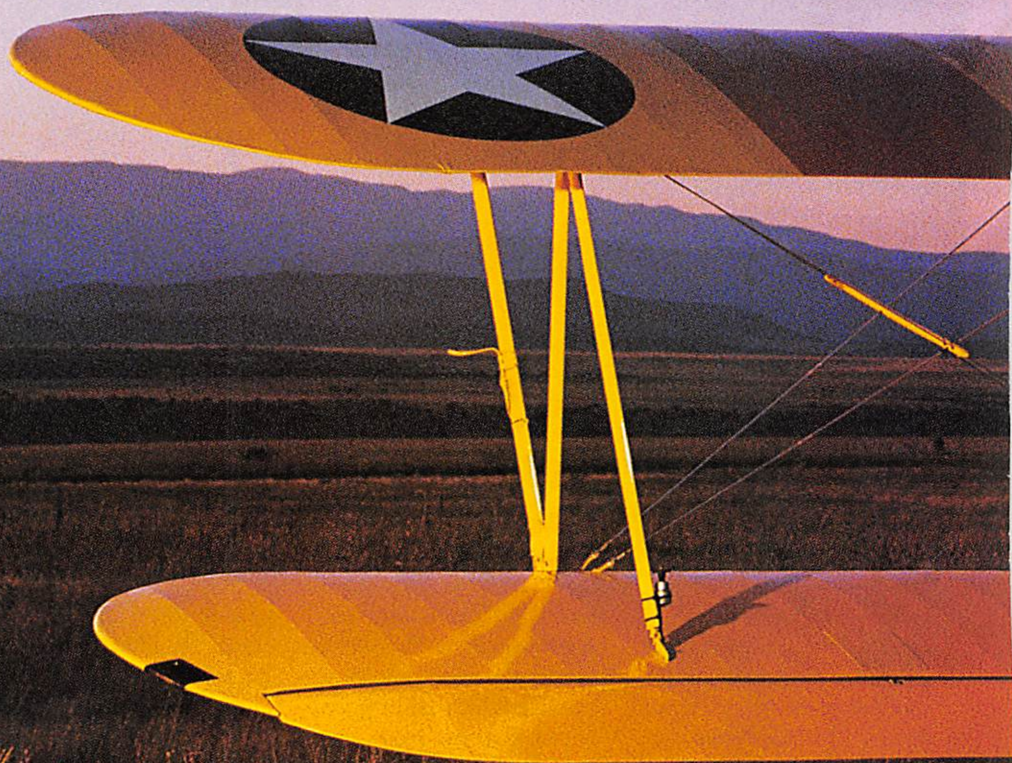
On the wings

Bill Marsano dons his Ray-Bans, confronts a magnificent obsession, and soars, barrel rolls, and loops his way across the Old West in a 51-year-old biplane



Those magnificent men and their flying machine: Pilot Grace, author Marsano, and Stearman Triple-7 Juliet Golf.

PHOTOGRAPHS by THEO WESTENBERGER

of desire

AT FIFTEEN THOUsand feet above the prairie the bone-cold Kansas morning turned mild as we climbed into a warm inversion layer. I regarded the landscape: the plains quilted in great brown-cornered squares framing bull's-eye disks made green by center-pivot irrigators; the white farmhouses proud opposite hulking barns. Here and there a tractor turned the soil, hanging thin veils of dust in the windless air. Windmills, like stopped clocks, awaited breezes that would stir them to pumping water, and the horizon was very far away.

Behind me the pilot spoke over the intercom: "You can fly her now if you'd like."

He meant me. There were, after all, just the two of us aloft. This flight had no number and it departed unmarked by radar. The plane itself was tiny and agile, able. If pressed it could get takeoff in 150 feet: Starting at the tail of a 747, it would fly before leaving coach. Its destination was yesterday. How come?

I LAY IT TO OBSESSION WITH SOUNDS. THEY ARE TO me Proust's tea-dipped madeleine: the gate of reverie. From my Manhattan home I hear night trains whistling in the yards beyond Penn Station and cruise ships hooting away from their piers on the broad river: "I heard the *Queen Mary* blow one midnight," E. B. White wrote, ". . . and the sound carried the whole history of departure and longing and loss."

The most sirenlike sound comes on autumn weekends. *Ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa:* It transported this Walter Mitty from his middling vision and quiet desperation to the larger world of dreams. The sound is made by an antique biplane plodding past the towers and tumult of Manhattan to the serenity of the Hudson River valley. *Ta-pocketa-pocketa* echoes barnstorming pilots in flimsy Curtiss Jennys landing in pastures and selling rides to farmers to keep on doing the grandest thing a man could do: fly.

