

Project name: Agricultural Pilots: Crop Dusters in the Rural Midwest

Field ID and name: Interview 4

Interviewee: Sam Styron

Interviewer/Recordist: Ellen Kendrick, Samuel Kendrick

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Location: Harrisonville, Missouri

Others Present: Jackson Kendrick

Equipment used: Zoom H6 Handy Recorder

Microphone: Saramonic Wireless Lavalier Microphone

Recording Format: .WAV

Recorded Tracks in Session: 1

Duration: 1:01:12

Keywords: Ag pilot, crop duster, ag plane, safety, chemicals, representation, advocacy, FAA,

Corresponding Materials: Photographs

Context: Sitting/standing around the hanger where Sam flies out of

Technical Considerations: There is a hum and tends to come and go on the recording, it makes listening to it difficult, but doesn't affect the content.

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: Record. It's March 24, 2021. We're in Harrisonville, Missouri, and it is 2:20 and we're talking to Sam Styron.

SK: At the airport.

EK: Anyway, this is a 602?

SS: 602 Yeah, slightly bigger than, well, I think Dusty's is a 5m 502. So, and he used to have a 402, which my 402 is out on the runway because there's not enough hangar space here at Harrisonville for me to,

EK: That surprises me that there's not, as close as it is to the city.

SS: Well, yeah, I don't know. I mean, we could certainly rent out more hangar space if we had it. But the airport's kind of landlocked, doesn't have any more space to expand the hangar space or the runway or anything really, so anyway. Yeah, 602, eleven hundred horsepower engine. Pratt Whitney turbine. It won't quite haul 600 gallons of water but it's good for, I bought it for handling dry fertilizer. We've gotten where we top dress corn more and more every year.

EK: I've noticed that, utilizing the services rather than just calling the local elevator.

SS: Well it really it developed because we had such wet springs here four or five years ago.

EK: Oh, and they couldn't get into the fields.

SS: Couldn't get in the field and then they realized what an advantage it was to use the airplane because you weren't running down the crops. And you know if you follow those guys that top dress corn with ground rigs, you see their tracks all over the all over the place and it's, so anyway, the farmers realize it's economical enough that...

EK: I wonder if like the trend towards no-till and cover crops and all that has also helped business?

SS: Oh, cover crops certainly have. I don't know about the no-till part. I just don't know if that makes a difference or not. But certainly cover crops that's become pretty good part of my business.

EK: You wouldn't want to run over your little hills in the field and mess up your...

SS: Oh, and compact on the terraces and things, yeah, that always the advantage to is the no compaction, hopefully with our airplanes. On occasion, you hit the ground, but those are not especially good times. [Laughter.]

EK: Have you done that?

SS: Yes. [Laughter.] A couple of times I've done it and kept flying and other times I've done it it was the end of the flight. So yeah,

EK: Yeah, do you want to talk about it?

SS: I can tell you what ever you want to know. The first time was actually the first season I set up here in 1993. And actually was haulin' soybeans. And I took off with a full load of soybeans and I

couldn't climb out. And I just barely got over the power lines and still wouldn't climb and every time I tried to climb it started shuddering like it's gonna stall out. And then I thought I'd let the nose down. Then I barely got over the powerline. I already said that. But the next thing was I hedgerow and my left wing caught the top of the tree and I just spun in the ground slid about 200 feet, broke the plane all to pieces.

EK: Was it in a like a 402?

SS: No, actually my third plane over there's a Cessna Ag Wagon, rag truck. And it's Oh, it's 260 gallon hopper, but the one I had was like that, at the time and so it was smaller. And so anyway,

EK: You walked away?

SS: Yeah, walked away. Yeah, the airplane didn't, it got hauled away. And so yeah, I walked away from that one.

EK: We saw some pictures of the wrec, that Aaron said he had in Indiana.

SS: Yeah, yeah, that was bad deal for Aaron. Oh, yeah.

EK: The interesting thing I thought is that like the cockpit of the plane was intact.

SS: That's the great thing about especially this plane, the Air Tractors, they have a really solid cockpit. The guy I was telling you about in Independence that knew Jacob, he, he crashed one maybe on takeoff or something, lost his engine? But he wadded it up pretty good but his cockpit was all intact. So they've done really the, this brand Air Tracktor, which is, there's another brand built here in the U.S. called Thrush.

EK: We haven't see that one though.

[00:05:22]

SS: A Thrush is what Kevin Kingsley's brother Kimon has. Kimon, isn't that his name?

EK: Yeah, he's on our list.

SS: Yeah. And they're Cayman and Cayman. And Kevin I've met.

EK: Really? There's more like, they are multiples?

SS: Something like that. [Laughter.] I know Kevin, and I actually had Kevin come up and, and do some work for me when, well, last spring. So last year, a year ago, I was I had a stent put in my heart in. Anyway, so I couldn't get my medical back until May of last year, or the very end of May, first of June. And I had the stent put in and the last day of the year, December 30, I guess. Anyway,

but it took that long to get my medical certificate back and had to jump through a lot of hoops for that. Still have to. I had to do that again this year. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

EK: You're fit though.

SS: Yeah, but you got to prove it. For, til, for another six years.

EK: So what do you have to do to prove your health?

SS: You gotta do a treadmill test and nuclear treadmill, or nuclear stress test, I guess they call it and so you run on the treadmill, and they get your heart rate pumping, and they fill you full and nucleide. So they can take pictures of you at rest and after or at exercise and monitor you the whole time with the EKG machine. And, and then and then you got to send in the, the video recordings of all that showing that your heart's pumping in the blood flow and the heart...

