

Hylton ([00:00](#)):

I had a lot going on and there was the stress levels were probably way over the top. A couple of things happened very quickly. And then that resulted in me doing what would normally fix it, which would of course, be drinking more. I got to a point where it wasn't working anymore, was losing things that I cared deeply about. And it all happened very quickly. For me, flying is something that I really love. The fact that I was in a position with the amount of alcohol I was drinking that I may not ever fly again, was probably the biggest cursor for me to know that I was in a really bad spot, you know, to say that I didn't make me nervous to be around a lot of people that the whole world was drinking, it did, but, it was uncomfortable. And you had that feeling of not fitting in initially at first, but look it soon goes, and there's always somebody there. And strangely enough, a lot more than you think that aren't actually drinking as well.

Intro ([00:59](#)):

You're listening to flying straight, an 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 ([01:35](#)):

Hello, everyone. Welcome to this fourth episode of Flying Straight -piloting a sober life. I'm your host, Andrew O'Meally talking to you from the sunny Coast, Queensland, Australia, although I'll be heading down to Sydney tomorrow to do ground school and two simulator sessions. It's the first time in almost a year that I've had to do this due to COVID. The airline has sprung this on with not a lot of notice. So I'm feeling just a little bit anxious about doing this. My mind has been so far out of the cockpit for so long that I've changed my mindset from airline pilot mode to that of a full time university student, completely different worlds. The good news is, from what I've heard, that it all comes back pretty quickly. Anyway, my guest today is Hilton Ward, and I have no doubt that his story will resonate with quite a few of you, especially if you've worked in out of the way, places. Hilton calls, Winton Queensland home, and he's the owner-operator of a successful charter business. And with that business, he manages both fixed wing aircraft and helicopters. I consider him a remote area expert. He flies both in the desert and around Island,

Andrew ([03:00](#)):

Scattered across the top of Australia. His schedule is always changing. So I'm really grateful that things have worked out and his plans to visit the Sunshine Coast have eventuated. So we chat amongst other things about living a life free of alcohol in isolated areas where strong drinking culture is often the norm. Okay Hilton, It's good to see you. I have finally caught you here on the Sunshine Coast Queensland. You're a hard man to catch. You could be in Winton Queensland where you're based or the next day I could find you flying up in the Torres Strait at the tip of Australia, flying helicopters around there. But at the moment, you've come to the big smoke to- well, the Sunshine Coast Isn't exactly the big smoke, but, you're here for some kind of meeting. What's that all about?

Hylton ([03:51](#)):

Thank you, Andrew. And good to be here. Tourism expo this evening. From lunchtime almost today. Just spreading the word, getting the word out there. We do, well, that's how our thing out at Winton, we try

and show the Outback of Australia to the rest of Australia and, when the time is right, the rest of the world

Andrew ([04:12](#)):

Yeah. And beautiful part of the world out there. Yeah, absolutely. So you've brought your fiance along. she's come along on a free holiday?

Hylton ([04:21](#)):

Is actually my near enough, my opposition. She has her own business with four wheel drive buses and i'm aviation obviously. And, we're going to spread the word together tonight, so have all a collaborative approach to the outback and we're looking forward to it.

Andrew ([04:35](#)):

Oh, that's nice. Yeah. I look forward to getting out there. Have you found that there's many more, well it's only domestic tourism at the moment has suffered because of COVID or is actually booming a little bit because of the whole rising caravanning and Australians holidaying in their own backyard.

Hylton ([04:55](#)):

Exactly. And that's your answer. That's exactly what's happening, and it's great. And then they're going home and spreading the word and, of course it's got an on flow effect, the end of last year and by all indications this year looking amazing. So we're very, very happy, good luck. So if you want a good, good story. That's a good story.

Andrew ([05:14](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Excellent. So you're a successful owner operator of a charter business at Elite Aviation. How long has that been running for?

Hylton ([05:27](#)):

Uh, in it's 5th year this year. So, we operate a setback from above, but it's, to be honest. It's a fantastic lifestyle. It's love, absolutely love what I do. So that's all part of the journey.

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

Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Excellent. Yeah. I assume your company website, at least some of the destinations that you have to offer, and it goes on from the great barrier reef to the Whitsunday islands, Whitehaven beach, Gilberton Outback retreat, and Wollaman falls. And you also run dinosaur tours and movie experiences, and that's just scratching the surface there. One of the things I saw on the website was Orpheus Island. And when I saw that and I know to get out to Orpheus, that's in a sea plane, you did a fair bit of sea plane stuff. Flying

Hylton ([06:20](#)):

Used to be sea planes. And actually i it was me that instigated using helicopters. So I'm gonna put the helicopter on the IOC, but that used to be in a previous life. I was out there every day. So that was part of it. But these days and another operator, utilize that and yeah, it's going well. So that's good to see. Yeah, It was,, previously sea plane operation and that was great too, let's see. But the helicopters is always been my thing and tend to sway that way a bit.

