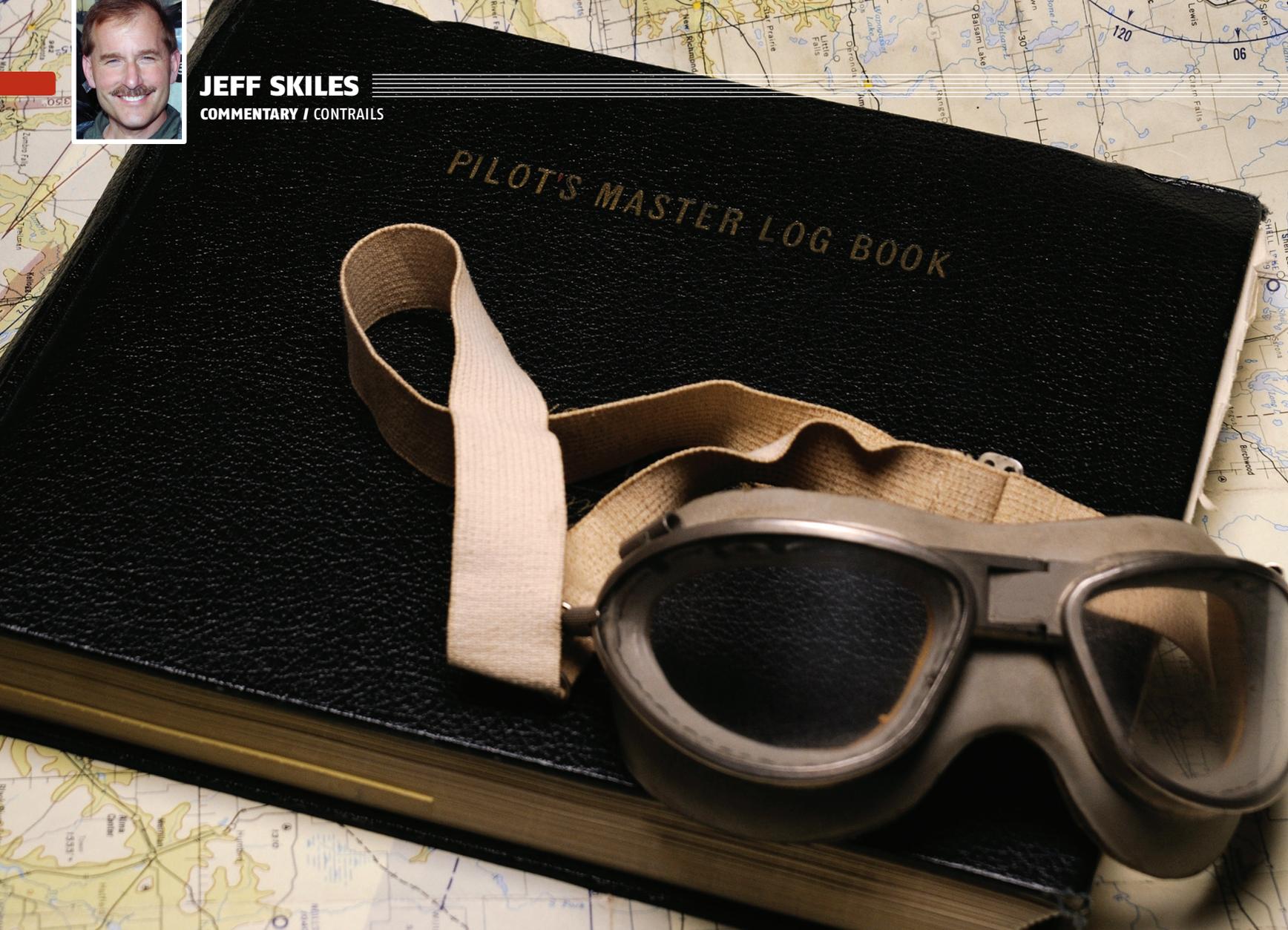


**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



# The Pilot's Pilot

BY JEFF SKILES

**WHAT IS IT THAT** separates the great pilots among us from the rest, that indescribable something that is only possessed by the truly gifted? My fellow *Sport Aviation* scribe, Dave Matheny, has published columns exploring the inner-most depths of the pilot being. His columns titled “The Pilot Personality” (October 2011) and “Pilotship” (September 2012) sought to capture and define the essence of what sets us apart from the common ground-bound rabble. Having spent many decades consorting with pilots, and even occasionally being accused of being one myself, it occurs to me that I may have something to offer on this topic as well.