EK: Who do you send them to?

SS: The FAA.

JK: That's about the same level of examination of an ATP.

SS: Well, yeah, I don't know if they do that on every year for an ATP.

JK: Well, not every year, but I know to get your ATP you have to do that.

SS: You got to go through a lot of that.

EK: What's an ATP?

SS: Airline transport pilot, the guys that fly the big jets. So anyway, I had to do that the first time and prove it. And, and, you know, they get this, I actually go to Chicago to a guy that, it's a doctor who knows how to get through the bureaucracy in, in Oklahoma City where the main office is for the FAA. And

EK: Like for the whole country?

SS: Oh, yeah. And he says, they got 40,000 documents there all the time that they're processing. So anyway, but he, the great part of this guy, and the reason I got him because another friend of mine is a crop duster up at Carrollton. He had a brain tumor, benign, but he still had one and it was causing problems and headaches and stuff for years. And anyway, had it worked on but that's who he went to. And he said, You need to go see Dr. Chen. And so I did. And I mean, he, when I went up there, he gave me exam and all that and, and I did all the paperwork that he said I had to do getting the stress test and all that. And then he handed me a piece of paper and he says, here's what you need to do. When you go home, on so many days, after we FedEx the documents to them, call them

at 8:05 in the morning. [Laughter.] And say just I'm an interested airman checking on my paperwork, seeing where it is. And they'll mark it down.

EK: So you have to be very specific.

SS: You tell him what, yeah, tell him your interest, he says, and then he says, then don't call him next day. Don't call him on consecutive days, call him the third day or you know, leave a day in between then call him. Do the same thing. And when they the red flag, or the flag that comes up is we've flagged your file. And he says when they say that you call me immediately and let me know because then I can call them and say I'm his AME, I'm his airman, airman, medical examiner. And he can start asking and pushing and getting stuff done. But he had I mean, he had it printed out exactly what to do, what date when to call exactly when and all that and what to say?

[00:10:01]

EK: So if you hadn't done that, if you didn't have him, you'd still be sitting here.

SS: Well, it would have taken, he said we'll knock off four to eight weeks.

EK: Yeah. That's money.

SS: Well, absolutely. And you know, I here I am, season generally starts, start getting work in April and then if I'm spraying pasture we get down to Fort Scott there and spray in June after the leaves come out on the trees and the brush and, and then and then, you know, then it just rolls on into spraying corn, fertilizing and all that. But really, if I had to wait till middle of June, it would have fouled me up. I've got a sizable contract that we've been doing in Iowa, at times is half, half my year, and we do it in three or four weeks. So I needed to get, get fixed and get recertified otherwise, and I was scrambling to find pilots. Someone to just fly my plane for me. And anyway, and I actually ended up hiring a guy out of Australia to fly my other one in Iowa.

EK: So he was in Australia?

SS: He's from Austin. Tasmania, which is the south side.

EK: Yeah. With the devils, Tasmanian devils.

SS: According to him, they're not really very demonic. [Laughter.] Pretty docile little critters.

EK: I think that's what we all think when we hear Tasmania.

JK: So what made you start flying?

SS: Okay, well, I'm an engineer, like maybe not like you, but I'm a civil engineer.

EK: Well, I looked you up on the, when we were researching, I just did crop dusters, and you were one of the first names that came up. And I did like, I said, he's more than just an airplane flyer, he's an engineer. And anyway, I thought that was pretty interesting and saw that you had a storefront on the square.

SS: Yeah, just off the square But no, I in 1991, I suppose. Anyway, I we didn't have any kids, my wife and I, and we lived in the city and I was working work in engineering and I like really like engineering actually. And so working for a firm there and, so, didn't have any kids, my wife had a good job. And I was getting to fly I had my pilot license I was getting fly once a month maybe go rent a plane at the airport, go for a flight, maybe get a hamburger or whatever, and you know just once a month. It wasn't very satisfying and I wanted to fly more and so I told my wife I'm going to learn fly crop dusters.

EK: What'd she say to that?

SS: Okay. [Laughter.] She's, my wife is really good. I don't understand her. If that's what you want to do and so I told her what I was doing and I grew up well, south you guys, Granby.

EK: Oh, okay.

SS: Was my hometown and where I grew up in my, we worked on truck farms out there and so growing up I was around small town farming a little bit. Not a farmer but I worked on a truck farm cutting cabbage and picking tomatoes and cucumbers and peppers and all that. Anyway, so in my first encounter with a crop duster, there's guy at Lamar and Carthage. I can't think of his name, Lou Quinn, Flew an old biplane, and Lou was quite a character. I didn't know him, just had only seen him flying and stuff at different times over the years and when we'd drive through Carthage we'd see his airplane parked there on the ramp. Anyway, that was my first encounter of crop dusters.

EK: And it stuck, didn't it?

SS: I guess, you know, and my dad was a military pilot in World War II a little bit in pilot training. I don't think he ever got out of that. But anyway, he had his stories about flying and that always piqued my interest. So anyway, I got my pilot license, but I wanted to fly more and so I decided that want to move out of city and seemed like a way to do it.

EK: So how old were you when you got your pilot's license? Did you just decide to do that? Was that just like...?

SS: Well, I was in the Air Force.

EK: Oh, okay, well...

