



# Flying the Rim

## Chapter 5

### Navajo Country

*Every time I fly, I experience another dimension of existence, no longer tied to the earth. I feel free—free of gravity, free of everything. It's the greatest feeling in the world.*

—Forever Flying, R. A. “Bob” Hoover

A fine mist drifted across the runway, as McCary and I departed Grants, New Mexico , to establish temporary residence in St. George , Utah , where the abundance of Shinarump ledges would keep us busy for weeks.

The Navajo Indian Reservation occupies an immense territory, which extends from Farmington , New Mexico , westerly for 200 miles to the boundary of Grand Canyon National Monument . From north to south as the crow flies, the distance is 140 miles, give or take a few. From the GooseNecks of the San Juan River to the Painted Desert lies a country of formidable and awesome beauty called Land of the Sleeping Rainbow by the Navajo Indians.

In the middle of the Navajo Reservation stands the Hopi Reservation. Like a hole made by a rock crashing through a plate glass window, it appears on the map to be formed by jagged edges of broken glass. Looking down through this imaginary splintered hole, you can see the darkly weathered pueblos clustered on the fingers of high plateaus. They are still occupied by the Hopi Indians, just as they were 300 years before Columbus sailed from Spain on his epic voyage of discovery.

The land itself looms like a vast, stormy ocean. Scalloped hills are whitecaps breaking on the surface of rolling plateaus that form the ground swells. A pilot flying westbound from Window Rock, the Navajo tribal headquarters, is an adventurer setting sail from a rockbound shore.

We flew beneath a solid overcast following the Santa Fe tracks to Gallup . From there we headed northwest to Window Rock, crossing the Defiance Plateau and detouring south around a squall line through light rain into the clear. Crossing the north leg of Winslow Radio Range seventy miles out, I made a ground speed check, switched off the radio, and hung the headset on its hook.

The Kaibab Plateau juts southward like the prow of a ship to form the north rim of the Grand Canyon . The prow forces the Colorado River to loop far south before it turns west and plunges deep into the canyon.

An airplane driver approaching from the east sees the Kaibab only as a swelling on the horizon, though it rises more than 9000 feet above sea level at the southerly end. Our destination lay seventy-five miles beyond those imposing heights. Whether we could reach that destination would depend on my skill in maneuvering around the weather that lay ahead. Off in the distance it seemed like the entire horizon extending in an arc from the north end of the plateau to the distant terraces of the Grand Canyon stood black and menacing. Each mile brought us closer to reality. The Kaibab was hopelessly socked in.

Dark clouds swept down over forested slopes. I turned to McCary and shook my head. He pointed south at a bank of dirty gray clouds trailing long, lazy stringers of rain. No use going that way. I fumbled for the map, holding it up and jabbing a finger at the Marble Canyon airstrip, twenty miles north. But McCary was preoccupied watching a double-cell storm, close abeam, playing a game of cat and mouse as it swung in from the northeast across our line of retreat.

I racked the Super Cub around in a steep right turn, sliced down between the two storm cells, and burst through a veil of rain, nose down, gaining speed with a clear view north where I could see the airstrip, a long scuff mark near the base of a 2000-foot-high cliff. I was about to heave a sigh of relief; instead, I swallowed my chewing gum. One of those ugly dark thunderstorms squatted over the cliffs like a sumo wrestler. Fascinated, we watched the rain sheeting down and water spilling off the cliffs in torrents. The thing moved slowly toward the airstrip, deluging the earth with an ocean of water. Which of us would get there first?

I palmed the stick forward, cranked in nose down trim, edged the airspeed up to 120, and followed the highway with 10 miles to go. Dust boiled on the far side of the airstrip. Other cells formed to the east dropping rain out of the cloud base. A streak of lightning zigzagged across the nose, scalding the ground below. I squeezed the throttle back, wasting speed down to sixty. Turbulence pounded on the wings. I banked into a vicious cross wind. White lightning barbs sizzled through the charged air, and dense rain churned up a sea of red mud north of the strip.

A gust hammered us sideways as I lined up on final. I jammed the wing down, stopped the drift, slid into a down draft, and panicked full throttle. An updraft slammed the tail skyward. I jerked off the throttle and yanked on the flaps. Violent buffeting seesawed the nose and rattled the instrument panel. Four hundred feet over the field boundary a blast of rain whipped the windshield. The Super Cub yawed wildly. I torqued the wings level and muscled us down a jerky descent path, smacking the ground on one wheel, bouncing and hopscotching along the strip. I curled the stick back in my gut and nearly stuck both feet through the floor panels standing on brakes and rudder pedals.

“I’ve got the ropes!” yelled McCary leaping to the ground.

