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W. SCOTT OLSEN

Never Land

Adventures, Wonder, and One World Record in a Very Small Plane

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Acknowledgments

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Special mention needs to be given to Mike Paulson, manager of the Fargo Flight School, and the Fargo Jet Center. Mike fielded a thousand questions with patience and insight, and the Jet Center is simply the best FBO in the country.

Parts of this book have appeared in literary magazines: "A Prairie Roll" appeared as "Aileron Jazz" in *Mid-American Review*; "What Remains" appeared in *Nimrod: International Journal of Prose and Poetry*; "Altitude" was published in the *North American Review*; and "The World Record" appeared in *Mid-American Review*. A small section of "The World Record" also appeared in the magazine *Outside Go*. "The Long Cross-Country" appeared in the *Northwest Review*. I am grateful to the editors of all these fine journals for their support and interest.

Finally, the deepest thanks goes to my wife, Maureen, and to our kids, Kate and Andrew, for their love and patience when the sky called.

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Glossary

AGL: Altitude above ground level.

Airspeed: The speed of the air moving over an airplane's wing (usually given in knots).

ATC: Air Traffic Control.

ATIS: Automatic Terminal Information Service, an automated reporting service used by pilots to obtain current information on weather conditions, active runways, available approaches, and so forth.

AWOS: Another automated weather reporting service.

Flight Service: Run by Lockheed Martin, a service that pilots use to say where they are flying (file a flight plan) and to obtain important information about weather and other conditions along that route. One of the elements of a flight plan is the "time en route." If a pilot exceeds it by more than a half hour, Flight Service will call the destination airport to see if the pilot simply forgot to close the flight plan. But if the pilot has not landed, the search teams organize.

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Ground speed: The speed that the airplane is moving over the ground (usually given in knots).

IFR: Instrument flight rules.

Information XXX: Weather changes rapidly. Automated systems update themselves quickly. An automated weather system such as the ATIS, which is broadcast using a human voice generator over radio waves, will conclude its report with something like, "Upon contacting tower, report you have information Alpha" or "information Bravo." That way the tower knows you have the most current information regarding wind speed and direction, visibility, and so forth.

METAR: Code used by weather reporting stations to report current weather conditions at airports. A METAR reading looks like this: KFAR 031653Z 18013KT 10SM CLR 01M03 A2954 RMK AO2 SLP014 T00061028. "KFAR" is the reporting station (in this case Fargo, North Dakota). "031653Z" represents the day of the month (in this case the third), and the time is 1653 Zulu. ("Zulu" is the military designation for Greenwich [England] mean time and is equivalent to 10:35 a.m. in the central time zone of the United States.) "18013KT" means that the wind is from 180 degrees on the compass (from the south) at 13 knots. A letter *G* here would indicate gust speeds. "10SM" means that the visibility is at least 10 statute miles (this is normally the maximum number given). "CLR" means clear skies. This space can read BLSN for blowing snow, TR for thunderstorm, and so on. "01M03" means that the temperature is 1°C and the dew point is minus 3°C. (It is important to know the dew point, because if the temperature and the dew point are 4 or fewer degrees

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apart and there is little or no wind, there is probably fog.) "A2954" is the air pressure, which is used to set the altimeter reading. This is a constantly changing value, so ATC and the towers give frequent altimeter updates. "AO2" is the type of weather reporting equipment in use.

MSL: Altitude above mean sea level.

TAF: Terminal Area Forecast.

VRF: Visual flight rules.

VOR: A type of radio beacon that pilots use to navigate toward or away from and establish their positions. ATC can "see" a VOR and all the air traffic near it on its radar screens.

A Note on Numbers

In general, numbers are spelled out as complete words in this book because of the way pilots talk to each other and to control towers. In stating a radio frequency of 122.8 mhz, for example, a pilot would never say "one hundred and twenty-two point eight." That's too easily confusing over the air. So it's always "one two two point eight." The tail number of the plane I fly most in this book could be typed as "N5329B." But it's always spoken as "November Five Three Two Nine Bravo." The shorthand for this is "Two Nine Bravo," not "29B" (or "twenty-nine B").

Runway numbers are their compass heading, but you need to add a zero to the end of the number. A runway number of "three-six," for example, would be pointing toward 360 degrees on the compass, or due north.

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Prologue

Here is what I believe.

We have a *desire* for infinity.

Nature, the axiom goes, abhors a vacuum. Nature will fill any vacuum, by any means, as quickly as possible. Nature rushes to fill the empty space, compelled to find a way, any way at all, to leap toward distance. This is why I believe there is nothing in the long line of human inventions as deeply rooted in our souls as the airship. It doesn't matter if the airship is a balloon, a kite, a glider, a zeppelin, a little Cessna 152, or the X-15. No building, no monument, no bridge, no wheel or aqueduct, no lightbulb or computer system comes even close to the spirit, the hope, the necessity, and the reach of flying. Up has always been a better direction than down. Heaven is always someplace above where we are now. To look up into a clear or cloud-filled sky and to ask "How do I get *there?*" is one of our ancient questions.

Curiosity, and the reaching that comes with it, has a million expressions. Climbing a mountain is the expression of

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wondering what limits there are to rock. The sailing ship is the way we discover how far the ocean goes. The submarine is the way we discover how deep. And it is certainly possible that these are all really the same thing, all ways of our reaching out to fill the void. Perhaps the submarine is in fact the mirror reflection of the airship, everything the same except it's all backward. Down instead of up. Fully enclosed against increasing pressure instead of open to thinning air. And perhaps the sailing ship is very much like the airship, curving the wind to catch it in its upright wings and move it forward. All three machines, and the people who steer them, navigating a fluid alive with currents and storms as well as soul-exploding beauty.

