

~~~ Hanger Flying ~~~

By: Bob Wheat, Founder-International Crop Duster's Day

Several years ago, well, actually more years ago than I would like to admit, I was flying my old Stearman duster from Anahuac, Texas over to Vinton, Louisiana to apply fertilizer to some fall pastures.

That particular September morning began clear with a hint of coolness, a perfect day for a cross-country open-cockpit flight.

As I climbed into the calm morning sky, leveling off about 800 feet, I expected a normal one hour or so flight to Vinton. Just another flight, one of many I had done in past years.

As I flew along, I thought of how the past Rice Season had been good, and a fall pasture seeding and fertilizing run was shaping up to be very good also. I had been busy seeding Rye Grass seeds in many recently harvested rice fields and improved pastures, and fertilizing was just beginning.

Because I had been seeding a lot of Rye, and flying some long days, I had neglected to wash out the seeds that had accumulated in the belly of the Stearman, figuring that as fertilizing was beginning, I would assume my regular habit of daily evening wash-outs.

Flying along that early morning, I crossed the Texas border and headed over the marshes that covered southern Louisiana.

As was the usual this time of year, I looked down at the many large flocks of Ducks and Geese that had begun arriving from the North to their wintering grounds in the marshes and rice fields of Texas and Louisiana. Quite a sight to see as the flocks rose up at the sound and sight of the Stearman passing over them.

Shifting my gaze around, I glanced down into the belly of the plane below my feet, which were propped lazily on the rudder pedals, when I caught a flash of something vibrating and moving around under my feet. Coming to a full alert, I looked intensely to see if I had lost something from my pocket when all of a sudden, this huge, fat, field rat came into view. Immediately raising my feet from the pedals, I began stuffing my pant legs into my boots. I could only imagine the sequences of that huge rat coming up my pants legs 800 feet in the air. As I watched this red eyed monster, which looked like it weighed four pounds vibrating around, twisting and clawing to get a hold of anything, really put me in a defensive mode.

I knew the only thing I could do at this point, was to do a series of violent, as near vertical as possible stalls, hoping that sucker would fall out the back of the fuselage.

After five or six stick shaking stalls, I leveled off and –no Rat . I figured I had succeeded in shaking that sucker into a free fall and settled down to proceed to Vinton knowing I was safe from that huge, red-eyed rat.

Confident of my actions, I paid little attention to the cockpit floor, chuckling to myself of the size of that rat and how he had evidently gorged himself during the night on the rye grass seeds left in the belly of the Stearman, and what I would done had he gotten on me in flight.

Glancing down at the floor as I laughed, I was horrified at the sight of a long black snake vibrating around under my feet. This sucker looked to be at least five feet long, and seemed to be curling and twisting around, trying to get a hold of anything.

I immediately jerked both feet from the pedals and started more violent stalls.

After a series of intense stalls, the snake disappeared from sight.!

Hoping that critter had followed the rat into a free fall, yet not knowing for sure, really made me uneasy. I could imagine that big old black snake wrapping around my leg when I least expected, which would produce some serious results.

The suspense got the better of me, and I immediately began looking for someplace to park this plane for a look see.

Spotting below me a circular knoll sticking up in the marsh, I wheeled around and prepared for a very short landing.

Now, this decision had some dire consequences should I flip over on landing, knowing I would be stranded for some time, at best, and would get a real a\*\* chewing from the Flying Service owner.

However, I made a successful very short landing, and upon stopping, bailed out of the cockpit and began opening every panel on that fuselage, and for the next thirty minutes looked in every nook and cranny for that snake.

After determining that it was gone, I contemplated why the snake was in the belly.

Evidently, I assumed, the snake was on the prowl for food, and he had detected the scent of the rat in the belly of the airplane the night before, and forged ahead into the Stearman for a meal of a big, red-eyed fat rat full of rye grass seed. As I had left in a hurry that morning, he and the rat had no time to get out of the airplane's belly. Maybe, the snake had a hold of the rat and couldn't get out before I took off.

Finally, I buttoned up the Stearman, and made one of the shortest take-off of my career, I got airborne from the marsh and proceeded on to my destination. Upon landing at the strip, everyone questioned the mud and grass covering the bottom of the wings and

fuselage. I related my story and everyone got quite a big laugh; that is, everyone except me.

You know, my old Stearman was one of the cleanest airplanes to be put in the hangar every night from that day on.

Until next time, keep your Goggles clean and your belt tight, and look down before take-off !

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