A WING AND A PRAYER

BUSH PILOTING IS THE STUFF OF LEGENDS: DODGING MOUNTAINS, FLYING LOW OVER TREETOPS, LANDING ON IMPOSSIBLY HEMMED-IN AIRSTRIPS — WHEN THERE'S ANY STRIP AT ALL. SO WHAT WAS PETER HELLER THINKING, SIGNING UP TO LEARN IN THREE WEEKS?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MCGARRY

The master, Dave Hoerner, and his pupil, the author, on a remote Montana runway

THE AIRFIELD AT RONAN WAS A LONELY STRIP of tarmac up against Montana's Swan Mountains. I was glad to see it. Not because this was my first cross-country solo and there hadn't been much open ground west of Flathead Lake (none, really, for an emergency landing). Not because the blue water had been sanded with wind or because the Cessna had bucked hard coming through the saddle, but because I had to pee.

I taxied up to an old gas pump and shut her down. Nothing but open tarmac, a half-dozen planes tied down, a few beat-up buildings. I took a leak in the cheatgrass, sighing with relief. A rusted metal sign rattled against a pole. I climbed back in, set the throttle knob, and turned the key. Two groans, then nothing.

I tried twice more, then climbed out. There was no one for miles. I looked at the mountains and saw dark thunderheads gathering at the peaks. If I didn't get out of here soon, I'd be grounded. I imagined my solo, a requirement for my license, going down the tubes. Why hadn't I just pissed in the Coke bottle?

I walked out into the middle of the open pavement, shoved my cap back on my head, and stood there like a lost mendicant. Then I saw an old blue Buick rattling out onto the ramp, at the edge of the hangars. I waved. He noticed and putted over. He was an old man, pushing 90.

Hoerner trains the author over rugged Glacier National Park. The veteran pilot knows his profession's dangers well; his own son died in a crash three years ago.

"Are you a pilot?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Think you could look at it?"

He got out of the car stiffly. He was wearing a checked wool shirt and had the craggy, proud face of Robert Frost, even the shock of white hair. He leaned into the plane. "I'd like to try to start her."

He put his right foot on the strut step, thought about it, then hauled himself up into the seat. He pumped the throttle knob three times and, trembling just a little, turned the ignition. The prop spun slowly twice, balked, then caught and whirred. The engine roared.

"Great," I cried. Then it occurred to me that only his feet on the brake pedals were keeping the plane from rolling forward. "But now you're up there and I'm down here."

We looked at each other. Silence.

"Okay," I yelled over the engine. "I'll hold back the plane; you climb out." Gingerly, he stepped down. His right leg caught in a loop of cable from the headset. I let go with one hand and had to reach forward awkwardly to lift his foot out. The plane was tugging forward. I swung around the strut and jumped up in the seat.

"Oh, man, thanks so much!" He looked up at me. "Your name? What's your name?" I yelled.

I thought he mouthed Baer. Wayne Baer.

I taxied out, waved, then waved again as I took off. He watched me, inscrutable. He was keeping his own counsel as to my odds as a pilot. As I circled back to the north I looked down; he was standing in the same place, watching me go, the only human being for miles.

TWO YEARS AGO, FLYING INTO A GRASS airstrip called Schafer Meadows in Montana's Great Bear Wilderness, I got an idea. Three of us were going to paddle the Middle Fork of the Flathead for three days. The river was beautiful, pristine Class IV whitewater with grizzly scat in the camps and good fishing. But I was even more impressed with the flight in. We sailed in on a Cessna 206 through a notch in the mountains close enough to see the tracks of elk trailing through the fresh snow of a windswept spur. When our pilot landed he hugged the black timber of a ridge, checked the runway for browsing elk and deer, banked steeply, and pushed hard down into a bumpy strip that ended at the cone of a steep hill. It was spectacular. I remembered how in Alaska, when I'd run rivers, flying in had almost been my favorite part then, too. Up there, bush pilots were the heroes of the backcountry, and stories about their exploits were as common around campfires as tales of bears.