When it comes to piloting skill and decision-making ability, I have seen good, bad, and everything in between. The vast majority of my time in the air has been spent observing other pilots, either as a flight instructor, flight engineer, first officer, or captain. In fact, all but perhaps a couple thousand of my hours have been logged with another pilot in necessarily close proximity.

Sometimes too close, as with the 727 captain who insisted on smoking the

foulest-smelling cigars one could imagine and blowing his vile exhaust my way while relishing every puff. Or the truck driver student pilot who was of such a stature that, once he finally managed to get the door of the Cessna 150 to slam shut, he and I both sat incapable of even the smallest movement. Fortunately a larger Cessna 172 eased our immediate dilemma.

I wouldn't fool you into thinking I am bright enough to have developed an in-depth analysis, but I have drawn grand and probably inaccurate conclusions from my years of observation as to what makes pilots tick.

Pilots begin their journey in the sky with an individualistic fervor. They guide the raw skill of flying by the personality that the passing years, influences, and genetics have created. Some are meek and timid; some are bold and prone to rash decisions. These traits largely mirror who they are as people. This is why the most dangerous of pilots are the newly minted—too little experience to know caution, too much to know fear. But in truth, being a pilot defines us more than we define it. As the years pass, a great homogenization occurs as experience teaches us the lessons of survival. Where we may have come from largely disparate backgrounds, the school of flight leaves us as one possessing the knowledge of the ancients.

The first lesson for aeronautical neophytes is that a newly minted certificate, while certainly an achievement worth celebrating, should in fact be viewed as merely a learner's permit. The true lessons are yet to come. A checkride shouldn't signal the end of the journey but only the beginning if one's true aim is to become a *pilot's pilot*.

On the happy but unusual event of my accomplishing a kiss-the-ground touchdown, even I have been accused of being a pilot's pilot by the uninitiated. But truth be told, there has also been many a post-flight walk-around where I have looked askance at the wings half expecting to see gear legs sticking through their upper surface. I take solace in the fact that even

great pilots bottom out the shock struts occasionally. Sorry to strip you of your illusions, but it's just part of the game.

A smooth landing will certainly gain you much acclaim among passengers, though. So easy are they to please. But, to be a standout in the rarified community of pilots, one must possess qualities uncommon to the masses.

I have long handicapped the field with the following adage: "Five percent of the pilot population are natural-born fliers, 5 percent probably should have opted for another pastime, and the rest of us muck around somewhere in between." So what are those qualities that make a pilot stand apart from the flock? What makes a pilot soar in the company of eagles? Well, let's try and define them.

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There are pilots whose impact on aviation has been so transcendent that they will long have a place in aeronautical lore. Lindbergh would be one example. I have no idea if he was a good pilot or not, but his stamp on aviation is timeless and continues almost four decades after his passing.

Certainly there are pilots whose combination of keen sensory perception and swift neuron transmission seem to excel at the physical manipulation of an aircraft. They in fact *can* make smooth landings more often than not. The Sean D. Tuckers and Michael Goulians of the world would be examples of this sort of excellence. Men who can seemingly make an aircraft dance in the air before a crowd of onlookers. I would imagine, though, Tucker and Goulian would tell you that

their mastery is only part natural skill augmented by endless hours of difficult practice and hard sacrifice. As in all facets of aviation, practice makes perfect.

Physical airmanship might cause a pilot to excel in air show performing or crop dusting, but it rarely is the defining characteristic in the airline world. Here the vaguely defined term "professionalism" takes reign as the primary characteristic of the truly great. Judgment, decision-making, and adherence to procedure are the hallmarks of an airline pilot's pilot. While the general public might think that successfully handling dangerous situations with aplomb makes a pilot's pilot, the best pilots mark their careers with a complete lack of incident, so good are they at avoiding hazardous situations in the first place. Airline pilots aren't paid to take chances; they're paid to completely avoid danger.

