clearing the peak until we cleared it together. It was our last flight in formation. A month later our time had run out in the peacetime Air Force and we were civilians again, promising, sure, we’d meet again, because people who fly always meet again.

Back in my home town, I was sad to be gone from high-performance flying only until I found that the same tests waited in lightplane sport flying. I discovered formation aerobatics, air racing and off-airport landings, all in little planes that can take off and land five times in the distance it takes an F-100 to get off the ground once. I thought, as I flew, that Bo would be making the same discovery, that he was flying just as I was.

But he wasn’t. He was no sooner out of the Air Force than he was lost, no sooner established in business than he was dead, the agonizing death of the pilot who turns his back on flight. He suffocated slowly, the blue-suited businessman had taken over, had mortared him into an airless corner behind a wall of purchase orders and sales charts, golf bags and cocktail glasses.

Once, on a flight through Ohio, I saw him long enough to be sure that the man who controlled his body was not the same man who had flown my wing that day toward the mountain. He was polite enough to recognize my name, to wish me good day, but he heard without interest any talk of airplanes, wondered why I looked at him strangely. He insisted that he was indeed Bo Beaven and quite happy as an executive for a company that made wringer washers and plastic products. “There’s a great demand for wringer washers,” he said, “a lot more than you might think.”

Way far down in his eyes I fancied I saw a faint little signal of despair from my friend trapped within, fancied I heard the smallest cry for help. But it was gone in a second, quickly masked by the businessman at the desk, behind the nameplate Frank N. Beaven. Frank!

It used to be, when we were flying, anybody who called Bo by the name “Frank” advertised he was no friend at all. Now the clumsy business executive had made the same mistake; he had nothing in common with the man he had sealed up to die.

“Of course I’m happy,” he said. “Oh, sure, it was fun to fly around in the ’100, but that couldn’t go on forever, could it?”

So I flew away and Frank N. Beaven went back to work at his desk, and we didn’t hear from each other again. Maybe Bo had saved my life with his cool question in the desert, but when he needed me to save his, I didn’t know what to say.

It was ten years from the day we had left the Air Force, then, that I got a note from Jane Beaven. “Thought you’d be pleased to know that Bo made his move and is at last returning to number one love, the flying business. With American Aviation in Cleveland—is like a new man …”

My friend Bo, I thought, forgive me. Sealed away for ten years and now you come crashing through the wall. You’re a tough one to kill, aren’t you?

Two months later I landed at Cuyahoga County Airport, Cleveland, and taxied to the American Aviation factory, with its pond of bright-painted Yankees awaiting delivery. And out across the ramp came Bo Beaven to meet me. He wore white shirt and tie, to be sure, but it was not the businessman Frank, it was my friend. There were just bits of the Frank-mask left about him, bits that Bo had allowed to remain because they served a purpose in his job. But the man who had been walled away from the sky was now alive and well and in full charge of the body.

“You wouldn’t have any of these planes to deliver east, would you?” I said. “Maybe you and I could ferry one out.”

“Who’s to say? We just might have one to go.” He said it with a perfectly straight face.

His office now is the office of the Director of Purchasing, a mildly cluttered place with a window overlooking the factory floor. There on a filing cabinet stands a scratched and battered company model of an F-100, pitot boom missing, decal shredded, but proud and there, banking into the indoor sky. On the wall is a photograph of a pair of Yankees in formation over the Nevada desert. “That look familiar?” he asked shortly. I didn’t know whether he meant the desert or the formation. They were both familiar, to me and to Bo; the businessman Frank had never seen either one.

He showed me around the Yankee plant, at ease in this place where the seamless sport plane comes to life out of metal as he had come to life out of grounded flesh. He talked about the way the Yankee is bonded together instead of riveted, about the strength of the honeycomb cabin section, about problems in sheet planning and the shape of a control wheel. Technical business talk, for sure, but the business now was airplanes.

“All right, fella. What was it like, what has it really been like for you, the last ten years?” I said, relaxing in the car while he watched the road home carefully, not looking at me.