I asked Kyle, the pilot from Red Eagle Aviation, how a guy could learn to fly bush planes in the shortest time possible. He had a smoke-graveled voice and a Tom Selleck mustache. "Aw, give me three weeks and five grand and we'll get her done," Kyle winked.

He seemed only half serious. I wasn't. Not long ago I called Red Eagle again. For mountain flying there's no better place to learn. Dave Hoerner, who used to own the company and is still its chief pilot, agreed to put together a program for me. One of the nation's top wildlife pilots, Hoerner wrote the book on bush flying. It's called *Advanced Mountain Flying Techniques*. He has logged 30,000 flight hours in the mountains, probably more than anyone else.

"I want to get a private license with an emphasis on mountain flying," I said.

"We're in Kalispell, Montana. It's all mountain flying."

"Okay."

I blocked out three weeks, checked into the Aero Inn, which backs up to the airfield, and prepared for full immersion. A private license requires 40 hours of flight time. Most people take a year or more of lessons for that alone. I'd do that and the ground school simultaneously, all in the extreme context of mountain flying. I'd go up two or three times a day. I'd study at night. I prayed I'd be a natural. I wasn't.

DAVE HOERNER WAS GASSING UP HIS CESSNA 185 the morning I met him. It's a powerful single-engine six-seater that's been modified to fly slowly without stalling and to land on short patches of ground. He can circle tightly over one wing at 50 knots, when most planes would simply drop out of the sky. On a good day he only needs 200 feet of runway to land.

Hoerner is beefy, in his mid-50s, compact, and ox strong. He grew up here; he was a logger for about a decade and dropped one of the biggest trees ever taken out of these parts. "There was enough board for three houses in that one tree," he says. One day he passed the local flight school, got a wild hair, and signed up. That's all it took. He started spending a good chunk of his paycheck on lessons and flight time. "I might as well have been sticking a needle in my arm," he says. "I told my wife, 'I've gotta find a way to keep doing this to make a living.' "

He entered a niche — radio telemetry, tracking collared animals from the air — that few others did because it was too dangerous. You had to fly into country so rugged that you might never be found if you crashed. You had to fly low and slow, and your best emergency landing spot might be the tops of heedless pines. In the summers he flies helicopters in Alaska, taking fishermen into canyons most pilots won't go near.

I peered into the back of the plane.

“Those backseats can be removed,” Hoerner said. “I can fit seven adult wolves in there, stacked like cordwood.”

“Wolves?”

“Once I had a boar grizzly we were moving from Schafer. He was so big, his head rested against my leg. He’d been darted — conscious, but it makes them so they can’t move a muscle. I was taxiing for takeoff, and I looked down, and he wrinkled his nose. Just like that. Not good. Then he made kind of a grunt. I slammed on the brakes, ran around, opened the side door, and hauled him out onto the ground. He got up, looked back at me, and walked off. He didn’t look too happy.”

Hoerner was about to take a biologist on a three-hour flight tracking wolves and asked if I wanted to come. Mountain flying is serious business. Hoerner threw his camo pack in the back; it holds an extra locating beacon, a .454 pistol, a two-way radio, a blanket, and strobe lights.

“What’s the pistol for?”

“Mostly for me, you know,” he smiled. “Case I break a leg.”

That’s along with a duffel holding enough camping gear and food for weeks. He has all his young pilots do the same. Nobody’s being overcautious. Four years ago a pilot flew out of Kalispell to Schafer Meadows carrying four Forest Service rangers. Hoerner had just done the same route and radioed back for them not to go. “It wasn’t very good. Turbulent, cloud cover. But he went.” The pilot hit a downdraft, and his wing clipped a cliff. He and two rangers died; the others spent two days walking out, badly injured. Five years before that two businessmen from nearby Polson went wide into the mountains on their approach to Glacier International Airport. “The government spent 700 flight hours looking for them,” Hoerner says. He then located them in seven days. “See, I knew where the bears were. That’s how I found the carcasses.”

