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Field ID and name: Interview 3

Interviewee: Aaron Phillips

Interviewer/Recordist: Ellen Kendrick, Samuel Kendrick

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Others Present: Jackson Kendrick

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Corresponding Materials: Photographs

Context: Standing in the hanger that Aaron flies out of in Fort Scott, KS

Technical Considerations:

Transcription prepared by: Samuel Kendrick

Transcribing Conventions:

Use of square brackets [] indicates a note from the transcriber.

Use of parentheses () indicates a conversational aside.

Use of dash - indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.

Use of ellipses ... indicates a discontinued thought.

Use of quotations “ ” indicates reported speech.

Use of *italics* indicates emphasis.

Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.

Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.

Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

[00:00:00]

EK : I'm going to the date. We're in Fort Scott, Kansas at the airport. We're talking to Aaron Phillips. Right? It is currently, that is 1:33. And it is March 15th (2020).

AP: Yeah, right. Yes. And it's cold. Okay. [Crosstalk; chatter prior to interview.]

EK: Yeah. So we're on now, by the way, and we just carry on and work. We introduced, we had to do the formal business and we're done with that. So. And on these, I'm doing most of the talking. Just because Sam doesn't know how to talk. He takes after his father. And I get going on tangents. I see. You know, you can talk if you want. What? Now it's on now, no one's talking. It's like the freeze up. You can say like, whatever you want to say. Yeah.

AP: Did you have Do you have questions?

EK: Yeah, we do have questions. I was surprised because we like we like we've walked into every hangar and I'd forgotten that. You like you're working for a company now a corporation rather than just flying individually? is is that it's the one like the big company in...

AP: In Seneca.

EK: Yeah. You need to like

AP: Yeah, Heimen brothers, the brothers, Agra services out of based out of Seneca, Kansas, up north of Topeka. That... yeah, I mean, I started my own company in 2015, and then flew until the beginning of last year, I sold, I approached him and said, Hey, would you be interested in buying my operation here in Fort Scott, and they were and so we managed to reach an agreement. And part of that agreement is they wanted me to fly for them for three years, so

EK : So you sold them like your business like all of your customers that you had around here?

AP : Yeah, basically, I sold them my book and any work that comes book,

EK: What's a book?

AP: My customers.

EK: Yeah.

AP: And I sold 'em8 my customers list and they now have the lease on this hanger and that building out there that I built for the load facility. They now have a lease on that and in there [untelligible] there was like a tools and equipment list that went with that like my fuel trailer and my water tanks and my inductors and all that stuff. And I sold all that stuff to them and they provided me with an airplane and now I fly for them and I don't have to talk to customers and I don't have to bill and I don't for the most part .

EK: You just fly.

AP: Just fly.

EK: They're huge, aren't they...

AP: Yeah.

EK: Like a huge company?

AP: So last summer I was all the way from they got Vernon, Texas, Altus, Oklahoma down in southwest Oklahoma. I was down in around Blackwell, Pawhuska, Oklahoma, a lot. And in all over North Central Kansas and Southeast Nebraska. And Missouri, like north of Kansas City in that area.

EK: Really? Because like my cousin's farm, like north of St. Joe around Mound City.

AP: Yep.

EK: And I was gonna call her and ask her if she knew anyone who, who worked up there but apparently you're standing right here. (Laughs.)

AP: Well and Dusty spends a lot of time with he actually goes right up to Mount city for Gerald I forget his last name, but I've never flown for them. But he'll go up there and work that area. On the, on the Mound City side on the east side of the river there.

EK: Yeah.

AP: And I'll spend a lot of time right there on the west side of the river Atchison County, Kansas Atchison, Kansas Uh, Doniphan County up in there, and then over by Hiawatha, and that whole area. So there's been times where Dusty and me would both be flying up there. You know, and we'll hear each other on the radio and recognize each other's voice.

EK: But you didn't know...

AP: No. I had no idea that we were both there at the same time.

EK: So are there independent ag pilots up there as well?

AP: Oh, I don't I mean, I'm sure there's ag operations all over the place. But you know, most, most, most companies are, you know, the companies. Now. They've been doing it. It's been in the family for a while. They're, you know, they'll have multiple airplanes. It's not as I don't think it's as c - I would have to look at the statistics. It's just not common just to have a one guy that buys a plane and decides he wants to start sprayin'. That almost never happens.

EK: Really?

AP: Yeah, that's very rare.

EK: Not anymore?

[00:05:02]

AP: Well, yeah, it's just, yeah. It's a very difficult industry to get into anyways, which is part of the reason Dusty, and I did it that way, because we were older and had families and had bills to pay.

And we decided to switch from what we were doing to that. And we had no choice but to go out and, and try to make a living right off the bat. So we chose... Because if you do it the traditional way you work for somebody and load for an airplane for a few years, you get all your pilot's ratings, they may let you fly a little bit the first year or maybe a little more the second year. And if they like you, and you don't tear anything up, then they'll let you fly, eventually. It takes a long time to get up to where you're flying a turbine, and you got 3,000 hours of ag time. And you can go make, you know, \$120 to \$220,000 a year flying an ag plane. It takes a long time. Typically to do that. We didn't have time. So we just did it.

EK: That's what I understand.

AP: A lot of stuff we bought our own, started our own companies. We had, he had, a lot of farming contacts I did too. I had a co op manager right over here in Moran that was already my first he was my first customer called me up said hey, I got 3,000 acres a week. And he's, You can do it. And I was off and running.

EK: So that's not how it's done then.

AP: That is not how it's done. It's not advisable either. So it's very dangerous to do it that way. It's very difficult to do it that way.

