

Tony ([00:00](#)):

I couldn't imagine how far I had fallen. The truth be told, like, I couldn't imagine it was happening to me. I thought this has gotta be some kind of a weird dream, but, it was no dream that's for sure. You know, in one of the jobs in there too was, was scrubbing the latrines in individual cells. And as I was doing that, you know, scrubbing out a stainless steel toilet. I was sitting there thinking, man, three months ago, I was flying a triple seven, Captain, eating cheese and fruit on a tray. And now I'm, on my knees scrubbing a toilet out so that maybe I can get back and go flying again.

. ([00:42](#)):

You are listening to flying straight, and aviators guide to navigating through a life of sobriety. People in the flying industry, and other walks of life, will share their experiences of living a life free of alcohol and other drugs. You will also hear from experts in the world of addiction and self-improvement join Andrew O'Meally, airline, pilot, and non-practicing alcoholic, as he takes you on a journey discovering how a sober life can lead to a deeper level of happiness.

Andrew ([01:20](#)):

Hi everyone. My guest today is retired. Airline Captain Tony Driza talking to us all the way from West Olive, Michigan in the United States. Tiny grew up in Muskegon. I hope I've pronounced that right. It's 25 miles or so down the road from where he is right now. And other than a stint in new England, he's always called Michigan home. Throughout his amazing career, Tony flew some pretty nice airplanes, including a range of Boeing's, the seven O seven, the seven two seven, the seven five seven and the seven six, seven. He also operated the DC 10 and the MD80 before getting an airline. He flew a whole lot of light aircraft as well. He completed his career in command of a Boeing triple seven - big wide body operating between Tokyo and Dallas Fort worth. It was a classically beautiful ending to his career. As he taxied in towards the terminal. You can just imagine on either side of the taxiway, the fire trucks shooting their water cannons in the air and forming an arch for Tony to maneuver past. This is a tradition in aviation to salute, farewell and thank retiring airline captains for a job well done. So it is a big deal and it's something that is earned when he got off the aircraft, his family were waiting for him to celebrate a perfect end to a perfect career. You might think. Well, the perfect end part that's pretty accurate, but as Tony will tell you shortly, the journey was far from perfect. He didn't just start with a company and fly for a few years then walk away. There were a few interesting events along the way. His career path was not one you'd probably expect from such an experienced pilot. You see Tony had a problem with alcohol so much so that when he drank, he would break out in handcuffs, a direct quote from him. Welcome, Tony.

Tony ([03:23](#)):

Thanks, Andrew. Good to be here.

Andrew ([03:25](#)):

Good to see you. How's life in, Michigan sunny, Michigan

Tony ([03:30](#)):

Sunny today was sunny. It was just cold, uh, is very cold right now, but not cold enough for ice on the lakes. , just about good weather for, we've got a little snow on the ground, good weather for riding a fat tire bicycle through the woods. dealing with the COVID stuff. Pretty much like everybody around the world is, and our governor is starting to relax things a little bit. Uh, we haven't been able to eat in

restaurants forever and hurting in another 10 days. We're actually going to be able to do limited, um, dining inside and in restaurants with some restrictions, but we're moving in the right direction. So that's a good thing.

Andrew (04:07):

Yeah, that, that sounds like a really good thing. So a Michigan, all your life. And, you got an interest in aviation as a young guy.

Tony (04:18):

Yeah, I really did. We, I lived pretty close under the flight path for Muskegon County airport. So pretty much from the time I can remember wandering around outside, you know, I'd see aircraft flying overhead and my dad would occasionally take us out to the airport. We'd watch, watch airplanes take off and land. And then when I was about 13 years old, I got my first plane ride with a friend of mine who had just got his private pilot license. And I'll tell you what, that was just pure magic. There was nothing like it. I could not imagine how cool that was to see the earth from that perspective, you know, just watching that shadow of the aircraft get tiny as we, as we took off pure magic. And I knew right then right there that, that was going to be the career for me, for sure.

Andrew (05:06):

Alright, great. So first solo, how old were you when you, when you flew an airplane on your own?

Tony (05:12):

I soloed when I was 16, I didn't have a driver's license yet. I rode my bicycle to the airport to actually, do my first solo. So I, I, I soloed early as early as I could, 16 in the States, got my private license when I was 17. And then I think they felt sorry for me because I was spending so much money on flying lessons. I actually hired me to pump gas at the airport. I started pumping gas and washing airplanes and, you know, whatever they needed doing. I did that. And then by the time I was 18 and graduated from high school, I had my commercial, my, all my ground instructor ratings, instrument instructor, and, uh, basic CFI as well. So had pretty much everything except the ATP, the time I got out of high school.

Andrew (05:59):

Wow. Oh, that's amazing. And then, uh, high school, what happened then?