I cut the engine and followed him out the door, bracing myself for the storm's onslaught. We worked fast, holding struts against bucking winds, ramming rope ends through metal rings, looping them around a rusty cable staked to the ground, stretching hard, and cinching tight. I caught the cowl cover tossed over the top and passed the line underneath to McCary—twice more, hard knots, both sides. Last thing, I slammed the door, latched the handle, and turned to run for cover.

Light raindrops pecked at the dust. The humid air seemed strangely quiet. High overhead, dark stains tarnished the sandstone cliffs, but the cascading waterfalls had dried to a trickle. We stood there for a moment gazing after the thunderstorm slowly receding in the west.

Down the highway at the Navajo Trading Post we straddled the counter stools. McCary joked with the waitress and struck up a conversation with a stranger while I sat quietly studying the pies on the glass shelf behind the counter.

"Does your quiet friend want anything to eat?" the waitress was asking.

McCary's elbow nudged my ribs. "How about a piece of pie, Hotrod?"

"Boysenberry," I answered. "The boysenberry looks good."

"It's blackberry," she countered.

"Blackberry's okay." I propped my chin in the palm of my hand. "And a refill on the coffee, please."

In the afternoon we slipped out of Marble, hugging the ground up House Rock Valley and ducking over the Kaibab, unnoticed by roving thunderstorms looking for other innocent victims.

Broken cumulus clouds drifted overhead. A north wind raked the clouds, pulling the woolly sheep south and leaving the fluffy lambs to play. I turned in my seat to catch McCary with his nose pressed to the window, muttering strange incantations as he stared at the juniper covered terraces that spread westerly from Kanab. "Chinle," he was saying. "Shinarump. Moenkopi. Its all there."

St. George, Utah, offered a choice of two airfields. We preferred the smaller one with short gravel runways on a basalt mesa overlooking the town. A neat row of fruit trees shaded a metal hangar from the afternoon sun. White-trimmed windows gave it a homey touch.

The airport was tidy if not threadbare, reflecting the personality of its proprietor, Glen Haren, a diminutive phantom who materialized at the sound of balloon tires crunching on

the gravel. He worked on airframes and engines in a kind of spiritual isolation. Wearing spotless tan coveralls that seemed to be treated with a magic grease repellent, he neither whistled, sang, nor swore. Occasionally a listener standing motionless inside the hangar door, like a hunter in the forest, could hear the faint clink of a wrench. We trusted Glen to keep the Super Cub flying. His bills, like his habits, were spare.

For ground transportation, the company owned a jeep wagon. It was cared for by Harold Rhoades, former paratrooper and recent assay chemist with Climax Uranium Company. Rhoades treated the jeep like a temperamental mule with kind words, daily grooming, and sometimes a good cussing out. Between them a splendid love-hate relationship developed.

“It’ll go anywhere,” Rhoades boasted in his falsetto rocky mountain twang. He drove it up a steep, rocky hillside in four-wheel-drive and dented the oil pan. In a fit of remorse he fashioned a protective shield of quarter-inch steel plate and fastened it under the frame. The jeep responded to this act of kindness by high-centering on a dirt road. It had to be winched off.

Warm air thermals made rim flying bumpy at best and impossible after mid-morning. McCary and I did most of the flying; Rhoades and Marrs drove the jeep. We usually ordered breakfast in Dick’s All Night Cafe at 4:30 in the morning.

“Honeypot, how about a stack of hot cakes?” McCary gave his best leer. The waitress glowered, scribbled the orders, and started a fracas in the kitchen with the cook. The drab couple across the counter seemed sullen and morose. All the cheerful folks were still in bed.

On the mesa we moved the Super Cub from the hangar onto the concrete apron with the aid of jeep headlights. Under starlight, surrounded by darkness and stroked by a soft breeze, we shed the sour mood and felt the excitement of flying.

I reached forward in the violet glow of the cockpit light to uncage the gyro horizon, to set it free in a manner of speaking.

“Let’s go, Hotrod,” said McCary, tapping my shoulder. “What are we waiting for?”

I nudged the throttle and taxied into the darkness, wondering about McCary and his uninhibited ways. I liked him for his independence and generosity. He never spoke unkindly of another human being. He wasn’t offended by rudeness nor bothered by the washed-out people in Dick’s Cafe.

Outside, pulsating splashes of ruby and jade washed the ground under the wing tips. The runway was a catapult, slamming us backward against the seat and hurling the Super Cub over a black void, where we drifted above the Virgin River, catching the sparkle of a quarter moon on its crude oil surface.

