# South to Toronto

Richard Bach

The reason that a lot of adventures begin in this world is that the adventurers sit by the fire in comfortable living rooms and they haven’t the faintest mist of an idea of what they are letting themselves in for. They stretch out in that easy chair and there is no such thing as cold or wet or wind or storm and they say well it’s about time somebody discovered the North Pole and they lapse into a dream of glories and an hour later, dreaming still, they set wheels turning, maps unfolding, cogging other warm adventurers’ lives to changing, to saying “Why not?” and “Jove! It should be done! Count me in!”—themselves tranced in a fantasy where hardship and trouble are only words that faint hearts look up in dictionaries.

Poke the fire, then, sit here in this warm chair, and let me spin you an adventure.

BARNSTORM WINTER CANADA!

What a sight, all those little towns snowed north of America, huddling through a white-quartz winter waiting for somebody to drop down from the sky and bring them colors and thrills in ten-minute hops to see their town from the air, three dollars the ride! And what a sound—that soft virgin February sighing to the touch of our skis! None of the problems of summer barnstorming here, no endless searching for pastures and hayfields smooth enough and long enough and close enough to town … why, all the world will be a place to land! Lakes are frozen flat, bigger than a hundred Kennedy Airports; every field that’s rough in summer, or planted in tender crops, is a smooth perfect runway for our Cubs. Let’s prove there’s still room in the world for man individual, man challenging Canada winter to do its worst to keep him from bringing the gift of flight into the lives of those who have never been off the ground! How about it? The Canadians, after all, are frontiersmen, up there, with red-checked mackinaws and blue wool caps; axe in one hand, canoe in other, laughing all the time at danger—no hesitating there to buy our tickets! We’ll fly up there for February, be home by March with the wilderness a part of our soul, the frontier alive again within us, the way it used to be!

That was all I had to spin to myself to be convinced. That, and letters from Glenn Norman and Robin Lawless, Canadians, woodsmen turned airplane pilots, no doubt, inviting me to stop by Toronto, someday.

Toronto! What a sound! A real Canadian outpost in the snowfields, Utopia for barnstormers! I stirred from the fire and got out the maps.

Toronto looks a little larger than one expects a wilderness outpost to look, but beyond it there are thousands of much smaller wilderness outposts, for miles around. Fenelon Falls, Barrie, Orillia, Owen Sound, Pentanguinishe. There are a dozen towns on the shores of Lake Simcoe alone, thirty miles from Toronto, and they are mere doorways to the teeming villages north and east and west. Imagine waking in the dawn, looking out from your warm sleeping bag under the wing, and finding the sign there in the ice:

PENTANGUINISHE!

My reply to the Canadians went out by return mail … would they be interested in joining the Winter Wonderland Flying Circus as wilderness guides? The wheels of adventure had begun to turn.

I sent letters the same day to American pilots with light planes and skis, mentioning that space was available in Canada for February.

Russell Munson signed on, with his Super Cub, the moment he got the news. All at once we had a starting date; on January 29th our two planes would touch their skis in Toronto, on January 30th we’d be off north, into high adventure.

We prepared all through January. I found a pair of used Cub skis in a hangar on Long Island, Munson found a pair of new ones in a factory in Alaska. We went through the flight over and again in his New York office—what must we be sure to take along?

Warm clothes, of course, and before a week was by we were clomping around the airfield in parkas and multilayer wools and insulated snowboots. Wing and engine covers, and we were enveloped in yards of sheet plastic and burlap, sewing them together just so. Hand-warmers for us, engine-warmers for the Cubs, inflatable tents, space blankets, survival kits, maps, spare parts, tools, cans of oil, sleigh bells for the skis. It is remarkable how much equipment one needs for a simple Canadian wilderness barnstorming tour.

My airplane was painted in enamel milk, which would never do; what customer would notice a white Cub parked on a snowbank? For the next three days I laid masking tape in candy stripes across the top of the wings and tail while Ed Kalish sprayed bright red over it all and remembered his days mechanicking at God’s Cape, north of Hudson Bay.

“Got there one day,” he said from a scarlet cloud of Dulux, “and it was seventy degrees below zero!”

My parka, the warmest garment I owned, was rated to fifty below.

“Had to start the engines with blowtorches up the exhaust stacks, turning the props backwards and getting the cylinders warm through the valves.”

I went out that day and bought a propane blowtorch. And figured if I had to, I could stuff my parka with leaves.

Of the two other pilots I had invited, one wrote to say that he felt that Canada in February might be a little chilly … hadn’t I meant we’d barnstorm Nassau?

When I finally replied that this flying circus was heading north, he wished me luck. I remember thinking that there was a strange reason to cancel adventure, because it would be cold. He had advised me to recall that the Cub had no cabin heater at all, but somehow that bounced off me like moose off ice.

The other pilot, Ken Smith, would meet us in Toronto on January 29th.

That gave us three Cubs, three pilots, and a pair of wilderness guides. We needed one more airplane, a Canadian, to join us so that we could be a true international circus, but I had no doubt that there would be dozens of CF aircraft ready to go along when we arrived in their country.

By mid-January the lakes were turning to ice all over Canada. New England ski resorts had opened for business and a few large snowflakes fell on Long Island.