Andrew ([06:52](#)):

Yeah. That seaplane gig That's my dream job. I remember that, you know, living somewhere in North Queensland and just flying out to those islands, I think that would just be magnificent.. Yeah, You've done some enviable flying stuff all around remote areas. And we could go on all day talking about your adventures out there, but as tempting as that is. I'd like to get into the adventure of drinking and sobriety. So how about we go back to the start? You were born in Chinchilla and I've never been to Chinchilla, but I know it's the Mellon capital of the world. And before our thoughts stray too far that's watermelons. Yeah. Okay, good. So you grew up there and is that where you had your first drinking experience?

Hylton ([07:44](#)):

No. No. In actual fact, I lived with my grandparents. My grandparents were very involved in the community there and I spent part of my young life with them. They bought me up part of it and, yeah. And that's why I was born there and, spend a bit of time there when I was younger. But no, I didn't start drinking really till I was about 21.

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

Oh, okay. Cause I just thought that sort of country, culture that drinking was probably a big, big part of that to socialize with the local dances in the local halls and that sort of stuff, but that, didn't really hook you at that stage of the game. No, not at all. When, when did you start, thinking that, Oh, wow, this is a really, really good ,fun thing to do?

Hylton ([08:37](#)):

Probably I'd say around the age of 21, I was, and obviously sociably at the time. That was the way to be social and, like everybody, I guess, would agree in most cases, a few drinks and you do relax and, and of course, once I worked that out, then I thought a few drinks was good.

Andrew ([08:57](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Okay. And so early age in you say 21 and then, you're not exactly a young guy now. You're not an old guy. And in fact, you look very young for your age, I might add, but so you, you have been in sobriety for what, five or six years.

Hylton ([09:19](#)):

Yeah. Just coming up to five years. So This year,

Andrew ([09:21](#)):

congratulations on that. So, so you, you obviously, for the majority of the time you were drinking, you, had been a successful business owner and so on. So you handle the, or you could balance that drinking work life pretty well for majority of the time.

Hylton ([09:42](#)):

Yeah. And that was part of the culture and, and I totally enjoyed it. And did it work in my favor? Primarily when I was younger. Yes, it did really. It was very social. It was very accepted ,and I was in a good spot for, I've had a good life that's for sure.

New Speaker ([10:00](#)):

Yeah. So you mentioned to me at one stage, you, in your early days, you were a builder and you did a lot of remote area resort building. Where was, where was that?

Hylton ([10:10](#)):

Yeah, yeah. And that's obviously where the drinking came into it because it was a good way to get things done at the time. But, yeah. Anything, Heron Island Dunk with Bedarra, lizard Orpheus, all of those. I loved it, loved doing that too. It was a good opportunity to get round and, and, obviously we initiated the remote area style, which is what I tend to enjoy. Yeah.

Andrew ([10:33](#)):

Oh, so that comradery with the other word is, and so, I mean, on an island, there's always the sun sinking in the West there somewhere you can find. And that tropical paradise North Queensland, it must've been, at the time as a young guy just fitting in. Yeah. The thing to do. Yeah, yeah. So it, uh, it wasn't a problematic type of thing for years. It was a means of socializing. Absolutely. Yeah. And you were just like everyone else you thought, I guess yeah. Drinking the same amounts?

Hylton ([11:08](#)):

I was probably, probably ahead of them a little bit, but that was fun in itself.

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

Oh yeah. Yeah. Okay. Well, what do you mean fun in itself?

Hylton ([11:14](#)):

No, I, tended to be, I've always, well at the time I was, uh, uh, quite a big drinker. I thought that was normal, but it probably wasn't. Uh, but most people accepted that was just how it was. Yeah.

Andrew ([11:26](#)):

Yeah. So was it a bit of a badge of honor, in a sense, that you drink a bit more like, there's Hilton he's a man, he can hold his drink and all that sort of stuff.

Hylton ([11:37](#)):

Absolutely.

New Speaker ([11:38](#)):

Yeah. Right. And then that didn't continue, I take it. Now at the last Birds of a Feather meeting, I, don't think you were there, you were probably tied up flying celebrities around the place or, or mustering or something like adventurous like that, the, the topic was, 'why did we start drinking?' Yeah. Why did we start drinking in the levels that made our life ended up being unmanageable and, within the group, all sorts of reasons came out that maybe contributed to like something, some people mentioned anxiety and fitting in, introversion. Of course, let's not forget, was that magic potion that allowed us to break down those barriers and, drum up the courage to talk to prospective partners. But in the end we said, it's why we stopped. So I'm not going to ask you why you think you were drinking to those levels, or you could, if you think there's one big factor that they may have done it, but it sounds like it just progressed

over time. But what I'd really like to know is why you stopped, what got you to that point where you thought "that's it", or even the days leading or weeks or whatever, leading up to that point.

