

NEEDLE, BALL, & ALCOHOL

The Second Great
Fleet Biplane Excursion

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Needle, Ball, & Alcohol

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CHAPTER ONE

A THREE-TERM SHERIFF UP in Franklin County once told me that banjos have souls; he had shown me the way of the claw hammer banjo and he said banjos were special, not like guitars or even fiddles. After flying airplanes for more than thirty years, I know that airplanes have souls too. They are not like cars or boats; they are ever so special. But especially the old ones.

When I was twenty years old and a very inexperienced pilot, I read of a place east of Wichita where you could land on grass and taxi on the public street to an old hotel and eat lunch. I told myself I would go there and that I would do it only in an open-cockpit biplane. Thirty-four years later I bought a 1941 Fleet Model 16B, restored lovingly over a decade by an old-school aeronautical engineer from the days of slide rules and giant drafting tables.

He sold it to me, a complete stranger, because a mutual friend had told him I wanted to fly that airplane all across the United States. He did not want to see it only pulled out of a hangar on calm Sunday afternoons for a couple of circuits around the patch. He wanted that airplane to travel and to be seen and enjoyed by those who would know why to appreciate it. Sadly, he would not live to see pictures of the Fleet parked proudly beside a Rocky Mountain trout stream or on the Kansas prairie. But the Fleet would do those things and more.

This was not the Fleet's first adventure, but it was the one which finally took me to Beaumont, where I could taxi up to the old hotel. My friend, Wayland, went with me. He loves road trips and will endure any mode of travel and any of its inconveniences just to detour in order to see the world's largest acorn or the world's biggest hand-dug well. He is an intrepid traveler who believes in the journey as much as the destination. So, to be in my front cockpit was almost inconsequential to Wayland. If I had told him I was driving out to the Midwest on an old riding lawnmower, he would have been right there sitting on it somehow. For me though, it had to be in an antique, open-cockpit biplane. I believe in the journey as much as the destination too, but for me, seeing America from the rear seat of the Fleet is the destination. It is both. It is a dream I have dreamed since I was twenty years old reading about grass strips and the little mom-and-pop cafes that sat beside the airfields. Many of these establishments have disappeared during the three decades it took me to finally buy an old biplane, but some are still out there if you search for them.

Beyond Beaumont though was Greensburg, Kansas, which would be our westernmost point of landing and was originally the motivation for our excursion. We had met much of the town's population several years before under somewhat tragic circumstances and we wanted to return for a visit.

CHAPTER TWO

OUR DEPARTURE WAS DELAYED for a whole year because I had to remove my center section fuel tank for a repair. The tank was easily fixed but the resulting fabric repair was huge and I am the slowest airplane mechanic in the world, especially when I am learning a new art. I was learning the mysterious ways of dope and fabric and the curve was a long, high one. But it was as much a part of the upcoming journey as any other aspect of the trip; it was showing the Fleet that I wanted to understand it and care for it. The shame of it was that my dad had tried to teach me these things when I was a teenager and he was busy keeping two Piper Pawnee crop dusters in the air. But I cared more about watching television after school than helping him replace cylinders or rib stitch out at the grass strip where he flew. No childhood was more wasted.

Better late than never though and there I was all last summer using his old EAA dope and fabric manuals, still in mint condition, trying to unravel the secrets of seine knots and why butyrate sticks to nitrate but not the other way around. By October—I said I was slow—the job was completed. My big fabric repair turned out okay and passed muster for the Fleet’s annual inspection, but I was glad it was on the top wing and mostly out of sight. You never knew when one of those Oshkosh Grand Champion craftsmen was going to wander out of a hangar at some obscure little airport while you were pumping gas and take a really close look.

There was one other repair that had to be made as well. I had replaced a copper head gasket only twenty flying hours previously and it had ruptured again. I had landed after returning from Ball Field’s thirty-ninth annual fly-in and immediately heard the steam-hissing sound coming from the number four cylinder. There was much more to be learned about this seemingly straightforward repair. Through Al Ball’s (no relation to the Ball Field gang) generous giving of his encyclopedic knowledge of the Kinner engine, I learned that I must anneal the copper gasket with my torch, which made it pliable and better able to seal the space between cylinder head and barrel. There was also a procedure to properly break in the new gasket and re-torque the cylinder nuts once I flew the airplane again.

