

OH-3042, Robert Laird, 6-15-2014, WY in Flight

MARK: So let me put something on the front here. Today is the 15th of June, 2014. My name is Mark Junge, and I'm in a hangar, actually. And I'm talking to Bobby -- Bobby, what's your last name?

BOBBY: Laird.

MARK: How do you spell it?

BOBBY: L-A-I-R-D.

MARK: I knew a Robby Laird. Where were you raised?

BOBBY: Southeast Montana.

MARK: OK, not the same one. OK, and it's -- you want me to call you Bobby, or --?

BOBBY: Bob, Bobby, Ding-Dong, whatever you want to call me. I answer to anything.

MARK: (laughter) OK. And so we're here at the -- what ranch? The Little Buffalo Ranch, run by Gary and --

BOBBY: Millie.

MARK: -- Millie Marquist?

BOBBY: Yes sir.

MARK: And we're in one of their hangars here, where there's a couple of planes and a little Mercedes-Benz on the other side. And Bobby, just tell me when and where you were born.

BOBBY: I was born in a small town in southeast Montana called Ekalaka. And we were raised on a ranch [00:01:00] between Ekalaka and another small town called Broades, Montana.

MARK: Whereabouts is that?

BOBBY: Very southeast corner. It's -- the closest (inaudible) is Miles City and it's 130 miles from there.

MARK: (laughter) Is this where the movie *Missouri Breaks* was filmed?

BOBBY: No, but it was close. The *Missouri Breaks* -- we're over on the other side of [Armond?], Missouri, but no, it's --

MARK: Did you see the movie?

BOBBY: Uh-huh.

MARK: Yeah. OK. And when were you born?

BOBBY: 1964. December of 1964.

MARK: So you just turned... oh, you're going to turn --

BOBBY: Fifty.

MARK: Fifty.

BOBBY: Yup.

MARK: You don't look 50.

BOBBY: Thattaboy.

MARK: No, seriously -- I'm not blowing smoke. You don't look like you're 50. So I want to know a little bit about your flying career. What was your first interest -- going

way back, your first interest in flying?

BOBBY: It's a family affair. My dad learned to fly when he was in Bozeman at college, and it's the family ranch -- been on the ranch, or been in the family [00:02:00] for three or four generations. But he was the first real pilot. My grandpa was a mechanic in World War I on our planes. Then my father had -- just a SuperCab two or three different smaller planes, which is a fairly good-status ranch. And then in the '80s he got his commercial rating and his flight instructor rating. And then I -- I was actually his first student. And I got my license as a senior in high school, and then -- I didn't do much with it for four, five, or six years --

MARK: You mean -- you can't have a relative give you a
(overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

BOBBY: No, he gave me the flight instructions. The tech ride I took was in [Skifish?]. And there was an FAA examiner in the back. But I was my -- my mother -- was a pilot, is a pilot, I guess, until [00:03:00] (inaudible), but --

MARK: Here, let me get it.

BOBBY: (inaudible) what you're doing?

MARK: Yeah, this fell off. OK, let's see here. OK.

BOBBY: OK. Anyway, she's a pilot. She doesn't fly anymore.

MARK: Your mom?

BOBBY: Yup. Dad still flies -- he doesn't do commercial work anymore, just flies around the ranch.

MARK: How old is he?

BOBBY: Seventy-five. Just turned 75.

MARK: Why does he fly -- what is he doing at the ranch, flying?

BOBBY: Checking water, checking cattle, checking fences.

There was a lot about -- since the forties airplanes have kind of come down a little bit in importance, but when you had to ride your horse 13 miles just to go check your fence, it was a lot easier to get in your Cub, zip over there, and if you had to, you could land, take some staples with you, whatever you were doing. And now he just flies for the enjoyment, (inaudible) whatever you want to see. You know, it's just fun for him, and I'm happy for him. But he doesn't do the commercial work with us anymore.