On September 4, 2004, the dangers of bush flying hit much closer to home. Hoerner and his son Ryan, 31, also a pilot, were up in Alaska, about to buy a fly-in fishing lodge that they would run together. “He went flying, and I went fishing,” Hoerner says. Ryan’s PA-12 dropped out of the sky and augered into the ground. He and their business partner were killed instantly. No one ever figured out conclusively what happened, but Hoerner believes it was a broken elevator cable.

One of the first things he showed me when I walked into his office was a picture of Ryan holding a bow and hunkered over the biggest moose I’d ever seen. He was a handsome kid, with his father’s square face and frank expression. “Third biggest ever taken with a bow,” Hoerner said proudly. He turned and looked out the glass door. It had been two years, but he was just coming out of it. “Tell you the truth, I don’t know what I’ve done for two years.” Initially after the accident Hoerner didn’t know if he would ever fly again. “He was my best friend.”

We climbed into the 185 and strapped in. We flew straight over the winding bends of the North Fork of the Flathead, a yellow vein of turning poplars flowing through the dark timber. Ahead were the rock crags and pyramid peaks of Glacier National Park, as forbidding a mountainscape as I’d ever seen. Fresh snow dusted the summits, etching the ledges and covering the glaciers that had broken apart in milky lakes. This is not a place where you ever want your plane to quit working.

We flew level with ridges of razored stone. Nobody spoke. We were listening hard to the static in the headsets. Then, very faint, the pulse of a beep, a radio signal in the blizzard of sound. It was a wolf, calling out from below. The biologist, Kent Laudon, locked onto the frequency with his transmitter box. “It’s a female,” he said. “Could have a pup.”

Hoerner flew with a toggle switch in his left hand, the same hand with which he gripped the yoke and flew the plane. On the little black box there are three positions: left, right, and both. As he flew he reflexively toggled back and forth. The beep was louder in the right position, so that’s the direction he turned the plane. Within 10 minutes we were circling a peak called Circus, and the beep was loud and percussive.

“Right down in that basin, don’t you think?” Hoerner said. It was a rhetorical question. Hoerner can follow these signals better than anyone alive. He pushed the yoke forward and swooped down fast below the ridgeline, then tipped the plane over the right wing and tightened the circle. We were flying nearly on edge, spiraling over one wing.

“See that bull elk,” Hoerner said calmly, looking down, past Laudon, out the window to the ground. “Just below that silver snag? Come 200 yards this side of it, right on that knob.” Just as he said it four gangly wolves trotted off the little spur. I had never seen a wolf. They were tall,

WIEN, REEVE, GILLAM: ALASKA AVIATION HERITAGE MUSEUM; SHELDON: GREY VILLET/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

LEGENDS OF THE SKIES

Bush pilots have a long and colorful history. Here are the greatest of all time — a group of renegades, college cast-outs, and circus performers. *by* ABRAHAM STREEP

NOEL WIEN
Considered the father of modern bush flying, Wien began his career performing in stunt planes with a barnstorming circus in the Midwest. He moved to Alaska in 1924 and shuttled previously dogsled-bound gold prospectors between Fairbanks and Nome in his World War I biplane. Nicknamed the Lindbergh of the North, Wien made the first round-trip flight between Alaska and Asia, then went on to found Alaska’s first commercial airline.

ROBERT REEVE
Reeve learned to fly in Texas after being discharged from the army and expelled from college. In 1932, after a stint pioneering airline routes in South America, he stowed away on a steamer bound for Alaska. He arrived broke, but after rebuilding a wrecked biplane he flew supplies from Valdez to remote gold mines. He pioneered the concept of attaching skis to planes, allowing him to land on glaciers and service mountainside mines year-round.