Tony (06:03):

Well, after high school, I went, I spent a couple of years in a community college, and I was still, I at that time, I graduated from pumping gas. I actually flight instructing and flying some single engine charter. I didn't have a multi-engine rating yet. So I flew some single engine charters, then I continued college in Lansing. Michigan went to Michigan state university, picked up my multi-engine ATP when I was there. And then started flying, multi-engine charters, um, Beech eighteens, Baron, Cessna, three tens, that sort of stuff. When I was working there, when I got hired by American airlines when I was 24.

Andrew (06:40):

Well, okay. So, flying has definitely been in your blood for the vast majority of your life. And, one would think that that would, create a pretty sort of stable and motivating type life, but that isn't exactly the

case, How about you wind the clock back a few years and if you can just paint a picture of how your life was, back a number of years ago?

Tony ([07:08](#)):

Well, I, you know, I really thought it was, it was going along pretty well. Um, you know, I got married when I was pretty young children from my first wife. I was actually married three times over the course of my life so far, but three great kids from my first life or wife first life's wife. and, you know, I thought things were going along. Okay. ,I thought I drank pretty normally at that point, but relationships for me were never as easy as, flying an aircraft that seemed to come naturally, anything to do with relationships with spouses that was kind of tough, and you know, the tougher the relationship got, I think the more I tried to solve it by, you know, maybe having another drink, you know, I seemed like that kind of took all of the sting out of things made.

Tony ([08:00](#)):

I thought it made everything great. And in fact, it's, even early on as early as maybe 30 years ago, I could kind of tell that that was my coping mechanism. When a relationship, especially with my partner was starting to go sideways, that I would usually, you know, turn towards alcohol to try and solve it. And it just progressively got worse. I refuse to accept that every single wife that I was married to all three of them, they said you have a problem with alcohol and each marriage progressively got shorter in duration. my, last marriage, , didn't even last five years, it probably never have happened to start with, but that's another story probably for another time, but alcohol is definitely a huge problem in all of those relationships as things started to go sideways.

Andrew ([08:53](#)):

Okay. And, I remember once you were talking about that new wife smell, so possessions and so on were things that you chased and new experiences?

Tony ([09:04](#)):

That's exactly it, I always looked to just try and acquire what I thought I didn't have. If I was having a problem with a certain wife, I thought, well, I'm either gonna maybe go have an affair and get what I was lacking in my relationship. And then everything would be perfect. And of course that never turned out to be the case. Um,, I literally kept thinking that if I could just get this new wife or get this new car or get this better sailboat or a new camera, you name it, any of those things I thought that was gonna actually take me over the happiness hump, I would get it and I would say now what, cause I don't feel any happier than I did before.

Andrew ([09:47](#)):

Yeah. Right. That resonates with me. And especially at the moment with the whole COVID thing and being stood down from work, and I've always thought that I needed things, material possessions around me to, to make me happy. And that the weird thing has been the less things I have, the happier I seem to be, which I'm still trying to work all that out. But anyway, so other than that relationship issues and so on, things seem to be tracking along. Okay. Pretty, as you probably thought, typical for an airline Captain and had a good wage coming in and on the afternoon of November the ninth, 19, 2016, you told me how you decided to go and visit a buddy just to have a couple of bourbons. That was a hell of a session. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Tony ([10:41](#)):

Yeah. Well, it actually started a little bit before I decided to go to my buddy's house, I was already separated, so I was living at home, feeling particularly rotten about life in general. So I started drinking bourbon pretty early in the morning and it was a Saturday. So there was a lot of college football games on, and that was my plan. I was just going to sit around and watch college football all day drink, you know, I didn't have to fly. I think my next trip was maybe four or five days in advance. Didn't wasn't too worried about anything. So I was pretty well hammered when I, when I decided, that it would be a great idea to just drive over to my buddy's house. Just five miles straight down the street, no turns, no anything. I just had to make one turn out of my driveway, one other turn into his driveway.

Tony ([11:28](#)):

So it's not like it was very complicated. And I definitely remember getting down to his house and we sat in, out in his barn and had a couple of a couple of more bourbons and he had some really good bourbon that tasted better than what I had been drinking all day. So we're just sitting there smiling and everything was good. I remember it was right about sunset. I left his house and I made the turn go to my house. And the next thing I remember, two hours later was just a very violent impact of a head-on automobile crash. So for two hours I was apparently driving around. I have no recollection where I was, or what I had been doing. I still had my clothes on, so I guess it was, it was okay, but really no recollection. I never saw the car that I hit coming at me. I never saw or heard the sirens, the police vehicles, ambulances, stuff like that coming afterwards. I just remember the violent impact and getting out of the truck and where, when they found me, I was just laying on the ground, outside the truck. My next memories of that were just waking up in the hospital with a chest full of broken ribs, broken breast bones, broken fingers, and some lacerations. And it was at that point, I thought, well, this is not good.

