



# In Search of America's

*By Jay Calleja*  
*Manager of Communications*

It sounds simple enough on the surface. The aerial application industry needs new pilots, and new pilots want to get into ag aviation. The reality is newcomers must overcome several obstacles before they can earn a seat, none bigger than earning the trust of a willing mentor. But who is willing to mentor? And who is worthy of being mentored? Those questions are on the minds of operators, prospective ag pilots and NAAA.



# Next Ag Pilots

Like several people who were attending their first NAAA Convention last December, Jeff Johnson, an amiable young man from Eufala, Ohio, came to Reno, Nev., to learn more about the aerial application industry and look for an opportunity to become an ag pilot. The Flying Tiger Aviation graduate listened intently during NAAA's General Session program on mentoring new ag pilots and was one of 75 to 100 attendees who crammed into one of NAAA's *Compaass* Rose sessions, soaking up

advice from some of the industry's wise old owls. But just in case his intentions weren't clear, Johnson came up with the ingenious idea of wearing a different colored T-shirt each day of the show emblazoned with the same simple message: NEW AG. PILOT LOOKING FOR FIRST SEAT.

He was not alone. Several pilots, many of them students of one ag flight school or another, came to Reno hoping to hit it off with an operator willing to



*Jeff Johnson was one of several pilots looking for a seat at NAAA's 2009 Convention in Reno, Nev.*





*"I know a bunch of guys in this room who are in the exact same boat as me where they're trying to do all of the right things for you. Still no mentors," said Nathan Broehl, a pilot looking for work, at NAAA's 2009 General Session on mentoring.*

give them a shot. During the General Session program on mentoring, the NAAA Insurance Committee did a terrific job of shedding light on the process and the parties involved when an operator wants to train and mentor a new ag pilot. The program clearly illustrated the coordinated effort that must take place between the operator of an aerial application business, the operator's insurance agent and the underwriter to get a new or low-time ag pilot insured and on the path to becoming a full-fledged ag pilot.

Obtaining insurance for a new pilot is one of the barriers operators and new pilots face, but one thing that came through loud and clear is that the operator is the linchpin to the pilot-operator-agent-underwriter union. Insurance agents and underwriters are willing to work with operators they respect and trust to come up with a workable solution.

NAAA's General Session program showed how the process could work, but there's a bigger issue with which

operators, the industry as a whole, NAAA and people who want an opportunity to learn and work as an ag pilot are grappling. More importantly than *how*, operators and prospective pilots looking to get into this industry are struggling with the issue of *who*—whom to mentor, and who *will* mentor.

Consider Nathan Broehl's situation. Broehl is an NAAA member pilot and another Flying Tiger Aviation student who went to NAAA's 2009 Convention. In addition, he is a certified flight instructor and a pipeline patrol pilot with an accident-free safety record.

"I'm still having trouble finding an operator," he announced at NAAA's General Session. "I've made a lot of phone calls, and they've all been very kind, but they say, 'Well, the insurance is too much.' ... I know a bunch of guys in this room who are in the exact same boat as me where they're trying to do all of the right things for you. Still no mentors."

According to a demographics survey of aerial pesticide applicators conducted by the EPA in 2006, aerial applicators have 25.42 years of experience, on average. Unquestionably, the industry needs new blood to replace ag pilots nearing retirement, keep up with the demands of an ever-growing world population and fulfill aerial application's mission to enhance food, fiber and bio-fuel production safely, efficiently and effectively. Aerial application operators understand this intuitively, but it's not that simple.

"A lot of young people don't realize how much the operator is risking taking on a new pilot," said Jeff Reabe of Reabe Spraying Service in Plainfield, Wis. "Even when I hire an experienced pilot, I have to be real careful about who I hire because my reputation is riding on what he does. He could

"Even when I hire an experienced pilot, I have to be real careful about who I hire because my reputation is riding on what he does. He could make one mistake, and I could lose a major account for years. So, it's not just the dollars and cents that we're risking. We're risking our future."

—Jeff Reabe, Reabe Spraying Service, Plainfield, Wis.