Howsoever cautious and wary I may be with needle and thread and nitrate dope, I am a thousand times more careful when I am working on an engine. My normal snail’s pace is even slower than usual in order to avoid mistakes. I did not grow up disassembling and reassembling my toys like some kids. I watched television. And while that garnered me a certain kind of knowledge, it did not teach me to time magnetos or to weld aircraft tubing. But one habit I had somehow inherited from my dad was to read manuals and to do things pursuant to the manufacturer’s instructions. He was a firm believer in that; he detested shade tree mechanics. *Jacklegs* he called them. Likewise, I had learned to defer to the expertise of people like Al Ball who, like my dad, were meticulous and precise.

Summer became autumn and then winter had arrived by the time I finished all the repairs, and so our trip would be delayed until the following spring or summer. Our exact departure date would depend on our work schedules. Wayland would be sure not to schedule any court cases that week and I would have to be without commitments to any of the companies for which I did contract flying. I had learned in recent years that talk is

cheap and there is a finite number of days left for us to make dreams come true. Life is short; shorter for some than others. That is what Duvall's character had said in the greatest western ever made. I had decided a few years ago that since I could not ascertain when I would die, I would not squander any more of my precious time. I would not let the conventions of planning for retirement and social security prevent me from doing what had become so important, that is, living. I would not lie on my deathbed with any regrets. And I most certainly would not discontinue the Fleet's adventures across America for any reason.

CHAPTER THREE

I GAVE WAYLAND AND his wife, Jane, their first open-cockpit biplane ride one beautiful fall afternoon at the grass strip where I live. They were enchanted, as most people are, by the experience and it was the genesis of our flight to the Midwest. The romance of old biplanes was not entirely lost on my friend and it was undoubtedly a conveyance he had never used on any of his previous road trips, some of which are near legendary. As the time drew closer, he became more and more excited about our undertaking and, of course, so did I.

In the weeks before our departure I stayed busy with the smaller, last-minute maintenance details which were no less important than the larger ones. I checked magneto timing and cleaned and gapped the spark plugs. I drained the engine oil and added fresh and pulled the Cuno screen to inspect it. I enjoy changing oil more than anything else; I feel I am administering a blood transfusion to the one hundred and sixty-horsepower Kinner. Engines must surely luxuriate in fresh oil. A happy engine has new, clean oil.

I greased and lubricated and inspected every airframe component that needed it. Cables, turnbuckles, oleos, and flying wires. I rejuvenated some dope that was showing early signs of cracking. I organized everything in the small baggage compartment behind the rear cockpit: first aid kit, engine oil, Marvel Mystery oil, chocks, tie-downs, rocker grease and grease gun, fuel stick, windscreen cleaner, rudder lock, tool bag, rags, extra spark plugs and a hand crank. I always ran out of volume before I ever exceeded the compartment's sixty-four pound weight restriction. The Fleet was made to teach cadets how to fly, not to go on cross-country jaunts with lots of camping gear. Those antique airplanes are called DeHavilland Beavers.

I can never sleep the night before a long-awaited flight, so I did not even try. After I thought every task had been completed, I pulled up a chair on the hangar floor beside the Fleet and began at the nose and visually inspected every part all the way to the tailwheel. Did I forget to inspect anything? Did I forget to service something? Do I have the tools I may need should this or that break? Especially the ones I have specially bent and shaped to make certain jobs easier. And don't forget the paperwork. Restored antique or not, the Fleet has a Standard Airworthiness Certificate and is a factory-built airplane as far as the FAA is concerned. Yep, it's all there, snug and secure. Wait. Where are the cockpit cover and the small tarp for the Kinner? Can't forget those since it's more than possible we may get caught out in the rain before we get back home. Bad enough if the Fleet gets soaking wet outdoors, but at least I can keep water off the engine and out of the two cockpits with those covers. And even without rain, I have found that cool mornings with lots of dew can condense water inside the magnetos. They never dry quickly either.

Unabashedly, I tell the Fleet I don't think I have forgotten anything and that I think we are ready for another adventure. I get out of my chair and walk over beside the fuselage and lean against it like a child would lean against a big family dog. I love this airplane; it is the only one I have ever owned and it is exactly what I have wanted since I was twenty years old and did not know much about flying.

My wife, Alice, and I bought the Fleet after we had been married more than a decade.

She had known of my dream involving an open-cockpit biplane as long as she had known me. Even without my passion for flying, it still appealed to her because she had that kind of spirit. I could never have owned the Fleet without her in my life, but that is another story for another book.

I decided I had not overlooked anything and sat at the round wood table in the rear of my hangar to organize the new sectional charts which arrived in the mail the day before. I had ordered enough charts to accommodate most deviations we might make in our planned routes because of weather, or just due to getting lost, which was not beyond my capabilities.

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