Andrew ([12:51](#)):

You're lucky to be alive by the sounds of it.

Tony ([12:54](#)):

I truly, truly was. The impact, I was going about 55 and he was doing about 40. So it's the same kind of a thing as hitting a tree at about 90 miles an hour, both, vehicles were totalled. They had to cut him out of his truck. I'm just very grateful that he actually was driving a full-sized vehicle and I was too, the airbags deployed. We were both kind of skinned up in the face from the airbags, but at least we didn't have any other damage that way. So we're both very fortunate, but, he had some more serious injuries than I did. He broke ankle and had to have five or six different surgeries to try and put his leg back together.

Andrew ([13:34](#)):

God. Yeah. So, what did you think? Lucky escape. And, I'll continue, have a few weeks off flying and then back to work again, or what were you thinking then?

Tony ([13:47](#)):

No, it was an, almost an instant realization that what I had been doing, finally caught up with me. I for about a couple of years, I was thinking I was just barely staying ahead of the wreckage behind me. I knew my drinking was getting worse. I was having some, some health issues. I, you know, would just all of a sudden start to cough uncontrollably. I didn't miss any work. I was sort of a binge drinker. I would, you know, drink at home in between trips and rarely if ever drank anything on a layover. I just never wanted to have any, I had seen too many guys get arrested at the airport, in some foreign country. And I

said, I'm never going to do that. But when I got home, it was a different, uh, a different story. So I actually came to the realization quite quickly.

Tony ([14:37](#)):

I was only in the hospital for two days, came back home. And the first phone call that I made was, to the, my pilots union, allied pilots association, it was to the HIMS, chair. And I had, I remember writing that phone number down several years back at recurrent training. So I dug that out and gave him a call and literally I was shaking so badly on the phone. I'm not sure he even understood what I was saying, but I think he had heard that same kind of a cry for help many times before.

Andrew ([15:11](#)):

Right, Okay. Just winding back a little bit there you were saying you're a binge drinker. You didn't go out much on slips, on trips away. So I guess from the outside the pilot community that you were, you were in, would have not perceived you as the typical image of, of that alcoholic drunk that a lot of people do have in their mind. They would've just seen you as Tony Driza the triple seven captain.

Tony ([15:42](#)):

I think that's a pretty fair statement. And I think I became over the years, I became pretty proficient at it, putting the image forth that I wanted other people to see. And it didn't matter what type of group I was with. If I was with some buddies who were drinking, I could be that drunken guy. If I was with, you know, with the airline staff, I completely shut that off. And I was Mr. Professional Captain. Like I said, rarely even drank even a beer or something on a layover. And so, I disguised that pretty well when it came to work, but I felt at home, I didn't have to disguise it. In fact, I got to the point of certainly in my last marriage where I had no intention of disguising it and, you know, we'd get I get into an argument with my ex-wife and rather than try and sort it out that way, I just would get belligerent and, you know, and have another scotch or another bourbon or a beer or wine or whatever I happen to have. Um, but yeah, the image that I projected to, to everybody else, nobody really had any idea that I was an alcoholic.

Andrew ([16:52](#)):

So there's Captain, Tony Driza lying in hospital. You're making a few phone calls. And, you mentioned, so you rang up the HIMS chair. So just, for those that didn't listen to the previous podcast, I briefly explained HIMS It's a supportive organization, not for profit that's in, around the world, but started off in the U S and it gets pilots back in the air again, from pilots who have been there and pilots such as tiny who will probably talk about that soon. So you made a phone call to the HIMS chair, Mike Galante that you spoke with.

Tony ([17:31](#)):

Yeah, Mike was actually the, he was the HIMS chair. And so I spoke with him, you know, told him what was going on. And he reassured me that, number one, I wasn't the first person to have this happen too, which was a great relief to me. And he said, you know, I don't know if we can get you back in time before you have to retire. Because at the time I was 63 years old and mandatory retirement age is 65. So he wasn't sure that I would ever get back to work just from the logistical standpoint of it takes anywhere between eight to 10 months, typically to go through this program and get your special issuance medical back. And so he was a little uncertain of how that was going to look like. But he says, Hey, we'll get you in there as soon as you're well, enough to travel.

Tony ([18:17](#)):

And it took actually two weeks before I was well enough to travel. I did a 30 day inpatient, stint at a rehab center in California, which was the first part of the AME's requirement that you do one of those first, but even before I could do that, because of the offense that I committed, in the state that I live, it's a felony. And I had to get the permission from a circuit court judge to even leave the state because once you've committed a felony, they didn't want me to leave the state. So I was granted permission to travel to the rehab center and at least get that part of it out of the way and come back to Michigan.

