# The $71,000 sleeping bag

Richard Bach

A ferry flight, that’s all, to take a Cessna Super Skymaster from the factory at Wichita to the distributor at San Francisco. Not much worth note could happen on such a routine flight, and nothing did. It happened on the ground.

The Skymaster and I had landed at Albuquerque late in the evening, taxied to the far end of the field, the west end there, the Cessna dealer. I walked to the new terminal for a bowl of soup and a bunch of crackers, and about midnight walked back to the plane.

I play-act, sometimes, when I fly a kind of airplane that I don’t often fly, and pretend I’m the person I’d expect to see flying that plane. In the Skymaster, I was an executive pilot, walking back across the line to my company machine. Stereotype business pilot, all solemn: facts and figures, little briefcase, black bag full of Jepp charts—you know the kind. This was me, moving through midnight, making a note to check the weather now although I wouldn’t be flying till morning. Cool. Level head. No nonsense.

But as I was going my businesslike way, just stepping up from the street onto the parking ramp, by the low cyclone fence, I happened to notice the silhouette of the Skymaster against a big floodlight … the twin shark tails all still and powder-black against the light. I felt a great surge of affection for the airplane, for that thing.

Just because we had come far together in one afternoon, I guess, and against headwinds.

Affection for an airplane. Somehow, I had never thought that company pilots felt that way. But they do.

That was the first thing.

Mounted on the Cessna hangar is a loudspeaker that is set to the tower frequency, and turned up way loud so the lineman can hear it and be ready to flag the in-bounds in for gas. Nothing but static, at that hour, static very highly amplified in the speaker. But then there was a burst of words, the voice of some guy flying unseen in the night. “Hello Kirtland Tower. Twin Beech niner six Baker Kilo is at the Pass, inbound to land.”

No sound in the sky, just that voice in the speaker, echoing, with the throb of engines in the background.

Then a few minutes later, I heard the faintest little muffled rasp of propellers humming around, and saw the slow streak of navigation lights. The guy had taken a step into reality; he was slowly changing from one dimension into life. “Six Baker Kilo is five out on a straight-in.”

“Baker Kilo cleared to land.” It was a gentle drama, a play on a ten-mile stage, and I was the whole audience.

A few minutes later came the chirk-chirk of wheels touching concrete, the sigh of engines fading back from approach power. Then silence. Then the sound of engines again rumbling around at idle, louder and louder till they gasped suddenly and coasted their propellers around to a stop just fifty feet from where I stood by the Skymaster. The quiet little noises, then, of flight’s end: chock scrapes, door sounds, and the talk of pilot to copilot.

That was the second thing.

When the Beech pilots had left, I put the right seat of the Skymaster to full recline, stretching out on it as best I could. Suit coat for a blanket, padded headrest for a pillow. It wasn’t comfortable at all … not a tenth as pleasant as unrolling one’s sleeping bag under the wing of a Champ and looking up at the stars.

This airplane was different. It was sheet metal instead of cloth and dope, radios and omni and ADF and DME and marker beacon and EGT and autopilot and trim and flaps and prop control and mixture instead of nothing. But the stars were the same stars.

By sunup, I was convinced that the Cessna Super Skymaster, although it is a great twin-engine plane that can never kill a pilot with the terrible yaw of engine loss in the weather at full gross, is a lousy sleeping bag. For $71,000, I thought thay should at least make the airplane a little easier to spend the night in. Then, too, I found that you don’t want to hang your good shirts on the aft propeller, because you’ll get exhaust powder all over them. The front prop is okay, but the man with a $71,000 airplane will certainly have a larger wardrobe than can be hung on one propeller.

That was the third thing.

At dawn we were airborne, the Cessna and I, and before noon we were landing in California. An abysmally poor sleeping bag, but not a bad machine for going places.

Machine? I thought, and saw again the shark-fin silhouette at Albuquerque, the Beech pilots brought alive, the $71,000 sleeping bag. They are all alike, if you look at them at just the right times. Old or new, rag or tin, no airplane’s a machine. And what they are instead is a lot of what makes flying kind of fun.