“I used to think about it,” he said slowly, “the first year out of flying, wandering to work in the morning when there was a bit of cloudiness. I’d think of the sun, up on top. It was awfully hard.” He took the turns fast, keeping his eyes on the road. “The first year was bad. But by the end of the second year, I almost never thought about it; but occasionally I would maybe in the corner of my ear hear an airplane above an overcast or something, and give some thought. Or maybe for business reasons I’d take a commercial flight to Chicago and have occasion to go on top, and then I’d remember all these things. ‘Yes, I used to do this frequently, that was fun, that was enjoyable, that made you feel clean and all that sort of stuff.’ But then I’d land, get to the business of the day, and maybe sleep on the way back, and I wouldn’t have that thought, I wouldn’t think of it tomorrow, or the next day.”

Tree-shadows flickered over the car. “I was unhappy, with that company. It had no relation to a product that I knew about or was interested in. I didn’t care if they ever sold another wringer washer or another ton of reclaimed rubber or another carload of diaper pails. I didn’t care at all.”

We stopped at his house, a white-painted lawn-surrounded picket-fence place in the shade of Maple Street, Chagrin Falls, Ohio. It was a moment before he left the car.

“Don’t get me wrong, now. I don’t think that at any time, other than just flying alone, tooling around, did I ever give any thought to things like breaking through the overcast. When I saw the sun, it was what I expected to see. It was very nice, pleasant to see all the clean tops-of-clouds where underneath there were all the dirty bottoms-of-clouds. But I don’t think I had any lofty godly-type thoughts when I was flying, that sort of thing.

“It might have been very casual, I might have broken out and said mentally, ‘Well, God, here I am up here looking at it the way you’re looking at it.’ And God would say, ‘Roj,’ and that’d be all there was to that. Or he’d click his mike button to acknowledge that I had spoken.

“I was always awe-stricken at how much there was of the top of clouds. And the fact that I was up there, tooling around with the bigness of it all, skirting a big thunderhead or something like that, when people on the ground were merely deciding whether they should take their umbrella. I’d think of these things, wandering to work …”

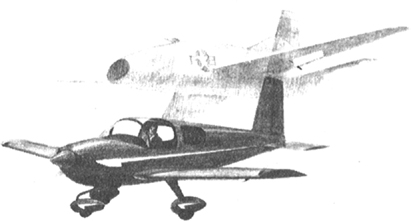
We walked to the house, and I tried to remember, No, he had never talked that way he had never said that kind of thing out loud, as long as I had known him.

“And now,” he said after supper, “well, very few people know of American Aviation. They either don’t know it, or they screw it up and say, ‘Oh, that’s the operation that’s going broke, or went broke.’ That’s good, because then I can give them my speech: ‘No, this isn’t going broke, this is American Aviation. We’ve got people who are pros …’ and all this sort of thing. And they are pros. This is one of the other things I wanted to do when I quit the wringer-washer job—I didn’t want to work with a bunch of … well I wanted to work with a more professional organization.”

We checked the Yankee for its ferry flight to Philadelphia, and I remembered what Jane Beaven had said the day before. “I don’t know him and I never will. But Bo was a changed man, when he went completely away from flying. It got to him, he was understimulated, he was bored. He doesn’t talk a great deal about what he feels, he doesn’t go on and on about anything. But when he quit at last, he had two choices of excellent jobs. One was with a big metals company and he would be there forever, and the other was with American Aviation which could, as far as we really knew, fold the next day. But after one interview I knew where we were going.” She had laughed out loud. “He kept saying, of course, ‘The metals company would be marvelous, and much more secure,’ and all that, and to me it was the biggest line of hogwash … I knew where we were going.”

The Yankee rolled out onto the runway, one of Beaven’s first flights after his years on the ground. “You’ve got it. Bo,” I said. “Your airplane.”

He pressed full throttle, tracked the centerline, and we found that the Yankee, over grass, on a hot day, is not a short-field airplane. We left the ground a good way down the runway, angling long and shallow up into the air.



The ten years absence showed, even in a man who at one time had been a better pilot than I could hope to be. He wasn’t thinking ahead of the airplane, he was rough on the controls, and the sensitive little Yankee pitched and rolled under his hands.

But oddly, he was perfectly confident. He was rough and he knew it, he was behind the plane and he knew it, but he also knew that all this was normal as he got used to flying again, and that he’d catch up before many minutes had gone by.