Andrew ([18:57](#)):

Uh, okay. So, Mike really guided you through a lot of the process and, was there any talk of, "hey, maybe you're not going to be a free man in the near future" or was that always, was that already something that was really high in your thought processes?

Tony ([19:18](#)):

It was very high in my thought process because when I got out of the hospital and I, you know, and I read the traffic citation, and what I was being charged with, and it was a felony and I looked it up and my jaw just about hit the floor because it said, this is punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. And I thought, wow. I mean, I knew I had done something seriously wrong. I didn't quite kill this individual, but I came pretty close to killing him and myself and the state took it very seriously. So I knew that this felony charge was going to happen. I knew it was something that I did not want to fight. I knew what I had done. And from that standpoint, I just wanted to lean into it. Um, you know, to start the path back, whatever that looked like, whatever it was going to take to get my life back on track, I was willing to do it. Um, I just wanted the opportunity to do it. And thankfully the circuit judge, let me leave the state to start that. But I was very aware that when I got finished up with rehab, that I was going to probably be going to jail or prison for some amount of time. I just didn't know at that time for how long,

Andrew ([20:29](#)):

So the court case happened. And, tell us a little bit about, how that all went.

Tony ([20:37](#)):

Well, again, it was the first time for me ever being in court like that. And I had been conversing with my attorney and he was saying that he thought probably I would get 30 days in jail, that the judge would see that was the sentence that was recommended. And I thought, okay, 30 days I can, I can kind of handle that. And so, you know, I'm dressed up in all of my fine clothes, looking presentable to the judge and answering the questions. And, when he told me to, rise for the sentencing, he sentences me to six months in jail and I thought was, I mean, wow, I had no idea that that was, was coming, based on the court recommendation. I really wasn't prepared for that, but when they said six or six months in jail, and I thought the first thing I thought of was, well, that's the end of the airline career because I was already on a pretty tight time table as it was just because of my age.

Tony ([21:41](#)):

And I thought, well, that's the nail in the coffin right there. I'm never going to get back to fly again, which was, it was just absolutely crushing because of all the work that I had put in to my recovery program. To that point, I had already been through the inpatient treatment. I'd already done the intensive outpatient treatment. I did the 90 AA meetings in 90 days and was just bicycling back and forth to all of these

events to make it happen. And then to go into jail where they only had one AA meeting per week. And it was sort of a joke. I think the only time that people actually went to this meeting was to get out of their cell just for an hour. And they didn't really cause they would go back into after the meeting, they would go back and say, well. When I get out of here, I'm going to, I'm going to go drink again. And I knew I was not going to, but it was, it was very disheartening to have to spend that time in there. And I had asked the judge if I could, you know, get out of jail periodically to attend some of the required meetings for HIMS. And he flat refused to let me out until my sentence was completely served.

Andrew ([22:52](#)):

Well, what a, what an experience. So once that sentencing, the six months you heard that you were in for six months, I'm not, I don't know. I'm not familiar with the system in the US but do you get to go home and get your toothbrush and change your undies or what happens there?

Tony ([23:12](#)):

Uh, no, no, and no, right straight from the sentencing, there's a door from the courtroom and I was led through that door. They took my tie away from me, anything that they thought I could hurt myself with, they took away from me, immediately put me in handcuffs in a waist chain and leg chains and handcuffs and then I sat downstairs for about two hours, just on a concrete slab with a bunch of other people that were now being transported to jail. And so sat there for a couple of, and was transported to jail and then sat in jail on a different piece of concrete slab. They actually took the handcuffs off for a little while, while we were in that other holding cell. But we sat in there on a concrete again for about 12, almost 12 hours before it was almost midnight. And before they actually took me to my cell block where I was going to spend the next hour is as it turns out four months.

Andrew ([24:13](#)):

Oh my God. So you've gone from wide body Captain Tony Driza to being handcuffed and sitting on a concrete slab. What a feeling

Tony ([24:33](#)):

It was. I couldn't imagine how far I had fallen. The truth be told, like, I couldn't imagine it was happening to me. I thought this has gotta be some kind of a weird dream, but, it was no dream that's that's for sure. But, you know, at that point I remember listening to, I was fortunate enough to have heard Lyle Prouse's story, where he had actually went to prison as well for a year and a half,, for what he had done. And just knowing that he had been through a similar situation, and, and made it through, gave me a lot of hope. And in fact, in the, in the big book, one of the stories in there is his story is just called grounded, near the back of the big book. And I think that was the first story that I actually read in the, AA big book and reading through that thing. At least there was some hope that, okay, I'm not the first person that this happened to either and he ended up getting back. So maybe there's a chance that I'll get back as well.

Andrew ([25:34](#)):

Right. So Lyle was the first us pilot to be jailed for drinking, flying. He was in prison for quite some time, but it was what, what sort of advice was Lyle giving you when you, when you went in there?