EK: He said, he did say that you went to school? Like you did some kind of formal training?

AP: There was a school down in Miller, Missouri. And yes, I did, I went and uh... Yeah, when I was finishing up my commercial license, I went down there and just 40 flight hours, but they take, they put you in, you do 10 hours of dual with an instructor in **Alaska**. And then we would show me, he basically just showed me how to enter fields and how to set up basic spray patterns, and taught me some basics about you know, turning the plane around and doing cleanup passes and watching for wind drift and things like that, and just all the basic things that you need to know to do the job. And then I spent 30 hours and a Pawnee by myself just spraying water on fields. And he watched me with binoculars and tell me, you know, say yeah, you know, do this different or get a little lower, or you know, whatever. And yeah, and I did, and I went through that course. And that was really helpful, because at least I had some basic knowledge at that point of how to do the basic stuff in the air. And so that helped me and then Dusty didn't. He didn't go they wanted him to go to school to and he didn't go, but I did. So I just kind of helped him. Like I taught him what I learned right at the school.

EK: Right. He did say that.

AP: And then he would go and do the same things. And sometimes we'd fly together a lot there in the beginning.

EK: Yeah.

AP: Picked it up.

EK: Yeah, he did say the other day that, like the things that you would learn, then you would come back and share with him. But it was like Kevin didn't, he didn't like really say, I mean, he did say but didn't say. And so because obviously like before we even started this project. We did a little bit of research, and I couldn't figure it out. Like what you say makes sense now as to how people learn. But like, okay, say if what, what would Sam do if Samuel decided he wanted to be an ag pilot?

AP: Okay, the best way to do that is you got to go get your pilot's license. You got to get your private, you got to get your commercial. And then once you have that, then now you're qualified legally to do the work. Now you have to go find an operator that's willing to start you out.

EK: Is that what they... What they...? Well, there was a thing called the mentor program is that what that is?

AP: There's nothing official in the ag world that has a name that you can say that this is how you do that. There's, that's why it's so difficult to get into the industry. Basically, you as an individual, have the motivation and the desire to follow through. Because that's your goal in life, and you're going to be an ag pilot no matter what. And if you approach it with that attitude, you'll be an ag pilot. But if you're looking for a formal path to get into the business, when none exists, it's not there, like Flyin' Tigers down in Louisiana...

EK: Not like Truck driving school.

AP: No, uh-uh. You're not going to get, you're not guaranteed a job, you're not guaranteed insurance. It's, it's a very personal business. And people look at you as an individual and they will, they're very serious about who they let get in an airplane. They don't take it lightly, for good reason. Because you can, you know, there's a lot can go wrong. You know, they don't want to see you get killed, and they don't want you messing up on a job. Because you know, there's so much liability with the stuff we're putting out. And if you don't do it, right. I mean, it's a precision deal. And with an airplane, thinking about spraying water and chemicals from 15 to 50 feet in the air from an airplane, you gotta know what you're, you know, you really gotta know what you're doing. Things go wrong in a hurry.

[00:10:01]

EK: I don't think people think about that, do you? Like when you're like, when you just see, see you out there? You know going over, passing over a field. They just think, oh, you're out there flying. It's like...

AP: Yeah, it looks like fun and really neat. Yeah, yeah, no, it's a lot more to it than that. I mean, it's, it's very... it's a hard work, it's exhausting. Especially in the summer, I mean, we'll get up, I'll get up, I'll take off, you barely even see a sliver a light over the horizon, and I might be loaded, takin' off. And by the time I get to the field, it's just light enough to not hit obstacles around it, you know, and work until the sun goes back down again. Sometimes I'll land, you know, my last load in the dark. You know, that happens a lot in the summertime. And that's all day long. And you're only getting out of the plane to maybe even go to the bathroom, get some water, stretch your legs for a minute while they're loading you and you're right back in the plane and wheel around and out you go.

EK: So do you do you drive to Seneca, like they just call you, or do you fly out of here?

AP: I fly. Cause the plane's based here it's just... the plane they're giving me they're moving me up to an 802 this year from a 5 and that plane is down in Vernon, Texas, get an annual right now. And as soon as it's done, I gotta go down there and get it. And then when they call me, I just come in here and get in a plane and fly to wherever they tell me to go. And then I stay like I'll pack a bag, usually with them. And then they'll just move me from place to place to place indefinitely. If the work is, if there's work to do, I just follow the work. I just go where they tell me. I'll be done. I might be last load of the day. And my asset manager will call me and say Where are you? How you getting along? And I say, Well, I'm on my last load over here by wherever Beloit, Kansas, and you say, okay, fly to York, Nebraska, when you're done, get enough fuel to get to York, and then you're gonna work there for the next couple days. Okay, I go up to York.

EK: And see that's more like trucking. That's, you know, like, you just like, dispatch sends you out and pick up a load and wherever you are.

AP: Yeah, yep. And then when they run out of stuff for me to do they let me come home for a day or two, maybe? Maybe not.

EK : So you have a family?

AP: Yeah. Wife and Kids.

EK: Do they live here?

AP: Yeah, well, Redfield is just north of here. 20 minutes.

EK: So they go to Uniontown rather than the high school?

AP: They go to Uniontown. Yeah, I'll take off. And if I go, if I'm going that way, I'll fly right over the house and usually blow smoke as I go by, and the dog chases me and the kids screaming at me.

EK : (Laughs.) Hi, dad.

AP: Yeah.

EK: What do you...? Like, you just you said that most people don't work independently.

AP: And there are a lot of single operator single mag 137 guys out there. It's not that they aren't out there that they generally didn't start out like that, like they started out... EK: What's ag 137? is that FAA?