SS: I didn't fly for the Air Force. I got, I was stationed in Idaho in 1977, so that would have made me 19 maybe?

EK: Yeah.

[00:15:10]

SS: When I got my pilot's license, and then shortly after that, well, I was there for 12 or 14 months and then went to Germany for a couple years. And so I didn't get fly in Germany. I think they actually had a flying club, but I wouldn't aware of it. Anyway, I was having a lot of fun doing other stuff. [Laughter.] Got, got out of the service and went to college at MU in Columbia and got my engineering degree and last year of that I started flying again, And, and anyway, got back into flying was wanting to fly more. And so that's when I...

EK: So here you are.

SS: I started. There used to be a magazine called Ag Pilot that was produced by a guy named Tom Wood out of Oregon, I think, or Washington. So I got a subscription to that and started reading about it and studying it a little bit. I went and visited Lou Quinn down in Lamar. Yeah. He wouldn't have anything to do with me.

EK: There's an old guy in Nevada. You probably know him Eddie Hamersley.

SS: I know Eddie.

EK: And I suspect he's of the same ilk.

SS: Oh, and he's nothing like Lou. And Lou. I mean, he flew Stearman, but then he had, actually were Kevin Kingsley's hangar is is where Lou operated out of. But he had an Air Tractor 301, which was one of the first Air Tractors built had a radial engine on it. But before that, he had biplanes, Stearman biplanes. And anyway, stories I hear Lou would pull up in his airplane to get loaded, and he'd throw out a can of beer and get another one and, and get loaded, both ways. [Laughter.] And go back to fly.

EK: Oh, that's impressive.

SS: Anyway, so that that's, that's the stories I hear about Lou. But my actual encounter was I went to his house and told him I wanted to get into business. And I was thinking, he'd take me on, he's getting pretty old and want to get out of his business. And I would be a way for him to do that. And he says, I'm not babysitting anymore.

EK: How old was he then you suppose?

SS: I don't know. I don't know how old he was when he died. I suppose he was, he looked ancient to me. And, he's kind of a heavysset guy and or big beer belly or something. But anyway, and a cigar in his mouth, and I can remember going in his house and him sitting on this chair, he kind of had it up on a platform, it looked like a throne. [Laughter.] And anyway, Lou said, I'm not taking on anyone, or not going to babysit anyone was what he said. So I got the message and moved on.

EK: Yeah.

SS: And so there was another fella named Sam Dyer in, in Marshall, Missouri. And his, his company name was Dyer the Flyer. [Laughter.] And Sam's, he's quite a, I think he's still alive, I'm pretty sure. He was an FAA flight examiner, so if you're getting your license you can go to him. He was also an auctioneer. But anyway, I went and talked to him. And I said, What I got to do to be a crop duster? And he says, have a have an IQ of about the same as your shoe size. Okay. [Laughter.] I can probably manage that.

EK: That's easy.

SS: So anyway, and he wasn't encouraging. And then there was another guy, actually just down the road at Clinton, a guy named Larry Farrow. And he and he had, had for years has his runway. I guess they just planted it this year. He's made a, it used to be right along the road next to the highway. And Larry flew. Well, he had he had a Thrush also, but it wasn't turbine, it was a radial engine and then he had some Cessnas and another one built in Kansas called a Funk. There's an aircraft manufacturer called Funk and they did build a crop dusting plane.

JK: I don't think they built very many.

SS: No, they didn't build many. Well they built, well there's several funk, well, I wouldn't say several but they're different models of the Funk. Yeah, I don't know but he had one radial engine on it. Actually, that's the last airplane I seen him flying before his daughter turned him in tot he FAA. [Laughter.] Because he was getting old and he was a cranky old guy anyway, and he used to come out here. I was getting started and he'd come fly up here and he'd be loading his plane, the sun was on the ground their loading him, and, and he'd get out of his plane and I'd be over there loading my plane and he's start hollering at me telling me I need to go to South Dakota or someplace and learn how to fly. Anyway, he was, he was a deal. Larry Farroiw. And uh...

[00:20:41]

JK: So you just kind of started flying.

SS: Well, so I, actually so I decided I was going to do it. Making this all a real long story.

EK: No, I, I'm thinking okay, at what point did you, just because this could be done? Because this it the third guy you've gone to.

SS: Yeah. Larry Farrow wouldn't have anything to do...

EK: Nobody seems to want to...

SS: No, all these, you know, everybody's getting old and gray headed. These guys. I'm talking to them, and they're not interested in getting anyone started. And so anyway, I decided I was gonna do it. I'm hard headed that way. And so,,

EK: Determined.

SS: There's a school, there was a school, still there actually, in Bainbridge, Georgia. That would train ag pilots. And I went down there. And I was there nearly two months, eight weeks, and got 40 hours of training. Well, I had to get my commercial. I got my commercial license, which is 250 hours of flying, and taking a test, and exam, practical exam.

EK: You did that around here?

SS: Yeah. So I did that here. We lived in Shawnee in the city. Anyway, I did that. And then went down to Georgia for those eight weeks and went through the training. And, and mostly the reason it took so long, you get 40 hours training, but there's a lot of guys there actually, people from Canada, and other places around the country that we're going there to learn to fly.

EK: Are there their not that many schools?