Tony ([25:51](#)):

Well, I didn't speak to him directly. I heard him speak at a HIMS seminar. And so it was just mostly his words. And I think the thing that motivated me the most was, his total acceptance of what he had done and the fact that he didn't want to delay going to jail. He just wanted to get on with it, and get this over with. And that was the same sort of an attitude that I wanted to take as well. I didn't want to fight this. I didn't want to appeal it. I sort of felt, I was lucky in some regards because I could have been sentenced to up to five years in prison. And even though six months was more than what I thought I was going to get. There was still a lot better than what I might have have received. So what Lyle gave me, I think was just some inspiration and some motivation that, okay, this isn't the end of the world. It's going to be a tough path back, but the way to get through this is to just really dig into it, lean into it and get all the help that I could along the way.

Andrew ([26:58](#)):

That's great. So it sounds like you had a lot of support there to get through, the likes of Lyle and Mike Galante, we mentioned, and probably family and a whole range of other people, which is fantastic now. So when you got in there and you had all this support, obviously you didn't just sit back thinking, well, this is wonderful. I'll just draw upon this support and wait until my time finishes, there would have been a lot of, sort of unsavory sort of tasks that you would have had to perform while you're in prison.

Tony ([27:33](#)):

Um, there truly were, and actually is unsavory as they were, they had a program, it was called a sentence work abatement program where if I worked outside of the jail every day, um, for every four days that I worked, they reduced my sentence by one day. So during the Monday to Friday, part of the, of the prison deal, I would be outside. I was doing landscaping work, uh, you name it, we did it, whatever the towns needed. They just needed some manual labor, moving things around. And, and the funny thing was, I mean, I was far and away the oldest guy in this swap, deal, I was 64 years old. And most of these people in there were kids. I mean, they were in their twenties and, and I think I outworked most of them. I was motivated once I found out I could reduce my jail time. I was, I worked pretty hard, but, you know, in one of the jobs in there too was, was scrubbing, um, the latrines in, in individual cells. And as I was doing that, you know, rough scrubbing out a stainless steel toilet. I was sitting there thinking, man, three months ago, I was flying a triple seven, a Captain eating cheese and fruit on a tray. And now I'm on my knees scrubbing a toilet out so that maybe I can get back and go flying again.

Andrew ([29:01](#)):

So you got out and, obviously, flying, as we said, was, was in your veins in your blood. So I guess most people probably would've thought, well, now they've got a short period of time until retirement. I might as well just hang out till then and, not fly and then disappear somewhere. How did you approach all that when you got out?

Tony ([29:29](#)):

When I got out of jail, I was able to really get back into the HIMS program, Hard. I still had a couple of major obstacles to get through. I still had to do the psychiatric evaluation, and then I had to do a cognitive brain screen test. So I had to go down to South Carolina to take both of those, did pretty well on that. And all of the paperwork was finally in order. They put that off to the FAA, I believe in October of 2017. And once the FAA gets the paperwork, it can sometimes take two, three, four, five months, whatever the FAA up here works very slowly. So I had no idea how quickly they'd be able to look at my

file and make a determination one way or the other, if I get my special issuance medical. So once they submitted it, I was kind of on pins and needles.

Tony ([30:25](#)):

I was still on long-term disability at American, which I'm very grateful for because financially I didn't have any hardships. I was still getting a paycheck. Even though I was now divorced, I, you know, so I was living at home. I was still doing AA meetings. I was still doing aftercare. But I was just waiting to hear from the FAA. And when I finally heard from the FAA was in January of 2018, there was only three months before my 65th birthday. I called American airlines and told them I had my special issuance. They put me on the payroll that very same day, and they, they gave me a couple of choices and I didn't really realize that I was even gonna have a choice, and I realized now that Mike Galante from Allied Pilots Association had, had spoken with the, our vice president of flight at American airlines.

Tony ([31:22](#)):

Interestingly enough, I had flown with him when he was just, &@& First Officer, or, you know, we knew each other. And when Mike mentioned my situation,, I know that he, he pulled a few strings and he said, they gave me an option. They said, well, you can stay at home. We'll just pay you until your retirement day, or if you want to, or if you want to try and get back and fly, you're going to have to do a complete requal on the triple seven, do all the back training that you've missed in the last year and a half, and we'll get you back and we'll make it happen. And I said, I want to go fly the triple seven again. And so weeks later, they got me, they, they patched together, a re qualification training thing because all of the training slots had already been awarded, for that particular time period. So they hand crafted a program just for me. I was the only one in it, you know, usually go through with another copilot, but they used our ground school instructors. They use SIM pilots for my FO on the triple seven, to get me back through that. And then I took the check ride, which I passed, um, and was able to get back and fly that one last retirement trip just four days before my 65th birthday.