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Richard Long of Havana, Fla., understands that. He went to Reno to meet operators too. In addition to 24 years of flying experience, he has been in law enforcement for 16 years, so he reads body language. "I saw that the operators wanted to put in their two cents about what they feel is going on and what they see. And a lot of it was they wanted to reach out to the new guys, be they 25 years old or 50 years old, but there's a bridge there, there's a gap between us and them," Long said.

Part of the problem, he acknowledged, is that operators have doubts about whether pilots looking to get into aerial application are interested in it for the right reasons. They are on guard against the get-rich-quick mentality, for one thing.

"We've got a lot of new guys showing up in our industry wanting to get involved in it for the money," said Terry Sharp of Agri-Tech Aviation in Indianola, Iowa. "I get 20 or 30 or 50 phone calls, e-mails a year—guys wanting to get in it. Eighty percent of the time the first question they ask is, 'How much money can I make?'"

"I believe that a lot of people that are chasing the golden ring for the income, they want the money, but they're not willing to do the work to get it," Long said.

Another point new ag pilots need to understand is there's more to it than flying. "I haven't heard anyone ask for a job as a professional pesticide applicator," another operator at NAAA's mentoring program observed. "Everybody wants to get into this business to fly airplanes, and that's secondary to the job, in my opinion."

### Establishing Trust

For all of its technological advances, agricultural aviation remains a

## Some **Dos** and **Don'ts** for Aspiring Ag Pilots on the Job Trail

While there are no guarantees, your chances of finding an operator to mentor you as an ag pilot will improve if you follow this advice.

### **DO: Join NAAA and the state or regional ag aviation association in your area.**

Membership has its privileges. It shows that you are serious, for one, and grants you access to valuable resources like NAAA's Annual Membership Directory in print and online. Whether you are a pilot looking for a seat or an operator looking for a pilot, NAAA's directory offers a wealth of nationwide contacts and resources.

### **DON'T: Come across as opportunistic.**

Asking right off the bat how much money you can make as an ag pilot leaves a bad taste in the mouths of operators.

### **DO: Come across as humble and hungry at the same time.**

As operator Stan Jones put it, "I had one call [last] summer. The man's attitude was fantastic. 'I don't know anything. I'll come work for you; I'll do whatever it takes.' I hired him."

### **DON'T: Underestimate the importance of on-the-job training.**

If someone gives you the chance to get your foot in the door, think twice before turning it down, even if you consider it an inferior position. For instance, an operator may ask you to pay your dues for a year or two as member of the ground crew to learn the ag side of the business. The pay won't be great, but the experience will be invaluable.

### **DO: Register as a pilot looking for work on NAAA's Web site.**

Complete the form on pg. 16 or visit [www.agaviation.org/careers.htm](http://www.agaviation.org/careers.htm) for more information.

### **DON'T: Miss the Compaass Rose events**

at conventions across the country. NAAA created Compaass Rose to advise new pilots and people interested in getting into the industry.

### **DO: Attend NAAA's Annual Convention**

and conventions held by state and regional ag aviation associations. These are golden networking and learning opportunities.

### **DON'T: Get discouraged.**

You knew you weren't going to land a seat overnight, but chances are it's going to take longer than you think to catch your big break. Author Seth Godin refers to that period when you've experienced your seventh or eighth rejection as The Dip, that "long slog between starting and mastery." In his book "The Dip: A Little Book That Teaches You When to Quit (And When to Stick)," Godin advises, "Never quit something with great long-term potential just because you can't deal with the stress of the moment." ■

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*Richard Long understands the risks an operator takes when hiring a new ag pilot, but worries about making the barrier to entry so onerous that operators reach a point where there won't be enough quality pilots available to meet the industry's future needs.*

throwback industry. It is an industry where you rely on feel and instincts as much as you do your instruments. It is an industry based upon trust. Trust between the operator and his customers, and the operator and his pilots. The best way to learn it—the only way, really—is at the knee of an experienced operator. This goes beyond a mentorship and falls into the category of an apprenticeship. It's a lot to ask for of an operator to share his knowledge and experience, and a lot to expect from a trainee that is going to have to toil at the bottom, learning the job from the ground up, but that's the way it is more often than not.

