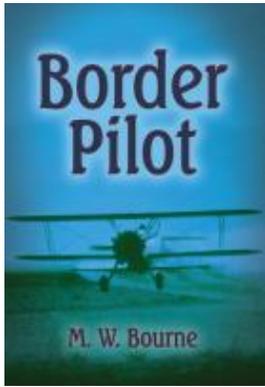


Border Pilot



M. W. Bourne



This is the story of a crop-duster pilot. It tells how he came to follow that trade, and of the life he led along the Texas/Mexico border. It is the story of reckless years spent without plan or caution, and the glories and pitfalls of agricultural flying. It is an account of how one man used up a few years of his life in that untamed land along the Rio Grande River. A tale of airplanes, and men, and a way of life that is now gone forever. There are many different ways a man can go about making a living in this old world. Some are stranger than others. But, flying old airplanes under high line wires at 100 miles per hour all day long has got to be the strangest of all...

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Second Edition

Chapter 1

Night Flight

The sun had slipped away and the night had turned against me. That old airplane was leaking like a pecan tree. I was banging along in a high wing PA-18 not a hundred feet above the ground, with the rain pelting against its worn fabric skin and pouring into the cockpit around the plexiglass window in the top of the center section. In what seemed like a matter of minutes, the temperature had dropped about 25 degrees.

The overcast was ragged and boiling, and as I blundered on into the night I dropped down to about 75 feet above the ground. I was following a highway I knew well, over country that I knew like the back of my hand. Still, it was a little disconcerting the way the blackness of the scrub oak reached up for that wind-stomped airplane.

I should never have launched out on that flight. I hadn't bothered to check the weather. I was probably the only man in the State of Texas who didn't know that a few days earlier an ocean of cold air had come rolling off the arctic ice cap and was now sweeping everything before it from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico. I was now flying right square into the leading edge of a Texas Blue Norther that was slamming into a warm, moisture-laden Gulf air mass. Ignorant of these events, my mind heavy with the routine problems of my daily work, I had climbed into that old airplane and headed north to Crystal City.

Slowly it occurred to me that only a fool would be sitting up there in an airplane on a night like that. But there I was. That's just *exactly* what I was doing. Just sitting there, getting knocked around all over the place by the wind, staring into the lighting-slashed darkness and choking the stick fit to kill.

"What am I *doing* here", I kept asking myself? I had good sense. I had been flying airplanes for years. This was the very sort of insanity that got pilots killed, and I knew it. This was killing weather. This was the kind of foolhardiness that gave aviation a bad name.

As I tried to keep out of the overcast, and keep the airplane right-side-up, I was desperately searching for a suitable spot to safely put her down. I realized that the scene was playing out exactly like the first page of one of the many National Transportation Safety Board accident reports I had read. "This is how some idiot got himself killed," they all read between the lines. Because I was so familiar with the country I was flying over I knew that my only hope was to stick like a leech to that highway. I knew that all the country on either side was rough and desolate brush country, and that making a forced landing away from that highway would have been like going down at sea. It had become evident even to my addled brain that I was going to have to put that airplane on the ground. And pretty soon.

As I searched into the darkness of the night, and into the gloom within my mind, I found that the fear was matched only by the disgust of having let myself blunder into yet another losing situation.

Real pilots, like Rosco Turner, Terry and The Pirates, or Chuck Yeager, would have known just what to do. They would have become steely-eyed, and done something heroic. They would have landed safely in some barnyard and graciously accepted an invitation to join in the family meal. After dinner, they would have sat before the open hearth, smiled at the farmer's daughter, and told stirring tales of flight.

But not me. I was a tramp crop-duster pilot. Scared to death. Soaked with cold rain. I wanted on the ground!

Because I knew that country so well, I knew that I was approaching a 200 foot radio tower about five miles ahead. I knew it was located about 100 yards off the east side of the highway. Although I was sure it was at least five miles ahead, I still had gumption enough to keep on the west side of that highway. And the west side was

closing in. I was starting to be forced to alter my course in a zig-zag sort of way around the rain squalls and low-hanging clouds.

As I fought the airplane deeper into the turbulence the scattered rain showers in front of me started coming together. Soon they became a solid wall of black water. I knew that time was running out.

I knew that I could not allow myself to lose visual contact with the ground even for a few seconds. That old airplane had never been equipped with blind flying instruments, and at present had little more instrumentation than a poorly-calibrated magnetic compass and an airspeed indicator that worked now and then.