[00:04:00] I went to Helena and got my airplane mechanic's -- well, license, I guess it is -- in 1990. And then pretty much since then, to go back and forth to Gillette, and I had the interest in the business in Gillette, it's that land. But most of my flying -- almost all of it is doing surveys. Some charter work.

MARK: So what is your full-time job?

BOBBY: Babysitter.

MARK: (laughter)

BOBBY: I always (inaudible) that I am amazed -- it's not huge, it's got 11, 12 inch areas, but I'm the general manager. But for the most part I don't do hardly any mechanic-ing anymore, just because I work on my own airplanes, I've got two airplanes for myself, and then [FlightLine?] has a bunch and then the ranch has one.

MARK: So this was a step up for you, to become an administrator.

BOBBY: I guess so. Right now, for the next week and for the past three weeks, I've been [00:05:00] flying a (inaudible) husky den, so that's for the state, for the Game and Fish.

MARK: OK. And that's on a contract basis.

BOBBY: Yes. Yes.

MARK: OK. How did you get into that?

BOBBY: Right place at the right time. Honestly, I met a biologist in Gillette when I was first starting out, and he took a liking to me, and then from there it just kind of progressed, and now I'm -- with the Game and Fish, I'm sitting pretty deep. I've got all the work I can do. Other stuff -- we do a lot of game (inaudible) in the (inaudible) for sage grouse. We'll have seven to eight airplanes every morning at 4:00 taking off to go look for strutting sage grouse males.

MARK: Seriously?

BOBBY: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

MARK: Why?

BOBBY: Because if you're going to come drill a well, if Bob's Oil Field is going to come drill a well, and I'm going to go to a place where there's only federal minerals, [00:06:00] a private -- the government has mineral rights, whatever it is -- then before you can drop that rod in there, you've got a whole bunch of impact studies that you've got to take care of. And sage grouse are on the protected list; they're not endangered yet. They're supposed to be maybe next year. And then there's mountain plovers -- there's all kinds of different things where you've got a buffer -- if you're going to put your well in, and you've got a buffer three miles wide, but you've got to make sure there's no sage grouse (inaudible) in there, or mountain plovers, or whatever it is, but --

MARK: That being a strutting ground.

BOBBY: A strutting ground, yes. Excuse me.

MARK: No, that's OK. A listener -- whoever listens to this someday way down the road is going to wonder, what's a [let?]?

BOBBY: Yup. (inaudible) -- I don't even remember (inaudible).

MARK: I don't either.

BOBBY: But it's -- either way, the oil and gas business is really picking up. Really picking up in Wyoming, obviously. So there's one to plant wells, whether it be oil, gas, CBM, whatever it is -- [00:07:00]

MARK: CBM is --?

BOBBY: [Cobalt?] methane.

MARK: OK.

BOBBY: And that's kind of on the downswing. But every time you do that and the government's involved, you've got to follow these certain steps. So there's a number of contractors that were -- Bob's Oil Service got to hire some consultants in Gillette, say, and they've got 50 people working for them, and then they go out and they (inaudible) in the springtime, and then -- but also they want to encourage in making sure these tests get done. So I'm actually working for the consultant in town, and [share?] - - I know whatever it is that we're working for.

MARK: [badly distorted audio; inaudible] -- sage grouse that are [let?] from the air?

BOBBY: It's all about (inaudible) image. We can see that the males -- when a male is strutting -- think about between a gallon ice cream bucket and a five-gallon bucket. And they're always in a certain spot, [00:08:00] a certain area, you know where they (inaudible) in open areas, and we

can only work for an hour after sunrise, because then they quit strutting. Once they turn back into a bird, you can't see them.

MARK: Yeah.

BOBBY: Yeah, I mean, you may as well be looking for a sage grouse. But if they're out strutting and the sun's on them, all they're doing with the flying is just seeing if they're active. We don't -- they can't take a number off of a count from the air. But what we can do is tell they're active, and then they'll come out there on the ground with one of their crew next week, with (inaudible), and then they can count them with their grasses and see how many males and females, because all we can see are the males.

