

Earning Your Wings

This is Top Gun Tactic #1 to win in business and life.

by *Waldo Waldman*

Capt. Scott Perko. That name never leaves me. He was at first my nemesis—and then, over time, my best friend.

It was the first day of Undergraduate Pilot Training at Williams Air Force Base in Phoenix, Ariz., and it wasn't just the blistering heat of the Arizona sun in June that made me sweat. As my assigned Instructor Pilot (IP) in the Cessna T-37B twin engine jet trainer, Capt. Perko stood between me and something I wanted more than anything else. As tough as nails, intensely disciplined, and astoundingly patient, he was a superb pilot with amazing attention to detail and an ability to get inside a student's head to solve a problem.

I resented Capt. Perko most of the time because he made me work harder than I ever worked in my entire life. No mistake went unnoticed. No flight discipline error went uncorrected. He was what we call in the pilot community “a hammer.” And he was relentless.

But I respected Capt. Perko because he had something that I had only dreamed about before I ran into him: AIR FORCE PILOT WINGS. He earned those wings. It was time for me to earn mine. He paid the price and was now the best of the best, an instructor pilot in the Air Force. He may not have been flying a jet fighter, but he sure was a “Top Gun.”

Twelve months later, when I crossed the stage to shake Capt. Perko's hand and receive my wings, it was almost surreal. I had done it. I was now a U.S. Air Force Pilot. There were many hurdles and doubts. The sweat, sacrifice, and stress; the 16-hour days; the studying on weekends; and the fear of being part of the 33 percent that washed out of pilot training. It all paid off.

I liken the feeling of earning my wings to graduating high school, receiving my diploma from the Air Force Academy, earning my MBA, soloing in the F-16, and becoming mission ready in a combat fighter squadron. Each accomplishment

was an obstacle overcome, and all of those trips were marked with serious personal sacrifice. Most importantly, each carried with it the privilege of increased responsibility and the joy—yes, joy—the new responsibility carried.

As I observe my current career as a professional speaker and leadership consultant, I realize I still have to earn my wings every day. If not, I'll become average and accept the status quo. This will eventually lead to mediocrity, and mediocrity leads to complacency. Complacency kills. It kills businesses as it does fighter pilots who fail to prepare for each mission and adapt to rapidly changing environments. Top Guns are never complacent.

Earning Your Health and Safety Wings

As leaders and managers in the world of health and safety, you, too, have to earn your wings every day. As soon as you think things are “good enough” and fail to prepare for your missions, accidents will happen. The consequences are drastic because they can result in safety mishaps, injuries, and even loss of life.

Your world is constantly changing. Technology, inspection procedures, updates to Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations, safety initiatives, and training requirements are all changing at a rapid pace. If you fail to keep up and adapt to these changes and study the impact on your processes, accidents can and will happen (often, when you least expect them to).

Top Gun leaders understand it takes work to earn your wings. Moreover, they realize complacency never can be tolerated at work when it comes to health and safety. What this equates to is long hours at the office, walking the flight line to get to know your people and their challenges, briefing your team on changes, and attending OSHA and VPP seminars and conferences. Top Gun leaders lead by example, and they lead at the head of the pack.

As you continuously earn your health

and safety wings, mentor your team to do the same. You should observe work conditions and practices and intervene when necessary to correct hazards, conduct specific pre-task analyses to prevent accidents before they happen, and take the time to write, edit, and update safety and loss prevention standards to provide a guide for safe operations. As part of your mission de-briefs, make it a habit to conduct detailed accident investigations with a qualified team to identify why any incident occurred to prevent their recurrence. Make sure your managers and workers attend safety survival training and join them to show you are practicing what you preach. Communicate with your team through monthly or quarterly safety meetings to encourage open communication about workplace safety and health.

Finally, empower employees to improve workplace safety and health by holding them personally accountable for any unsafe work practices. After all, they may not always have an “IP” around monitoring their performance. They need to realize they are ultimately at the controls of their aircraft every day. You want them to be your partner in promoting a safe work environment, not an adversary.

One of the three core values of the U.S. Air Force is “A Commitment to Excellence.” It was drilled into me from day one at the Air Force Academy and during my years as a fighter pilot. It is still at the core of everything I do. I refuse to be complacent because I want to be a Top Gun in my life.

What about you? Commit yourself to excellence every day by doing at least one thing that sharpens your sword. This is how you earn your wings: one mission at a time. Yes, it takes time and energy, but Top Guns continuously pay the price to earn their wings, and so must you. When you commit yourself to excellence and earn your wings, you'll be able to fly your missions with confidence and pride, knowing that your wingmen are safer and healthier because of it.

Push it up!® ■

Known as The Wingman, Waldo Waldman builds team unity within organizations as a leadership motivational speaker. To learn more visit www.yourwingman.com or call 866-WALDO-16 (925-3616).