SS: There's not. Actually I have a guy that I'm getting started. That's why I bought this small Cessna over there for him to spray in this year. He's up in South Dakota, right now doing that, going through a pilot, ag pilot training school. And so there's not many I mean, there's a few. There's more than there were back when I did. Anyway, I did that went there. And then I got back home and started calling people and there's a Floyd McElwain in St. Joe, and he was 54 or five years old. Anyway, I called him up, talked to him. And he said, yeah, we made it in.

EK: Finally.

SS: I guess I left out one, there was another guy over, over at Ottawa, Kansas. A guy named Chuck Lemaster. And I was, tried to work out a deal with him. He was willing it seemed, but in the end, at least I think the end if it wasn't his wife, it was the insurance company that said, we can't insure. So anyway, and insurance is even now is a problem to get a young guy started because you can't get insurance unless you have experience and you can't get experience unless you have insurance. So it's a bit of a battle. And it's expensive. And so anyway, that's from...

EK: Aside from everyone being a crabby lot.

SS: [Laughter.] Yeah. Right. So, so anyway, I called Floyd. Floyd, I mean, if you know Floyd he's willing to do some really stupid stuff. [Laughter.] And he took me on, which is an example of that.

But he put up with me and then the first year I flew for him and, and I was driving to St. Joe not I mean, on the season last four or five months. So I didn't fly up there. I didn't go up there a whole lot. But that season, and I got 300 hours of flying in and flying his airplane and that year, we came down, there was an armyworm run that year in 1992. And they were thick. And we went to Lamar and set up and worked there for a week or two. And there was, so actually Floyd and me and maybe another guy with Floyd. And then there was this guy, Larry Farrow that I was telling about down the road here and Sam Dyer, and a buddy of his, Dan Parker. Anyway, all of us were at Lamar for a week or two working and spraying army worms. And then we moved, kind of followed the worms up this way. We landed in Harrisonville, a guy had called and needed some spraying on wheat, and we stopped here for a day or two. And that guy, after the season was over and said, We really like to have a crop duster here. And so I was going to set up a spraying operation with Floyd using his plane and being here and, and do the business. But we couldn't get come to terms on how I was going to get paid. And so he said, Why don't you just go do it yourself? I said, Okay. And so I bought a plane. And the fella that wanted us to do that had, had a farm out here and we built a runway on his place. And I worked off of that for a little bit. But I would have starved, if that was my only income. And so but anyway, that's how I got started and got in this area.

[00:26:12]

EK: And that was in '92 then.

SS: Well actually '93 was the year I got here, but '92 is when I started, and flew for Floyd that first year. And so I was driving down from Shawnee, down here for, for a few years. And three or four. Anyway. But when I got here, turned out my brother was here. He was the editor, managing editor of the newspaper.

EK: Oh. That's interesting.

SS: Yeah. And just, just happenstance. Anyway, he was here. So I had a connection here anyway. And then... let's see, what happened? So got set up here and started working. And then somebody found out I was an engineer, and well, one of my farmers and actually a guy I went to college with, or was at college same time. Anyway, he's Hartzler Equipment.

EK: Oh, yeah.

SS: Guy, it's Heartland now, I guess.

EL: Yeah.

SS: They got a shop down your way. Here, Lowell Hartzler.

EK: Yeah, Vicki's our rep.

SS: Yeah.

EK: I don't know her. I just...

SS: We actually know them fairly well. I was in college, knew Vicki in college. I didn't really know Lowell. So anyway, we, anyway, Lowell had a lake that had washed out the dam. And he wanted me to design something. I said, Well, I need surveying work done. And he got ahold of the surveyor here in town, and surveyor says we need an engineer in here. So I set up an engineering office, in their place. They said just move in here. We got space for you. So I did.

EK: So they needed you both.

SS: Yeah. So that worked really good. I actually got really busy engineering. I was engineering night and day. And that was coming up through the '90s and all the housing, boom. We were designing subdivisions. All of that for just, I could work night and day, all weekend. Everything. It was just busy. I got really tired of it though. I was glad to see the boom, I mean, the bust.

EK: And bust it did.

SS: Oh man, it was huge. And so that happened in about 2005 or '07, things just shut off engineering, but at the same time, that's when the fungicide business for spraying came in, you know, they had this big threat of soybean rust and it was gonna blow up from South America and never really happened. But people started putting fungicide on stuff. And they realized that it worked on beans and worked on corn and it worked on wheat. And, and that's when my business literally took off. I mean, you just started getting calls. Literally and figuratively. [Laughter.] It has always literally taken off. Anyway it was, so the fungicide business really made it where I can make a living. And engineering business died. I mean, I still do some of it. I was doing 60 jobs a year and now I do half a dozen or a dozen.

EK: So you can just pick the ones you want then.

SS: Yeah, well, I mean, you either take them or you don't.

EK: Yeah.

SS: But yeah, and they're usually little jobs. But I'd started a subdivision up in Peculiar 15 years ago and we did the first phase of it. And it went belly up and in the crash and then a new guy bought it. And I just finished that subdivision this past year. The second phase of it, and they're building it out now. But anyway,

[00:30:13]

EK: But isn't there one along the highway? Like on the west side of the highway?

SSL In here?

EK: Somewhere just out here? Yeah. Or is it South? Like in between Hartzler's and here? Maybe?

[0:30:26]

SS: Oh, there is. Yeah, that's, yeah, those are large lots. The ones I were, do are like postage size stamps. Or that's what I did. Did a lot of business. Mafe Money. That's what, you know, those small residential lots are. They packed with houses in as tight as you can get them.