AP: That's the FAA operating certificate that allows us to legally do the work through the FAA. Because every, you know, every, like the airlines, and then charter, they all have their own operating certificate, it's got a specific number that they're operating under a certain set of rules and guidance to operate. Like part 135 is charter and 120 to be like an airline, and 137. So we have our own separate set of operating rules.

EK: The restricted thing?

AP: Yep.

JK: So how different is it going to be to go from a big plane to the biggest one?

AP: It's big. The 8's the biggest one they make. If you see them side by side, you're like, oh, wow, that's a huge difference. So it's faster, it's bigger, got a bigger wingspan, the wheels are higher off, or, you know, just everything's gonna be different.

JK: So is it gonna, like wallow a little bit more?

AP: No, well, it's, it's gonna fly different, it's gonna be heavier. I've flown a 602, which is in between a 5 and an 8. And it is it was quite a bit heavier than the 5. And it took a little, it took me a while to get used to that. But it's, uh, other than that, I mean, basically, the cockpit's set up the same, the flight controls were kind of pretty much the same. And it looks the same when you're looking out. It's just, there's just more airplane out there. And it's faster, but it is they are heavier too. So but you know, it's cool because you get a lot more acres, like I could in a 502 maybe on a good day, if a really good day, I might be able to spray 2,000 acres, you know, if I'm really hitting it hard all day long, and I got good fields close to the airport. 2,000 acres is a lot for a 502. And an 802, you're knocking back 3,000 acres a day. Easy, in an 8, so by the end of the year, the same amount of time and an airplane you're making a lot more money.

JK: At the same time though the airplane costs more to maintain.

AP: It does but that's not my problem anymore. They used to be, but not now. But yeah, I mean, that was it was hard, you know start now you know you're trying to move up. I started out with a well, started out in the Pawnee. I bought ag cats, radial cats. And then we moved up, I bought a 301 air tractor. We still had a radial on it 1340 radial, but flew that for a couple years and then leased a

502. And then flew that 5, crashed that 5. Got into Heinen brothers 5. And now I'm going to go to an 8.

[00:15:21]

EK: You crashed?

AP: Um-hm. Twice.

EK: Really? That's frightening.

AP: Tell me about it.

EK: Do you want to talk about it?

AP: Sure. Well, the first one was in the ag cat and I was just trying to land I was trying to load right next to the field I was supposed to do fertilizer on. It was an it was an old private runway that wasn't really in use anymore and had a big hole in the middle of it. And anyways it was a hay meadow basically. And it was a little greasy, I made a bad approach from the... I'd landed there the other, I landed one direction that came back a couple days later and I came in from a different direction over some trees and I just didn't shoot a very good approach. And when I bounced, I ended up coming back when I hit I got on the brakes too hard and it flipped over. And then just skated to a stop. But that upper wing kept I had mud all over the back of my helmet like it was kind of close. But I was fine. And I crawled out kicked the door open crawled out and nothing caught on fire. So that was nice. And then, you know, I was sore for a while, but it was okay. And then in May of 2019, May 31, 2019, I was flying for a buddy out in Indiana on wheat, he called me and I flew out there got up the next morning and got a really good 2,000 acre day and that 502 and I was on my last pass and my last load right before dusk. And there were some really some big, big grove of trees on one end and some huge cross country power lines going across, like on the west side of this field. And I was working the field, I'd worked the whole field. And I had, I had to make three passes along the trees and under the power lines, boom, boom, boom back and forth to clean up that one end of that field. And I shot out from underneath right by one of the big stanchions right there underneath powerlines I pulled up and there was another set of power lines, short ones on the other side. So I went under the big ones over the little ones. And I turned big lazy left hand turn and I was looking down at my hopper gauge and I had like 10 gallons left in the hopper 12 gallons, it was like nothing like I could have gone back to the airport with that and it wouldn't have mattered. But I thought well, I'll make one more trim pass on the other end of the field just to get rid of it. And then that's it for the day. Well as I made that left hand turn and came back around. So now I'm 180 degrees headed back towards the field and coming in at a different end of the field from a completely different angle than I had been flying the whole time. And literally just completely forgot that there were powerlines there and couldn't see 'em. And so when I hit them, I didn't even know I hit them. But my windscreen shattered when I hit him. I think there's a bracket that holds like four of them apart to keep them from slapping together. And I hit that right on the glass and it just instantly just shattered my windscreen and then what felt like a long time but

really wasn't later my left wing tip hit that second set of wires there's three across the bottom and it basically yawed the plane almost completely 90 degrees to the left, ripped that wing tip off. And then when the plane corrected it came back to the right my, my flight controls are fully deflected the stick the paddles everything just went Bam! And the plane went left and went right and then it just rolled upside down and just all the way to the ground. Just tumbled. through the air. So about 100... I probably hit 'em doing 130 or 40 mile an hour.

EK: And you walked away from that one.

AP: Walked away. I have no idea how.

EK: Yeah. But was there anybody around?

AP: A guy watched it happen. It was out in the middle of nowhere, farm country but one of the there was a house close enough by and by the time I got out of the airplane. I was trying to fumble around and get my bearings. He was running out across the field screaming at me you know he thought I was dead.

EK: You thought you were dead too.

AP: I thought I was dead. I thought I knew I was dead before I hit the ground. I mean, I saw the last thing I saw before I hit it was the plane is upside down. So I was looking at the ground and I knew the plane was going to come down on top of me. So there's no way at that speed and just the way it was going in I was like there's no way I'm gonna survive this. It's impossible. And somehow something dug in. I don't know if it was the prop, or the wing or something, but it flipped it over on his belly, spun it around, hit a tree, one of the wings hit a tree, spun it around and I ended up coming to rest facing the direction that I had come from, belly down. sitting in the cockpit. And the rest of the airplane, the left wing was completely destroyed. The tail was destroyed. Most of the prop was destroyed. The end of the right wing was destroyed. The landing gear was destroyed. And there I sat and most of the stuff inside the cockpit was broken too. But...