But, in truth, I think not. The sailing ship ends on the other side of the ocean. The submarine ends at the ocean floor. Even the climber must turn around when the summit has been gained. At the moment of departure, there is a finite goal, a limit, a boundary that is imposed by geography and inviolate.

Only the airship can claim a step toward infinity. Only the airship pilot can look up and find a universe larger than his ability to dream it.

When I imagine flying, as I often do, I imagine four moments. The first is when the preflight checks are done, the routes planned and the flight plan filed, the last sip of coffee drained, and the engine finally running. This is the moment of declaration. This is when you announce to the world that you are in an airplane and you are ready to fly. You look around the cockpit, just making sure, and then you key the

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microphone. "Fargo Ground," you say, if you are flying the little Cessna 152 where I took my lessons, "this is Cessna Five Three Two Nine Bravo. I'm at the north ramp, departing to the west, at or below four thousand feet, information Juliet." The controller in the tower at Fargo's Hector Field will reply, give you a runway to head for and a squawk code for the transponder, which you will say back to confirm, and then your toes will come off the brakes and the airplane will start to roll. The music is playing, so to speak, and the dance has begun. You have stated your intentions and stepped out onto the floor.

The second moment is not even a few minutes later. Just before the runway there is a place to hold for other traffic, to run up your engine and make sure all systems are working, and when you are done you call the tower again, but on a different frequency for a different purpose. "Fargo Tower," you say, "this is Cessna Five Three Two Nine Bravo, ready for takeoff." "Cessna Five Three Two Nine Bravo," the controller will respond, "you are cleared for takeoff, runway one-eight." There might be other instructions, such as to maintain runway heading after takeoff, or to make an immediate turn one way or the other, but you push the throttle in and taxi onto the runway. You point the nose down the centerline, and then push the throttle in all the way hard. The engine deepens its voice. The airplane shudders a little as it beings to roll, faster and then faster still, and you watch the runway centerline to make sure you're heading straight. You also watch one instrument, the airspeed indicator, because when it gets to a certain number, for me about 60 knots, the second moment happens. When the plane is going fast enough, you pull back on the wheel or stick and the nose of

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the airplane rises. It's called rotation. You point the thing at the sky. And into the sky it goes.

The third moment is in the landing. If it's a normal day and the winds aren't too wicked, you've entered the airport traffic pattern on the downwind leg and watched the runway parallel the airplane. When the runway numbers are about 45 degrees behind your shoulder, you turn onto the short base leg, and then onto final approach. You bleed off the last bits of altitude and airspeed, and as the runway numbers come under your tires you should be low enough and slow enough to level off and then flare, to point the nose back to the sky even though the plane is descending, and then there is that feeling of the tires meeting pavement. You are no longer flying. No matter what else, you have landed an airplane. That moment, the tires meeting runway, is the finale, the signal of a job well done, the point where your smile is relaxed. You want to hurry to the hangar or the tie-down spot, because everything that's just happened, even if all you did was fly the pattern for touch-and-goes, is now a story to tell. And you know there are people in the hangar who will listen.

But the fourth moment is the important one. It is unlike the others in nearly every way. It is special, and it's going to take me this entire book to explain. The fourth moment rises gradually, quietly, and while it has very little to do with technique or physics or meteorology, it has everything to do with intimacy and how well a pilot knows the plane he or she is flying. The fourth moment is when the airplane as an object ceases to exit. The fourth moment is when the airplane becomes, instead, an extension of the self. When you can feel the rush of air over the wings and past the rudder.

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When you can feel, in your hands and in your legs, the body moving in the sky. The fourth moment, which does not always happen, is the first moment you can say you are truly flying. Just as there is a subtle though obvious difference between following instruction and real dancing, between technique and art, there is a moment in the air when you understand that, this day at least, you belong where you are. And a small voice in the back of your head, childlike yet fully aware, lets you know that if this day were truly perfect, you would never land.

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What Remains

There has to be something—

Painted barn tops. The rusty skeleton of a tower that once held a beacon. Marks on the land, now plowed and harvested for nearly eighty years. But if they are here, I cannot find them.

The altimeter in this little Cessna 152, tail number Five Three Two Nine Bravo, says I am two thousand five hundred feet above sea level, and over this part of the North Dakota prairie that means one thousand six hundred feet above the ground. Yet it's a beautiful spring day, and I can see to every horizon. The wind is from the north at only 3 knots. The sun is shining. There was some ground fog earlier, but now there is just a haze in the air—some showers on the radar, off to the west and north, but they are light. The rain may not even reach the ground.

It has been almost a year since I sat in a pilot's seat, and the feel of this small airplane in my hands and feet is a reintroduced joy and grace. Last night, going over the calculations

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for weight and balance, the need for fuel, planning my route, looking at the weather, I smiled at how easily the mind can switch from one set of borders to another. Last night, early, I was thinking about small repairs I need to make around the house, about the thousand chores that need to be done. My world was limited, scarcely larger than the three-mile walk I take with our collie. But when I retrieved my flight bag from a bookshelf and unfolded a sectional map, the world became a much larger place. Instantly, the definition of *here* included magnetic deviations and airspace rules, winds aloft at three thousand and six thousand feet, reported from a thousand different locations. *Here* was everything within about three hundred miles of where I sat. All of it present. All of it necessary. *Here*, whatever that space is in the brain, suddenly included the curve of the earth.