EK: Yes, they do. I was thinking about liberty, Missouri.

SS: Yeah.

EK: Like, that boomed during that time. And then like, during the best, like, you drive through the neighborhoods and out, and there'd be all these empty houses.

SS: Oh yeah. The one I did, they had streets and all the infrastructure in and no houses. Right. And it sat that way for 15 years.

EK: Yeah. There was one up North like, between, like 152, well off of Barry Road that sat like that it was on Antioch to 152. And it sat, I bet it sat for 12 years.

SS: Yeah, probably did.

EK: Yeah.

SS: So things are starting to shake loose now seems like.

EK: Seems like a lot of apartments are being built.

SS: Yeah. Seems to be a demand for apartments.

EK: Are you into that?

SS: I have two apartments that I rent out, but beyond that no.

EK: No designing them, no engineering...

SS: Not that. I don't do buildings. I just do infrastructure, streets and water and sewer lines and storm drainage, and that kind of stuff.

EK: But that that's kind of neat. I mean, not for the people who went bust, but for you, like it gave you an opportunity to do what you really wanted to do.

SS: Yeah, I mean, it worked. It worked great. I can do my crop dusting in the evenings and on the weekends or early morning and then go in the office and do the engineering I needed to do and...

And anyway, so I did that for years. And you know, it paid for the airplane, it didn't really give... Kind of satisfied my flying.... Uh, need.

EK: But it's a good living, isn't it?

SS: Engineering?

EK: Crop dusting.

SS: Yeah, it is now?

EK: Yeah.

SS: Yeah. And I I tell people they don't hardly believe me, I make way more money flying spray plane than I ever made engineering.

EK: Yeah.

JK: It's hard work, though.

SSL Well, I mean, you work hard when you work that... You know, there's a lot of days I get up and fly two or three loads and the wind starts blowing or something's not right, and you got to shut down and then come back out in the evening and set and wait and see if the wind's gonna die, then you might get one load off. And so there's a lot of, there's a lot of that goes on. And I mean, if you're doing it, right. I see a lot of guys take off when they shouldn't take off. You know, the wind's wrong. I mean, it's too hard. I mean, when gets to 10 you need to be shutting down. And so I, actually some of the guys I was telling you about that come up here and compete with sort of, they're up here and the wind was blowing 25 miles an hour. And, and I was running fertilizer, and you can do that with dry material. But when you're spraying liquid, it's not going to hit your field. And this guy was going and I, I'd taken off in load and headed down to my job and I, and I flew over that guy flying. And he was spraying and it was just going off. When I came back, he was in his plane with another load and I started talking to him on the radio. I said you're not really going out again. He was, Who is this? [Laughter.]

EK: S concerned citizen.

SS: I said it's Sam and I'm the guy that operates out of Harrisonville. Anyway, he turned around and parked his plane. Anyway.

EK: So he just would have done it.

SS: Oh, yeah. He'd been doing it. And the people he was working for, they got mad at him. And he left the next day. But anyway, I mean, that's the business. I mean... Crop dusting business, in a way has a bad name. They think we're all cowboys and are going to do, you know, do whatever to make

a buck and, and... It's changed significantly. I mean, people would just, I go there now. I'm involved with the National Association.

EK: Yeah, Jack said that you were going to speak in September at some convention?

SS: Well, so I...

EK: Didn't you tell me that?

JK: Yeah, I thought you were gonna like host a panel or something?

[00:35:05]

SS: Well, so what I do, I'm on a team safety team, that, that goes around. So they call it, I can't even remember what the acronym stands for. It's PAASS. Anyway, it's basically a team that goes around and presents this program. Talk different aspects, because we do have deaths in this business. And so what's causing those deaths? And how can we mitigate it? And one of our reasons for doing it is so we don't get over-regulated by the government.

EK: Oh, yeah.

SS: I mean, there's regulations in place already. We don't want any more. And so if we can self police, and take care of ourselves, which it has significantly improved. Since we started doing PAASS program, I think it's 20 years now.

EK: You've been involved that whole time?

SS: No, no. I got involved, well, I've been going to the National Association for that long, but I didn't get involved with the safety team or this past program team till a couple years ago, I think, yeah, this last season was my second season. Anyway, but you know, so we have a program that talks about decision making, about being professional in your job, and primarily to mitigate accidents. And, and it has, you know, we used to have 25 to 30 deaths a year, and we're down to less than 10. And, of course, we like to claim that it's because of our program and awareness.

EK: I'm sure it is. To some extent.

SS: And, you know, I don't know if this is where I was going or not, but the people that deal with that, on the national level, or not national level, but you meet across the country that are in this business, they are highly educated aerospace engineers. Or just, you know, backyard engineers, but they're so smart. And you're just like, holy cow. I didn't even think of that. And so I get impressed every time I go and meet with those people. I'm like, Oh, holy cow.

How did you get to that stage? I don't think that way. Or, or I wish I did or something. You know, I wish there was...

JK: It's hard, for a lot of people, I think that like it's not a natural impulse to analyze your failure.

SS: Yeah.

JK: But you have to as a pilot, wouldn't you say?