On the night of the 20th I practiced sleeping among those flakes. It was only twenty degrees Fahrenheit outside, quite a bit warmer than we’d be having in Canada, but any test was better than none. Twenty degrees, I discovered, is actually quite cold. This was discovered some time around three in the morning. It wasn’t that the tent had failed, or the space blanket wasn’t working, but that the cold, after waiting that long, comes around and attacks the sleeper through the ground. I could think warm, all right, and fight it, but it took such a concentrated effort conjuring Saharas and bonfires that there was no time left for sleeping. At four I gave up and dragged tent and all back into the house. It was then that I began to think that while this was a lark for us, chasing this adventure, it was no game for winter. We were pointed dead-on into what the Air Force used to call a “survival situation” … men froze to death in warmer climates than February Canada! I packed an extra blanket at once.

Norman and Lawless flew to check out Lake Simcoe. The lake was frozen solid, the day they did, and the temperature was thirty below.

On January 27th, Toronto had its worst blizzard of the century. Towns were buried under snow, rescue operations were underway.

We were glad for this news; the deeper the snow, the closer we could land to town. When you are barnstorming, you might as well go home if you can’t land close to town.

Extremely early on the morning of the 29th, Munson and I started engines under the dim place in the night that would be dawn … our engine exhausts were blue in the terrible stillness. It is around sunrise that adventurers reach that point at last where they begin to understand that they are out of their minds, just like everybody says.

“Russ, do you realize that this whole trip is folly? Do you realize what we are getting ourselves into? Look, I’m sorry I brought this whole idea up …” I wanted to say it, but didn’t have the courage. Adventurers are cowardly about things like that.

Munson wasn’t saying anything either, as the sky lightened and our engines warmed, and at last we climbed without words into our airplanes, taxied over the deserted concrete, and took off north, across Long Island Sound, across Connecticut. The outside air temperature at five thousand feet was eighteen degrees below zero, though I must admit that in the unheated cockpit it didn’t feel any colder than ten or fifteen below. In the first place, I couldn’t believe that I was going to spend a month in that temperature; in the second, I was thinking about summer, when the roads get so hot you can’t walk without shoes and butter turns into yellow pools if you leave it out.

At our first stop, our very first stop, I noticed that my engine seemed to be blowing a little oil out the breather pipe. It always lost some oil, but this was more than usual. I unhooked the extension and let the pipe breathe in the warm engine compartment.

Since his airplane had a gyro compass, VOR and ADF radios, Munson was the flight leader to Toronto. My one magnetic compass was as sensitive to direction as a bench anvil, so I merely flew along as wingman and enjoyed the scenery, which was white and soft. Why this strange feeling, then, an hour after our second takeoff, that this was not the way to Canada at all? Those mountains to the right, weren’t those the Catskills? And shouldn’t the Hudson River be to our left? I moved into close formation and pointed to my map, looking a question at the flight leader. He looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

“Russ!” I shouted, “Aren’t we heading south? We’re heading SOUTH!” He couldn’t understand what I was yelling, so at last I fell back and followed uncomplaining, as a wingman should, to see where he was going. He’s been flying for ten years, I thought, so it must be me that’s wrong. We’re just following a different river. I noticed that he was checking his map, and this was reassuring to me. He didn’t change course. We must be headed north … it’s me that’s lost, not for the first time.

But after a while it began getting warmer. There was less snow, down there on the ground.

The Super Cub realized, with a jolt, that somehow there had been a terrible mistake. It banked sharply right, changed course one hundred sixty degrees, and then drifted down to land at a little airport by the river. It was the Hudson, all right. For once in my life I was lost and it wasn’t my fault!

“You may live this down,” I told him gently, when we had landed, “but believe me, it is going to take a long time …”

I was sorry at once, for he was deeply upset.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with me! I was following the highway and I noticed that the compass was a little off and the VOR wasn’t quite right, but I was sure it was the highway! I just sat there and didn’t pay any attention. I saw the compass, but I didn’t pay any attention!”

It was not hard to change the subject. There was oil all over the belly of my airplane, blown out in the last hour. The landing gear and cowling were covered with it, congealed and frozen everywhere. A broken ring, perhaps, a cracked piston? We talked about turning back to check it over, but it sounded like the quitter’s way.

“Let’s press on,” I said. “It’s probably just suction there at the end of the breather pipe, taking out more than it should.”

Munson nailed the course north on the Hudson, turned left at Albany, drove dead-on toward Toronto. An hour past Albany my oil pressure dropped one psi, then two. I have never had the oil pressure drop in any airplane engine without something bad happening soon … I pointed “down” to my flight leader and we landed at the next airport, five minutes away.

Another quart gone. The prospect of forty hours flying over the Canadian wilderness with an engine spraying its lifeblood into the sky was not the adventure I had chosen to play. It is one thing to be ready for engine failure, barnstorming, but quite another, and not so wise, I thought, to be convinced of it. Proceed or return, I was going to be a quitter; but better to be a warm quitter than a cold one perched in some Pentanguinishe treetop. Besides, the weather people told us, there’s a fresh blizzard at the border.

I filled with oil and took off south, puzzled that I should be sad at missing out on a freezing. Once one gets started on an adventure, no matter how crazy a thing it is, the only way to rest easy is to carry it through, no matter what.

An hour and a half later the oil pressure fell five pounds, then ten, and then clunked against the peg at zero, leaving me to glide down the runway we had started from before dawn.

The problem with the engine was not as simple as a cracked piston or a broken ring. The problem was that the cylinders had all worn oversize, beyond tolerance even for chrome plating. Four overhauled cylinders were available, at eighty-five dollars each, plus rings at thirty-two dollars and gaskets …

By the time I collected the money for engine parts, spring had come to Canada. Snow melted to grass, fields to crops, lakes dissolved from ice into blue water.

How’s that for adventure? The winter raging wild up in Canada and you can challenge it and call it names and still sit all month by the fire … here’s to adventure and adventuring! And next year, by Ned, it’s on to the Pole!

