Hanger Talk

***Over 200 Years of Collective Wisdom,   
From the School of Hard Knocks***

*By John Thomas*

*Shenandoah Flight Service,**Nebraska City, Neb.*

Last year I had the honor and privilege of attending NAAA’s Leadership Training Program sponsored by Syngenta. There I met 14 exceptional individuals from across the country who are also involved in this industry. They all had varying degrees of experience, ranged in age from as young as 30 to as old as 60 (just a guess), and not all were pilots. Throughout the course’s social interaction I learned a great deal about ag aviation from these gentlemen. All totaled, this group has over 205 years of combined experience in ag aviation, a treasure trove of knowledge which I believe is worth sharing, particularly with aspiring ag pilots or new pilots in this industry.

I asked each classmate for a single piece of advice and/or a lesson learned during their early years that would apply to junior ag pilots. Here’s what they had to say.

The best advice I can give is, safety first. You have to learn to ignore all of the stories about how “old so and so” hauled some unbelievable load or how fast they could turn around. When you are starting out keep your load size small and your turns slow and with some luck you can live to enjoy the greatest job on earth.

**Tommy Anderson**

**Tommy’s Flying Service, Keo, Ark.**

***31 years in the ag aviation industry***

You have to be prepared to work your way up the ag aviation ladder. It doesn’t matter how many flight certifications you have, ag aviation is completely different from all other types of aviation. You should expect to start off on the ground as a loader to both learn about the business as well as prove your dedication and loyalty. It is a tough business to get into but persistence is the key.

“When things feel good, watch out!” When you as the pilot start to feel confident about your flying skills and are comfortable with the aircraft, that is the time when you need to be extra careful that you don’t get complacent. There seems to be two critical levels of ag experience when most accidents happen: about the 500- and the 5,000-hour marks. The 500-hour pilot may have two or three seasons behind him and is relatively comfortable flying the plane and therefore may start to shift his attention to other things that may distract him from the basics. For the 5,000-hour ag pilot, the flying has become routine and nothing is “routine” in ag aviation!

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**John Bartholomew**

**Bart’s Flying Service, Aurelia, Iowa**

***17 years in the ag aviation industry***

You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. I have learned that as professional applicators we must always act and present ourselves as such. Years ago we used to disregard the complaints of folks on the ground. Not only shouldn’t you do that, you can’t get away with it anymore if you want to remain in business. Where I fly, many of the rice fields are surrounded by houses and the people that live in those homes aren’t necessarily involved in agriculture so you must be empathetic to their concerns. By showing people courtesy and respect you will be much more successful and it’s the right thing to do!

**Doug Biessenberger**

**Kinder Ag, Eunice, La.**

***15 years in the ag aviation industry***

When I first started spraying I was eager to do the best job I could. We want to do the best job we can for our customers, but that few tenths of an acre is not worth your life. You just can’t cover every square foot of every field. Don't paint yourself into a corner. Have an exit path before you start every pass.

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**Les Cady**

**Cady Aerial Spray, Deer Grove, Ill.**

***18 years in the ag aviation industry***

 The best advice I received from my boss when I first started and that has stuck in my mind is that a corner of a field surrounded by wires and trees is just an impossible area to spray and not worth it. Even if the farmer insists that it get sprayed, the job’s just not worth it.

I learned the hard way that you never have too much fuel unless you are on the ground—and on fire! It’s easy to go back to the airfield and get more chemical if you run out; it’s not so easy to go back to the airfield to get more fuel if you run out!

**DJ Fischer**

**Air Kraft Spraying Inc., Gettysburg, S.D.**

***5 years in the ag aviation industry***

Never quit flying the airplane! If something happens, whether it’s a malfunction or something distracts your attention, you must keep flying the airplane until it is on the ground, turned off and properly secured. Minor distractions can lead to catastrophe; aviate, navigate and communicate.