And today, what I am wondering is if *here*, which is nearly the same word as *now*, can include decades of time, time long passed. I have been wondering about the first pilots in this region, the old airmail pilots, and how they saw the land. How they found their way from one place to another. I have a global positioning system (GPS) and radio navigation. I would have to work to get lost. They had neither, and getting lost not only was possible but could very well be lethal. Follow the land, the rivers and the roads. Beware of haze, of mist, of clouds—anything that could send you off course.

In the old days, I have learned, there were barn tops painted with arrows pointing to airports. There were flashing beacons every fifteen miles for navigation at night. There were intermediate landing fields, too, just pastureland made available for emergencies. And all through this past winter, every

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cold and windy night slamming itself against the windows and siding of my house, I have been wondering if any of those first things have survived. Is there a barn, old and gray and leaning tremendously to one side or another, with a faded arrow on its roof? Is there a plowed shape in the ground that would tell me this place was once a landing field? You would see these things only from the air. Every time I laced up my winter boots, I knew a little more deeply that I would have to find out.

What I am looking for, of course, is evidence, some small piece of the *then* that has made it through to the *now*. And I am looking for that moment of encounter.

What I am looking for is the connection between history and self—hard and physical and real in a way that notes from an index in some corner of a library will never be—the very same thing that people look for when they retrace the route of Lewis and Clark or Marco Polo, when they stand on the stone of the Colosseum or in the grass at Gettysburg, when they find themselves in Jerusalem or Delhi or Machu Picchu or Auschwitz or the Olduvai Gorge. How would I have measured up? Who would I have been? The time between then and now is very large, and my life is very short. I need to know.

. . .

Start with 1918—

World War I is four years old. The Russian Constituent Assembly is dissolved by the Bolsheviks, Czar Nicholas II and his family are executed, and the Germans bomb Paris. The Allies begin a new offensive on the western front. The U.S. Post Office burns magazine selections of James Joyce's

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Ulysses, H. L. Mencken publishes *In Defense of Women*, and there are new books by Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence, Bertrand Russell, and H. G. Wells. Paul Klee is at work, as are Freud and Jung. Claude Debussy dies, and Leonard Bernstein is born. The Dada movement begins. There is new music by Béla Bartók, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and Igor Stravinsky, and Max Planck wins the Nobel Prize for Physics for introducing quantum theory. Vilhjalmur Stefansson returns from five years of exploring north of the Arctic Circle. A horse named Exterminator wins the Kentucky Derby, and Knute Rockne is named head football coach at Notre Dame. Missouri is the last state to ratify the compulsory school attendance law. Daylight savings time begins. Billy Graham is born. Jack Dempsey knocks out Carl Morris in fourteen seconds. Eight and a half million people have died in the war; twenty-one million have been wounded. An outbreak of influenza begins that turns into a worldwide pandemic that kills nearly twenty-two million.

It is a difficult year, and a tremendous year as well. Disaster and the work of creation. Chaos, and then a renewed sense of purpose. Perhaps a desire to make things better after they have gone so terribly wrong.

On April 21, 1918, Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, the most successful ace of World War I, is shot down and killed. Chasing one Sopwith Camel and being chased by another, he takes a bullet through his heart and lungs, and still manages to land his Fokker without damage. Although there is some question, it's most likely the bullet comes from the ground. He is buried with full military honors by his enemies, the British and Australians, and a British pilot flies over German territory to drop the news.

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Not even one month later, on the other side of the planet, another era starts. Less dramatically, awkwardly but insistently, airmail begins in the United States. This too will change the planet.

Airmail. Like our visions of the Pony Express, the very *idea* of airmail fills our heads with images of daring pilots on noble missions. Fast news from the outside, delivered selflessly and at great risk, regularly and on time. The fighter pilots of World War I were heroes, battling an enemy, finding victory because of better skill, better equipment, better luck. But the airmail pilots were extraordinary. You couldn't outwit a thunderstorm. You couldn't surprise a blizzard or shoot down the fog. You made it through, or didn't, only by what seemed like the grace of God. Charles Lindbergh was an airmail pilot, and even he had to bail out twice and float to earth under a parachute because of weather.

In the introduction to a book called *Pilot's Directions*, William Leary writes, "The country's first regularly scheduled airmail service opened with great fanfare on May 15, 1918. Even President Woodrow Wilson took time off from his demanding wartime responsibilities to attend the inaugural. At 11:46 a.m., Lt. George L. Boyle departed Washington's Polo Field with 140 pounds of mail for Philadelphia and New York. Unfortunately, the young pilot became lost en route when he followed the wrong railroad tracks out of Washington. Attempting to land to get directions, Boyle managed to nose over, flipping the Jenny on its back. To [Assistant Postmaster] Praeger's great chagrin, the mail went by train."

Not the best beginning. And Boyle didn't just follow the wrong tracks. Three days later, he was given a bit of advice

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he followed exactly. Keep Chesapeake Bay on your right, he was told. But then the north end of Chesapeake Bay showed up, and he followed the other side, always keeping the water of the bay on his right, until he landed in Cape Charles, out of gas and out of land, in completely the wrong place. But it was a start nonetheless. Other flights followed, and a little later that same year, the first New York to Chicago route was opened. Flying time: ten hours and five minutes.