MARK: How high off the ground are you flying?

BOBBY: At least 200 feet.

MARK: (laughter) You say that with a smile.

BOBBY: It's -- honestly, 200's -- 200 feet is the right number. You can see out there quite enough, but what you don't want to do is [squire?] the birds and flush them. [00:09:00] Those poor dumb birds are trying to die and it's all we can do to keep them alive, and the last thing we need to do is [squire?] them and flush them, and (inaudible) birds left, and you know, they only have a

month of it --

MARK: Now, something you just said went right over the top of my head -- they're trying to die?

BOBBY: They're (inaudible), the sage grouse is. Dinosaur-old. And -- not quite, but -- and they're not -- they're having a real tough time; that's how come they're on the protected. First of all, their sage brush is slowly diminishing. Then -- they don't adapt well, you know? [Cows?] can adapt to anything, and most of the animals -- but sage grouse are having a tough time adapting. They don't farm well, you can't raise them in captivity and turn them loose; there's just a lot of things -- I'm talking about things that I shouldn't know about, and I don't, I'm not a biologist, but they're on the protected --

END OF AUDIO FILE OH-3042, PART 1,

MARK: OK, we're back on. Sorry, Bob. We were talking about sage grouse. So you do the surveys, but you were raised in rural Montana.

BOBBY: Correct.

MARK: You know about rural Wyoming. The attitude of some people, and in fact a guy I talked to yesterday, in fact, was that -- it was kind of like, "Well, these gol'durn

environmentalists, you know, they want to cause us all kinds of problems. They want to take our living away from us, basically." And I'm paraphrasing.

BOBBY: No, I know.

MARK: So you understand that argument?

BOBBY: I'm born and raised on a ranch. It's very common to me. Very common to me. And whatever else I've found out in the last 20 years of doing this business is -- it's opened my eyes a lot to a lot of different views that I wasn't raised with. And when you immerse yourself into that other deal, I mean, there's nuts on all sides of everything, [00:01:00] there's no doubt. But when you start working for it -- and I'm not talking because it's my living or I'm making a living at it; it's one of those things you do alone after you become fairly passionate about it. And there's -- I can see where the rancher is, trust me. My family ranch is in the same thing. And I can see where the importance of monitoring things are. And quite honestly, it's a slippery road, and I don't know what I would do if I was on the ranch and found something -- you know, I mean, that's -- found sage grouse (inaudible); are you going to report it or are you not going to report it? It's a tricky setup. And whatever else I've learned, there are two sides, and there's no right or wrong.

MARK: What's it like to do -- now, you do other surveys besides sagebrush.

BOBBY: Certainly.

MARK: Antelope?

BOBBY: Antelope. Telemetry with the radio collars. We'll do deer with -- they've got [00:02:00] deer down by Douglas with radio transmitters on them.

MARK: Real quick, do you have any stories?

BOBBY: Puking. (laughter) Everybody gets sick. It's probably an 85% mortality rate when it comes to getting sick, especially with the low and slow when you're banking hard, and people have gotten sick down the back of my neck while we're flying. And --

MARK: Oh, I thought you -- you were the one who had that problem.

BOBBY: No, no, no, no. It's always the -- I've actually never gotten sick. You know, when you don't feel well or when you have a bug or something like that, you get -- it's not fun, but I've certainly not been queasy. But no, usually it's one of the passengers. If you're in a two-place airplane, one in the front and one in the back, literally had them puke down the back of my neck. And it's not uncommon. It's -- most of the time they just grab a bag. We've got Ziploc bags, and they can see what they had

for breakfast then.

MARK: Is there a trick to doing these surveys? I mean, is it pretty mundane, where you fly a vector, or what do you call it, a path, and then come back...

BOBBY: The transect? Some of it is.

MARK: The transect.