THE IDEA WAS TO FLY, NOT BE FLOWN; TO SENSE what made the Wright brothers fling themselves to the winds of Kitty Hawk. For ten days I would fly low enough to see America unlimber in an open lazy sprawl marked with small towns and smaller airports, wagon ruts left by pioneer families, the walls of old cavalry outposts. Low enough to navigate by riverbeds, the iron compass of railroad tracks, and water towers painted with the names of towns. In the 1940s a town with *two* water towers marked them *Hot* and *Cold*—that's the sort of quirkiness I was after.

"YOU CAN FLY HER NOW IF YOU LIKE. . . ." I WANTed not to hear him, to stay in my daydream, but I rallied and finally said sure. He said to take the stick and rudder pedals, and I did: Ankles and knees went rigid, hands locked as if the stick were a python badly in need of throttling. Nothing, to my amazement and relief, happened. We lived.

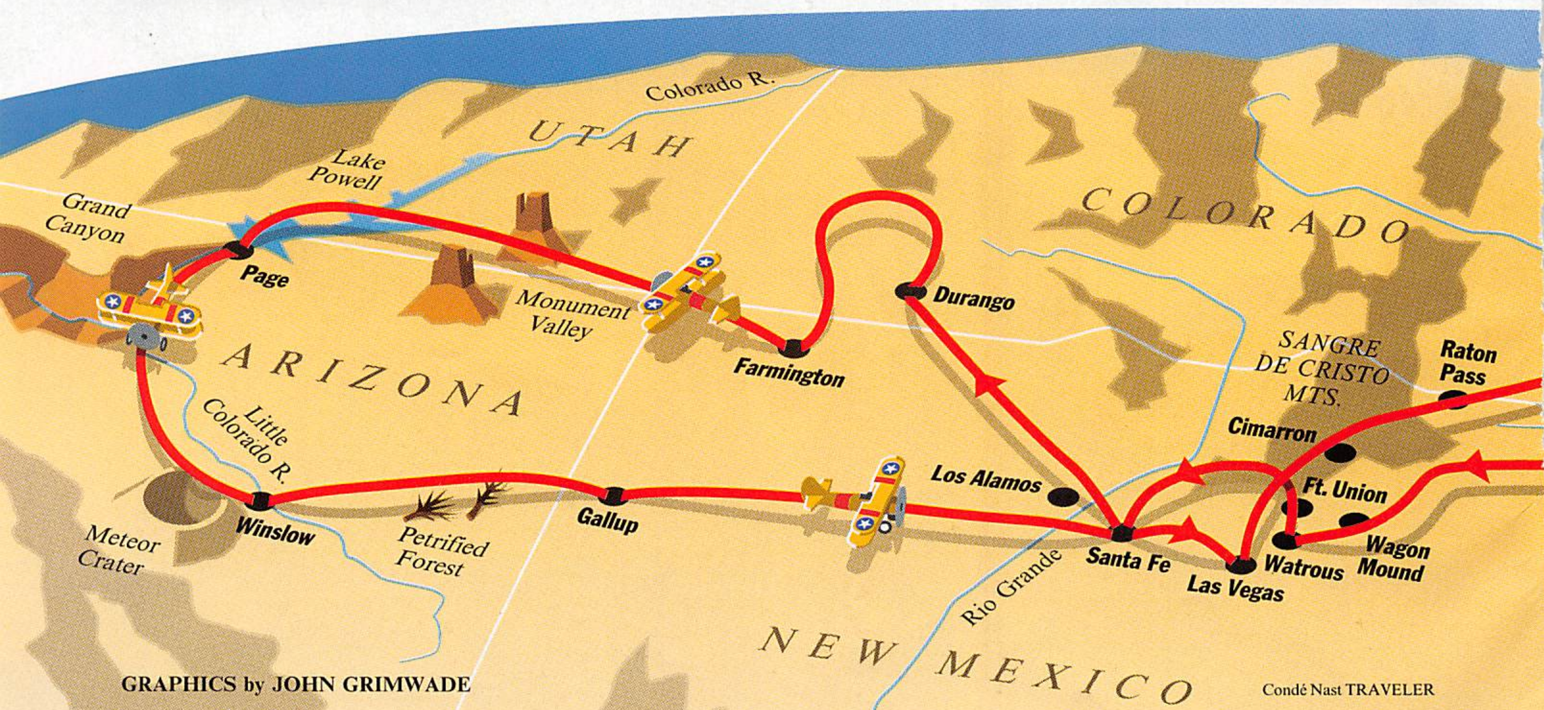
Next I agreed to (gently!) apply left rudder. A cautious poke turned us clumsily left, like a skidding car shouldering into an unexpected direction. Now the stick, also gingerly, nice and slow.

