

PLANEGRAM



DUST TRAILS

By: Buck Rogers

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When it comes this time of year and the wintry winds blow and all the little bugs (bless their cotton pickin' little hearts) are curled up in their blankets waiting the coming of a new crop it leaves a poor old crop duster with time hanging mighty heavy on his hands. So I found it with myself.

About all I know is the difference between an aileron and a rudder and sometimes get mixed up on that as can be attested to by some of the operators for whom I've flown. Knowing my limitations I've learned not to stick my neck out trying to hold down a job that doesn't have flying connected with it. I've had some pretty sad experiences in the past trying to do so. Being so danged old nobody will give me a job except in the crop dusting business and that's a strange paradox if ever I saw one!

With all this in mind I decided to toss a few things in Clarabelle and go up Bishop way to visit Cuz Sim who is currently herding sheep for a living. In fact, he's been doing same ever since the end of World War I.

He's the guy who won the war single handed. He's the only guy who could fly an airplane backwards and got the Germans so completely confused they just flat

gave up and quit. Every time they thought he was coming he was wenting and when they thought he was wenting he was coming. I guess it was mighty confusing and I don't blame them for quitting.

Cuz was just a flash in the pan, thought, and when the war was over he had to go back to sheep herding to earn a living. He's still at it up Bishop way.

Clarabelle and I staggered into Cuz Sim's camp late in the evening tired, hungry and thirsty. A pall of dust as thick as Los Angeles smog hung over the camp and from it came a bedlam of "B-a-a-s" as Sim staggered drunkenly through the herd catching this sheep and that only to turn it loose and go on to the next one. The campfire was out, the beans cold and no coffee made, a mighty strange thing for a sheepherder's camp.

I let out a yell and Clarabelle honked her horn and after several repetitions we finally attracted Sim's attention. He slowly came over to us and I hardly recognized him. Several days growth of bread - which isn't so strange for one in his occupation- clothes ragged and torn and his eyes blood shot from loss of sleep.

"For the luvva mud, Sim! Whassa matter with ya?"

"Ah lost muh sheep! Ah lost muh sheep!" Sim's got a hair-lip and it's only through long association with him that I'm able to understand what he says. He continued to mutter these words over and over and it was nearly an hour before I could calm him down to where he could talk coherently, as coherently as Cuz Sim can talk at any time.

Like all sheepherders, I learned, Sim has a pet sheep he thinks the world and all of. All his affections are lavished on this one sheep. Living apart from human companionship and in the wilderness surrounded by only sheep and one lop-eared jackass I can see how this situation could arise. One look at the jackass would be enough to eliminate him from anyone's affections.

It came out that Sim had a blue ribbon tied around his favorite sheep's neck. All was happiness and contentment and then, like a bolt of lightning, disaster struck from out of the blue. Sim found the blue ribbon hanging on a sage-brush-and no sheep attached!

Sim went berserk. One thousand and eleven sheep in the herd and they all

looked alike! Cuz Sim had been sorting sheep for a solid week and

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had only

gone through four hundred and eighty six of them. Right now he was at the point of exhaustion.

"Look, Cuz," I said. "Didn't your sheep have a name?"

"Yeah, sho did." The tears coursed down Sim's cheeks and his hair lip quivered as he spoke. "Name's Mary."

"Did she answer to her Name?"

"Yeah. Every time I called her she just came a runnin'."

"Well, ya big dumb cluck!" I yelled. Why don't ya do some calling!"

Sim looked at me in bewilderment for a few moments until the import of the statement sank in. Then he leaped to his feet with a wild yell and started calling for Mary.

Well, it was quite a touching scene when Mary trotted out of the gob of woolies and came coyly up to Cuz Sim. A big lump came into my throat and the tears coursed down my cheeks unashamed. Even Clarabelle busted loose leaking from her radiator and backfired a couple of times.

A big mellow moon hung in the sky like a golden disc and the stars winked in friendliness as we sat down to a typical sheepherder's supper of sow-belly, beans, sheepherder bread and black coffee. Mary had gone back to the flock wearing her blue ribbon again. Clarabelle was snoozing contentedly with her radiator tucked under a sagebrush.

I breathed a big sigh of contentment as I finished my coffee, lit my

pipe and settled back with my head on Sims's bedroll. In the distance a coyote gave a couple of tentative yaps and was immediately answered by one of the sheep dogs which closed that argument. Peace and quiet settled around our little camp.

"Sim," I said. "It looks like you've got something here. Peace and contentment. It's so different from the life of a crop duster. No yowling engine to listen to all day, no traffic to fight, no one to bother you. By gosh, my mind's made up! I'm gonna quit crop dusting and be a sheepherder."

"Yup. Yuh shore am right. Nothin' ever hap—"

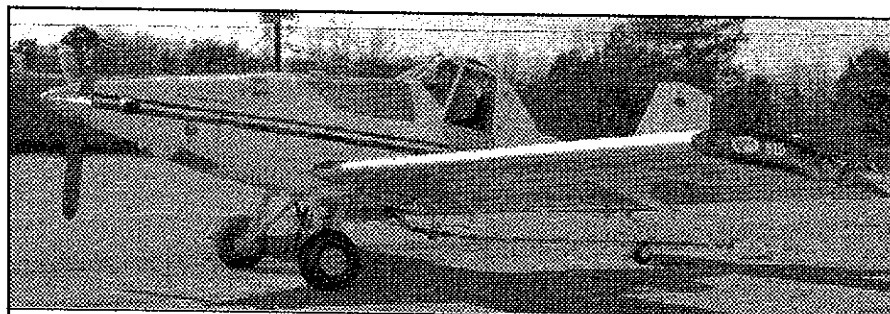
A wild beast from the herd cut Sim short. Out of the flock came a wild eyed wooly headed straight for us and she didn't detour. Evidently she had plunked her fanny down on a cocklebur and had decided to leave for parts unknown. She wasn't alone. One thousand and

ten other sheep, including Mary with the blue ribbon, went with her and they didn't detour either. Clarabelle tried to get in gear but didn't make it and what sheep didn't go through her went under and over. When the dust cleared away Sim and I looked like we'd been run through a meat grinder and to add insult to injury one of the sheep dogs mistook me for a sheep in the confusion and nipped the whole seat out of my britches.

Clarabelle and I finally made it home to civilization sadder but not much wiser and both of us in a complete state of dishabille. At the mere mention of sheep we both shudder.

The last we saw of Cuz Sim he was running wildly through the sagebrush waving a blue ribbon and yelling, Mary! Mary! Please come back!"

I dunno. It's said you have to be nuts to be a crop duster but if there's anything nuttier than a sheepherder I would like to know what it is.



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