DON SHELDON
Colorado-born Sheldon made his living by transporting, supplying, and, when necessary, rescuing mountaineers from the glaciers of Mount McKinley. In 1955 he spotted eight army soldiers stranded in the glacier-fed Susitna River. He flew upstream, landed in a 30 mph current, floated backward over the rapids, hauled the first soldier out of the river, spun his plane around, and repeated the maneuver three more times, saving all of them.

HAROLD GILLAM
In the 1930s Alaskan pilots referred to three types of weather: good, bad, and “Gillam” — conditions in which only Harold would fly. He arrived in Alaska at 20 and shuttled prospectors by air to Kennecott. In 1943, the man known as Thrill ’Em, Spill ’Em, But Never Kill ’Em Gillam crashed into a remote mountainside. After building snow shelters for four other survivors, he set off for help. He died of exposure, but rescuers saved the passengers.

Taking off on short dirt strips offers little margin for error (note trees, mountains), left; the author doing his preflight inspection.

On my first landing we came in yawing like a deranged mallard. We hit so hard the plane bounced; rose into the air about 15 feet, which is called ballooning; stalled; and clunked down with another teeth-jarring jolt.

"I hope I get better at those," I said after we'd rolled to a stop.

"Me, too," he said.

That night, eating grilled chicken at Scotty's across the road, I thought about how surprised, almost shocked I was when I saw the runway rising up and heard the urgent call to straighten her up. *Now!* It occurred to me that almost everything I had learned and loved in my adult life — kayaking, surfing — involved at the beginning a kinesthetic testing of the limits, a wipeout, another try. Flying is not like that. There is zero margin for error. If you don't straighten out that nose, if you don't flare early enough, you wreck. It was like trying to learn to kayak with Class V consequences. The sense of responsibility, of exacting discipline, was almost overwhelming.

THIS IS SERIOUS BUSINESS. HOERNER CARRIES STROBE LIGHTS, FOOD FOR WEEKS, AND A .454 PISTOL. A PISTOL? "CASE I BREAK A LEG."

lanky, all leg. They flopped down in the shade of a big spruce and ignored the drone of the plane circling a hundred feet overhead. They looked over at the big bull elk and thought about it.

MY OWN FLYING BEGAN LATER that morning. A quiet, very accomplished 21-year-old named Eric Komberec took me out for the initial two hours. The first weird thing is that when you taxi down the tarmac, you steer with the rudder pedals. I wove back and forth like a drunk. "Slow down," Eric said, and I pushed on the throttle knob instead of pulling it, almost accelerating us into the parking lot of an adjacent grocery store. Dang. Somehow Komberec got me lined up on the runway, and we took off. I pulled hard back on the yoke, and the nose went to the sky. Eric yelled into the mike, "Not so hard; push it over! You'll climb so fast you'll stall her." He slid his eyes over to me. "Right?" he smiled.

"Right."

Once up, it was fun. Gentle banked turns. Keeping altitude with a combination of the yoke, the power, and the little trim wheel that helps hold the pitch. "Power for altitude, pitch for airspeed," Komberec kept saying, whatever that meant. My left hand crushed the horn of the yoke. I was afraid, not of crashing and dying but of doing everything wrong. Landing was another story altogether. "I'll take the first one, walk you through it," Eric said. "We always land upwind, right?"

Holy shit. How many things can a single person on a Danish and two cups of coffee keep track of at once?

Hoerner took me out the next day. Learning to fly from Dave Hoerner is like learning to hit a tennis ball from Roger Federer. It really shouldn't happen. He took me south along Flathead Lake, letting me feel out the controls and take in the country. He also started making me aware of what happens in the mountains. He told me to think of wind as a river. "The ridgetop there, that's like rocks in the river. The wind tumbles along it, creates turbulence." He showed me the lens-shaped clouds just off the Swans and told me how you didn't want to go near them, that they meant very high winds. He showed how you could look at the surface of a mountain lake, how if one edge was slick and the other textured the wind was moving away from the calm.