It worked. As the pilot says to a gaga passenger in one of the dustiest of hangar gags: *Push forward and the houses get big; pull back and the houses get small.*

"Good. Now bank her, like a car rounding a curve. Apply left rudder, simultaneously easing the stick back and left. That's *coordinated flight.*"

I made a slow, cowardly turn whose radius could be measured in miles.

Flight path into the big sky: *Sometimes the Marsano route followed ancient wagon trails; at other times, the horizon.*



GRAPHICS by JOHN GRIMWADE

"Very nice," he lied. "Now aim for that silver tower ahead on your right. That's on our course. If you drift a little, that's perfectly normal; just turn back to it. Okay? I'm handing over to you."

"Ah, okay. Fine, even. But do assure me that there's nothing I might do that you can't *un*do."

"Bill, I have an instructor's certificate and a conventional regard for my life and safety. And I'll be right behind you. Now—you have the airplane."

The controls lightened as he let go; I had the airplane and was supposed to fly it. I aimed determinedly at the silver tower on my right. Seconds later it appeared on my left.

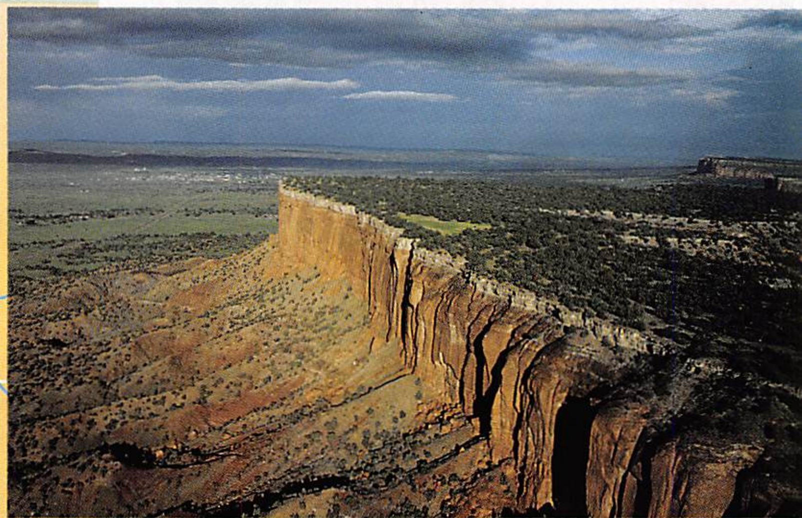
I tried holding it there, tried to lock on, but quickly it escaped, drifting right while I tried to catch up only to lose it again. I was always one move behind: Either the tower was moving like a Klingon in a video game or I was tacking like a sailboat. Or both. Then the houses got bigger. Envisioning a fresh wound in the prairie, one labeled Smoking Crater Memorial Airport, I pulled the stick back and climbed to fifteen hundred feet but couldn't hold her there, either. Up, down, left, right—*annnnnd repeat*. Again, now—*annnnnd repeat.*

Nothing was violent in all of this; nothing dramatic or threatening. I merely *billowed*—haplessly slipping, sliding, rising, *(Continued on page 128)*

The Stearman throws its shadow far below, a winged black cross on the earth's surface.

Heading southwest, passing over a farm pond.

GRAPHICS BY JOHN GRIMWADE



Continental Divide.

(Continued from page 75) sinking—far beyond my own poor power to add or detract. I did not fly the airplane; the airplane flew me.

I struggled but finally surrendered. Bravely taking a hand off the stick, I pushed the mike to my lips, unclenched my jaw, and said, "Okay, take her back now."

"Good idea. Never overdo the first day."

I felt competence return to the controls and slumped despairingly. I was slick with sweat after having "had the airplane" for ten minutes. Evelyn Waugh had dreams in which his knees would "suddenly refuse support in moments of pursuit by bearded women broadcasters." My knees felt the same.

ROBERT GRACE WAS THE KIND of pilot I had searched for—a pilot that the writer Ernest K. Gann would have called an airman, not an airplane driver. I wanted a joyous soul, a boon companion, but a skilled, sane one. Safe return was not negotiable; we would not, as pilots say laconically, "alter the appearance of the airplane."

