

ML.70. Who Needs a Pilot?

At 1540 hrs on October 11, 1957, 1st Lt Ray Creel took his C-47 with nine crew members from Forbes AFB on a routine four-hour nav training mission, and almost made it. Unfortunately, some obscure part of that cantankerous Gooney Bird wasn't up to the whole mission and near Butler, KS, she went down. But wait...

When the aircraft stopped flying so well, and Lt Creel and crew had decided they would rather walk home, the pilot retrimmed the aircraft for a more controlled crash because he couldn't find his chest pack. The other 8 – co-pilot Capt. E.P. Zeidler, Crew Chief A/2c L.W. Holden, student navs Capt. E.T. Piwetz, 1st Lt B.S. King, 1st Lt J.M. Lekstrum, their instructor Capt S.B. Labe, and me - were already going or gone.

But someone had left a back pack, which Lt Creel found and donned. He bailed out safely moments before the crash. Because of the retrimming, the plane made a perfect belly landing – unmanned.

I returned to the airplane to retrieve my bag and maps, and found a hole on the side where I was sitting. Two C.A.P. Cadets were inside trying to turn off all the power, but were told to stop as it was important for the investigators to know the positions of the switches.

We all gathered at a nearby farm house where a kind lady made us breakfast. It was about three a.m. when we left, offering to pay for the breakfast. She wouldn't take our money so, when her back was turned, we stuffed one of her dishes with cash.

That rugged old Gooney Bird, having landed itself, was carried out and lived to fly again, after it tried to kill me. This was my first operational flight: I took off in an airplane and landed on my butt. (I flew again, too.)

- Roland Saenz, 2nd Lt, Crew Navigator