Andrew ([32:43](#)):

That's amazing. Yeah. That the, the cost of, of training just for that one flight, I'd hate to think what it could even be, you know, the resources with the manpower, the simulators, the administration, and on and on, and on, and on. I mean, normally the, the investment from the airline airlines are a business that usually expect a pretty good return on their investment. Obviously, American airlines, we're getting nothing out of this other than the fact that they were really looking after you. And, that just goes to really show what a, what a great organization they are and HIMS as well to getting you to that point.

Tony ([33:27](#)):

Exactly. And that wasn't lost on me, that American was going to get nothing from this other than the - it's, it's even, it's even hard for me to put into words, but I think with American, and I would like to think with other companies, but I know this for sure, with American, they really care about the individual. They weren't just paying lip service to it. And for them to put that kind of investment into me, the simulator time, I don't have any idea what the whole program costs. I'm not sure simulator time on a triple seven is definitely not cheap and then they had to buy some other captain off of the trip that I actually flew, to make that happen and put a check airman on the trip as well. So it was, it was very costly for them.

Tony ([34:15](#)):

and it, it just, it, the other thing that pointed out to me too, though, was that, there is a certain reward, as I say, in the, in the AA 12 step thing that the promises do come true if you work for them. And I think part of the reason that they were happy to maybe go a little bit of an extra mile was I really put a lot of effort into trying, you know, just to be a different human being from, from the one that I was before I went into the HIMS program. I think they recognize that. And, that's the other reason I think, in the longterm that the union and the airline actually asked me to stay on and the HIMS program and volunteers as a peer monitor. And I'm still doing that three years after I retired.

Andrew ([35:02](#)):

Yeah. Good on, ya, that's as you say, it's not just lip service from the airline. It's, it shows a really deep engagement with everyone, but it's, a real honesty about the airline as well. And that's the perception I get about it, but that effort that you're talking about, you know, someone once explained to me, or gave me their take on, effort and believing in something bigger than yourself guiding you was, uh, it's like we're in a boat and the effort we're just at the oars and where we're rowing as hard we can and that whatever it is the rudder. So as long as we, we row really hard in that boat that, that higher power or whatever you believe it is, will be guiding you to where you want to get to. Fantastic. So it was only, only a few days until your retirement date, that, that, that last flight took place. You landed at, uh, Tokyo and, uh, what happened then?

Andrew ([36:06](#)):

Well, Tokyo was pretty easy and it was a really shortly over, the layover hotel is pretty close to the airport. I had been flying there for years, so everybody knew it was my retirement trip. They had a nice little party for me at the hotel, and usually they would break out bottles of wine and champagne and everything else. And I said, no, you other guys can have that. And so they had some nice sparkling Perrier, for me, you know, but again, it was a short layover and, you know, we flew back to Dallas and they obviously had the, the water cannon salute all set up.

Andrew ([36:46](#)):

You were taxiing in, did you expect that, did you know that was coming?

Tony ([36:51](#)):

It was going to happen. American said that they were going to do it. And my concern was the day that on my retirement trip, the temperature was below freezing in Dallas. it was maybe minus two Celsius or something like that. Clear skies, beautiful day, but it was very cold. And I was thinking, I don't know if they're going to shoot water cannons, you know, through the inlet. So these big triple seven engines, you know, and fouled these engines up, you know, we're trying to figure out, should we turn on the engine, anti ice, or what's going on here actually again, but, the, they did the water cannon salute right at the gate. All we had to do is just line up on the, on the lead in line. And there was a firetruck on either side and they shot the water cannons over the top of the fuselage and Flight Attendants took a lot of pictures from the inside. And my two daughters were up on the roof of the airport at the Hyatt Regency filming it from up there. So I got some great video and some great pictures from both inside and outside.

Andrew ([37:52](#)):

That's unreal. That's really good, lucky you did it at, when you finally got to the gate and not taxiing. And imagine if this, if the engines flamed out and you never got to the other end, but that would have been a little bit embarrassing! But that's excellent, mate. Really good. So you get home and then that's the end

of the career. How is life. Now, as far as you were saying, you're kayaking and riding your bike around, but, tell us a bit about your, building of your kayak?

Tony ([38:25](#)):

Well, the kayak was, was great. In fact, even after flying, I knew that I had to do something to replace all the time that I had spent drinking home, because I had a lot of hobbies and I just quit doing them when I was drinking. I'd have a few drinks in the morning and I would quit, I would just not do any projects. So with the years that I had in sobriety, after I retired, I thought, well, I've got to do something now, what do you want to do? Then? I thought, well, I've got this beautiful wood shop and it's winter. I always wanted to, build a kayak. And so I found a company that sold kits, everything was pre-cut. And then, so I ordered one of these, it showed up at the house, and I said, as I started unpacking, and I thought, man, I don't know if I could put this thing together.