In mid-September, after a summer of courting Robert by phone and fax, I came to St. Francis, Kansas—population fifteen hundred—a quiet, flat little town I could walk across in ten minutes and between hangar and horizon be the tallest thing standing and the only thing moving.

It was a chance reference in a book to the annual Stearman Fly-In at St. Francis that led me here. A fly-in is homemade entertainment for small towns with little airports and less to do, a remnant of the knockabout air shows of the 1930s, staged whenever six barnstormers had gas money on the same day. Robert is the airport operator, and the Fly-In attracts about four dozen planes annually, plus balloonists and sky divers.

Robert especially invites Stearman biplanes. These masterpieces—ex-military trainers derived from Lloyd Stearman's 1927 C-1 sportplane—differ from most contemporaries, as, say, Douglas's DC-9 (awfully nice jetliner) from its DC-3 (single most important aircraft in the history of air transportation). Most U.S. military pilots in World War II had to fly a Stearman before getting a chance to break something expensive. Painted high-visibility "lookout yellow," she was called the Yellow Peril.

She is a tail-dragging, wooden-winged champion with a round engine, open cockpits, and her wheels sticking out. Low-tech, bereft of modern aids and instruments, she has fabric-covered wings held together or apart by struts and wires. Her seven-cylinder Continental radial engine produces 220 horsepower, a deafening racket, and a speed of eighty-five knots, or about ninety-seven miles per hour. Sitting tail down/nose up, as if sniffing the breeze, she is to me a thing of heartbreaking beauty and inexpressible loveliness.

Ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa.

Robert's father, John, flew P-40s and P-38s during the war and later bought a surplus Stearman for $850, or about ten cents on the dollar. After thirty years' crop-dusting, he retired her and, because she was family, restored her to original Navy specifications. She came out of the shop looking new as the day she went to war. That was fifty years ago; this was my airplane.

After airport introductions (Robert's friends were "eager to meet anyone who would willingly fly in an airplane with me") came a slightly strained farewell dinner. We had met only an hour before. Robert's wife, Debbie, and four-year-old daughter, McKenzie, eyed me dubiously, as if they had seen city slickers before. Only John Grace seemed comfortable with two strangers meeting over his old airplane and deciding to fly her to yesterday with an itinerary based on guesswork. At seventy-three, he was lean and leathery and he didn't say ten words all night, but he sensed what I was searching for. His flight log was longer than my life, and he loved the smell of clover crushed by fat rubber tires on grass runways.

I DRESSED AT DAWN AND HIKED to the airport, the sun rising on a CAVU day—Ceiling and Visibility Unlimited. We manhandled the Stearman to the gas pump (her wings have handles for such intimacies) and minutes later growled down the strip, crushing clover as we snaked along in broad curves—on the ground, tail wheel airplanes are bat-blind forward—and then we were flying.

A biplane, with a wing and a spare to generate lift, is positively born to fly. You're hardly rolling when the tail comes up, barely making a good turn of speed when she simply rises, floats, levitates into the air. It is a moment of surpassing glory.

At eighty-five knots, the forty-six gallons of gas tanked in the center of the upper wing would take us about three hundred miles, with a half-hour's reserve, so

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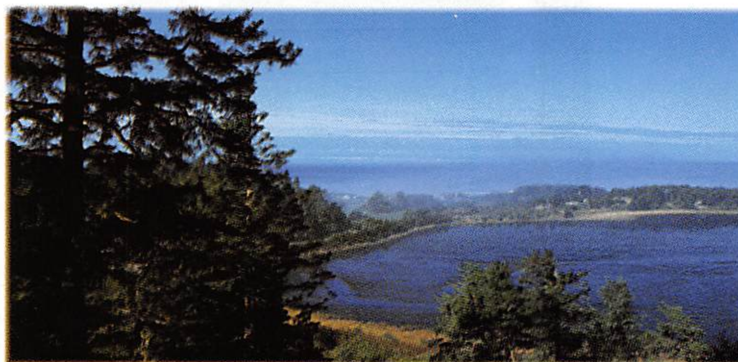

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Gleneden Beach, Oregon

we'd land often to refuel, pour a quart in the oil sump, and grab a meal. Robert had plotted our route to fit, adding secondary and tertiary airports just in case—in case we found strips so bare they didn't even have gas. Also because we were flying VFR, or Visual Flight Rules. We had to see to fly. We had Sony's Pyxis global positioning system, which would keep us from getting lost, but it couldn't land us in darkness or bad weather.