BOBBY: Some of it is. [00:03:00] What I'm doing right now with the Husky is transect flying, and other than getting behind a mountain or something and knowing where your wave's -- where your wind's coming from and that sort of thing, it's fairly simple. In the spring we're doing a lot of nesting surveys, so there's a lot of turns, and that's where you can get yourself in trouble. And there is some risk with that.

MARK: Have you gotten them in trouble?

BOBBY: Yeah, quite a few times. [I know?] three times.

MARK: Tell me the worst parts.

BOBBY: Well, probably the very worst one was -- I was hunting coyotes in Montana for the state, and we'd just come off of a run, and we were circling around to get another one, and I was flying a Super Cub, and they're very, very, very forgiving, and for whatever reason, that airplane just let go and it started to mush in. And I hollered to the back-seater, I said, "Hang on, hang on." And finally we got

down -- we were below [00:04:00] the fence height, and we kind of staggered around out there and got it back together. And one time I took a ride, not -- this was unrelated; it was in a small Ultra Light airplane at the ranch, and the guy didn't know how to fly it any better than I did and I didn't know how to fly it at all, and we took off and he ran off the runway, and we got up, we had wheat -- it was in the fall and the wheat was probably four feet high, and literally we couldn't get any higher than the heads of the wheat. The wheels were turning; it was all outside, you know, you could reach out and touch the wheat, it's a little Ultra Light. And this antelope got up in the middle of the wheat field -- we scared her -- and ran across us, and we kind of jumped over and then settled back down, and finally we got enough energy to get up off the ground. But there's not that many...

MARK: No crashes?

BOBBY: I have not. I've had to land quite a few times because of issues -- mainly those issues, generally --

MARK: What are those, usually?

BOBBY: Last year I had to land down by Edgerton; my oil pressure indicator was [00:05:00] going from zero to full, and I had a biologist with me, and it was poor weather, and that's just not something you screw around with, your oil

pressure. And it turned out to be a faulty indicator, but still, you know, there's the highway right there, and we kind of just zigged and zagged and landed in front of the cars, and we pulled off --

MARK: What does it take to be a good pilot, or at least a pilot who's still alive?

BOBBY: Yeah. Well, you know the saying, there's old pilots and bold pilots but no old bold pilots? Common sense is most of it. I honestly believe if you're doing this low kind of stuff, the wind and where it's coming from is the most important, what it'll do to you, and how it affects your flying when you're turning and you're slow.

MARK: That's what I've heard from everybody so far, is cross-winds, cross-winds.

BOBBY: Yup.

MARK: I've heard it from everybody, so it must be -- is that a particularly Wyoming problem?

BOBBY: Maybe. Because there's all the rolling hills that mess it up, and then there's always a good northwest [00:06:00] wind. And it's always something that's in the back of your mind; eventually you don't even know it's there. And then you get a screwed-up day where the wind's out of your east, and you're setting all your runs up to look at that nest, going the wrong -- you know, it takes

you half a day to figure out that the wind's blowing the wrong way and you're going... anyway, that's -- common sense, it don't...

MARK: Do you consider yourself a good pilot?

BOBBY: I do. I do.

MARK: You take pride in it.

BOBBY: I'm only good at about two or three things, but I'm a good pilot.

MARK: What else are you good at?

BOBBY: I'm a good flight instructor, and I'm a good -- I can get people excited about what they do sometimes. Sometimes you can. But mostly I'm just an old rancher that likes to fly. And like I said, I have been good at it. I've cheated at it enough times that I can learn from it, and that's the main thing, I think, more even than common (inaudible), to learn from your mistakes if you've got the chance to do it again. [00:07:00]

MARK: Well, as a flight instructor, what do you have -- what does it take to be a good flight instructor?

BOBBY: Good teacher. Good listener. Good patience. I don't do it that much anymore; I've got Ryan that you were going to interview and the other Ryan; I've got people up there that do it. When I was a flight instructor, I was very good at communicating. Very good. And to be honest with

you, that's what really taught me how to fly. When you've got to keep somebody else from killing you and explain to them why they're doing it, then it's -- that's when I learned to become a real pilot.