Each situation and opportunity is unique, and from the operator's perspective, the decision to mentor and train a new ag pilot is not only a personnel decision but a highly personal decision. There is one more obstacle new or low-time ag pilots encounter, whether it's stated or not—the fear of getting burned.

"They've worked hard to get their business to where it's at, and they're just having a hard time taking that step to say, 'Okay, I'm going to hook the hose up to you, and it's just going to be a 9-inch fire hose, and we're going to go and see how far you can go,'" Long said.

"I understand the operators [who] are saying, 'What are we going to get out of this? We don't want to just have a revolving door. ... There has to be a trust on both sides. Is there a goal that I can look for, and is there a commitment from the operator at the same time?'"

Long is willing and eager to pay his dues, but at 49, he knows he is one of the older pilots looking to get into the industry. He flew as a corporate pilot for the state of Florida for five years before joining the Crestview (Fla.) Police Department as a Major of Tactical Operations. Last May, he quit his job with the Crestview P.D. to pursue his dream of becoming an ag pilot. The next day, he started flight school at Ag Flight Inc. in Bainbridge, Ga., located just 45 miles from his house.

After putting in countless calls, he landed a short-term loading gig last summer at Dungan Aerial Service in Connersville, Ind., working for Jeff Dungan and Travis Weston. "It was something I had never been used to," Long said. "You just had to start learning it on an hour-by-hour basis." Even though the job only lasted three and a half weeks because corn prices were fluctuating and farmers weren't requesting as much spraying, he was grateful for the opportunity. "It was absolutely vital to learn that side of the business."

## Are You Willing to Mentor?

NAAA receives frequent inquiries from people outside the industry who are interested in becoming ag pilots and operators. There is currently no definitive list of industry professionals who can be counted on to guide and

educate these individuals. NAAA appeals to you to support your industry by becoming a resource for these hopefuls. Please contact us to let us know that you are willing to invest a little of your time when folks are looking for direction and guidance. NAAA will not publish your contact information as a dedicated mentor, but will direct inquiries to you when

someone in your geographic area contacts us. A few moments dialogue with an aspiring pilot could make all the difference for their future and ours. Please commit today to advocate for the future of our industry by becoming a mentor. Contact Jay Calleja at the NAAA office at 202-546-5722 or by e-mail at [jcalleja@agaviation.org](mailto:jcalleja@agaviation.org). ■



Long first looked into agricultural aviation in 1984 when he was 24 years old. He was working for the Florida Highway Patrol and visited an operator in north central Florida about getting into ag aviation. Although sympathetic to his plight, the operator did not have much to offer in the way of encouragement. "He literally had hundreds of résumés" and told Long it is very difficult to get into the business as an outsider. "That's when I just kind of accepted that I just wasn't raised in the right family, even though I had lived on a farm," Long said, chuckling.

He exchanged business cards with several operators at NAAA's convention, but he doesn't have anything lined up for the 2010 season. In fact, he's back in law enforcement working as a Havana, Fla., police officer. He hasn't given up on his dream of becoming an ag pilot, however, something he was up front about when he was hired.

"My eyes roll back in my head. That's the love of aviation that I have. Not corporate, not flying freight like I used to. The ag side of the business is where it's at. That's what I want to do," Long said. "I will never let that go. Never. And I'll keep on going every year. I'll keep going back to NAAA, the conventions—however long it takes for me to meet somebody and that marriage happens."

### Two Groups of Pilots Searching for One Common Runway

Where there's a will there's a way, but the challenge is getting to that willing place where an operator is willing to give an existing pilot or a newcomer an opportunity and the new pilot is willing to demonstrate his commitment to the operator and to the industry.

"I had one call [last] summer," said Stan Jones of Top Hat Aerial

## INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW...

# What do Insurers Value Most When They Evaluate a New Pilot an Operator is Mentoring?

An operator from Northern Minnesota who has mentored several pilots asked a question on a lot of people's minds at NAAA's General Session program on mentoring.

"My question is to the underwriter," he said. "When we mentor new pilots, what do you guys look for—what's more important to you? That they've been to an ag pilot training school? Is it the farm background? Is it the time loading? What things do you guys look at?"