Our course was south-southeast toward the Cimarron Cutoff, a bloody shortcut on the Santa Fe Trail. There we swung southwest, following it in theory and by VFR—we knew it was there because Pyxis said so and because Route 56 parallels it much of the way.

Below we saw the earth and its texture: the twin ribbons of trees—cottonwoods, willows, tamaracks—that stake out the Cimarron River where it flows underground, the springs where it broke surface, the swelling grasslands that challenge the plains' flatness, the natural rampart of Point of Rocks. We could see too the veneer of history. This was bitter desert once, called by the Spanish La Jornada; in the 1930s it was the heart of the Dust Bowl. Under either name it is marked by the ruts of ox-drawn wagons bound for fortune.

In Oklahoma's panhandle we overflew Autograph Rock, where traders "signed in"—some for luck, others from a poignant need to leave their names to history. Then the low bare slopes of Rabbit Ear Mountain, near where the Spanish and Comanches fought, signaled Clayton, New Mexico.

I learned the Stearman's name here. N777JG is her civil registration, so we reported to tower as "Stearman Triple-7 Juliet Golf." The strip was disappointing asphalt, but there was a small antelope herd capering madly nearby, as if in welcome. As we taxied to the gas pump, a work crew downed tools to watch us pass.

Clayton's woolly days lasted at least until 1901, when Black Jack Ketchum, local nuisance, was condemned here. With true frontier bravado he told the hangman, "Hurry it up. I'm due in hell for dinner." He also asked to be buried facedown, presumably to get started in the right direction. When with this lore and a full tank we taxied out an hour later, there was again the clangor of shovels hitting pavement: They watched us go like a one-float parade. In the rearview mirror Robert opened a contented grin: "You're never alone with a Stearman."

Soon Wagon Mound's straight-sided bulk reared up above the Kiowa grasslands. This isolated butte was the Cutoff's most visible landmark, and as of 1850 a grim one. That May a hundred Jicarilla Apaches massacred a mail wagon there; twelve days later an outbound wagon train found "parts of bodies . . . scattered about, eaten by wolves and ravens." Nearby, the half-toppled stones and crosses of a weed-grown cemetery italicize the appalling loneliness of this empty vastness. No wonder travelers wrote their names on Autograph Rock.

WE FOUND A GRASS STRIP NEAR Watrous, but it was marked private, so we settled for Las Vegas, east of the Sangre de Cristos from Santa Fe. An old mechanic here said Las Vegas had been a wartime training base, with Stearmans wall to wall, and he was moved to see one return. He stroked her as a man would a favorite horse, and turned away with his eyes screwed tight.

Las Vegas had no hangar space, but the airport manager and the line boy coveted the Stearman. After quiet palaver with Robert, strictly aviation gossip during which no favor was ever asked, they found a way to wedge her in.

We returned at dawn. Already I liked early takeoffs: the airport empty, air so still the airplane rides like a big box kite, seeming not to move but instead to turn the world below. Two things delayed us. First, tower held us short of the runway. No explanation was needed. We heard the radio: A Piper Seneca twin was coming with a troublesome mind.

Her pilot had lowered the gear, and the mains were fine. But the panel showed no green light for the nosewheel, and two out of three ain't good. He needed to low-pass the tower for a visual.

We heard him far out, coming in slow for the best possible look; suddenly, there he came in a long arc, looking for help. Tower called his gear down. Now all he had to do was land the damned thing.

"It's down—but is it locked?" Robert said. "This is high pucker."

Pucker is what, at such times, your sphincter does.

We had sympathy pucker when the Seneca came around again. The pilot flared, the mains touched and chirped; now he felt for pavement with the nosewheel. It touched and it held. The radio

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hissed loudly as four people exhaled simultaneously.

Then tower called us back—we had a message.

The clerk was breathless. "It's the Widow Doolittle," he said. "You must have overflown her place last evening because she's been calling everywhere looking for you. She wants to come see your airplane."

Barbara Doolittle, it turned out, was a cattle-ranching pilot from an all-pilot family, and the majesty of Triple-7 Juliet Golf had *ta-pocketaed* her heartstrings. The grass strip we'd seen yesterday was hers. Robert asked the clerk to call and say we'd come to her.

The clerk rang off, looking as if he'd been knighted on our behalf. "This is something," he said. "You've been invited to the ranch. I hear that's quite an honor."

We were there in fifteen minutes. Grass is cushy, receptive stuff, the right stuff for flying, tennis, and baseball. But this strip was a challenge. Lying on a short, narrow ridge above I-25, edged with old tires, it wasn't for sloppy pilots who score confirmed kills on runway lights. And there was a stiff crosswind.