I knew that airplane would soon be on the ground, and I resolved to fly it to the

ground as the pilot, as opposed to being later described as the man found "still strapped into the pilot's seat." I bit down the panic rising in my throat.

I knew I could no longer fly north. I knew I could not chance moving to the east side of the highway. I pressed lower, and began a careful turn to the right. The blackness had closed in behind me. My turn moved me over the highway, which was really only a narrow, hilly, twisting, little Farm and Ranch Road with telephone lines crowding one edge, and concrete buttresses marking the culverts at every little low spot. That road was dead cross-ways to a gale force wind.

Subconsciously, I abandoned my plan of getting the airplane on the ground in one piece. I knew that I was way past the time for making wise decisions. I knew I had run out of options. My goal now was to get the airplane on the ground, and still be able to walk out and find a telephone.

I knew that I had rather take my chances putting her down into the wind, and into the brush, than taking a wild stab at that narrow little strip of asphalt. As that road sailed below me I could see that I was dead down wind. I knew that the only plan I had left was to

continue the turn 180°, cross back over the asphalt at a 90° angle, roll-out dead ahead into the wind, and put that airplane down straight ahead into whatever blackness fate was going to toss up at me.

The reader should understand that I was not a man who had fully discounted the power of prayer, for I had not. I just hadn't had much luck with it. I had long since given up the idea of offering up overly ambitious prayers. They simply hadn't worked for me. Which, no doubt, at least partially explained how I had come to be a tramp crop-duster pilot in South Texas. So that night, my prayer was very modest. I think it went something like this:

"Lord, I know I'm the biggest jackass you ever let live, and I promise I won't keep asking for these little favors. But could you help me out just one more time?"

Perhaps He agreed, although it is presumptuous of me to imagine that He even bothered. But when I slid back over that little strip of asphalt, a lacing network of fire right outside my windshield revealed a long open path not 100 yards to my left where the bulldozers had scratched out a jagged right-of-way.

I kicked and fought the aircraft over where it needed to be, chopped the throttle,

and dove for that long, twisted space. I knew that my airspeed was much too high for touchdown, but I also knew that I had to make immediate contact with the ground. I no longer had any visual references, and vertigo had taken me by the throat. My last intelligent thought was that I was drifting much too fast to the left. I had either grossly misjudged the wind, or it had abruptly changed. Just as I slammed her into rough alignment and tried to spike one wheel against the ground, the world went black.

I hit hard. I didn't even flare. I just flew her flat against the earth, ricocheted like a hockey puck, busted through a knot of wind that wanted to roll me inverted, and slammed the throttle to the fire-wall.

But it was too late. The aircraft was crashing, and I could not tell where the horizon stopped, and the blackness began.

And then I just sat there and rode her out. I just sat there in that little steel cage as it destroyed itself against the earth. There was nothing left for me to do.

The right landing gear failed on the second impact, and the propeller sliced into stony ground. The right tire and landing gear strut folded up against the fuselage and tried to come into the cockpit with me. As the dying airplane started its pivot to the right, the wing spar outboard of the wing struts failed, and that portion of the wing, plowing through ancient limestone and tree stumps, folded back like it had been built on hinges.

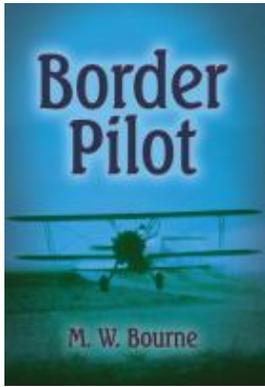
As the engine mount failed, the steel tubing behind the fire-wall folded back against the rudder pedals and I could feel the structure closing in around my legs. That terrifying fold abruptly stopped as the fuselage behind me began to twist, and the longerons started to bend and buckle. As the engine tried to roll up under the belly, the wreck lurched to a stop.

Sure, I sat there for a few minutes. I didn't think about much. I just watched the light show, and slowly realized that the world was roaring with noise. The silence of my engine had only allowed the outside noise to grow stronger. As I wormed my way out of the cockpit, I heard the first scatter-shot of hail against the cloth-covered wings.

I walked away a little bit, my hands discovering only minor traces of blood. My whole body was trembling, and the icy wind sliced across the goose bumps on my barren arms. I stopped and looked back at the twisted hulk. It looked so small and maimed in

the traces of blue light. Before I began my long walk out, I looked up into the screaming sky.

"Thank you, Sir," I said.



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