EK: Was that it? Was that the last time you flew independently? Did you say I'm done?

AP: No. I came home.

EK: Did you have to fly home?

[00:20:13]

AP: Well, I caught a commercial flight home. I got another plane, I got that 602 and I hired a pilot. And he flew for me for about three months that summer. And I just ran the operation, I just ran the business with a hired pilot. And we made it through then. And he was busy. I kept him busy all summer I sent him off to Iowa and then he went and help some other operators. And then at the end of the season, I finally got in the plane and finished the season and got – [air compressor

comes on]. I got, I don't know, 50 or 60 hours in it, at the end of the season doing just clean up, finish up work. And then and then the next season, would've been last season, and then I've got back on a 502 for Heimen brothers and I flew that plane 450 hours. I mean, I did 80,000 acres last year, so.

JK: So how do you come back from something like that?

AP: Well, wasn't easy.

JK: A normal person would be like...

AP: Well, that's why I was. I mean it was hard. It was extremely difficult. I mean, I don't know how much I want to talk about that. But I'll just tell you it was not easy and it's still not easy.

JK: So you don't have to. I mean it's just it's just one of those things it's like... The job is inherently dangerous. And you know statistically in aviation we talked about every incident or accident is preventable. But even then I think after an accident like that you would think I could have prevented that but somehow I didn't, so am I still you know capable of flying?

AP: That's how, yeah, and that's kind of how it felt that summer. I mean I it was hard to get back in that Air Tractor and fly the first time and then it was, you know. And I honestly, when I sold the business I've said because I got a type rating now this I see or copilot type rating and the Falcon 900 and I've got a buddy that I was in the Marine Corps with that it's his job that's as he flies that and 76 Sikorsky down in Sarasota, Florida, but when he needs a copilot he'll they only have one full time guy on staff so he'll call me and I'll get in the plane and they pay me to fly down there and get the Falcon we go take our trip and we're before COVID hit we were gonna do that's what I was gonna do. Yeah, I was just gonna start doing jet working I was gonna quit flying ag I was gonna sell my business get what I could and step away and but like I said, they were like, yeah, we'll buy you out but you got to fly for three years, I'm like, Oh, so close.

EK: But for three years you're locked in?

AP: Yeah, well two more but yeah, I got one season I got two more but. But that's okay after last season, you know, I kind of really got in I mean, it felt good to fly the plane and it felt good to work. And I'm looking forward to the 802 now and seeing how that goes. I mean, I like I mean I got a lot of time now a lot of experience I got ... I've managed to survive to this point. So now I'm very marketable as an ag pilot. [Laughter.] So...

JK: It's kind of a testament to an Air Tractor actually.

PA: Yeah, that that's amazing that that thing they held up like that. Oh my helmets here somewhere. I'll show you my pictures I'm looking for if you want to see 'em

EK: Yeah.

AP: Oh, there we go. You can swipe through there there's a few pictures. Videos I think. See? What I did? Yeah.

EK: Oh my gosh, look at that wing.

JK: Yeah, we're looking at the left wing. You said the left wing or the right wing was the one that got hit first?

AP: The left wing is the one that hit the wires first. Okay, so the right wing hit a tree on the ground that's what spun me around backwards. Which was part of what saved my life I'm sure.

JK: The cockpit actually looks remarkably good.

AP: It does, doesn't it? Yeah, it that it's there built pretty solid. Really solid.

EK: I can see why the guy thought he was dead. Yeah. That would be horrifying. To watch that happen.

AP: I may have taken that home. I was gonna show you my flight helmet that I was wearing when I crashed. That's it.

EK: That's really low.

AP: I was getting my helmet. I was adjusting the helmet liner for the next season and I was getting ready to and I took the helmet liner out in there. There's so there's Kevlar shell, an energetic, thick foam inside the helmet, and it was completely split into, and open from the crash. I thought, that's why I had such a headache for so long. Yeah, but seriously my neck muscles. I mean, it was hard to I had to be careful for 30, a good solid month because my whole, I mean, it was just so tender and all natural just...

JK: Well, you were in a plane crash. That's understandable.

AP: That's what they said. And they released me from the hospital I said, was that said you're a little low on potassium? Other than that, you're just gonna be really sore for a while.

EK: Low on Potassium? [Laughs.] Well, no, no wonder you crashed, right?

AP: Yep.

EK: Is that inevitable? Like if...

AP: No, for to crash being an ag pilot? Yeah, there's a lot of guys get a whole career. But if, and Jackson probably researched this for you, but if you take the number of people actually doing this

job, and then you compare the accident rate to that, it's crazy. And then even compare with most any other industry really, it's just not that there are a lot of accidents. There's a lot of fatalities.

[00:26:19]

JK: Even, like even it's a fairly large proportion of a small number. Because if there's only two to three thousand ag pilots in the country, if you have say, you know, one or two accidents a year, then that's a high proportion.

AP: That's hot.

EK: Yeah. Yeah. It is.

JK: Especially when you compare it to other forms of commercial aviation.

AP: Yes. Oh, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. There's nothing else comes even close, except for maybe Alaskan bush flying would be the only other thing would be probably up there or anywhere in Eastern Europe.

JK: Yeah, that is not a great safety rating. [Laughter.] Yeah. So do you like the sort of instrument flying better? Is that what you kind of want to do?