No sweat: Robert aced the landing, holding one wing low, applying opposite rudder, keeping her straight and true until we rolled to a graceful halt.

Barbara Doolittle is a silver-haired, blue-denimed cattle queen, so gorgeous that even the most determinedly urban male might rethink his disdain of wide-open spaces and conclude that having no neighbors for twenty miles around wasn't so bad after all. But she had eyes only for the Stearman.

Down at the ranch house she poured tea and airtalked with Robert, discovering that her best friend at the Albuquerque balloon festival was his best friend from college, and they had planes in common, too. Driving back to the strip, Robert whispered, "She'd like a ride, but because she's a pilot she won't ask—they never do. So you'll have to help me."

We bullied her with kindness until she let me help her into the front cockpit. Robert cleared the prop, warmed the engine during taxi, then spun around and revved into the sky—blue and yellow, the prettiest colors I have ever seen. They carved loops, split-S's, Cuban eights; did chandelles, Immelmann turns, barrel rolls, a hammerhead that stood my hair on end.

How I longed to do the same.

Barbara couldn't stop grinning or start talking when they settled on the cattle-cropped grass. Our farewell was a roar and a waggle of yellow wings.

We turned north toward Fort Union, which the Great White Father built near where the Cimarron Cutoff joins the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail.

IN SANTA FE THE WEATHER TANtalized us; three times we walked hangarward in sunshine only to have rainy overcast return, like a wet blanket. Mostly we sat in the office, drinking coffee and talking airplanes. Robert was, I think, a little impressed. I had read a few books, "done some homework." He'd expected a dead-ignorant stiff who did nothing but fill the front cockpit and stare at the ground. He didn't believe I could simply shut up and listen. Neither does anyone else I know.

Things changed that day. We became partners. We flew united: I was not passenger now but crew. I handled tie-downs on gusty airfields, primed the engine before start-up (pump three strokes, turn and lock), checked elevation at every field (to reset altimeters), gassed up (remembering, because many pumps lack automatic shutoffs, to stop after filling the tank and before filling the cockpit), and other menialities. In fairness, Robert always lugged the luggage, and free flying lessons are the rock upon which the line boy—that's what I was—builds his church.

The Spanish established Santa Fe as La Villa Real de la Santa Fé de San Francisco de Asís in 1610, at which time it had more syllables than residents, and proceeded as per pattern: erection of fortifications, seizure of goods, forcible conversion of the Indians. The surprise was the Pueblo Revolt of 1680—the most successful native uprising in the New World. The Indians took the city and held it twelve years, until their alliance collapsed into bickering.

Leaving on the promise of clear skies, we skirted the southern reach of the Jemez Mountains and Los Alamos, navel of nuclear destruction. Turning north, we crossed the Continental Divide well west of Abiquiu, hermitage of Georgia O'Keeffe and site, most improbably, of the Dar Al Islam mosque.

Twenty miles from Durango, rain threatened again; Robert nimbly edged between two storms—one full of lightning—without wetting the wings. Ten miles out we couldn't raise the tower on radio, but

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the pilot of a big feeder-airline twin turboprop checked in with a greeting and relayed our message.

Robert said he'd stay high for maximum visibility on final approach but then dive for the runway—we'd slip down, fall right out of the sky.

"Hang on, Bill. Slips are fun."

Just short of the runway we turned hard left, pointed one wing at the ground, and stopped moving forward; we flew sideways, steeply angled, mimicking catastrophe. The wind now was hard on my left cheek as we plunged from the air and the light in a roaring, plummeting sleigh ride and soon, much too soon for me, touched with three wheels and Robert crowing: "God, I love slips! If the passenger's going to puke, it's too late, and if he's scared, it's already over."

Durango grew in the 1880s on the Denver & Rio Grande Railway, borrowing its name from Mexico and its population from a nearby town the tracks had bypassed. It grew rich on ore traffic from the silver mines and became a frontier town of the rootin'-tootin' stamp, full of rowdy folk with hair-trigger tempers and matching pistols. Bust followed boom and Durango sank to lassitude, and so survives as a pretty, likable Victorian town, and it still roots and toots at least a little.

The rodeo was on when we arrived, for example. The cowboys had booked every motel to the rafters, and because Durango's sidewalks are barely two Stetsons wide, there was a lot of good-natured crowding outside and expansive frontier-style drinking inside. Fortunately for us, Jill and Faith ("The Fabulous Durango Airport Girls") were available to wrench open a stubborn hangar door, recommend a good steak house, locate rooms in a rusticated bunkhouse that seemed about to fall off its own cliff, and provide a courtesy car, or wreck, that threatened to burst into flames only twice.

