

GROUNDED

Alcohol clipped this pilot's wings until sobriety and hard work brought him back to the sky.

I AM AN ALCOHOLIC. I am part Comanche Indian and grew up poor but in a loving home until alcoholism took both of my parents. Then the divorces came, three for each parent, and I learned the anger that is such a part of alcoholic family life. I vowed I would never be an alcoholic. Active in my Indian community, I saw what the alcohol did there also, and I was repelled and disgusted by it.

I graduated from high school at seventeen and immediately left to join the marine corps. I found a home there, relishing the tough discipline, camaraderie, and esprit de corps. I excelled and was one of three who were promoted upon graduation from boot camp. Four and a half years later I was given an opportunity to go into flight training. Success at the end of the eighteen-month period would mean pilot wings and an officer's commission. Again I excelled. Although most of my peers had college educations and fear of failure constantly plagued me, I graduated near the top of my class.

I excelled at something else also. Drinking was encouraged; the pilot persona was one of hard, gutsy flying with equally hard drinking, and attendance at

happy hour was considered a duty. I did not need any encouragement and reveled in the squadron camaraderie, good-natured joking, and competition at these events.

One year into my training, I reported for the final phase and met a young beauty. I was drunk the night I met her, and she would have nothing to do with me, but I could never have approached her without the false courage the alcohol gave me. The next day I saw her again, this time sober, and we began to date. I graduated from flight training on her twentieth birthday, and she pinned my gold wings and my second lieutenant bars on me. We were married two weeks later. We have just celebrated our thirty-fifth anniversary, and she is the most wonderful person I could ever have found.

We immediately had two young sons, and I left to go to war in Vietnam. Thirteen months later I returned. I spent 11½ years total time in the marine corps before deciding to get out because of the family separation my military career required. I had seen enough family chaos to know that I could never allow that to occur in my own family, so reluctantly, even painfully, I resigned my commission and joined a major airline. I had gained a reputation in the marines I was proud of. I had many accomplishments to my credit, a good combat record with decorations, and skill as a pilot.

Slowly I worked my way up within the airline structure and finally became a captain after twenty years. It had been a strife-ridden company, and our family endured some tough times. During one of the lengthy labor strikes, we adopted a baby girl. She completed

our family. Nearly half Chippewa Indian, she was a beautiful baby of seventeen days when we took her home with us.

My drinking continued to escalate, but I did not believe I was any different from my drinking comrades. I was very wrong. I had two charges of driving under the influence, years apart, which I wrote off to bad luck, and I paid handsome legal fees to get the charges reduced. This was years before the Federal Aviation Administration began cross-checking drivers' records against pilot licenses.

One night, after a hard afternoon and late evening of drinking, I and my two fellow flight crew members were arrested. We were charged with violation of a federal law that prohibits the operation of a common carrier while impaired. It had never been used against airline pilots before. I was devastated. Suddenly I was thrust into an experience beyond my worst nightmare.

I arrived home the next day, sick at heart and unable to look my wife in the face. Ashamed and destroyed, I saw two doctors that day and was diagnosed as an alcoholic. I was in treatment that night, going in with only the clothes on my back. The news media had picked up the story, and it was blared all over the world, on all the major television networks, and my shame and humiliation were beyond words. All the light in my life had gone out, and I entertained the idea of suicide. I could not envision ever smiling again or having a day with a bright horizon. I was hurting more than I ever knew a human could hurt, and I just wanted the pain to end.

I became notorious in commercial aviation, and the media had a field day with me. I lost my FAA med-

ical certificate because of my diagnosis of alcoholism, and the FAA issued an emergency revocation of all my licenses. I thought about my parents (now both dead), my Indian people, and all those I had previously considered alcoholics, and I knew I had become exactly what I vowed I would never become.

I learned my career was over via the six o'clock news one week after entering treatment. I refused to watch TV, but my fellow patients kept me informed. I was the lead story on the news for weeks. I was joke fodder for the late-night TV comics as they ridiculed me, my profession, and my airline.

I also learned I was going to federal prison. The sentence was mandatory if convicted, and there was no doubt in my mind that I would be. With nothing left, I dedicated myself to learning about recovery. I fervently believed that the key to my sobriety, and hence my survival, lay in the power of all I was being taught, and I spent no idle moments in treatment. I worked as hard as I had worked to earn my wings, but this time my life was at stake. I struggled to regain a spiritual connection as I underwent one legal crisis after another.

I got out of treatment determined to complete ninety A.A. meetings in ninety days but was afraid my court date would interfere, so I completed my ninety meetings in sixty-seven days. I went through an intense, media-covered three-week trial. On most evenings after the day in court, I sought refuge in A.A. meetings and renewed my strength for the coming day. Recovery and all I had learned allowed me to handle things much, much differently than my two co-defendants. Many spoke of my serenity throughout

this experience of horror, which surprised me. Inside I did not feel what others seemed to see.