AP: No, actually, I'm pretty, I'm a lot more experienced doing ag so instrument the instrument world is, I don't know, flying a jet and especially in the right seat's pretty easy. You just got to talk on the radio. As long as you know how to work the avionics, it's not that hard. That plane flies itself through the clouds and lands itself practically and especially if you got somebody over on the left seat doing actually landing it.

JK: You're more an engineer in that setting, whereas in the ag setting you're stick and rudder more?

AP: Oh, yeah, you're stick and rudder. I mean, you've got, we've got you know, GPS or mapping software that we use to set up fields that we need to know, be proficient with. But yeah, it's uh, you're dirty, and you're sweaty, and you're hot, and you're... Yeah, and you're flying, you know, you're using your, your body and your muscles to fly an airplane. I mean, it's Yeah, you're on this rudder. I mean, your feet are constantly a normal airplane. You're just kind of holding rudder. Normally, you're not really using them. I mean, you're using them, but you're just kind of holding 'em there. In an ag plane you're constantly manipulating those things to keep your airplane coordinated when you're turning around or flying and keep it like it's supposed to be because otherwise, that's the other good way to crash one, is get it out of trim.

EK: So do you do anything in the offseason to stay in shape?

AP: Oh, to stay in shape? Yeah. Oh, yeah. I'll go out and walk and I just try to stay active as much as possible. So try not to just sit around and eat all winter.

EK: Like the rest of us for the last year?

AP: Yeah. Just a challenge, as everyone knows.

EK: Yeah. So what is this that you're building?

AP: It's a D R 1. folker. Or Fokker, however you want to say it. It's the Red Baron tri-wing.

EK: (spells) f o k k er. And you're gonna fly it.

AP: That's the plan. Put a motor on it, get it covered and get it painted. And go fly it around.

EK: Does it get a canvas cover on it.

AP: Yeah, it's got, well in that pink bag over there. That's all the fabric but yeah, it's got a fabric process that you, you glue it down, you shrink it with an iron and then you paint it with a like an epoxy and then you paint it with whatever color you're gonna paint it.

EK: Season's about to start though.

AP: Yeah, and I had intended to have it done by now but I don't have a motor. So I'm trying to get a mid time motor so I don't have to pay full price for a new one. And so that's kind of got me at a standstill and it was too cold to cover, to do fabric work there a few weeks ago. So I decided I just let it warm up. And I mean, I can cover the tail. I could cover the ailerons and the wings. But I can't cover the fuselage until I get the motor and the fuel tank and all that gave me all the cockpit instruments and all that setup so I just kind of been doing other stuff.

EK: Is this a kit or like did you fabricate it?

AP: No, it's a kit. Yeah, I bought the kit and just built it of the plans with support from the engineer, designer. I called him every day. What about this? How come these plans and this kit don't match? Oh, those are 12 years old. I forgot to update them. Thanks. That was helpful.

JKL: Pretty standard line from engineers.

AP: Good lord.

JK: Speaking as an engineer, I can, I can attest to that.

EK: So are you like Jax? You've always loved planes.

AP: Oh, yeah. When I was a kid, planes and horses. So here I am. But yeah, I was in the middle. I mean, when I was in the Marine Corps, I was in a Huey Cobra Squadron, I was a door gunner in a helicopter. And then when I got out and went back to Iraq, as a civilian, and did the same thing for six years. Yeah, Iraq and Afghanistan. So I've been around, that was my aviation background. And that's what got me interested in this, because we would fly from North Carolina to California every summer to do training. And we, as we go across the south, you'd see ag pilots really close to you, because we're flying pretty low or 500 feet, and they're down there below us working. You know, we're trying not to run into them. And I thought, I'll check into that. And I did. And then when I was in Afghanistan later, one of the pilots there was a was a ag pilot from Alabama. And he, him and another guy kind of got me really turned on. Brad Hammond was another mechanic and he was gonna do the same thing. He's gonna go start his own business, buying it, you know, get go to school and be an ag pilot. And he had me all wound up about doing it, you know, and that's kind of really my biggest, last biggest pushed in my brain to say, you know, I might actually try to do that at some point. And we came back and he went, and he was actually he was working in Northwest Missouri. And he did he got to the point he got somebody to hire him. And I was still and I was actually shoeing horses at the time for a living. I came back from Iraq and went back to shoeing. and because I used to do that. And then he went out on his very first paid job in his Ag Cat and got killed, hit some trees and flipped it over upside down and crashed and burned up. Yeah, I know. And then, about a couple years later, is when I started flying.

[00:32:23]

EK: So how'd you and you and dusty did this together?

AP: Yeah. My wife had bought a toy tractor off of Facebook. And I hadn't seen Dusty in a long time. I knew him, but I hadn't seen in a long time. And she'd, my wife says, Hey, you need to go over to Deerfield, to the Elkington's and pick up this tractor. I was like, Oh, yeah, that'd be cool. I haven't seen him in forever. And I'd drive over there...

EK: Where did you meet?

AP: We knew each other from rodeoing from before, and college and from being in this area.

EK: So did you rodeo before?

AP: Oh, yeah. So we knew each other from that. And then but like I said, I hadn't been around him for a while because I've been gone overseas and stuff and just had lost contact with him. And I go over there and we're loading this toy tractor in the pickup and we're talking like, what are you been doing? I mean, I just started getting my pilot's license. I'm gonna be a crop duster. And Dusty's like, What? Me too! [Laughing.] We're at about the same amount of hours and we're just getting started. And then, which was fortunate for us because we actually used the, we leaned on each other pretty heavy there for a while. Like I borrowed his Champ when we got our private licenses and he had an Aeronka Champ we built all our time in towards our commercial. And we flew, we did everything together for a while. We flew together, we planned together, we got our

business, we started building, putting equipment together to load airplanes. I mean, we bought that we went and bought a Piper, 150 horse Piper Pawnee up there in Salina and brought it back on a trailer and put the wings back on it, put it together, got it running and started flying it around. And started loading water on it. Put a spreader on it, did some turnip seeds with it, you know, we're just.. [Laughs.]