SS: Oh, you got to. You got, you got to analyze and think about, well, I mean, covers all aspects. Your decision making, what, what makes you make those decisions, what biases and it was, this last year's program was about different kinds of biases that you make, how it affects the way you make decisions, you know. One of the things that causes us to have bias, buy these big airplanes, million dollar airplanes, I got to pay for that. Well if the winds blowin' that's not gonna slow me down. So is that really a good decision? You know, what, what does that really do for the industry, do for you? Are you really getting ahead because you took off, you know, you're, you're flying 60 miles, where the wind may be blowing, and totally different from where you are. And you're getting down there. And you see that it's that way, but you've already made that trip. But because I got this big airplane, I can fly there fast and do the job and and get it done. And, and so, am I going to do that? And is that a good idea? Well, I gotta pay for this airplane. So I got it, and I don't want to come back and then fly back down there. And you know...

JK: It's interesting you say that because Aaron was talking about it. He, he didn't use the term, but as failure analysis, and in that process, you do think about bias a lot. But he was talking about a contributing factor to the big accident was he had, like ten or twelve gallons left in his hopper, and he just didn't want to fly back with it.

SS: Yeah.

JK: He didn't want to waste it because we made that one last turn of the day.

SS: Yeah, and he's not the only one with done that. We actually had an example in our program, maybe previous year, where a guy did the exact same thing. And he goes back into the field caught a wire and crashed and fortunately lived to tell about it. And he shared you know, but you know, he's talking about layers of distraction when you're flying and, and what, what are, what things are distracting you and so... So anyway, just trying to eliminate or get the pilots to think about what are the things, where do I need to have my mind when I'm sitting in that cockpit flying? Well, you don't need your wife calling you on your cell phone. and telling you the kids are sick or, or whatever. And so how do you get people to say, Okay, I need to talk to my wife about, or you're going to meet the female pilot out in New Jersey, you know, I need to talk to my spouse and, and say, okay, don't call me. We'll figure out another way for me to get the message when I get on the ground, but I don't need to hear about this stuff when I'm in the plane, and having to keep focused on the job at hand.

[00:40:27]

JK: So do you think there's a sweet, sweet spot between introspection and self, self critique, and just gettin' your head down and get the job done?

SS: Do I think there's a what?

JK: Oh like a sweet spot?

SS: Yeah, well, is there a sweet spot, I know, if there's a sweet spot, or if you've got to totally eliminate one, and so you can stay on the job. And that's, you know, obviously hard to do to eliminate it completely. But to minimize the layers of distraction and get them pigeon-holed or out of the way, that once they're there, you know, if you're flying, it don't take a split second, for your mind to wander. This happens almost every time I fly, you know, you pull up out of the field, you're in a turn, a little bit of lag time there. Okay, and you think about something, you come back around, and you missed your line for the next pass. Well do I dive in the field and go ahead and make that pass, even though I'm offline? Or do I go around again? And, and make it right? And anyway, it just...

EK: What's the way you do?

SS: Both. [Laughter.] Depends on how bad I think I'm offline.

EK: Risk assessment, then.

SS: Yeah, you just say, okay, am I really off that much, or, you know, or, or I set my limits, say, if I'm five feet, or 10 feet off, I need go around. Because I can't salvage the path. Gonna do a lousy job.

JK: So you go through you set your limits with before you fly. So in situation like that you're relying on like a set theory here. Or a set model. So you can say.

SS: Yeah.

JK: This is a model that I created, you know, six hours ago here is A, B, C, or D.

SS: That's exactly right. And that's, you know, and that's one of the things we talked about, we tell when we have these safety meetings, I you guys set your limit, and say, This is what you're going to live by and live by it. Because the more you talk to guys that have walked away from an accident, they've broken their limits, and they know it. Even though they'd already set 'em. So, and if they live by their limit, what they said was the line they would, they would have saved an airplane and...

JK: It's not advisable to do real time troubleshooting.

SS: No, you need to have you need to have it set. Like this year, like we just did a, me and three or four the other past presenters. We went over to Manhattan, they have a simulator, Air Tractor simulator. And one of the issues we've had, I don't know, maybe for years, but one of the issues people are flying into instrument weather, get within the cloud. And you push the limits and the clouds are coming down lower and lower and you keep trying to get lower and get under and then eventually you just can't. It just turns white. And how do you get out of that? Most of these spray planes don't have an attitude indicator. They might have a turning back, turn cold. Well, we flew the simulator, and the only one of us that got out of it was a current instrument pilot. And he was able to get out of it. The other two of us, we died in five minutes.

EK: So you're not instrument certified?

SS: No. And so the takeaway...

EK: You died in five minutes?

SS: Yeah, it's unbelievable.

EK: That's disturbing. It's scary.

SS: Well, the I think guy died in 45 seconds.

EK: It's one of the indications of what you're involved in.

SS: Well, right. So you know you think you can fly the airplane. But if all you got's a compass you know. I was, after I got in the clouds I said do a 180 get out of it. Well you got a compass down here in that simulator anyway, which is really odd because you had to look down which really screws up your whole balancing that you've lost all your references. Anyway. Should you look down and see what 180 is going to look like and, and you start doing that and you're climbing? Or are you divin'? You don't have any idea. And then you know well unless you look at your altimeter and it's going crazy and so anyway but just keeping your eyes on all of that. And then you're looking at, what got me was I started looking at the window and you got these... The simulator is really set up pretty cool, actual, like clouds, you know, different densities. And, you know, and then I break out of the clouds, and I'm going straight down at the ground, and I pull out of it, and then all of a sudden I'm back into it was, it was unnerving?

[00:45:13]

EK: So then, doesn't the issue become how do you convince, how do you convince a group of people who are who are self-motivated and determined? Who really aren't that comfortable with being vulnerable whether it's on the ground or in the sky to deal with that vulnerability in order to stay alive? Because that's...