Tony ([39:13](#)):

And it looked like it's going to take some time, but the beauty, I think of sobriety and in a good recovery is you just look at these things a lot differently. You know, you look at it as an opportunity to do something. And so I had plenty of time. I needed to fill that time up with, I like to think of it as just being a distraction literally the best part of my days in recovery are I don't focus on not drinking because to me that, that means that always I'm thinking about a drink and then just saying to myself, well, I'm not going to drink. Okay. So thinking about something else. And so, that's kind of what got me into the kayaking, deal. I knew it was going to take a lot of hours to put this thing together. And it was a great project. Took me just about all winter of 2019 to complete that kayak. And I could not hardly wait until winter was over and I could put the thing in the water and actually go and paddle it.

Andrew ([40:14](#)):

Yeah. Mate I've seen, you've sent me pictures of it and the actual construction of it, which is pretty intricate. And then the, the finished product, which is really, it is a work of art, you know, it's this beautiful, what would it be about, uh, I'm just trying to think in feet here, but 14 foot thereabouts,

Tony ([40:36](#)):

17 and a half feet long.

Andrew ([40:38](#)):

Oh, wow. Okay. 17. Yeah. It's, it's serious and it's, it's varnished and the curves on it and everything it's really, really, it is beautiful. And I guess you've probably gotten to the end of it, thought, I don't want to use this you know, I don't want to scratch it. It looks like something you'd hang up on,, you know, from the ceiling of, of a fancy hotel or something, it's just absolutely beautiful. And then you've sent some photos of, of actually using it and some great adventures with it.

Tony ([41:07](#)):

Yeah. I have, I've done some kayak camping with it. I took it up to Lake Superior. and it was just a really short trip, but usually Lake superior is ordinarily, it's too rough to do a lot of paddling on, but the day that I went up there, it was beautiful weather. Sunny skies, no waves. And it was maybe,, an eight mile paddle from where I put in to where the campground is, where I spent the night. And it was just wonderful to be out there, you know, and here I am, you know, 67 years old hauling this kayak through the woods with all my camping gear and going for a nice paddle and no thought of drinking, no alcohol

anywhere. And, I just had the best time of my life, you know, doing it. I tried to get somebody to go with me, but I couldn't find anybody on short notice to do it. So I just did it solo.

Andrew ([41:59](#)):

Yeah. Oh, fantastic. What a mind clearing experience.

Tony ([42:05](#)):

It was beautiful, just gorgeous. That's the kind of feeling that I have pretty much every day. You know, I'm doing something either. I've gone for a hike and I do a fair amount of backpacking or riding and as far as fat tire bike around on the trails here and that sort of that same feeling that at the end of the day, I've gotten through it clearheaded, I've stayed busy. I have, you know, pretty active routines where, you know, between,, going to online AA meetings because of COVID right now. and then just staying busy throughout the rest of the day. It's the beauty of it to me anyway, and I'm really grateful for there just is rarely ever a thought of bringing alcohol back into my life. I remember it was one of the Aussie Bird's meetings. I think that, I heard this, this is, this is huge. It says, you know, sobriety gave me everything that alcohol promised and,, and that is so true that,, you know, this sober lifestyle is, is really, has taught me that that's what it's all about. I don't have to go chasing all this other stuff, thinking it's gonna make me happy. I, it just naturally kind of follows me around these days.

Andrew ([43:19](#)):

Yeah. that's fantastic. I agree, the level of happiness I find through a sober life. It's such a deeper level of happiness because it's not an artificial, type of happiness. We don't pay you know, financially to get that happiness. We're not going to a bottle shop or liquor store and I'm paying money and then drinking and expecting sitting back and expecting to be happy. Or, you know, it's also like going to the movies you pay for a ticket. So you expect to be happy or go on a cruise, when you could do that sort of thing, and pay the money and sit back and say, well, "now make me happy" things that take effort, like building your kayak and, you know, living a sober life. It takes a lot of effort. And the depth of happiness is, is just the reward is just second to none.

Andrew ([44:14](#)):

It's unbelievable. But yeah. Now you're talking about the Aussie birds of a feather. So birds of a feather is, it's an AA group for aircrew. So we have, Australian Birds of a Feather it's on Zoom at the moment and Tony Zooms in and, shares his words of wisdom with us. And I remember the other day at a Bird's meeting, you were talking about, cause you, have brought it up a couple of times during this conversation about not focusing on drinking. and then you gave an analogy of riding a motorbike. Can you just relay that?

Tony ([44:57](#)):

Well, yeah, I mean, to me, a lot of it is about what I focus on and I've, I've observed with a lot of just the AA meetings that I've gone to. So many people are, are, are 100% focused on just not drinking and they really haven't made too many life changes. They're just trying to get through this thing with nothing but sheer willpower and saying to themselves for today, I'm not going to drink, but they really haven't changed anything. And to me, I needed to put the focus on something else. I remember one of the counselors when I was in rehab, they said, rather than spending an inordinate amount of time and energy to fix something that's broken, try and create something that's new because eventually you're going to get tired of trying to fix that broken thing. It's, broken beyond the point of being repaired.