MARK: Really?

BOBBY: Absolutely. I probably had eight, 900 hours when we started that, but I never really -- once you can talk somebody through it, and -- and then you find out you're a pilot.

MARK: Yeah, it's kind of like teaching.

BOBBY: Exactly.

MARK: You're learning -- if you're teaching history, you're learning it, because you have to read it before you can talk about it. You can't just stand up and -- well, the old-fashioned way of teaching was to stand up and lecture, and you can't lecture unless you read. And if you read, you're going to find out things. And pretty soon it builds up [00:08:00] to the point where --

BOBBY: -- you're a historian.

MARK: Exactly.

BOBBY: Yup, and you're a good one. Because that's what you do. Mm-hmm.

MARK: All right, so we talked about your close calls. What are your ambitions in flight?

BOBBY: My personal ambitions in flying right now are not that high. I'm not -- I mean, I'm real happy with what we've got; I've got a really good supply of pilots that are safe, and it's a tough business to hire into and to work into. A lot of our flights are only two hours long. Well, I can hire the best pilot in the world, but if I'm only going to make \$100 in two hours and he's got a hotel room and everything, you can't hardly bring somebody in to help you unless they're ingrained in your work, you know what I mean? In summertime you can do seasonal flying and bring somebody in to help out with the sage grouse work and that kind of thing. [00:09:00] But even then, it's tough. My ambitions are just to kind of keep things going; we're not going to do a whole lot more as far as buying airplanes -- that's what we just decided in a company meeting, or hiring new pilots. As long as we keep to what we've got, I'm going to do this for another four years, and then I'm going back to Montana, and I'll still be able to run it, but I'll be on the ranch then and take you to --

MARK: Why are you going to quit?

BOBBY: Because there's other priorities.

MARK: Which are?

BOBBY: The ranch. The family ranch.

MARK: Oh. Is there no one else that can take it over?

BOBBY: There's nobody else that is going to take it over.

MARK: Wait a minute. (laughter)

BOBBY: I've got a brother and a sister, and neither of them are that interested, and I am. I mean, I've got two passions: one of them's flying and one of them's ranching. And I've got my businesses set up pretty well on the flying side, [00:10:00] and I'll still be able to do all the flying that I want -- can do, but at the same time I'm gonna move back up there and work the ranch.

MARK: This business that you're in, flight instructor and commercial work, isn't that what you call it?

BOBBY: Mm-hmm.

MARK: Is it lucrative, or is one of the reasons you're getting out because you're being pushed out a little bit?

BOBBY: No. Right now it's the best it's ever been. And --

MARK: Really?

BOBBY: Yup.

MARK: Why?

BOBBY: Just because of the name that we've made for ourselves, and the business that we have: we go down to Texas and do surveys, Oklahoma and Nebraska. We've got a - - all the consultants are looking for a good, you know, "can you put me on that nest?" But mostly they're all looking for safe. "Can you put me on that nest and get me

home afterwards?" And everybody is incredibly safe, incredibly personal, you know, are personable. They really hit it off with the consultants or whoever we're working with, the biologists [00:11:00] or whatever it is that we're doing. And it's doing very well. So doing well enough that it's a struggle to know if you want to expand.

MARK: Yeah. But you made a value choice, not a money choice.

BOBBY: Absolutely. Yup.

MARK: Who will take over this business when you're gone?

BOBBY: It's a good question. There's a couple people that we're working into it, and hopefully that's what we'll do.

MARK: OK. What does it take to be a good pilot?

BOBBY: Just -- the best part is to learn from your mistakes, and common sense. It's all just common sense.

MARK: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) common sense? What if you're ADD?

BOBBY: That's tough. Because one of the ADD medication, a lot of it isn't approved by the FAA. And so you can't take it. And get your -- the FAA -- how they get you is with your [00:12:00] medical license. I have to take a physical every year. And if there's something that's off, if I'm taking medication that's not approved or something, then they can deny my physical, which negates my license.