. . .

If I were driving this route, the names of towns would come to me in order: Fargo, Harwood, Argusville, Gardner, Grandin. Places and people I know, events that can be marked in the soil. Flying, however, means a different perspective. Even just a couple thousand feet up the world needs to be rethought. Altitude brings the surface together. Pilots still mark waypoints, towns and structures and physical earth identifiable from the air, and they mark the time it takes to fly between them to make sure the plane is on course. Before takeoff, with a check of the winds and some fast calculations on a computer or a type of circular slide rule called an E6B, a pilot knows, for example, it should take eighteen minutes to fly from Town A to Town B. If Town B shows up too early or too late, or on the wrong side of the airplane, or does not show up at all, the pilot can keep track of where the plane's shadow falls and correct what needs to be fixed.

But to be honest, from the air the towns do not seem so separate, their buildings and their stories more mingled than apart. The Red River, old and meandering, cuts back and loops and winds. Smaller rivers, usually invisible to the roadways, join the Red from both sides. In 1997, there was

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a flood here that made world news. The land is flat, the bottom of the Pleistocene-era Lake Agassiz, the largest inland sea in the earth's history, and this river is the remainder of its drainage. When seven blizzards dropped more than one hundred inches of snow that winter, the spring melt became a problem. The Red flows north, and when the southern end thaws the northern end is still ice locked. The water has nowhere to go, so it spreads over the prairie. Following a river is one of the earliest forms of airplane navigation. At altitude, following a river with history is to see the connections and to feel afresh a sense of humility.

I have been away from flying long enough that I want someone with me, to make sure I remember what I think I remember, and so Joanna, an instructor from the Fargo Jet Center, sits in the right seat today. We take off, the plane a light dance in my hands as the wheels leave the ground and we make the short jog over to the river. If you had to follow something to Pembina, to mark your route, the river would be the first best choice. Because I am flying, Joanna gets to do something rare for a flight instructor—she gets to look around. She knows what we're looking for, and she's eager to find something. We call out to each other what we see.

"That's a pretty farmstead," I say.

"Look at that wooden bridge!" she says.

"It's all *new* barns and Quonset huts," I say. "I don't see a single old barn."

This is early May, and the fields are all brown. Snow and ice still hide in the shadowed spots. We see farmers out tilling the land, plowing and planting.

. . .

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Now imagine 1921—

Warren Harding is inaugurated as the twenty-ninth president of the United States. Hitler's storm troopers begin a program of terror. Enrico Caruso dies. Sacco and Vanzetti are found guilty of murder. The first radio broadcast of a baseball game is heard from the Polo Grounds in New York. The Ku Klux Klan is openly violent. Charlie Chaplin stars in *The Kid*.

In just three years, airmail has grown from one local route into the opening of a breathtaking transcontinental airway. New York to San Francisco via Cleveland, Chicago, Omaha, Cheyenne, Salt Lake City, Elko, and Reno. Just like the Pony Express with their horses, an airmail pilot would fly one leg, land, and a relief pilot would hurry into the cockpit, ready to fly the next stage, to keep the mail going. And just like the Pony Express, many pilots die working out the routes, fighting their machines, dodging the weather. The *New York Sun* runs an editorial that calls the route "homicidal insanity." Yet the biggest problem is night. Pilots cannot find their way over the mountains at night, so the mail is transferred from airplane to train and then back, and the total time savings turns out to be not very much at all.

But night is only a problem to be solved. And the solution is the prairie. Begin in the morning on either coast, and you cross the mountains in daylight. To fly the nighttime prairie, it seems, all you need is a good sense of direction. And between Cheyenne and Chicago, the post office has built 616 flashing beacons, one every three miles, to light the way. So on February 22, 1921, four airmail planes are sent out to demonstrate the night-flying abilities of the new transcontinental airway, to ensure the speed of delivery the idea has

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promised. Two leave New York, bound for San Francisco. Only one makes it to Chicago, where the continuation is canceled because of bad weather. Two leave San Francisco, bound for New York. One crashes in Nevada, and the pilot, William Lewis, is killed.

But one plane makes it through. As evening falls, a pilot named Frank Yeager takes over the controls of the De Havilland DH-4 biplane in Salt Lake City and flies via Cheyenne to North Platte, Nebraska. In North Platte, he gives the airplane to a man named James "Jack" Knight, and at 10:44 p.m. Knight leaves the ground, heading for Omaha.

What happens next is the stuff that creates a legend. People on the ground know the flight is coming, and somehow know the route. They certainly know the weather. And suddenly there are bonfires lit along the way to guide the pilot! No signal more ancient, no signal more welcome, no history book says how this was planned. No text explains what it must have been like, standing outside in midwinter, tending a fire, listening for the sound of one small airplane in the sky.

In Omaha, the replacement pilot either fails to appear or refuses to fly. The weather is cold, below zero, and turning nasty with snowfall and fog. For whatever reason, Knight decides to fly on himself. His takeoff time is 1:59 a.m. The plan is to stop in Des Moines, but deep snow prevents a landing. He flies on to the emergency field in Iowa City, where the night watchman lights railroad flares to aid the landing. Across Iowa and then Illinois, through bad weather slowly turning better, he finds Chicago's Checkerboard Field and a crowd of people who have turned out to see him land. A

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hero's welcome at 8:40 a.m. In the history books, the scholars say this one flight kept airmail alive.