SS: Right.

EK: You're vulnerable, because it's the kind of job where you've got to be tough. And you pride yourself on your independence and your toughness and your ability to do what other people can't do. Yet...

SS: Well, yeah, say I got limits. And believe it, and, and, you know, and you, you, and those limits, in this particular case, you got to say, well, there's a certain spread between temperature and dewpoint, that, pretty likely, you're gonna have fog. And so if, if, if that rain is like three degrees, or four, depending on what you read and believe, if the temperature is within that you need to stay home, stay in bed and sleep for another hour. And so... But you know, then you get the pressure from the other way, I got to get out there and spray, I got an airplane payment to make. And so, so there's a lot of things pushing that guy, but making the right decision, how do you get people to make that right decision and say yes, I do have limits. I'm not invulnerable.

EK: You can't make the payment if you're dead.

SS: Right, and you don't have to worry about that either.

EK: I was just thinking, like, how do you like, actually manipulation. How do you manipulate a bunch of people, who don't want to be told what to do, to do the right thing.

SS: And you know, and I would probably argue, that people want to, they want to be safe. Generally. I mean, there's some, there's some that are just totally cowboys. It doesn't matter what you say, and they'll argue with you. But most of the people want to go home to their families. It's most, and I, and and I think most of the people in this business are professional, they want to do a good job. They want to do it right. Do a good job. And, and I and I get surprised, I'll do a program, we had to do several on Zoom this year, but I'll get guys calling me, saying thanks a lot for your time for doing that. And really learned a lot. And, you know, I've been in the business nearly 30 years now. But I, when I go to those meetings, there's a whole lot more smarter guys than I am doing this stuff, and I've been doing it a long time.

EK: Maybe. It doesn't necessarily mean that they can carry the message though,

SS: Oh, that's true too. Yeah. But I you know, that I, I really do get amazed that the guys in the profession that are, they really professional, and really, really good at what they do. Anyway, I don't know if I finished my story how I got here.

EK: Yeah, you did.

SS: Sorry. Yeah. Anyway, yeah, I think I was at the point of the business started developing and then the fellow, I was telling you about down in Independence, Kansas. He and I had been buddies for almost the time we'd met. Because the following year after the armyworms, we had just horrendous, well, no, that was '90. Yeah. '93 was all the rain we had. And, and so we seeded soybeans in the wheat. We did 15,000 acres out of here. And I'd called in five or six planes, because, seeding soybeans, you can't carry 15 acres a load hardly. And so you got to make a lot of

trips. And so anyway, I had several people here working for me with their airplanes. And anyway, that's when I met Bill Warner out of, out of Independence. And so he and I, then I got called, when this fungicide thing started happening, we got called to Iowa to work for a guy I know up there. And we went up there together. Bill and I didn't have turbine airplanes just radial engines. I had a 401 and Bill had a 301 I think. Anyway, we were the only ones up there that didn't have turbine engines. So the guy came to us and said, hey, there's, there's a crop service guy or somebody that needed our services over in western Iowa. And, but we can't take any turbines over there because they don't have any turbine gas. And so anyway, Bill and I went over there. And that just turned into a really good deal for Bill and I because we, well this was, last year was the 13th year with Fran up there. I think I was telling you Bill died in a plane crash a couple of years ago. People flyin' real bad deal. His son and two grandsons were with him. And so those four died and, and...

EK: Where was that ?

SS: It was just out of Ponka City, Oklahoma, where it came up, they're gone down. He took the day off and flew down, they were having a pancake feed at the airport there. And they loaded up that plane and headed back and then crashed, right.

JK: Like a departure stall or something?

SS: Yeah, I think. Yeah, I'm, I'm almost certain they were overloaded. I didn't know much about this plane, it was called an Extra 700 or something like that. It's all composite. Mid wing, high wing plane. Anyway, they were overloaded, I'm certain. And they topped off with fuel and they'd flown down there from Independence and topped off fuel and took off. Anyway. Very sad deal, anyway.

EK: Yeah, tragic.

[00:51:43]

SS: But I still go to Iowa. And I mean, it turned into a very good deal for me, because now I get all the work Bill was doing, so I take both my planes and hire a pilot to fly. So that's a real lesson for 12 or 13 years, we were...

EK: Not a very, very big, I guess, the opposite, it's a small community isn't it?

SS: Yeah, well, there's what 3,500 spray pilots or something like that.

EK: Is that the number?

SS: I think there is 35, 38. Yes, cross the country. And then and then we got, I think there's 1,500 operators like me, well, not like me.

EK: Independent?

SS: Yeah. Businesses, business operators. And then they have, you know, they may have five or 10 planes, some of them. But, you know, just one-man shows like me, and one or two is probably the bulk of it. And then when the fungicide business started being really good, you started seeing cooperatives like, oh, what Pinnacle, and West Helena Asg out of Colorado started buying up spraying operations, airplane operations. And hiring, you know, so they would provide that service themselves rather than hiring us. And so they kind of consolidated some operations, or they'll buy up several of them in an area and instead of being a bunch of individuals like we are. There's pluses and minuses to that. But...

EK: One of the things that, well, my cousins, my family lives in Mound City. And my, my mom, who's about to turn 90 was talking to her 90-year-old first cousin, because I knew that, and they own a lot of crop land, the family does. And she, she said, Oh, yes, Garrold, he's our crop duster.