I was found guilty and sentenced to sixteen months in federal prison. My two codefendants received twelve-month sentences and chose to remain free pending appeals, while I chose to go into prison and get it over. I had learned how to live life on life's terms and not my own. From somewhere back in my high school days, I remembered a poem that says something to the effect of, "Cowards die a thousand deaths, a brave man only once," and I wanted to do what had to be done. I was terrified of walking into prison but told my children that I could not come out the back door until I walked through the front. I remembered that courage was not the absence of fear; it was the ability to continue in the face of it.

On the day I entered prison, nine of my fellow pilots began making our family's house payments, which they did for nearly four years. After my release from prison, I made four attempts to get them to let us take over, and they refused each time. So many came to help us from places we could never have imagined.

I served 424 days in the federal prison system. I started an A.A. meeting in prison, which was opposed by the prison administration, and they hassled us weekly as we came together to meet. The weekly meeting was a quiet oasis in the desert, a few moments of serenity in a prison full of bedlam.

My prison term was followed by three years of probation, which restricted my travel and had thirteen other conditions. Upon release from prison, no longer a pilot, I returned to the same treatment center where

I had once been a patient, and worked full-time with other alcoholics. Pay was minimal, but I found I was effective at reaching others, and I wanted desperately to pay back some of what so many had given me. I did that for twenty months.

For a long time I did not consider flying again, but I could not purge the dream of doing so from my heart. One of my meditation books had said, "Before any dream can come true, there must first be a dream." I had been told if I wanted to fly again, I would have to begin at the very bottom, with a private license, even though I had previously held the highest license the FAA awarded, the air transport pilot license. I studied for and took all the lengthy FAA written examinations. I had to go back and relearn things I had learned thirty years before and had long since forgotten. I had, unexpectedly, been able to reacquire my FAA medical certificate after proving the quality of my sobriety for more than two years.

The trial judge had put sanctions on me that made it impossible for me to fly again because of my age. My lawyer had become my friend and worked for three years after my conviction without taking a cent from me. He was one more person who entered my life in a manner I could only ascribe to some kind of Divine Providence. He took a motion to the judge to lift the sanctions, and the tears came flooding down my cheeks when he called to let me know the judge had approved it. With the lifting of those sanctions, the impossible became slightly less impossible. An extraordinary amount of work was left to do, but at least the attempt could now be made.

None of my friends thought it possible to regain

licenses literally from the ground up, but I had learned how to do many things one day at a time, one small step at a time, so I went after the licenses in exactly that manner. Had I chosen to view the whole panorama of licensing requirements, I would have quit; they were simply too overwhelming. But one day and one thing at a time they were doable. So I did them.

I knew no one would ever hire me to fly passengers. I was an ex-con, a convicted felon, a drunk. I had doubts as to whether anyone would even allow me to fly cargo. It took several months for the FAA to process my licenses and mail them to me. On the exact day they arrived, another miracle occurred. I received a phone call from the head of the pilot union, who informed me that the president of the airline had decided personally to reinstate me. I had not pursued the legal grievance process I was entitled to, because I knew my actions could never be defended or excused. I had steadfastly accepted responsibility, in front of TV cameras and in the treatment center, because my recovery demanded rigorous honesty.

It was almost beyond my ability to believe that the president of the airline could ever consider having me work for them again. I marveled at the courage of such a man and such an airline. What if I relapsed? What if I flew drunk again? The media would have a field day. For days afterward, as I awoke each morning, my first thought was that it had only been a dream, that it could not possibly have occurred.

Almost four years after my arrest and the explosive devastation of my life, I signed my back-to-work agreement. Restored to full seniority, given the retire-

ment I had lost, and once again an airline pilot! A large crowd gathered to watch me sign the document.

So much had happened in my life. I lost almost everything I had worked to acquire. My family had suffered public shame and humiliation. I had been the object of scorn, shame, and disgrace. Yet much more had also happened; every loss had been replaced with rewards. I had seen the promises of the Big Book come true in a magnitude I could never have imagined. I had gotten sober. I had regained my family, and we were once again close and loving. I had learned how to use the Twelve Steps and to live the wonderful program that was founded so many years ago by two drunks.

It took several years, but I learned to be grateful for my alcoholism and the program of recovery it forced me into, for all the things that had happened *to* me and *for* me, for a life today that transcends and far exceeds anything I had previously known. I could not have that today if I had not experienced all the yesterdays.

My back-to-work agreement said I would retire as a copilot. But the miracles in this program have never ceased for me, and last year I was notified that the president of my airline had granted permission for me to once again be a captain.

I retired at age sixty, and I checked out as a 747 captain, which means my final year at my airline concluded in the left seat. The circle, so sacred to my Indian people, will once again have been completed.

I take little credit for all that has happened. I suited up and showed up, but the process of A.A., the grace of a loving God, and the help of so many around me

have been far more responsible for all the events in my life. Today one of my sons has more than 3½ years of sobriety after nearly losing his life to alcohol and drugs. He is truly one more miracle in my life for which I am so deeply grateful.

I have returned to my Indian people once again after a long shame-filled absence. I am dancing again and returning to the old ways I left behind. I have spoken at two Native American A.A. conventions, something I never thought I'd see when I was a youngster growing up. Adversity truly introduces us to ourselves. But we need never deal with our adversities alone as long as we can find another alcoholic in a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.