There was a country airstrip in the town of Polson we could see ahead, down at the edge of the lake. He talked me through the landing. The whole sequence. I banked over the lake and came in on final.

"We high or low?" he asked.

"High, way high."

"Okay, go around." The way he said it was like I'd messed up. I circled around, banking up to the left.

"Jesus!" he cried. "Don't horse it!" He turned his body. His shoulders seemed way too big for the cockpits of little planes. "You drive a motorcycle, don't you?" I nodded. "And a pickup?" I nodded. "This is not a bike or a truck; this is a bird. Little adjustments. Happy feet on the pedals."

I came in again. We hit, cocked sideways, bounced.

"That was atrocious!" he said. He smiled. "You'll get it." I wondered if I would.

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That night, lying in the Aero Inn, listening to a small plane land way after dark, I went through the landing sequence again and again in my mind, the whole deal, from entering the pattern to touching down. All the movements, sight pictures, gauges. How could I ever land at Schafer Meadows, the grass strip down in the river bottom, guarded by hills, if I couldn't even grease a wide-open airport runway?

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS I REALLY learned to fly. I met Tim Kimmel, another Red Eagle instructor, at 6:30 most mornings, and we took off in the cold half light of dawn. I flew again at noon and again at three or four. I drank coffee at Red Eagle and listened to customers approach the front desk with requests uncommon at city airports. One man wanted to hire a helicopter to find a horse he lost in the Great Bear Wilderness. The next wanted to go into the Bob Marshall Wilderness to look for a dog who strayed during a hunting trip. The third asked if Red Eagle could move his cabin with a chopper and a hook. "It's a small cabin," he said, rubbing his stubble. "Kinda small."

The boys took me to grass strips in the valley with names such as Sky Ranch and Ferndale and taught me to come down onto grass fields holding the nose up to slow her down. No brakes, absolutely no brakes on an unpaved field; they could skid you out of control. They taught me to take off from the same fields by raising the nose earlier and then pushing down on the yoke to make the Cessna scream up the strip: 90 mph, three feet off the ground. The first time Eric demonstrated, I thought we'd take out the pole fence at the end.

They taught me how to fly with full flaps, slower and slower, high over a lake, pulling the nose up more and more steeply while the stall horn wailed, until the plane shuddered and started to fall out of the sky. And they taught me how to push forward on the yoke to break the stall.

Nothing else in my life demanded this much precision. The combination of the technical and the divine went straight into the bloodstream. I loved the moment just before takeoff. The plane vibrated on the tarmac. You aimed your eyes down the centerline of the runway, which ended in a clump of trees. Beyond that the wall of mountains. You took a breath and pushed the heel of your right hand against the knob of the throttle and shoved it all the way to the dashboard. The Cessna shuddered with a catastrophic roar and leapt forward like a horse out of the gates. I loved it all.

Everything but my landings. My landings still sucked. The instructors soloed me on day 8, after 15 hours: three laps of the airport, three landings on my own, and I did fine, but after that the landings got spotty again, and they wouldn't let me fly alone. I felt demoted. I took a day off and went fishing up on the Flathead. It felt good to wade into the river chilled by the near-freezing nights and throw hoppers. I caught a fish. But I still felt low.

ON DAY 11, ERIC DECIDED TO FIX IT. HE told me to show up after dinner, after full dark. We taxied to the south end of the runway. We could see the lights of town at the far end, the white glow of a football stadium just north of the airfield. I clicked the mike button five times, and all the runway lights lit up.

We took off in the inky black. I aimed straight for the flashing beacon of Glacier International 10 miles off across the dark fields. Ahead, the runway, almost two miles long, was etched out of the blackness, edged with white lights, its center marked with a brilliant tab of lamps extending from the end. It looked like some nocturnal heaven for pilots.

"Now just land the bastard," Eric said in his laconic way.

It was corollary to a mountain flying motto called the Three F's: Fly the Fucker First. Meaning, above all else, fly the plane, all the way to the ground. If you have to, forget the instruments, the rules.