SS: Garrold Kirk.

EK: Yeah. Is that his last name?

SS: Outta Mound City, Missouri, you're talking about.

EK: Yeah. Yeah.

SS: Thought you might be talking about Mound City, Kansas. But Garrold, I know Garrold.

EK: Well, yeah. It seems like everyone does. But she was very possessive about him. [Laughter.] He's our crop duster?

SS: Yeah. That's interesting.

EK: And I thought that was, was interesting that like you, you know, you establish a relationship. And I mean, she was like, Oh, he's ours.

[Laughter.]

JK: Something I've noticed too with Dusty. Like, ag pilots are almost agricultural celebrities. in the region, you know. If you talk to somebody about Dusty, he's like, Oh, yeah. He's sprays for us all the time.

SS: Yeah. Yeah.

JK: He sprays a lot of ground. [Laughter.]

SS: Yeah.

JK: So I'm sure you're talking about.

SS: Well, yeah. I don't know if I'm in the same vein. Yeah, we had him.

EK: I'm sure you are.

SS: We had him work for us once. [Laughter.] Yeah, I've enjoyed a good, mostly good relationship with most of the guys around here, farmers, and you know, in business 30 years you're gonna piss somebody off. Anyway. Any business that happens in engineering, or crop dusting, or whatever.

EK: Teaching.

[00:55:15]

SS: Teaching? Yeah [Laughter.] You never had any mad parents, did you?

EK: Oh no, never. Never did.

SS: "My kid's, smarter than that."

JK: Well, is there anything? We're getting close to...

EK: (Garbled) association, it's the 100 year anniversary?

SS: Yeah. So I haven't had my training yet. But I'm going to be one of the spokespeople for the 100th year anniversary of Ag Pilots Well, so we're going to do training and we'll do a Zoom meeting and get our training and, and we've got a professional coach to tell us how to, and what to say.

EK: I think you'll be fine.

SS: Perhaps, but, and I think most of it is going to be knowing the material. But, you know, there's a great history about the whole subject of crop dusting. And, uh, they started in, I can't tell you the year, but on catalpa trees spreading lead arsenic, for whatever worm was affecting the catalpa trees boundaries, and they used converted biplanes from World War I,

JK: I think they were Jennies.

SS: Yeah, Jennies, I think it was. But I think that was one of the interesting facts in that is one of the companies involved in it was called Delta Ag Spreaders. Now, of course, they're Delta Airlines. And so Delta has a huge history. I don't know if huge is the right word, but at least they have a history. That's where it got started, Delta Airlines did. And so anyway, that, that started doing that, and then, you know, and they dusted stuff, put dust out of airplanes. And it was pretty toxic stuff.

EK: Which we breathed for a lot of years.

SS: Well, all that was going on and, and that's a, you know, so the history of crop dusting, this is 100 years since that started. And that, you know, people we get frustrated as ag pilots, because anytime there's a claim against pesticides and stuff being used and people getting cancer, they show a picture of an airplane spraying.

EK: Dusty was upset about that, too.

SS: Yeah, I mean, we're, we are... The percentage that we spray, compared to all the ground spraying and the lawn spraying and everything that goes on. Pretty, pretty small percentage.

JK: But you're visible.

SS: We're visible. Oh, yeah. Yeah, no doubt. And that's why they put an airplane on spraying. Spraying liquid.

EK: He mentioned that very thing, that it was like, somehow connected to a Parkinson's?

SS: Oh, that's the latest.

EK: Something like that.

SS: Yeah, there's, I've been seeing that too. Parkinson's, I don't know whether it was Roundup or another, another product that's causing disease. And, you know, if you look at the, the active ingredient, it's unbelievable how small amount that we put on an acre. I mean, we used to talk about a can of soda spread across an acre. That's how much actual spray you know, the active ingredient. Now it's down to two or three ounces of stuff we use and the stuff we use is tested and tested and tested.

JK: And it's, it's considerably less volume than even ground rigs too.

SS: Yeah, yeah, I mean, well, and of course ground rig, we're putting out, well, some guys up to 20 gallons an acre, but I rarely do anything more than two or three gallons the acre, total mix. In that mix the ounces per acre, like there's some bug spray, Mustang that we spray on alfalfa weevil or whatever, 2.8 ounces to the acre of the actual spray that gets mixed into the liquid, put it out in the mix of two gallons. But you know, just, and if you look at a toxicity chart, coffee is more toxic than a lot of the stuff. More toxic than Roundup and per volume. So we get anybody in, in this business, whether it's crop dusters or ground sprayers, or whatever, you get pretty frustrated with the media and the attorneys and people involved in, in making these claims that we're, you know, they're trying to create business and get people Well, you need to make the claim if you've sprayed roundup and...

[01:00:16]

EK: Yeah, I see the ad on TV. We've all been to it or something.

SS: Yeah, so there's...

JK: At the same time, it only takes one irresponsible pilot. Spraying in a 25 mile an hour wind. Or...

SS: Yes. So one of one of our mottos, maybe the motto and now watch me get it wrong. The actions of one, upon a, the fate of all rests upon the actions of one. Basically, not exactly right. Anyway, one guy screws for all is the problem.

EK: Yeah.

SS: And that's, that's the battles we have. Anyway. I've been doing this a long time, having a good time.

EK: Good. That's a good place to stop.

SS: That's why I said it. [Laughter.]

EK: All right.