EK: He talked about it a lot, too. It must have been like, pretty special time actually.

AP: It was pretty cool. It's pretty fun to talk about when we get when we get together, we start remembering stuff we did. None of it was legal at the beginning and we just did it anyways, because we could so. We both started our I mean, I won't speak for him. but you know, I was I called the FAA, we got our planes. I said hey, I need a part 137 'cause I need to go to work. And like I said, I have family to feed. And they took their sweet time getting to me and I flew for a year and before they finally showed up to do my inspection, and then I just was like, I did my inspection and I did my stuff and, and the only thing that though there was lady she was the one doing all the question askin' and then after they're all done with the interview, and the whole process she's like, So how long did you fly for somebody else until now? [Laughter.] I was like, two years. Anyways, it was a, yeah, that was it, and then just kept working.

JK: That's kind of cool. 'Cause that's how those old timers did it in the '20s and '30s.

AP: Yep. Oh, yeah. They just had Steermans and they were just putting stuff in the hopper and way they went.

JK: Ran some pipes. Yep.

EK: You did it? Well, it would take forever, otherwise.

AP: Yeah, it would have, and I didn't... If you're starting out 18 years old and you're out of college or high school and you're just wanting to get into the industry, and you can afford to live in a camper and don't have a family, then you can build your way up. Or if your dad has a business, you know, he'll bring you in. That happens a lot. A lot. Family, you know.

EK: Or the boss.

AP: But start when you're 40, yeah. So, there's always a there's a will there's a way,

[00:35:53]

EK: But yeah, doesn't sound like you're the sort of person who wants to wait for somebody else to show you how to do it.

AP: I have a lot of patience because I've never used any of them. [Laughter.]

EK: You have it stockpiled. Just in case.

AP: Which isn't always a good thing. But yeah, that's kind of how I was.

EK: Yeah. That's exactly what Dusty said. Well, not that the part about patience. Because, yeah, just that, you know, if you're gonna do something, you just do it.

AP: That's and Dusty's like that, too. I mean, he, me and him are a lot like in that aspect. We just figure out what needs to be done and just do it. And a lot of people that stops a lot of people in their tracks because they just can't see to the next step or they it's too difficult to overcome whatever obstacles in the way, but we were so determined. And trust me, there were plenty of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, you know, that we're like, but we figured it out. Yeah, we made it work.

EK: He said that the way he grew up as an only child on a farm, that who worked his butt off that like, what that's shaped like who he is now and his approach to it. Did you grow up on a farm too?

AP: No. My dad was actually an electrician by trade. But actually, when I was 14, I started going up to South Dakota in summertime working on a cow-calf ranch up there. And I kind of I don't I like I said, I liked airplanes, and I liked horses. So I wanted to be a pilot, but I wanted to be a cowboy. And I ended up and I started rodeoin' too. So my ag background kind of went that direction. And I, you know, I spent some some time when I was younger, doing that kind of work. And I actually did it around here. I mean, I've done gala cowboy day work to here and I was shoeing horses. But I don't know I just always had a good strong work ethic, no matter what I was doing. I was always seems to be put myself into into it. Like this thing I built. I did all that and about two months. Takes guys five years to build these things a lot of times, so...

JK: That's impressive. Two months.

AP: I was in here, I would get up. I loved it. That was a great winter, I'd get up I'd take the kids to school union town and drive out here. I'd worked on this thing all day, I might go meet my wife for lunch or something. And then I would work until four o'clock in the afternoon and I go home, pick the kids up the end of the driveway and go up to the house and eat dinner. And it was just that's what I did. I just spent six, eight hours in here every day. Working on it.

EK: Where does your wife work?

AP: In RS trailers up on the highway? Horse trailers.

EK: I worked at I taught at the high school for 30 years.

AP: Uniontown?

EK: No, Fort Scott.

AP: Okay, cool.

EK: I taught art. So I always like to know the connections because you never know.

AP: Yeah, right.

EK: Yeah, I quit this last year.

AP: I see.

EK: It was a good year to quit.

AP: Yeah, right.

EK: Yeah, sure. Crazy year.

JK: So are you still wanting to sort of stop flying ag and move on to jets after a few years?

AP: I don't know. Like I said when COVID hit, I mean, we had all these trips planned we were gonna go to Scandinavia and a couple different trips to Europe and had all this other stuff planned. Now that all that came to a screeching halt. And they've hardly flown that thing. I mean, I've only been in it like twice last year.

JK: Sort of an expensive jet not to fly.

AP: Nope. Well, I guess I can afford it but yeah, so I don't know I mean, now I mean, flying ag is... I've come to a place in my life where I'm I've got a lot of time doing it and I'm pretty good at it. And you know, pretty like I said. I could get a job. I get enough references and in spite of the crashes that I could go work for just about anybody needed an ag pilot, so. And it's a good living. I mean, it makes good money. So it's kind of hard to say no to that. And you get all winter off, do something else, like building, build an airplane or whatever. Go skiin,' you know,

JK: Yeah, that's what Dusty does.