. . .

Published in 1921, *Pilot's Directions: New York–San Francisco Route* is exactly that: directions for pilots flying the first transcontinental airmail route. But instead of radio beam or GPS, these directions are all ground based. The first section, New York to Bellefonte, begins this way:

> Miles.
>
> 0. *Hazelhurst Field, Long Island*.—Follow the tracks of the Long Island Railroad past Belmont Park race track, keeping Jamaica on the left. Cross New York over the lower end of Central Park.
>
> 25. *Newark, N.J.*—Heller Field is located in Newark and may be identified as follows: The field is 1¼ miles west of the Passaic River and lies in the V formed by the Greenwood Lake Division and Orange branch of the New York, Lake Erie & Western Railroad. The Morris Canal bounds the western edge of the field. The roof of the large steel hangar is painted an orange color.
>
> 30. *Orange Mountains*.—Cross the Orange Mountains over a small round lake or pond. Slightly to the right will be seen the polo field and golf course of Essex Country Club. About 8 miles to the north is Mountain Lake, easily seen after crossing the Orange Mountains.

No maps. No sectional charts. No radio beacons. No VOR or automatic direction finder. Just a pocket-sized book of directions. Fly from this river to those railroad tracks, turn south, follow the tracks until you see the city, turn west, and

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there should be a notch in the mountains. Cross the whole country this way. Good luck.

. . .

In a light-brown field, wide dark paths mark where a tractor has been, pulling disks or plows. But the paths loop and curl and cut back on each other, ramble all over the section like a drunk's wandering after too long at the bar. Farmers checking their land, wondering if the fields are dry enough to plant, turning to earth to look just under the surface.

Joanna spots a beautiful green home, with porches and decks and a rounded turret room, too. She finds bridges and then drainage pipes in ditches. She spots bright-green tanks that could hold water or feed for livestock. The river is nothing but bends and twists, riparian trees shading the banks. We talk about the trees that make the ruler-straight shelterbelts for farmers, and about the evergreens that appear in the incongruous cemeteries, about how only the burr oak is native to this part of the prairie. Looking out her side window, she finds a point on the river where the grasses have been burned, black earth with some gray ash mounds still smoking.

But no painted barn tops. No beacons. No signs in the earth. My own eyes are fixed over the nose of the plane, looking for what might appear in the distance, looking for what type of aid or invitation there might be.

The winds have come up, 17 knots of headwind against the plane. Looking at the interstate highway, I watch a semitruck pass us heading north. We have to land in Grand Forks for gas, to have enough to get us to Pembina and back, so we call Grand Forks Approach and let them know we're

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coming in. I ask for a route that lets us stay over the river for as long as possible. The request is approved, but still there is nothing.

. . .

Sometimes it's tough to get a handle on things.

On the Web, from an official North Dakota government site, I read, "1928: An air mail service between the Twin Cities and Winnipeg through North Dakota was inaugurated, and Carl Ben Eielson of Hatton [North Dakota] became the first person to fly nonstop over the arctic."

1928. The year Amelia Earhart becomes the first woman to fly across the Atlantic. New music includes Gershwin's *American in Paris* and Ravel's *Boléro*. The first Mickey Mouse films appear. D. H. Lawrence publishes *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

But also on the Web there is an envelope for sale. Theodore Wolke of Prospect Avenue in New York sends a letter to Peggy Wolke of the same address. The letter is dated February 2, 1931, and the postmark is Fargo, North Dakota, at 11:00 a.m. The postage stamp costs five cents. Above Peggy's address "Via Air Mail" is typed in all capital letters. Above Theodore's return address, on neatly printed stationery, "Chicago—St. Paul Route. A.M. #9" is also typed. Most strikingly, however, is the large mark below the return address. A circle that fills nearly half the envelope, the outer ring reads "First Flight * Twin Cities–Pembina Extension * Route A.M. 9 * P.O.D. * Air Mail." Inside the ring there's a picture of a small airplane flying over the trees and fields and buildings of what is labeled as the State Agricultural College, under the banner of "Fargo, N.Dak., Feb. 21 1931."

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1931. The year Al Capone is jailed for income tax evasion, the north face of the Matterhorn is climbed, and Knute Rockne dies in an airplane crash. Salvador Dalí paints *The Persistence of Memory*, and Boris Karloff stars in *Frankenstein*. The Empire State Building is finished, and the building of Rockefeller Center begins. Pilots Clyde Pangborn and Hugh Herndon fly nonstop from Japan to Washington State in forty-one hours.

Clearly, this was an important day, a cause for celebration and remembrance. But how can there be a first flight in 1928 and another first flight in 1931?

On the phone with the staff and volunteers at the Northwest Airlines History Office, I hear a story too good to be true, and perfectly believable. On February 1, 1928, Northwest became an international airline by starting weekly service to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Three months later, however, the service was stopped because of opposition from the Canadian government. Then on February 2, 1931, the service was resumed. A compromise had been worked out to satisfy both countries. Northwest would fly the cargo and passengers from Minneapolis to Fargo, then Grand Forks, then north to the border town of Pembina, North Dakota, where they would be met by a plane from Western Canada Airways that would take them the remaining few miles.

But February 2, 1931, was Groundhog Day, and the groundhog did not see his shadow. The fog was dense and everywhere on the prairie. Joe Ohrbeck, the pilot for Northwest, made it only as far as Osakis, Minnesota, before he had to land the plane. He didn't even make it to Fargo. The Canadian pilots never left the ground. The eighteen thousand

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letters in the cargo hold of Ohrbeck's plane had to wait until the next day to reach Canada.