MARK: Exactly. And you're out of work.

BOBBY: Absolutely.

MARK: Well, the reason I ask that is because I don't think I'd be a very good pilot. I innately or intuitively know myself well enough to say -- if you're crazy, you know, because I'd love to fly. I've always wanted to fly. I worked for (inaudible) Airways for a little while as a fly (inaudible).

BOBBY: Really?

MARK: [Paul Eisman?].

BOBBY: Sure.

MARK: Yeah. But that was back in '69. You weren't even born, probably. No, you were --

BOBBY: Yeah, '64, yeah.

MARK: -- you were five years old. But I've always wondered about that, and I've thought, no, because I'm too flippant. I go from one topic to the next. And I'm not sure that that's a good qual-- that that's the kind of quality you want in an airline or a pilot -- in pilots.

BOBBY: Maybe not, but it's certainly something that for the most part can be overcome.

MARK: Yeah?

BOBBY: You just -- sure. You can -- you can [00:13:00] adjust which priorities -- I mean, I don't know. I don't

have ADD. And so it's pretty easy for me to say. You know, it's -- but you see them. Certainly there's a -- we've got a bunch of them up there, and as long as you can keep them focused on what they're doing and they don't start worrying about something that's not there to worry about, they're fine. Just fine. Doing something low and slow and multitasking, getting into where there's -- you know, you can't just freeze up; that's a little different, when you start doing something like that. But for flying, going from here to Sheridan, you do it until it becomes rote and then practice your emergencies.

MARK: Somebody told me the other day, when I was interviewing, "If you ever think you're going to get in a wreck, fly right through it." I said, "What do you mean, fly right through it?" He said, "Don't throw up your arms and panic."

BOBBY: Yup. Yup. Fly it till it's done.

MARK: Do you think most people have a tendency to panic?

BOBBY: In my... [00:14:00] from what I've seen, yeah.

MARK: [For real?]

BOBBY: Not panic, just freeze. I wouldn't consider it panic as much as just do nothing and let whatever happens happen, and that's not necessarily a good outcome. I've done it before.

MARK: You have?

BOBBY: Oh, yeah.

MARK: Frozen up?

BOBBY: I took off in -- when I was just a kid we had a Super Cub and we were hunting wild horses. And we had horses on the ground, moving these wild horses -- it was up by [Coal Strip?], and I didn't have any hours and didn't know density altitude to speak of. And I had this kid with me, and I thought he was a hundred-pound kid, and he was 190-pound guy. Anyway, we took off, and going down this -- it was just out in the pasture with a bunch of trees in front of us, and it wasn't flying. But somehow, again, a Super Cub is just -- something about -- but when I -- next thing I remember, [00:15:00] I had flaps in one hand and a stick in the other, and we were going down this valley, still trying to pick up speed. And that's all -- I definitely froze up; I was just waiting for the wreck. But hopefully I learned from it.

MARK: Yeah. Can you describe some of the feeling -- I mean, I've tried to get somebody to tell me what it's like when it's best. You know, I mean it's like saying, "Well, when was sex the best for you?"

BOBBY: (laughter)

MARK: But when was flying the best for you?

BOBBY: Right now. Flying's the best right now when we're out on a evening in the winter in December doing an eagle survey, a bald eagle survey, and the sun's going down and it's 15 degrees outside and it's that blue, turquoise, yellow, and there's not a breath of wind, and you just float, and it's fun. And it is -- there's not a worry in the world. It's just relaxing and fun, and there's nothing in the world that you'd rather be doing, sex included.

MARK: (laughter) Thanks a lot, Bobby. [00:16:00]

BOBBY: Thank you.

MARK: How do you spell your last name?

BOBBY: L-A-I-R-D.

MARK: Would you fill out just a -- or how much time do you have?

BOBBY: Sure.

MARK: What I want to do is -- I'll turn this off. I want you to fill out --

END OF AUDIO FILE