AP: Yep. That's what I do too. That was our first question. We went to the K AAA convention, the Kansas ag aviation Association, and I found out about it. I said Dusty, they got a convention. Ag pilots. You want to go and he's like, Yeah! So we jump in the truck and we drive up to Manhattan. And I kind of, I knew a guy that knew some ag pilots. So I told him we were coming he worked for MKC, Mid Kansas Co Op. So we met up there at the convention and he introduces us to these two guys. Spencer and Tracy. I said Really? Seriously? [Laughter.] Like Yeah, why? And I'm like, nevermind.

And Dusty, that's first thing you know, we asked about three questions and Dusty is like, what do you do in the winter? And Spencer's like, drink beer. He answered. It's all he said. He meant it. But yeah.

[00:41:16]

EK: Build planes and drink beer.

JK: Or if you're Jacob, you go to Thailand.

AP: Yeah, Thailand, spend the winter in Thailand. Yeah, I've done different things. I've pulled campers and just does whatever to stay busy. But I like this is my favorite winter really doing this. I enjoyed it. A lot of work, but

JK: It's good work.

AP: Yeah, it is good work. Keeps your mind active. Keep your hands busy. Gives you exercise. So yeah.

EK: Pulled campers? Do you mean like haul them around the country?

AP: You'll go up to Indiana to where they build them and you get it, grab one and take it and deliver it to dealership somewhere. I'd usually run out to the west coast and go up and down and get up, reload up or something go out to Oregon or Washington or grab another one run down to California and grab another one run back to Utah and come home, stuff like that. A lot of windshield time. Gets old after a while. And weather out there in the winter is not that friendly. So it's...

EK: I saw a picture of Cheyenne and the street was packed with snow about three feet deep. Yeah. yesterday.

AP: Denver, Colorado, got a lot.

EK: A lot of it actually. Snow. The snow picture is on this. There it is downtown Cheyenne. Yesterday.

AP: Yep. That looks like fun. I'm glad we're here.

EK: Yeah. Pretty interesting. So does your season start up big in June is that...?

AP: Oh ,it depends on the year. I mean, I might start flying the third week to do I mean, I'll be flying here can be slying here pretty quick, anytime. There are already some of the planes in different locations already been working for Hiemen Brothers. So..

EK: How many people work for them?

AP: I don't know. I think they had like 27 airplanes last year. They got they've got an operation up in Idaho too. So they've got a lot of...

EK: Who are they anyway? The guy that...?

AP: Heinen brothers? Scott and Glen Heinen the brothers that live up there.

EK: So did they start out independently? Or did they inherit this business?

AP: I don't know. I'd have to research that. I don't know how they start. They've built it really big really fast. I can tell you that. And they've got a lot of ground assets too. And they do fertilizer and they sell chemical. And they got all kinds of stuff going on. And they farm.

EK: So they're diversified. Yeah. That makes sense.

AP: But I don't remember the whole backstory on how they actually got into ag? Oh, I think they were telling they told me about it. But when you're working, it's hard to remember stuff. People are talking to you because you're kind of focused on that.

EK: So that's how you, so you met Emily and I can't think of her husband's name.

AP: I can't either, but yeah, I met him there there, Austin. Yeah, they showed up out there. And there they were, so visited with them for a couple days. I ate dinner with 'em one night.

EK: Maybe if I tell her that I know you.

AP: I don't know if she'll remember me or not. But you can tell her. Yeah, tell her that you talked to a guy that works for flies for Hienen brothers that met her and her husband for a few days last year. She might...

EK: Is she a good pilot.

AP: I think so. She's sweet girl. She seems like but yeah, she flew that brave for a couple days I think and didn't have any issues. I guess I guess I didn't see her but. I preflighted my plane. My plane was right in front of hers in the hangar one morning. I was pre flightoin' and so I was kind of visiting with her while we were getting ready to go. That's the extent of talking to her. There was a... So the other feat, did you guys hear about Bethany Root?

EK: Yes.

AP: I was there that day.

EK: Oh, you were?

AP: Yes. Yes, I was. I had flown in the night before, the day before I'd come up, I was still working for myself then and you know, they were looking for help. And the guy that I leased the plane, my plane from had sent them a plane that when it got up there that wasn't really ready to work. And anyways, so he calls me, he says, Is there any way you can go up there and help the Macelwain? They need a pilot, they need an airplane. I was like, and I wasn't doing anything. So I said sure. So I hopped in there. I flew up to Leavenworth and they loaded me out that day outta Leavenworth and I was just flying by myself out there. They have a load crew there and it was funny. I pulled in one time and there's a Thrush sitting there on the turn right there. And I was like, Wonder who that is? 'Cause I didn't know 'em. I'd never met 'em before. And I got outta the plane and walked in there and she and Russ and Bethany were there and Bethany was flying that that Thrush and she was introduced herself and I'm still kind of like, okay, cool, nice to meet you, you know, and looking at my maps and get my fuel and I hop in and I finished flying that day, and I land I hear her on the radio coming into Atchison, and I'm, so I radio that I'm you know, I'm a few miles out past her. So she lands right in front of me. And I come in behind her and I land we whip off in the grass and shut the planes down and hop out. And she's like, introduces herself again like, you know, hey, let's we're going to the air show tonight. It was Atchison Days and they were having an air show. And it had some aerobatics and that P-51 was there. And so you grab a couple of beers and grab a couple other another pilot and his wife and we hop in the pickup and haul to Atchison, and we hang out that evening and they had fireworks and everything. And we were all back there drinking beer. And the P-51. pilot was there. He got invited to the party. And at that, while we were all visiting Bethany was begging him for a ride in that P-51. She's like, I want to ride that P-51 tomorrow, and he was just going to get up the next morning, fly back to Illinois with it. And he said to us, you know, she's really pretty girl, you know, blonde here is she very pretty. And very, in very, I mean, she was I mean, she was just really not I mean, she was having fun. She's fun to talk to you know, and of course she's like, Oh, yeah, I'll give you a ride in P-51, you know, and that next morning, we're all firing up ag planes. I think she flew maybe one load in that Thrush and she came back and shut it off. And I was there, they spun it up, or I went and talked to that pilot, he was fueling that Mustang. He was putting gas in the wing and when I talked to him for a few minutes and then I got back in my plane. And I watched her get in it with him and they've, and they taxied out and I taxied out, they taxied out and took off and I was loading and I taxied out to the runway. And I saw 'em and they were doing aerobatics, like right over the field. So I waited for a few minutes, because I didn't want to hit him when I took off. And I watched and then it kind of drifted off and went over here some kind of out of my way. So I hurried up and whipped out there. And I made a quick radio call and I took off and turned right and headed west or headed east. And it must have just been a few minutes later. And they Yeah, you want a big loop or something and just... And I got back and all the planes were shut down. You know, and all the other ag planes. Nothing was turning. Nobody was doing anything was weird, you know, because there's a lot of work to do. And there's a lot of planes there. And Aaron Aiken who now works for Heinen brothers. They hired me first. So I'm A-1 and he's A-2. But anyways, he comes out to the plane and I'm sitting there and I you know, I had my door open. I'm like what? And he's like, shut it down. I was like, okay, so I killed the motor. And as it's winding down and he walks up to my wing, I was like what? And he said, it's Bethany. The Mustang. They're dead. I was like, oh my god. So yeah, we