What news did Theodore send to Peggy? In Fargo, that letter waited, stamped in celebration, for an airplane that would not arrive until the weather cleared.

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The stop in Grand Forks is fast and pleasant. Hot coffee in the flight support office, some candy from a little dish at the desk. We add only four gallons of gas, but that's nearly an hour of flying time. Once back in the air, we angle toward the river and keep watching.

"How easy," I ask, "do you think it would have been to get lost?"

At one level, we are flying over Thomas Jefferson's dream. Section roads run straight north–south and straight east–west. There are small turns and burps where the earth refused to give way or some creek made a mess of things, but mainly the world looks like an ordered grid, easy to measure. You can count off the miles to infinity. It would be possible to follow one road for a very long time. But in haze, or punching through just one cloud, you couldn't be sure the road you're following now is the road you began to follow earlier. If you let your attention wander, even just a little, you could be lost over a land that is perfectly ordered, and thus perfectly unknowable.

"You have the river," Joanna says. "I could never be lost here."

"Yes, but what if you got away from it?"

"I would never do that. If I had to fly here in those days,

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I would lock this river right out my window and never lose sight of it."

She is right, of course. Navigation, to a pilot, is one of the basics, like having a propeller. And unlike the parts of the machine that takes you into the air, navigation speaks to the pilot's understanding of the three-dimensional world, to the pilot's skill and artistry. If you get lost, you can't pull over and ask directions. If you run out of gas, you can't just pull to the side and make a telephone call.

If I were flying in the early days, I would be focused on the flying. I would make sure my cargo of letters and packages made it safely to wherever it was destined to go. I would hear the echo of the post office motto, "Neither rain, nor snow, nor . . . ," and it would keep me on task with its noble promise. But I can be easily distracted. There is a farm in the distance, a farmer working the fields, white tanks of anhydrous ammonia parked fieldside. I cannot see if he is just turning the earth, or if he is pulling planters as well, and there is a part of me that wants to go look.

"Look at this!" Joanna cries out.

In the field below us, it looks like large letter *V*s have been cut at the fencerow, angling toward the middle. It looks like an arrow, or a pointer, cut into the ground. We both wonder out loud if this could have been an intermediate field, a safe haven for a sudden worry, marked for the aerial view. We make a steep turn to the right, circling over the site. But then we see another field, close by, with the same markings. Then another. In a few days, my friend Jake Gust will tell me that this is what a field looks like from the air when a farmer works his land by driving the perimeter, then the next inside circuit, then the next, instead of back and forth across

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the length or breadth. From the air, a rectangular field looks like the back of an envelope with the flap sealed down, or like the slopes of the roof of a house.

And even a few days later, I will discover that Joanna and I aren't even looking at the same thing. In an e-mail she will write, "You didn't see what I was looking at because what you referred to was the arrows that the tractors leave in the fields and I saw that too, but more interesting, what I saw was three, long, green strips of grass located directly in the backyard of a house, I described them as miniature runways, or runways for model airplanes. But the shape they formed was very distinctive and the three lines all came into a peak that looked like an arrow pointing north, northwest. Perhaps they were strips for model airplanes or just a design the family wanted in their backyard, but it seemed to me the only thing that could have or may have possibly been from the old mail route. Do you know what I am talking about?"

Today, though, one thousand five hundred feet above the ground, Joanna and I wonder if this could be that thing that remains, even though we are seeing different things. Hope fills the little airplane. Then, sadly, we turn the airplane north again. We are almost to Pembina.

. . .

On my desk is a photocopied section from a 1920 publication called *Municipal Landing Fields and Air Ports*, sent to me by a historian at the National Air and Space Museum Library. The directory lists eighteen airports in North Dakota. Bismarck and Fort Lincoln are listed as Government Fields, under the control of the federal government. The remaining sixteen—Dickinson, Eagles Nest, Eldridge, Fargo,

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Glen Ullin, Grand Forks, Hobart, Jamestown, Judson, Mandan, Sedalia, Sims, Sunny, Sweet Briar, Valley City, and Williston—are listed as Emergency Fields, "at which landings have been made but where no facilities exist for obtaining supplies."

Also on my desk, also photocopied and also from the Air and Space Museum, a 1939 directory, *Airports: Established Landing Fields and Seaplane Bases in the United States*, that includes a map of the now thirty-nine airports in North Dakota. Following the airmail route, I see that Fargo has become a Municipal Field, the highest ranking. Valley City is a Department of Commerce Intermediate Field. Jamestown is Municipal. Medina is Auxiliary. Dawson is Intermediate. Steele is Auxiliary. Bismarck is Municipal. Just to the south of the route, there is an Auxiliary Field in Streeter, then a Municipal Field in Deisem. Just to the north, Auxiliary Fields in Erie and Carrington.

In my hands, though, is the current edition of the *U.S. Government Airport Facility Directory*, which lists more than one hundred landing fields in North Dakota. But the landing field at Medina is gone, as are Dawson, Steele, Streeter, Deisem, and Erie.

. . .

What I am looking for, in truth, is stories.

The guys at the Northwest Airlines History Office give me a phone number, a pilot named Joe Kimm, who joined Northwest in 1929 as a flight steward, running cabin service inside a twelve-passenger Ford Tri-Motor airplane when he was seventeen years old. Two days later, we are on the phone with each other.