Not surprisingly, the answer is a lot of things, Steve Knowle, an underwriter with Phoenix Aviation Managers Inc., said, but the operator's reputation and relationship with the insurer top the list. "The most important thing is the relationship that the operator has with the insurance company and how long he's been insured and been a loyal customer of a particular company. I would say that's the most important, because once I develop a level of trust

in my customer, I'll allow him to do just about anything he wants" with respect to training and insuring a new ag pilot.

That's not the only consideration, however. "Now, we do put a high value on the ag schools, and we do like to see that," Knowle said. "If I had an operator that I have only insured for a year or two and was not that comfortable with him, yet he came to me with a transitioning pilot, if I were to do it at all, I would for sure say that he would have to attend one of the schools.

"The other thing I consider in the big picture is maturity level. Is the gentleman married? Does he have a family? Has he moved around a lot? There's just a lot of variables and things that I consider, but again, I think the most important one is the length of time that the operator has been insured with us."—J.C. ■



*Doug Davidson (left) and Steve Knowle role play an exchange between an insurance agent and an underwriter. In the skit, Davidson approached Knowle about insuring a new ag pilot who would work under the supervision of a mutual operator client of theirs.*



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Please resubmit your application for 2010. You **MUST** be a member to be listed on  
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**Are you a (circle one):    Pilot looking for work?    Operator looking for a pilot?**

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Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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Are you an NAAA member?    Yes    No

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GPS:    Yes    No    Type: \_\_\_\_\_

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**"If it wasn't for the NAAA, we would be as far as the east is from the west. How would you marry up? Yeah, you may be able to be lucky. But there has to be a third party that is willing to pull these two together, because both of us are in the clouds. We're socked in. We have zero visibility. And we need to marry up and find that one runway that we both can land on and feel safe when we do it."**

**—Richard Long, NAAA Member Pilot, Havana, Fla.**

Applicators in Benkelman, Neb. "The man's attitude was fantastic. 'I don't know anything. I'll come work for you; I'll do whatever it takes.' I hired him. He came. I think it's going to work."

One of the best ways to demonstrate sincerity and network with operators is by attending aerial application conventions hosted by NAAA and state and regional associations around the country. In addition to the *Compaass* Rose program, there are plenty of opportunities to interact with industry veterans in an informal setting.

So how did that walking billboard of a T-shirt work out for Jeff Johnson in Reno? "Great," he said. "It allowed me to meet a lot of people I wouldn't have normally met."

Since NAAA's convention, Johnson has stayed busy attending state conventions, making phone calls and tracking down leads. He's made several meaningful contacts, though not all of them have positions open. "Everyone I have talked to has been helpful in one way or another by giving me advice, new leads or both," he said. "I had a couple of good flying opportunities shot down because I currently am not insurable for herbicide. Fortunately, there are areas doing a lot of fungicide and insecticide work so that is where I have been focusing. My next step is to hit the road and meet some of the operators I have been calling and visit some of those I met at the conventions."

With persistence and patience, those efforts should pay off. John Thomas,

who completed his first season as an ag pilot in 2009, attended three Nebraska Aviation Trade Association's conventions before he finally got the chance—and the insurance—he needed to fly ag. (For more on Thomas's first-year experience, see pg. 18).

Beyond *Compaass* Rose and the overall convention experience, NAAA is exploring new ways to pave the road between prospective pilots and operators and serve as a conduit between members.

"If it wasn't for the NAAA, we [new folks and experienced operators] would be as far as the east is from the west. How would you marry up? Yeah, you may be able to be lucky. But there has to be a third party that is willing to pull these two together, because both of us are in the clouds," Long said. "I mean,

we're socked in. We have zero visibility. And we need to marry up and find that one runway that we both can land on and feel safe when we do it. I believe that we can do that. I know we can do that. But at the same time, there has to be willingness to take that one step forward and to take the risk of stepping out" and investing in someone's future.

The future of their businesses and the industry depends on grooming new pilots, which begs a final question: *Can operators afford not to mentor?*

Considering the number of ag pilots nearing retirement, anyone looking to get into the industry should take comfort in the fact that there are and will continue to be opportunities for rookie ag pilots to fill the seats of veteran pilots. ■

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