were all in shock for a few hours. And then we slowly got, you know, kind of that afternoon and we got back into planes and kind of went back to work. But, takes a toll on you know, getting back in an airplane and flyijn'. You know, good Lord, what just happened, you know?

EK: Was it close to the airport? That it happened?

AP: Yeah, just a couple miles away. Wasn't far at all.

JK: Did they ever figure out exactly what happened?

AP: I'm sure they did. But I don't know. Yeah, I don't. Yeah,

JK; I think those accident reports are they're sad. But at the same time, I think it's neat that you know, they can help other people.

AP; Oh, yeah. I always read through those in the magazine, you know, you got to look through the incidents to try to, you know, learn from other people's mistakes, because there's just so many ways that can go wrong.

JK: What's the saying, a safe pilot is a boring pilot?

AP: Yeah.

EK: So you want to be boring.

AP: There's no old bold pilots.

EK: That pilot, it said he'd been flying for, I don't know, 40 years or so.

AP: Oh he'd been around for a long time. He'd done a lot of shows with that. And a lot of aerobatics with it. Baby Duck was the name of that plane or that sort of painting on the side of it. And there's he's on YouTube, you can pull him up and watch him do stuff.

JK: Those P-51s I think they had. I think the same thing happened at the Las Vegas show. Like they had a loss of control.

AP: There's a part back there on the tail that breaks on them. But I don't think that was a lot of speculation that they thought maybe that's what happened because it's common with those planes. But I think he, I think, and you'll have to look it up. I think he just did a loop too close to the ground. He didn't have enough room to pull it out. Because they said he augured that thing in so hard that they couldn't find one of the prop blades for a long time. But it was embedded in the ground under the fuselage from where he basically just run it right in. So pretty sad.

EK: I can't believe you were there.

JK: Still you kind of just like you say you gotta keep flying.

AP: Yep. You don't have to but you should. [Laughter.] Take offs or optional, landings mandatory isn't they say?

EK: Dusty told us that, didn't he? He said, there's always got to be a landing.

JK: Kevin has told me that too. While we're in the air, one hour.

[00:51;47]

AP: Hey, I'm telling you, I've been in a lot of these single seat, airplanes, different times, you know, ag planes. And every time you take off in a new and you're like, Great. [Laughter.] No I gotta land it.

JK: Ever had one of those oshit moments where you're like, Am I really, like capable of flying this new aircraft?

AP: A couple times. Yeah, that thought's run through your head. But you got to get rid of that quickly and just kind of hunker down and do it. But it works out. Usually.

EK: I'd like to see the 802.

AP: Hopefully it'll be I don't know. It's the 50. Yeah, they wanted it done by now. But it's obviously not so. But it should be done anytime. Hopefully, you know, I'm expecting a call any day to go get it and bring it up here. Go to work hopefully.

SK: So as we kind of come to the end of this interview. Have any final final thoughts? Final things to say about being an ag pilot?

AP: I don't know. It's, you know, it's been good work for me in spite of the, you know, the hardship and the accidents and everything else. I mean, it's just a... No, it's more than a job. It's way of life. Yeah.

EK: What kind of people do it?

AP: Crazy people. [Laughter.] I get that question a lot. Do you have to be crazy. I had a kid from the college called me last week. And I met him for lunch. He wanted to know, he wanted me to give some advice on how to be an ag pilot. And so I sat down there and I told him you know how to get started and what he should do in his position. And that was one of his questions and he looked me right dead in the eyes and said do you have to be crazy to be an ag pilot? And I said what are you saying? [Laughter.] I said no, I said actually, the, the less crazy you are the better chances you got of surviving in this industry. But you know, you gotta be willing to push the edge too.

JK: It seems crazy to an outsider.

AP: It looks crazy. And it can be crazy. And those guys down in Louisiana is full of crazy ag pilots. But that's why they have all the crashes down to there too.

EK: All right.

SK: Well, I just like to say thanks for taking the time out of your day to stand around with us.

AP: Sure. Happy to do it. I hope it helps and you got what you want.

SK: Thank you sure.