Leaving Durango the next morning was harder than getting in. At elevations like 6,660 feet, Stearmans climb reluctantly; it was agony climbing only two thousand feet; we followed a hawk into a thermal for borrowed lift and the hawk lost us; headwinds pressed so hard we were passed by road traffic. After a long slog getting nowhere, Robert punched the Pyxis and said, "If we go southwest to Farmington, we'll have *tail*winds." Right.

We flipped hard around, and the tailwinds shot us out of there.

Outside Farmington, Robert throttled back to fifty-five knots and handed over: "I want you to try some three-hundred-and-sixty-degree coordinated turns, then some stalls. Go easy on the controls, and remember: Anything you can do, I can undo."

I wasn't rigid this time; I felt oddly confident. I coolly stick-and-ruddered left in an easy bank, the horizon spinning slowly around me before I rolled back out.

"Nice. Very nice roll-in and roll-out. Very smooth. Didn't go all three hundred and sixty degrees, though—remember to take an aiming point. Go."

I picked a point, rolled, and this time got all the way around. Again, in a steeper bank; then another, steeper still, almost a pirouette and so tight I had trouble holding altitude. But I was flying.

Now, the stall.

Robert demonstrated twice, then handed over. I pulled steadily back; the Stearman climbed, laboring as the horizon fell away. The controls mushed, the stick was shaking—the quintessential warning. Then she sagged, as if life had suddenly gone out of her (which, temporarily, it had). The nose fell, the horizon rose abruptly, and my view now was all desert, no sky at all. I shoved the stick forward.

It didn't work. The desert didn't go away; we were diving into it. Robert undid what I'd done and leveled off. "*Gently* on the stick, Bill. The barest push. Climb some and go again."

Again I pulled back all the way to stick-shake. We mushed down, fell, and when my stomach touched my heart, I eased forward gingerly, lightly. Lift and control returned, the nose lifted, and a little back-pressure leveled her off. I did three more to make sure it wasn't voodoo.

Robert slipped the landing at Farmington, and I yelled, "God, I love slips!"

THE FOLLOWING DAY WE HEADed for Monument Valley. We drifted south to Page, Arizona, above Glen Canyon Dam, which created Page and Lake Powell, both by drowning the canyon.

Page is a hot stop for Las Vegas– and Grand Canyon–bound lightplanes and tour buses. People were everywhere; the joint was jumping. "Looks like show time to me, Robert. Think of something." He already had.

Inbound air traffic coming from the opposite direction was lined up on approach a couple of miles out. Tower offered us number six position and a tedious wait at the tail of the queue: jive. From right

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above the airport Robert radioed tower: "If you give me an immediate, I can be number one."

On tower's say-so, we knife-edged madly down over the runway in a yahoo slip of theatrical proportion and heroic display; the wind sang in the wires and the sunlight gleamed on white scarves and yellow wings as we *ta-pocketaed* down like a big toboggan to a landing of insolent perfection. On intercom I heard tower drone on: "Romeo Delta 6, you're cleared to land; Triple-7 Juliet Golf thanks for the show; Echo Tango stand by. . . ."

The crowd loved it too. People stopped in their tracks to watch, called friends out of the terminal and leaned over the railing as we snaked down the runway, turned lightly to taxi, and motored in triumph to the tie-downs. They loved it; they loved us, falling out of the blue in our hell-roaring yellow Pegasus and rumbling past like Lindbergh and Rickenbacker. Aloof as eagles we were in Ray-Bans and white scarves.

Pretty girls ran over asking please could they have their pictures taken with us while jealous boyfriends sullenly clicked away. Guys posed us looking rakish against the Stearman. Somebody asked for my autograph; somebody else asked, "Who *are* you guys," so I said we were *Bill and Bob's Amazing Ragwing Flying Circus, featuring the Mighty Stearman Biplane.* Were we giving a show? "No, season's over now and we're just a couple of gypsy pilots again." Where were we heading? "Who knows? We're just wingin' it."

Now south across a vast Indian reservation and a hard left at the meteor crater (you can't miss it) brought us to Winslow, Arizona, and the Twilight Zone—a sunblasted airport adrift in 1945. It looks abandoned, and in a sense it is.