When I first started flying ag I didn’t have a GPS or a radio. Now many people fly with a GPS, at least one radio, an MP3 player and an XM radio with weather. All these technologies have the potential to distract you from your primary job of flying the airplane. FLY THE AIRPLANE!

**Chad Frei**

**Frei Aviation, Grangeville, Idaho**

***14 years in the ag aviation industry***

My little piece of advice which has helped me with my career is, have high morals and ethics and follow them. If you are going to do the job, do it right or don't do it at all. Another lesson I learned early on is don't let the farmer fly the airplane, you, the PIC, fly the airplane.

**Franklin Howe**

**Howe Bros. Enterprises, Indiantown, Fla.**

***14 years in the ag aviation industry***

If you want to be an ag pilot you must be persistent—you have to pursue it like you pursued your wife! You have to want it so bad that you would be willing to spray for free simply to build time and experience. When you do make it in, and you will if you truly want it bad enough, be patient, take your time in your turns, build your skills slowly. You can become a good ag pilot but it takes time and experience, and experience doesn’t happen overnight. Above all else, fly so that you make it home to your family dinner table.

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**Gary Jerger**

**Ag Spray Inc., Moorhead, Minn.**

***37 years in the ag aviation industry***

**Chris Nolta**

**Lakeland Dusters, Corcoran, Calif.**

***23 years in the ag aviation industry***

My advice to a new pilot is to pick a pace that you can continue for the whole shift. Speed will come later; right now you need to develop some good, safe habits that will help you as you move into high-pressure situations and multi-aircraft environments as your career progresses. Staying predictable, consistent and keeping situational awareness are key.

The best advice my dad gave me was, “Make up time on the ground, not in the air,” and I still use it today. Proper planning on the ground may take a little more time, but it will always result in a savings of time once in the air.

My advice is to make your first pass two or three passes from the border of the field. Despite good scouting when circling the field, you sometimes miss something on the edge of the field. By making the first pass inside the field you still have a chance to see the obstacles that you might have otherwise missed. Although it may be more difficult setting up a GPS pattern this way, it could save your bacon at some point in your career.

**Brandon Visser**

**Visser Ag Inc., Rigby, Idaho**

***16 years in the ag aviation industry***

There is not a corn plant, soybean plant, wheat plant, potato plant or anything else you might spray that is more valuable than your life or well being, so do not put yourself or the equipment you are flying in a position that you are not comfortable with. If the operator, or the customer, wants you to do something that will compromise your safety, or is above your experience level, they are not worth working for. Most of the time, if you explain your position to the operator or the customer, they will understand and will support you 100 percent.”

**Nick Yoder**

**Nick’s Flying Service, LaGrange, Ind.**

***11 years in the ag aviation industry***

**John Thomas**

**Shenandoah Flight Service**

**Nebraska City, Neb.**

***2 years’ experience in ag aviation***

Being a new guy myself I don’t have much advice to offer as I’m still learning, but I do draw on some of the good habits regarding cockpit task management that I was taught in military tactical aviation that parallel ag aviation. Whenever you are in a descent, especially a descending turn, your head must be out of the cockpit scanning ahead of the aircraft and only occasionally scanning the light-bar; don’t stare at it. All short administrative, instrument or systems checks should be done once all obstacles have been vertically cleared and when nearing level in the cross turn, never when down in the field. Longer tasks should be done while straight and level at altitude. Controlled Flight Into Terrain, or CFIT, accidents are usually caused when a pilot is distracted with another task.

The most common themes expressed by my Leadership Training compatriots throughout this collective advice pertain to safety, dedication and professionalism—which are all applicable no matter where you are in your ag aviation career. Have a safe and productive season, and most of all make it home to your family’s dinner table!

**Editor’s Note:** *This is John Thomas’s third season as a professional ag pilot. A regular contributor to* Agricultural Aviation, *John has consistently chronicled his experiences as an up-and-coming aerial applicator and will continue to do so (we hope) in future issues.*