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"I had been building model airplanes since I was ten years old," Joe tells me, "and then a pilot for Northwest Airways named Walter Bullock wrote an article about the Ford Tri-Motor model for *Popular Mechanics* and suddenly found himself making parts and kits in his basement."

Ninety-six years old, his voice and mind as strong as ever, Joe is telling me how his flying career began.

"I won the indoor competition of a citywide model airplane contest in Minneapolis in 1928, in December, about a month before I graduated from high school in January 1929. There were about fifteen or twenty of us in a model airplane club we formed, and one of them knew Walter Bullock. Walter was about twenty-seven years old, had begun flying in 1915, worked for Northwest since 1927. Walter came to the first club meeting and said he needed help. I had just quit a job that paid me twelve dollars a week. Walter said he'd pay me twelve dollars a week to help with the kits. It was through Walter that I learned about flight stewards, and I said if he'd let me do that I'd work on my days off for nothing.

"In June, Northwest lost its first airplane. It crashed on the bluff in St. Paul. The pilot was killed, but the flight steward, Bob Johnson, was only mildly injured. So three days after the accident Walter tells me I can fly with him to Chicago as a flight steward if I got my parents' permission.

"I went to Mother, and I said, 'Mom, I'm all excited. Walter says I can go with him to Chicago tomorrow morning if I get your permission.' And she said, 'Oh, son, you better ask your father.' So I went to Dad, and I said, 'Dad, Walter says I can go with him to Chicago tomorrow if I get your permission.' And he looked at me and said, 'Oh, son, you better ask

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your mother.' And that was it. I decided they weren't objecting, so I got up in the morning and went out to the airport to take my first flight. Incidentally, I had gone to the hospital the night before to pick up Bobby Johnson's uniform. I needed a uniform to wear, and he was about the same tall, gangly kid I was, and his uniform fit me fine.

"I got to the airport, and they gave me a box of money and tickets, because there was no ticket counter out there—they only sold tickets downtown—and I had to sell tickets if anyone came to the airport and needed one. I never did sell a ticket. The next thing they did was instruct me that I had to wear a pistol. So they gave me a .38 revolver with a holster and belt and told me to put that around my waist and wear it. I had to wear this because I was handling registered mail, and it was a requirement of the post office that everyone handling registered mail had to be armed. I had never fired a gun before, and they didn't even tell me how to load it or fire it! They just handed me the gun. There's been a lot of controversy in recent years about arming pilots, but back then they had no problem giving a gun to a seventeen-year-old kid. I carried that same gun for twelve years and turned it in when I went into the service. But I had decided that if anyone wanted the airmail, all they had to do was tell me where to put it and I'd take it there for them."

I tell Joe I can't imagine going to the hospital to pick up the uniform of a man who had been in an airplane crash so I could fly in his place, or carrying a gun to protect the mail, and he laughs. "That's just the way it was back then," he says.

"Along about the beginning of 1930," he continues, "I decided I had the wrong job. I was busier than hell, doing

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all the work for $78 a month, and the pilot, all he did was sit up front and he got $700. So I decided I had to learn to fly. In 1930 there wasn't any money. The crash in October of '29 had really put the country in the kibosh. Nobody had any money. I was making $78 a month, which was pretty good money, but I was paying room and board and payments on a 1929 Model A Ford Coupe I had bought with my brother for $725. Thirty dollars to my dad and $35 for the car—that left me $13 a month to squander on myself. So I was broke.

"I wanted to learn how to fly but I didn't have any money, so I had to figure out how to get to fly, because I really wanted to be a pilot. I ended up going to the company. I got my nerve up—keep in mind I was a very shy kid, I wasn't one of these outgoing individuals who went out and made life for themselves, but when the chips were down I guess my stubborn streak would come out—so I ended up going in to the company and said, 'You've got a couple of Waco 10s out there you're not using. Can I borrow one?' They looked at me kinda funny and thought about it for a second or two and said, 'Well, you'd have to pay for the gas and oil.' I said, 'Well, okay, I can do that.' Gasoline was only nine cents a gallon. So I had an airplane. I ended up going to one of the captains, Chad Smith, and I said, 'Chad, I got an airplane. Would you teach me to fly?' And then he looked at me kinda funny and said, 'Sure, Joe, I'll do that.' So he soloed me. Took me six and a half hours to solo. I had a lot of airtime in the Ford. In the six to eight months I was a flight steward I got to sit up front with the captain every once in a while. They didn't have any autopilot, so he welcomed the opportunity to have someone spell him off. And they taught me how to

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fly the airplane in flight. Well, I got my license and soloed in September of 1930, and I built up my time and got my limited commercial license in November. Just about a month after I got my license, the Department of Commerce, which regulated aircraft in those days, came out with a new ruling requiring two pilots in aircraft weighing 12,500 pounds or more. That was just fit for the Ford Tri-Motor. So I just automatically became a copilot. Same job, same pay, but now I'm a pilot. This is unbelievable, but this is how aviation was in those days.

"I ended up flying a Hamilton and a Travel Air. I flew a couple flights when I was twenty-two years old as captain. Then the government came out with a new ruling that you had to be twenty-three years old and have an air transport rating, which required twelve hundred hours of flying time. I wasn't going to be twenty-three for about a month, until August, but after my birthday I went to Chicago and qualified and got my rating, came back at the end of the month in time to be told I was going to be flying as captain from Fargo to Grand Forks to Pembina.

