# Words

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We were fifty miles northwest from Cheyenne, level at twelve thousand five hundred feet. The Swift’s engine hushed along up front as it had for three hours since takeoff and as I hoped it would for another thirty hours of cross-country flying. The instruments were relaxed and content on the panel, touching pressures and temperatures and metals and airs and telling me that all was well. Visibility was unlimited. I had not filed a flight plan.

I was just up there flying along, thinking about semantics, without the faintest premonition of what was to happen in four and a half minutes. Looking around at the mountains and the high desert and the altitude and the oil pressure and the ammeter and the first few scattered clouds of the day, and thinking about some of the words of aviation, and what they mean to the rest of the world.

About flight plan, for instance. To thinking people a flight plan, obviously, is a plan for a flight. A flight plan is a certain order, a discipline, a responsibility to move with purpose through the sky. Flying without a flight plan, to any rational person, is flying without order, discipline, responsibility, or purpose.

Oil temperature seventy-five degrees Centigrade … it’s a good feeling, to have that forward-mounted oil cooler, on a Swift.

But to the Federal Aviation Administration, I thought, a flight plan isn’t a plan for flying at all. It is an FAA Form 7233-1. A flight plan is a five-by-eight-inch piece of paper which is filed to alert search and rescue when an airplane is overdue at its destination. To those who know, a flight plan is a piece of paper. Those who do not know believe that a flight plan is a plan for a flight.

I considered that, cruising west of Cheyenne. I remembered the news reports that I had read: “Today an airline jet transport taxied over a light Cessna training plane, parked and tied down at the airport. The Cessna, which was squashed flat, and had not filed a flight plan …”

Had not filed a flight plan, in news parlance, means. Guilty. Cause of accident. Deserved everything he got.

Why has the FAA never defined flight plan for news reporters? Is it because the Administration wants them to believe that anyone who has not requested search and rescue service on Form 7233-1 is guilty, and the cause of any accident? Strange how convenient it is, at the moment of any incident, to mention to reporters that the light aircraft was not on a flight plan. Or better, when they ask, “Did the little plane have a flight plan?” to reply reluctantly, with pain, “Well, gentlemen, no. Much as we hate to say it, the light aircraft had not filed a flight plan.”

It was not just two minutes till the event-of-which-there-were-no-premonitions was to happen. Engine instruments steady. Heading 289 degrees. Altitude 12,460 feet. But I kept thinking about words. There are so many of them, so many labels and terms so carefully chosen by officials that suspicious pilots might almost think they were cunningly set snares for the private citizen who has learned to fly.

Control tower. Air traffic controller. Where did those names come from? They control nothing at all. The people in that tower talk to airplane pilots, advise them of conditions. The pilots do every bit of controlling that’s done. A semantic detail, that, and of no importance? How many times have you heard nonfliers say, “Your airport has no control tower? Isn’t that dangerous?” Imagine how they feel when they find that the official terminology for a no-tower field is uncontrolled airport! Try explaining that to a news reporter! The words alone show an accident waiting to happen, airplanes trembling to fall out of the sky onto schools and orphanages. Here is a description of millions and millions of takeoffs, the kind of takeoff made every day, every minute: The light aircraft took off from an uncontrolled air port, without radio control, without a flight plan. Wow.

Airway sounds like highway, a smooth place on the ground where automobiles move swiftly and efficiently. In fact, an airway is a channel forcing airplanes to fly as closely to each other as possible in what would otherwise be a limitless sky.

Quadrantal altitude. A very technical authorized term to describe a system that at its very best assures that every mid-air collision will occur at an angle of less than 179 degrees.

Look around for other airplanes. It’s just too simple. In any society that refuses to trust a human being, in any civilization that requires guaranteed safety from infallible tin boxes instead of individual care, look around is embarrassingly undignified. Why, it’s unsophisticated, that’s what it is.

My time was up. I flew at exactly 12,470 feet, thirty feet below prescribed quadrantal altitude for westbound flights. I was on Victor 138, the airway from Cheyenne to Medicine Bow, Wyoming.

The other airplane was also on Victor 138, also at 12,470 feet, but it flew in a direction that would take it head-on through the spinner of the Swift, through the cockpit and aft fuselage, thence through to the rudderpost and the clear air beyond. The other aircraft was thirty feet below what was exactly the wrong altitude. I had the right of way, but he had the C-124, which was at one time the largest four-engine transport in the world.

The Swift and I decided not to argue about rights, and turned gently out of the way. The ’124, we saw, is actually a very large airplane indeed.

I was astonished. Why, that man is a professional pilot, an Air Force pilot! And he’s at MY altitude. He’s at the wrong altitude! He’s eastbound at the westbound altitude. How can a professional pilot, how can he possibly be so wrong, in such a gigantic airplane?

It wasn’t a near miss. The ’124 is a sufficiently monstrous chunk of iron to be seen long before near-miss time. But still, there it was, dead on my altitude, a hundred tons of aluminum-steel, going the wrong direction.

Had I been involved in an overlong session with my map, and had the giant in fact vaporized the Swift, no doubt exists as to the report that would appear in the news. After explaining that the Swift had been smashed to powder against a minor wing fairing of the transport, and perhaps showing the small dent that we would have made there, the news would have concluded like this: “FAA spokesmen expressed regret over the incident, but did admit under questioning that the light airplane had not filed a flight plan.”