# The snowflake and the dinosaur

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Have you ever wondered how a dinosaur felt, trapped in a Mesozoic tarpit? I’ll tell you how he felt. He felt exactly the way you would feel if you had force-landed in a winter hayfield in northern Kansas, fixed your engine, and tried to take off again through a carpet of wet snow. Helpless.

They must have tried and tried, those poor stegosaurs and brontosaurs, turning up full power, thrashing like crazy, sending tar flying all directions till sundown caught them in darkness and at last they got so tired it was a blessing to give up and die. It’s the same way in snow, for an airplane—in a mere six inches of picturesque, level snow.

With sundown coming on and a long walk from nowhere, the pilot’s alternative to dying is a cold night in a sleeping bag under shadow of new storms coming. Yet in spite of that, to me, the trap of snow wasn’t fair. I didn’t have time for it. Twenty tries at takeoff had won me only the understanding of the power of a snowflake, multiplied a thousand billion times. The heavy wet stuff turned to thick soup blurring underwheel, blasting violent hard fountains against the struts and wings of my borrowed Luscombe. Full power would drag us up to thirty-nine miles per hour at the fastest, and we needed forty-five minimum to take off. An atom-age dinosaur, we were caught in the wilderness.

Between tries, while the engine cooled, I walked the field, frowning at the injustice of it all, stamping down a narrow white runway, wondering if I’d be camping in the cockpit till spring.

Every new try at takeoff smashed the snow easily enough under the wheels, but at the same time built walls alongside, in ruts a foot deep. Jerking in and out of those tracks was like trying to take off with a balky rocket engine bolted to the plane. In the rut, we accelerated like a shot, but swerve two inches and bam! the nose pitched down, I was thrown forward in the seat, and we lost ten miles per hour in a split second. It was a kind of fixation. Bit by bit, I thought, I’ve got to wear down a runway till we can finally take off; or else it’s the rest of the winter here. But it was hopeless. If I had been a dinosaur, I would have laid me down to die.

When you fly old-time airplanes, you expect to have forced landings now and then. It’s nothing special, it’s part of the game, and no wise pilot flies an antique out of gliding distance of a place to land. In my few years flying, I’d had seventeen forced landings, not one of which I had even thought unfair, for all of which I was more or less prepared.

But this was different. The Luscombe I flew now was hardly an antique; it had higher performance than ultramodern planes of greater horsepower, and had one of the world’s most reliable engines. I flew this time not for fun or for learning, but for a business trip from Nebraska to Los Angeles and return, and I was almost finished with the flight and this was no time for a forced landing. It was more a bother because the engine had never quit. The problem had been a fifty-cent throttle-linkage connection, snapped in two. So when the engine power fell back to idle rpm on the last leg of my business trip—with an appointment waiting in Lincoln—it was the first unfair forced landing I had ever had.

Now, having repaired the linkage, I couldn’t get off the ground again, and it was just an hour till sunset, when dinosaurs must die.

For the first time in my life, I understood the modern-airplane pilots who use airplanes as business tools and don’t want to be bothered with such things as aerobatic training and forced-landing practice. Chances are rare that they’ll ever stop or that a minor little linkage will break in half. It is fair for that sort of thing to happen to a sport pilot, who pays attention to such esoteric trivia and enjoys being ready for it, but not for me in my business plane when I have people waiting for me at the terminal and a dinner planned for six p.m. sharp. Because a forced landing for a businessman is quite honestly unfair, I began to realize that he gets to thinking it can’t possibly happen.

I planned to make one more try to get out of that little field in Kansas before dark. I was already late for my meeting, but the snow didn’t care at all. Nor did the cold, or the field, or the sky. The tarpits hadn’t cared about the dinosaurs, either. Tarpits are tarpits and snow is snow; it’s the dinosaur’s job to get himself free.

The twenty-first try at takeoff, then, the Luscombe, spraying snow, tracking down a rut just long enough, bounced to forty-five, shuddered, wallowed, staggered into the air, touched snow again, shook it off, and at last flew.

I thought about it all as we turned for Lincoln, scudding along over the shadows of dusk. I now had eighteen forced landings in my logbook, and only one of them was unfair.

Not a bad record.