"You can imagine the thrill of going out and being on your own and being captain and being on your own and flying your first captain flight, in a single-engine Hamilton. They had another captain up there, and between the two of us we covered everything. We were station manager in Fargo on one day, and the next day we were flying captain to Pembina and back, so we alternated that way. There was always one of us operating the station and one of us always flying. It was interesting because there was no radio aids or any of that kind of help. Clarence Bates was the name of the other pilot, and he happened to be a ham radio operator, and

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he had a ham station at home. And for some reason or other there was a radio in the Hamilton, so we used Clarence's home radio to keep in contact. If I were out for a flight, Clarence would call me and tell me what the weather was doing down in Fargo, and give me any information he thought I might need. I lived right next door to his home, so when he was flying up to Pembina I would go over to his house and give him a report on his radio."

On my end of the telephone, I tell Joe I am amazed. "Compared to today," I tell him, "this was the glory days of flying."

"It really was," he says. "You know, nobody knew anything about flying. There wasn't a single experienced pilot in the whole country. These guys that were flying were guys that after World War I bought surplus airplanes from the government for four hundred dollars and taught themselves to fly. And then to build up experience they would go around to small towns and give passenger rides, or they would go to the state fair and perform stunts like aerobatics or wing walking, even parachute jumping, anything to make a living. It was a carnival atmosphere. Nobody really had any experience; nobody really knew what they were doing. We had to learn as we went along."

"It's a wonder you guys didn't get lost!" I say.

"We got to know our routes," Joe says. "Every farm, every barn, every windmill. We could fly that way until the weather got down to about two hundred feet above the ground, and about a quarter of a mile visibility. When it got down to that we were not able to fly anymore, so wherever we were we would find a farmer's field, circle it to make sure there wasn't a haystack in the middle, and then land."

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"What did your passengers think of that?" I ask.

"I'm sure they weren't very happy about being landed in the middle of a farmer's field, but that's the way it was. And you need to remember that the people who were flying were hardy people also. They were daring. They had as much courage as the pilot just to get into an airplane in those days. We would take them to town and put them on a train, and we would take the mail and put it on the train, and then we'd send a Western Union message back to St. Paul to let them know where we were. And we would stay there until the weather was good enough to fly again. Sometimes we would be there for two days!"

I ask if there are any stories that stick out in his mind more than others.

"You can't fly all the time I flew without having some episodes that are a little bit on the dicey side," he says. "I remember this one flight that was supposed to go to Chicago. The pilot was a man named Fred Livermore, who was a dapper young man. A natural-born pilot. When he sat in an airplane, that airplane became a part of him. He did amazing things with that Ford. He was also a daring type of individual. And remember we had to fly with visual reference to the ground at all times. Anyway, we got down to Winona, Minnesota, on the Mississippi River, and the weather popped down to practically nothing. We couldn't get any farther, so we turned around and decided to go back to Red Wing. When we got to Red Wing, we figured we'd go across the country and go down through Rochester, so we were coming in northwest of Rochester when the weather got really close. And for some reason or other he thought he could get out on top. He started climbing, and remember there were

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only a few instruments, and we climbed up through the overcast. When we got up to about five thousand feet, what happened was the Venturi tube on the outside of the aircraft iced up, so we lost our turn indicator. Then we stalled out. And when we stalled out we went into a dive and the engines would really hum, and then we'd pull back and the engines would get softer, but we'd stall out again. We finally broke out about two hundred feet above the ground and headed right for the trees, and he pulled that thing back as hard as he could. When we got back to St. Paul, they picked branches out of the landing gear."

"That's a great story," I tell him.

"You're never going to forget anything like that!" he says.

"How long did you fly?" I ask.

"Forty-two years, one month, and seventeen days. About thirty-six thousand hours."

There are more stories. Joe tells me about flying a way through the mountains with Amelia Earhart as a passenger, and about his last flight, coming back from Tokyo, flying a Boeing 707-320, how the tower operators in Seattle let his wife into the tower to give him final clearance to land. But I am thinking about thirty-six thousand hours of flying and what the turns of the planet must look like from that deep altitude.

. . .

At Pembina, North Dakota, the highway and the river are not very far apart. And as we follow the river, the airport simply appears in the distance, right under the nose of the airplane. It would be impossible not to see it. We're already

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lined up for a long final approach. We haven't found a thing. Not one barn top. No painted arrows or lights. But we have flown the route and looked. We have a story now, and that's worth everything.

When I land the Cessna, Joanna looks over at me.

"You have something against flaring?" she asks, smiling.

Ever the instructor, she points out that I've just made my second three-point landing in a tricycle-gear airplane. Just a little bit off, and that would be a good way to collapse the nose gear. It's been a year, and even though the plane feels familiar and good in my hands, there are things to remember and things to improve.

The runway pavement is broken and uneven. We taxi to the hangar and office and find the airport deserted. There are no planes on the ramp. No people in the office. The server is down for the computer that provides flight planning and weather information. Weeds grow around the metal rings in the ground for tie-downs. But the buildings are new; this whole place was underwater in 1997. A weathervane in the shape of a P-51 Mustang with a whirling propeller buzzes near the driveway. And just beyond it, a sight too good to be true.

An old metal light tower, exactly the type from the 1930s, rusted but upright, stands in the grass. An old beacon remains on top. It is not spinning, and I have no idea how long it's been dark. But there it is. At the end of the route, the light to welcome you home.

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