Like the Oscar nominations or the Lindys at Oshkosh, there is not one clear overall winner of a pilot's pilot award. So we'll create a few categories and posit winners from an EAA perspective. Here would be my short list of pilot's pilots, in no particular order.

#### **LEADERSHIP**

The list of course begins with Paul Poberezny. I only flew with Paul once in the B-17 *Aluminum Overcast* during his final proficiency check. Even at 90 years old, Paul's talents in an airplane were obvious. I think it would be hard for anyone to match his lifelong commitment to aviation from building model airplanes as a kid to that B-17 flight at 90.

And certainly it would be impossible to name one single pilot who has had more influence on an entire industry. EAA has 180,000 current members and more than a million have at one time or another held an EAA membership card, and Paul's organization has spawned many of the innovative ideas that have blossomed in our industry.

But to those who knew him, and I am proud to be one, Paul's legacy is not his knowledge of aviation, but rather his

knowledge of people. Paul built an organization whose strength is not in Oshkosh, but in the volunteerism and generosity of almost a thousand chapters and more than 180,000 EAA members. As Paul often said, his EAA chapters are like churches and even if EAA and Oshkosh cease to exist, his churches would continue spreading the word of aviation around the globe. Lindbergh himself could only hope to leave such a shadow.

#### SELF-AWARENESS

Tom Poberezny spent 25 years competing in the world of air show exhibition flying. He was a U.S. National Aerobatic Champion and served on the team that won the World Aerobatic Championships in 1972. Many of us remember the Red Devils and Eagles signature formation snap roll just after liftoff.

Tom's flying skill certainly puts him among the best, but when Tom talks about himself, which even by the definition of the most reticent of pilots is rare, he will sometimes talk of what his experiences have taught him in the air. What strikes me is that those hard-earned "lessons" never took place in front of an air show crowd. Tom was too much of a professional for that.

Tom's words were of a pilot often challenged to get through to the destination because the show must go on.

While we all weigh many factors in our decisions, Tom had unusual impediments. His Pitts Special and later Christen Eagle never had lights for night flight, and they weren't IFR-equipped, yet he sometimes would have to traverse the entire country between work at EAA headquarters and his weekend air show commitments. He knew where his abilities made him the very best, and he also knew where his unfamiliarity should breed caution. That's the hardest lesson to learn of all.

#### PROFESSIONALISM

I only flew with Sully a few times actually, but the world has made his name synonymous with the rarified company of Lindbergh or Armstrong. Sully Sullenberger would be at the top of anyone's list. Not for what he did in the Miracle on the Hudson, but for what he does every day.

His precise, leave-no-stone-unturned attention to detail stands out even amongst the most experienced and proficient pilots. I still remember how at precisely 56 minutes past every hour he would call up the destination weather and load the local altimeter setting into the flight management computer of the Airbus. Most, including me, would wait until right before descent to get the weather and set the altimeter.

Flying above 18,000 feet at standard pressure, the only setting that matters is the last one before landing, and the weather is the weather. We're going to land whether it's 200 and a quarter or CAVU. Yet, with five hours to go to destination, at exactly the time that the new weather comes out, Sully is going through his

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ritual. Why? Because that's his habit, going above and beyond, and that habit, and many more like it, is what has safely delivered a million passengers to their destination over the course of his career.

#### AIRMANSHIP

This man should be of no surprise to anybody who has ever met him or seen him fly, but I would give my airman-ship award to Bob Hoover. Bob stands out in any company as a military aviator, test pilot, and air show exhibition pilot. Who can ever forget Bob's energy management air show exercise in the Shrike Commander? Pure mastery of the machine. But that air show act is only a small part of his celebrated career. A truly remarkable pilot, and for those of you who have never met Bob, he's even more of a standout as a human being. Bob always has time for anyone who might want to meet or talk to him, and during your time with him, he treats you as if you are the only other person in the world. Bob is a truly gifted pilot, but even more, a true gentleman.

And there you have it, pilot's pilots all. The very best at what they do. We can try and emulate their talents and skill, and even in falling short, raise the level of our game immensely. In our own flying, let's set the standard high in everything we do, and maybe one day we can be pilot's pilots too. **EAA**

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