He flew the Yankee the way he last remembered to fly; he flew it like a North American F-100D. Our turn on course wasn’t a gentle sweeping general-aviation turn, it was WHAM! the wing slammed into a steep bank, dug into the air, turned, then flew back to wings-level in a furious hard whiplash.

I had to laugh. For the first time I could see what another human being saw, I could look inside his mind. And I saw not a little civilian Yankee slicing along at one hundred twenty-five miles per hour with a hundred horsepower spinning a fixed-pitch propeller up front, but a D-model F-100 single-seat day fighter streaking ahead of fifteen thousand pounds of thrust blasting diamond lights out the afterburner and the ground blurring by beneath us and that button-studded control stick under his hand, that magic grip that one need only touch to spin the world, or turn it upside-down or make the sky go black.

The Yankee didn’t mind the game, for its flight controls very nearly match the ’100’s. The wheel is light and positive as a racing Ferrari’s, so that one is tempted to fly hard fast eight-point rolls, just for fun.

Bo discovered the sky he had once known so well. “Will we ever own an airplane?” Jane had said. “I hope so. Because he’d fly. I can’t explain to you why, because the inner workings of his mind are always his own, but I think he feels better, I think he feels more like living … this sounds very corny, but I think his life means more to him when he can fly.” It didn’t sound corny to me at all.

Bo squinted into the horizon. “Looks like the clouds are going broken, here. What do you say, over or under?”

“You’re flying the airplane.”

“Under.”

He chose that for the fun of coming down. Carb heat and throttle, the Yankee snapped its wings up like a daylight bat, and we flashed down toward the trees. Bo was thinking ahead of the airplane now, and happy, though of course he didn’t smile. The wings lashed level and we shot above the Pennsylvania Turnpike, heading eastward.

“He’s a little bit afraid to let loose and commit himself completely,” Jane had guessed about him. “He’s a little bit leery to become again so totally involved as he was with airplanes before. He won’t let himself go. But there’s one thing about Bo. He doesn’t have to use a lot of words. He can communicate with flying.”

Right you are, Jane. It was there all around as he flew, ten years of standing on the ground wanting to shout, now that the time had come to fly again, and his pain that our mission was just to deliver this airplane straight and level to Philadelphia, instead of taking it there in loops and slow rolls. He didn’t have to say a word.

“What do you remember about instrument flying?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“OK, then, you’re on the gages. I’ll be approach control. ‘Four niner Lima in radar contact, climb to and maintain three thousand five hundred feet, turn right heading one two zero degrees, report crossing the one six zero degree radial Pottstown VOR.’ ” I had meant to bury him in instructions, but it didn’t work. All I had given him was a target to shoot for, and he aimed and shot, offering no excuses. The Yankee climbed and turned smoothly now under his hand, it leveled, and he remembered out loud.

“A radial is always outbound from the station, isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

He called, crossing the radial.

So I was around to watch my friend learn again, to watch the sky blast dust and cobwebs from a man who had been a magnificent pilot and who just might be one again.

“I’m joining the Yankee flying club,” he had told me. And another time, “It wouldn’t be too expensive, would it, to get a Cub or a Champ, just to fly around in? And as an investment, of course; the way prices are going up it would probably be a good investment.”

We dropped into the pattern at the 3M airport, and there it was again, I was watching through his eyes, and there was the smooth silver nose in front of us, and the arrow of the pitot boom, and we were smoking down final approach at one hundred sixty-five knots plus two knots for every thousand pounds of fuel over a thousand and speed brakes out and gear down and flaps down and trim …

The J-57 of the F-100 thundered soft in our ears, eighty-five percent rpm on final, hold the sink rate, antiskid on, stand by to deploy the drag chute. We touched, the two of us, in a 1959/1969 F-100/Yankee in Nevada/Pennsylvania, USA.

Then he pulled the nose up, after touchdown, way too high up, so that we nearly scraped the tailskid. “Bo, what are you doing?” I had forgotten. We pulled the nose up high, in those days, for aerodynamic braking, to slow the plane and save a drag chute. Of course he had forgotten, too, why anybody would want to pull the nose of an airplane up after touchdown.

“What a lousy landing,” he said.

“Yeah, that was pretty grim. I don’t know whether there’s hope for you or not, Bo.”

But I did have hope. Because my friend, who had saved my life, and then been dead himself for so long, was flying. He was alive again.