Tony ([45:51](#)):

So I put my focus just like I do with my motorcycle. I've got a beautiful Indian motorcycle that now the state of Michigan says I can legally ride again. So I'm looking forward to summer. But I think with the analogy that you were looking for there is when I was taking a motorcycle riding course, they said the motorcycle is going to go where your head and your eyes are looking. So if you see an obstacle in the road, stop looking at the obstacle, stop looking at what you want to avoid, look where you want the bike to go, and the bike will go that way. And I've found that that's pretty true with my focus on alcohol as well. I'm focusing on either building a kayak or maybe getting out a guitar and playing it or trying to capture some great shots where the camera, anything to put my focus someplace else, because that's where my mind goes. And alcoholism is pretty much a disease of the mind anyway. And what we do in between the ears, I think has a lot to do with how successful recovery is going to be. So I put my focus on other things, not so much on just, do not picking up the bottle in any given day.

Andrew ([47:10](#)):

Yeah, that, that was the analogy I was looking for. It's, it's fantastic. I relay that to people all the time and it's pretty much whatever you focus on, you're going to hit on a motorbike. And, that's, I feel that, you know, it's not so much suppressing the, the cravings and so on. It's just changing the track and thinking about something else without suppressing. It's really important. I find. Yeah. Anyway, that's, an amazing story, Tony you were the, the significant inspiration in getting this whole project up and running because when we were over in, uh, Denver, less than two years ago, I went to my first birds of a feather meeting. I had a, there was a hymns convention over there. And so I walked in, there was the HIMS convention had,, probably a couple of hundred, recovering alcoholic and substance use disorder, pilots there.

Andrew ([48:14](#)):

And, it was just an amazing to just all to get together. But anyway, walking into that birds of a feather meeting, and I hear this guy started telling his story, and that was you, and I just thought straight away, there's this story needs to really get out there-and other stories. I mean, there's so many different stories out there that, they're interesting, and they can actually influence people's futures, i believe. So I really think that'll happen. So, thanks for taking the time to share your life experience with us today. Now you're a great inspiration for many pilots, here in this part of the world, in Australia, all over the world. You know, in Australia, we sincerely hope that, you can come over one day and visit us, or some of us will probably end up coming over to do some kayaking with you in that beautiful area.

Tony ([49:11](#)):

Well, yeah. And I would just like to say to you, I mean, I remember well that meeting that, when we first met in Denver and, you know, there was, there was a powerful connection that we sort of formed right off the bat, I was, I was really impressed at number one, that you had come all the way from Australia to Denver, to start gathering this information. I was even more impressed when I saw you the following spring down in Atlanta at the advanced HIMS seminar. And I, said to myself, I mean, this is this is a man who really wants to take what we have here in the States and bring it back down under and get a program going because the disease really doesn't care. What, hemisphere we're in, whether we're North or South of the equator, it's the same thing, and pilots around the world are pretty much the same. We love what we're doing. We want to get back in the cockpit and what you're doing, through this podcast and, you know, your involvement in putting these birds meetings together. It's, I'll tell you what, it's just, a powerful motivation for me to keep doing what I'm doing as well. So thank you for that.

Andrew ([50:18](#)):

Oh, thanks mate I think it's that, that buzzword synergy too, you know, we all get together and the, and what we get out of is greater than the Sum of its parts. And, it guys like you just so inspiring and looks forward to doing this again pretty soon. And I'm sure we will.

Tony ([50:37](#)):

Well, I hope you get, I hope you can come to the States and we'll go kayaking. And, as soon as this COVID thing is over, I'm going to get an Australian visa and come down under and we'll go do something fun.

Andrew ([50:49](#)):

we'll Kayak through the Whitsundays. How does that sound?

Andrew ([50:52](#)):

I love it. All right, man.

Andrew ([50:54](#)):

Thanks.

Tony ([50:55](#)):

You're welcome, Andrew.

Andrew ([50:57](#)):

I hope you enjoyed Tony's story and maybe got something out of it. He regularly gives valuable insights into how to live a happy, fulfilled and sober life. To me, Tony's story is a classic example of it could happen to anyone - if alcohol is a significant factor. If you'd like more information on the organization, HIMS, you can find it on various websites. The Australian one is aushims.org.au, In the U S. It is himsprogram.com and, our bros across the pond in New Zealand. It is nzhims.org.nz Any feedback regarding this podcast would be much appreciated. My email is andrew@flyingstraight.com.au. Thanks for listening to the flying straight podcast.