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Professional Rebirth in the Roaring 20's



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"Do you remember what it felt like when you became a member of this industry?"

It's a question I routinely ask audiences to expose the gap in passion between our younger days and... sometime later. I usually follow up by asking them to think of the two or three times they felt most alive and fired up about their profession, and to share them with the group. The answers vary, but tend to run in three directions.

The first is a tough challenge overcome. Perhaps an emergency well-handled or an unpopular decision that turned out to be the right one. Competence and courage under pressure. The second invariably is about taking someone under their wing, becoming a mentor, or supporting someone who was struggling and helping them regain their footing. The third is a bit more vague, but I would use the words "turning point" to describe it: isolated events when something happened that changed their professional direction.

Reflecting on My Personal Turning Point

As I sat over the holidays and pondered these questions about my own journey in aviation, I ended up behind door number three—the turning point. I'd been a jet jockey for Uncle Sam for a dozen years when it happened.

On a routine night training sortie, two of my former students misdiagnosed a high-speed buffet as a stall indication, and executed a perfect staff recovery into the mountains of southern Texas on a moonless night. I had experienced loss of friends and squadronmates before due to human error accidents, but this one was more personal.

Deep reflection led me to change my focus from tactical excellence to human factors, and as a form of therapy to overcome the event, I began to write. A line from the Foreword of my second book, *Flight Discipline*, summed up the "why" behind my new direction. "I've been to too many funerals."

A Different Kind of Dying



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Fast forward two decades. I've worked with scores of aviation companies and addressed tens of thousands of aviation professionals. Fatal mishaps are now rare (although still occurring too frequently). It's not the physical deaths now that haunt me, it's something more sinister and less visible: *the slow death of passion, and along with it professionalism, for many in our industry.*

Don't read me wrong here. The influx of young professionals has given our industry a much-appreciated breath of fresh air and enthusiasm. But the greybeards among us know that they are entering at a perfect time. Wages are up, the economy is booming, and upgrades and promotions are fast.

We also know that our industry runs in cycles, and the good times are not guaranteed to last. So, I believe NOW is the time for the totality of the aviation world to recommit, fuel our passion, and achieve the levels of professionalism we will need when the wheel turns next. To do so, let's take the historical wisdom offered from the field at the top of this article.

1. *Be ready for the tough challenge.* We've heard from those who cite this event—when handled successfully—as a moment when the passion returned and they felt most alive. But they also tell us that readiness is a combination of serious preparation and constant vigilance. Take your training seriously and learn from every flight hour you log (or your non-pilot equivalent!).
2. *Take someone under your wing.* As I state repeatedly in *Going Pro*, the door to the highest levels of professionalism only opens in one direction—outward. Once you have mastered the art of honest self-assessment and routine continuous improvement, share this skill with others. Go out of your way to assist someone who is new, different, or struggling. The authentic joy you will feel when you help someone else provides a booster shot of passion. Mentorship can become addictive in a very good way, leaving a piece of your legacy in everyone you influence and creating a professional ripple effect that you may never know the impact of.
3. *Recognize and leverage turning points.* When I share my story, the loss of two former students is a clear and unmistakable turning point. But turning point opportunities abound in our industry. Do I accept the position as a safety officer I've been offered? Change equipment? Take a risk and move to a new domicile to advance my career? Do I take night classes to gain a new skill or certification? Almost any choice that causes you to stop and reflect is a potential turning point capable of fueling your passion.

It's the dawn of a new decade—the Roaring '20s—so let's make 2020 count by rediscovering the joy of our industry and raising the bar of professionalism across the board!

Work smart, stay safe.



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