IN 1929, TRANSCONTINENTAL AIR Transport would cart you coast to coast in two days if you could stand it: planes by day (Lindbergh himself surveyed the routes), trains by night. A crackpot scheme, but one with its own infernal logic. America then was far behind Europe in commercial aviation and also twice its size. Flying passengers at night was simply *not on* for TAT.

Westbound passengers boarded the Airway Limited at Penn Station to dine and sleep en route to Columbus, Ohio, where they would transfer to a drafty, deafening beast called the Ford Tri-Motor, or Tin Goose, and be wafted to Waynoka, Oklahoma(!), then entrained for Clovis, New Mexico, and the final air leg to Los Angeles.

There were intermediate stops along the torturous route, and when after about a year the service expired for want of victims, several towns lost their chance to become keystones of aviation's future. One of them was Winslow. Its pride now is having been mentioned in a song by the Eagles (". . . standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona," dum da dum); a plaque has been erected. Really.

The next morning we overflew the Petrified Forest, whose great trunks of fossilized trees suggested felled columns of pagan temples. Federal protection here, dating to Teddy Roosevelt in 1906, doesn't deter acquisitive visitors, who steal chips by the pocketful—an estimated twelve tons disappear annually by this means.

I steel myself for the long curve to the earth

We landed at Santa Fe desperate for civilized comfort after too many Roach Motels and a bellyful of Tex-Mex food, so we took the Inn of the Anasazi. Serene and beautiful, it was pure caressing balm. The calm, softly lighted restaurant served real food, free of Monterey Jack cheese, greasy beans, and withered tortillas. The rooms had carpets instead of chalked outlines of bodies; the mattresses didn't fold up like hot dog buns. No booming highway ran by the back; no Southern Pacific freight trains labored heavily through the night out front. For once we slept late. This was living.

But not for long. After a day of picture-taking we flew to Las Vegas, dampened by the undeniable evidence of return. I still won't say anything about Las Vegas except that we left at dawn, waggled our wings above Barbara Doolittle's ranch, and then went north up the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail, into thickening history.

We flew northeast, avoiding the uphill crawl over Raton Pass, hoping to avoid a cold front. We did miss most of it: What we got was like flying into a meat locker, because the turbulence laid back instead of socking us immediately.

South of Lamar we frankly dallied: Journey's end was too close for hurry.

The nearing of St. Francis was a minor crisis for me. I had chickened out of doing a loop at Farmington, then lost the day I'd spent nerving myself in Santa Fe. I owed Robert the loop. He shouldn't have to tote me home like baggage.

When I said I was ready, he answered by climbing for altitude. I asked him to do one loop so I could feel it again, and another with narration. I'd do the third hands-on, with him narrating again, working throttle and ready—just in case—to undo.

The first loop was easy; it felt familiar, felt good; then he talked us through the second, regained altitude, and said, "You have the airplane."

Imagine a clock face now, upright before you in the sky, five hundred feet in diameter. That's us, to your left, straight and level at ninety knots. "Dive to six o'clock now," Robert says. "Build speed."

I stick-forward and dive at twenty-five degrees—it feels like forty-five, the earth coming up fast—with the engine rising toward redline at 2,050 rpm, speed hitting 110, 115, 120. I'm staring hard at the gauges, but when I hear Robert throttle I know he's flying on experience, not looking at all. Now, at six, bottom of the loop, he begins talking me through: stick-back, hard; we're climbing steeply at nine o'clock ("Check that your wings are level with the horizon"), climbing hard, up and vertical now at three o'clock; I hear the engine beginning to labor, but Robert doesn't: He listens to the wind. ("Head back now—wait for the horizon to come back.") I'm aiming at empty sky; now we start going over on our backs: two o'clock, one o'clock, to full inverted flight at high noon in its most dramatic sense. We're crawling, barely sixty knots now, and I remember to ease the stick forward just a little, ease the back pressure so we'll make a *round* loop instead of climbing *down* harder than we climbed up (egg-shaped loop).

Now stick-back a little, not much: I steel myself for the long curve down toward a windscreen full of earth; it begins without warning and before I'm fully steeled, but I'm hanging on—eleven, ten, now aiming straight down at nine (very scary), now pulling back—hard, harder. I'm stiffening with multiplied gravity—and fear. Slowly the earth begins turning for me again ("Stick-back and ride it down now") at eight; by seven the engine is howling like some terrible beast—and then Oh God at last we bottom out at six into straight and level with me yelling "Take it, take it!" into the intercom and when he does pumping both fists in the slipstream with my head back shouting "Yes, yes, yahoo!" to the vault of blue heaven and the sun on yellow wings. □