Above the shadowy hills far to the east an iridescent glow spread across the sky chasing the darkness from every canyon and crevice. It flowed upward, touching the picture clouds with a rose pastel. It reached out in long, fiery traces flaring the hilltops like crown fire. It exploded over the rim of the mountain with an emerald bubble, which burst to fill the world with a lake of fire. In a moment, in the blink of an eye, the searing fire faded to the stain of red wine poured on the ground; the blazing sun turned to a gold disc swinging in the tourmaline sky; and the thunderous dawn left in its aftermath the haunting mystery of creation.

The layer of sediment, missing in New Mexico, the middle of the cookie according to Marris, was all around, but dog days of rim flying failed to uncover pay dirt. One evening with Marris riding in the back seat of the Super Cub chattering his usual magpie chatter, I peered into the gathering dusk, wondering what exactly I was looking for.

“Out there! Can’t you see it?”

“See what?”

“A channel!”

I banked around in a circle, fingers working the throttle, losing a little altitude, snapping the wings level, and skidding close up against the rim. “Show me.”

“Just ahead, behind all that brush.” He held up the scintillator, pointing it out the side window. “Good. Right there. Got a rise!”

“You sure?”

“I think so.”

It was too dark for another pass.

The next morning the four of us with Rhoades driving took the jeep down dusty wheel tracks as far as it would go. We abandoned the jeep and climbed to a ledge where the Shinarump stood exposed in a vertical cliff filled with smooth, rounded cobblestones cemented together in a matrix of sand and clay.

Marris and I went ahead. We stopped to examine a pocket of blue copper oxide crystals and shiny bits of carbon. Marris cupped his hands.

“It’s a pothole,” he explained. “Debris from an ancient stream settled in there. Leaves, twigs, decaying matter. The carbon is all that’s left.”

We hurried on, following the channel as it dipped down behind dense brush.

“This is where uranium salts would settle out,” said Marris breathless and excited.

Behind us, McCary and Rhoades, probing with the Geiger counter, moved at a tortoise's pace.

We leaned against the cliff, out of the hot sun, and waited. Marris shuffled his feet at a lizard. It scurried into a crevice, leaving tiny footprints in the sand. I swatted at flies and listened to the whisper of a high-flying jet long passed.

Whish! A sound like an arrow in flight caught my ear. I look up. Twenty feet above, a white-throated swift streaked along the edge of the rim in an updraft of air. High overhead its companion plummeted toward us with swept-back wings hugging its feathery body. As each bird recovered from a dive, it raced above the cliffs, climbed for altitude, rolled over, and tumbled down again with a piercing shriek of joyous laughter.

Soon we heard footsteps, muffled voices, and the sound of sizzling bacon. McCary came into view holding the Geiger counter.

“You've got something!”

His face was impassive. Rhoades dragged behind. McCary squatted and set the instrument between his legs. He fumbled a wooden match from his shirt pocket, struck it on the lid and lit a cigarette.

“That's only background noise.” He blew a cloud of smoke and shoved the Geiger counter under an overhang shielded from the sun. “See?” The sizzle went out of the bacon.

Marris left us for a job with an oil company, but not before capturing the heart of at least one young woman in town whose acquaintance he made while putting through a long-distance phone call. She was an operator on the local exchange. They arranged to meet in front of the movie house. That was just for starters. He took her out in the jeep on top of the mesa, where they played grab-ass on a blanket. Watching him leave I had to confess a certain admiration at his ability to charm the socks of practically any girl.

McCary and I took off westerly from St. George toward Caliente, Nevada, away from the morning sun, scouting for Shinarump in a brittle region of dry lakes and sparse sagebrush. Spinning out miles we stared through thin haze at variegated patterns until, looking down, we saw a group of buildings crowded along the highway and the railroad like tumbleweeds next to a sandy wash lined with cottonwood trees.

I jabbed a finger and yelled at McCary, “Caliente. There's nothing out here.” He nodded agreement.

I pulled through in a steep turn, leveled the wings on a reverse heading, and grasped the aluminum tubing that framed the windshield, stretching and looking down at the barren

Nevada mountains. The Super Cub dropped a wing and began drifting off course. My fingers fastened around the stick and eased it back.

Deep within its pistons the Lycoming thudded a heartbeat. Plugs sparked. Gas exploded. Valves chirped. Nozzles trilled. Fluids flowed burbling and gurgling. Air rushed, hissing and gasping. Sound amplified with clicking and chafing of metal moving with whirring and humming of shafts spinning.

Engine noise stands at the gate like a guard dog, its steady growl keeping trouble at bay. My ear is attuned to its pitch. I know it will warn me with a change in tone, a sharp bark, a rise or fall in its rhythm. Some might urge me to insulate the cockpit, seal out the noise, quiet the engine. But I like an engine's song. I want those sound waves stroking my ears. I respect that somnolent snore, and I listen to it with pleasure.