There was something about all the darkness that was a kind of quiet. The dim cockpit and the singleness of purpose expressed in two miles of landing lights lit just for you. I floated her down and kissed the pavement.

"Good job, now take off."

We climbed out steeply, and when I banked around to the left there she was again, twinkling, our own private La Guardia. This time, Eric reached over and shut off all the instrument lights. "Whoops," he said, "must've blown a fuse."

I don't know why, but I felt a rush of glee. No more needles in gauges unwinding counterclockwise. No more feet per minute, no numbers at all. I suddenly felt free.

I lined up with the lights and brought her down like a 2,000-pound feather. We did it again and again.

"Let's go home," Eric finally said. "You did excellent. It's all gonna come together now."

OVER THE NEXT WEEK I PRACTICED EVERYthing, over and over. As I relaxed more, I noticed more from the air. I liked how as soon as you lifted off, the world perfected itself. How a herd of sheep clumped for feeding looked like a big tuft of wool, how a trailer park in a spoked array was neat and lovely. From up here the world was clean, ordered, pristine, with the kind of removed perspective you get in a painting. The houses and trailers leaned neatly into their own shadows. Junkyards composed themselves. Cars went up the road as though that was exactly what they were meant to do. It was the strange allure of electric train sets. The idealized earth.

Once, flying back to the airport over town, Hoerner dipped his left wing and said, "My daughter Bree is at her boyfriend's house."

"You can see her car?"

He looked over at me and smiled broadly. "It ain't fair, is it?"

I kept flying with Hoerner into the backcountry, tracking animals. One morning we walked out to his 185, and he said, "Climb in. I'll show you my new place." We flew up the valley and he landed on a bumpy grass strip about as long as three tennis courts: his personal airfield. His new place turned out to be a three-plane hangar with living quarters attached, with big views of the mountains. Two chocolate Labs bounded around us. I laughed. The man who lives with planes. In the polished concrete floor was a broad etching of a set of moose antlers. "My boy's," he said of the horns depicted. "I'll hang 'em right up there."

The next morning, over ham and eggs, Hoerner told me, "If I had to do it over, I wouldn't have taught Ryan to fly." We ate in silence. Finally he said, "It brought it home to me. There's such a fine line between life and death. What I did the other day, flying wolverines, was pushing that line. You do everything in your power to give yourself the best chance." Sounded like a clean and simple philosophy. I thought, Of course you would teach your son to fly. In a hundred lives we would teach our kids to do what we loved and pray for the best.

On October 9, on my 15th day of flying, Hoerner pulled the gleaming red and white Cessna 206 out of the hangar. The day was cold, maybe 38 degrees, good heavy air for flying. "We'll take this today," he said. It wasn't insured for training, so he took the left seat, but he let me fly it through the gap in the Swans. He tapped his hand toward the south. I turned, and we crossed the Flathead Range and entered the Great Bear Wilderness.

"See it?" he said.

It was there, Schafer Meadows, a smooth grass rectangle cut out of the forest. Beaver Hill, a wooded cone, blocked the runway, but I knew it was there. I dropped the plane just over the trees toward it, leveling off as the grass rushed up, and then I flared, pulling back on the yoke, all the way to the chest.The plane settled gently, bumping over the ruts in the runway, slowing fast. I pulled off by a pole fence.

Hoerner turned to me. "Nice flare," he said. It was the first compliment he'd ever given me. We got out to stretch. "I hate to say it, Pete," he said, "but you did really good." He grinned. The wind lulled for a second, and it carried the fragrance of fallen leaves and fir trees. I looked at the master mountain pilot.

"Thanks," I said. In two days I would take my solo cross-country and meet old Wayne Baer, then two or three after that pass my check ride and get my private pilot's license. But this is the moment I would remember.

Hoerner looked back at me. "You're hooked now, ain't you, Pete?" I nodded. "Well, then we better go put the fear of God into you." We climbed back into the plane and took off. MJ