Hylton ([13:04](#)):

Yeah, mine did progress and it was, and I think anyone in that situation agrees that, I had a lot going on and there was the stress levels were probably way over the top. A couple of things happened very quickly. And then that resulted in me doing what would normally fix it, which would of course, be by drinking more. And then we all know that by doing that, that exacerbates the problem. And of course that didn't work. I got to a point where it wasn't working anymore. And all the things that I loved about what I did and, and people I cared about were obviously weren't an option for me at that time anymore. I was losing things that I cared deeply about, and it all happened very quickly. So, for me, flying is something that I deeply love. I obviously do it every, every chance I can. And, I do it for work. tThe fact that I was in a position with the amount of alcohol I was drinking, that I may not ever fly again, was probably the biggest, well by, it would be the biggest. So for me to know that I was in a really bad spot.

Andrew ([14:19](#)):

Right. Okay. So you were saying there was stress levels rising quickly. Was it, was that because of something that was going on or what was it like?

Hylton ([14:28](#)):

It was, yeah, and it was work related, not so much aviation related, but it was more to do with what I'd taken on and, a relationship at the time and, and, sale of companies and things like that, that all changed the way my world was going. And it was going beautifully. I thought they very quickly changed. And the way I dealt with it was the wrong way to deal with it. But at the time, that's what I always worked in the past was to have another drink and just relax and calm. It will be okay. But I was to the point where I was waking up and it just wasn't going to be okay. And then my way of fixing it was, was not going to work.

New Speaker ([15:05](#)):

Yeah. Right. So it was a, I guess, a short term fix and ended up creating a whole heap of other problems. Of course. Yeah. And so flying light aircraft, single pilot, and feeling like that, did you, get up sometimes and you you'd operate, you'd go to work. But I'm just thinking about, because for me in New Guinea, I was drinking excessively over long periods of time. And, and I go flying and I'd have these horrible sensations when I was flying you know, like I'm anxious or dizzy or whatever, you know, when steep turns and all that sort of stuff. How did you feel at that point of time when you were, you're flying around?

Hylton ([15:52](#)):

Uh, I'd actually got to a point where I stopped flying, because I knew things weren't great, that the job I had at the time, and that was part of the stress level was changed. It, changed significantly. And I just got to the point where I wasn't flying and I was just trying to get on top of me again, just get me back together. Yeah.

New Speaker ([16:15](#)):

Gotcha. And so you feel like you weren't, Hilton, you weren't you'd look at yourself and think, Oh, what what has - where's this all going?

Hylton (16:27):

Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. It's three or four months earlier in the, you know, in the piece and Hilton was exactly what the person that we were all used to, I knew myself. It wasn't right. I knew something things weren't right. And, and they weren't getting better.

New Speaker (16:40):

Did, did that happen pretty quickly? And then, so what, one day you just said, that's it,, was there one day where something happened and you thought that's it?

Hylton (16:58):

People around me noticed that I wasn't myself and I guess the one day that would stick in my mind more than any other day was the day that my, stepfather, phoned me and said, he'd been talking to a gentleman named Laurie Shaw and he said, that would be the person to talk to. This is his phone number. I suggest you pick up the phone Hylton, but your, you know, you're in a bad space. Okay. So I did that. And, and that was the start of the rest of my life early. Uh, it got to that.

Andrew (17:35):

So we hear Laurie's name around a fair bit. He was one of the founding guys in HIMS. So before any support group, anything like that, or, or seeking medical advice, that was the first call that changed that sort of put the brakes on the whole drinking.

Hylton (17:55):

I tried to do it myself by talking to doctors and, and, and, and other people. So it wasn't like I hadn't talked to anybody.

Hylton (18:05):

I knew I had a problem and, and I needed to deal with it. And of course in this industry, you've got to be very careful how you deal with it. So you don't want the whole world knowing What's going on and this was handled from the moment I picked up the phone was handled. Just everything felt right there was trust and I felt even from that point onwards, there's a chance here to get things. Right. So, yeah.

Andrew (18:30):

Yeah. And it was it's ended up absolutely pretty good. So you, you've stuck your hand up and you go and seek some sort of inpatient support, or how did that work? Yeah.

Hylton (18:46):

Yeah. So at the time I was, um, I was in a terrible spot after talking to Laurie, he put some guidelines in place to move forward. He wasn't interested in what was wrong, really per se. He knew what was wrong. And he and his team got together and made a bit of a plan for me to move forward, which is what it needed. And, no, I didn't just stop straight away. I wish I always had strong, I wasn't capable of stopping straight away. I, it was still hurting. And, and I found that it was a lot harder than, well, obviously I knew it was a lot harder than, than I'd envisaged to be able to give up at that stage just to, you might get away with it for a couple of weeks, but you certainly couldn't continue at long-term and, and be happy.

Hylton ([19:37](#)):

And you've, you really need to be yourself and happy to move forward. So we made a plan. He organized for, inpatient help, we talked to another man Dr Mike Atherton who's another man i'm extremely grateful for, I care very deeply about him too. He's, a very good at what he does. And, I got myself back together and then, formed a new company, for myself or in partnership with another, another man in Ayer. And, and then we sort of branched out and ended up in, in, winter news. Um, uh, that, that just seemed to happen. Like I was saying, you know, just went from, uh, an opportunity, seem to arise there. And we took a chance headed out there and fell in love with the place and pencil. I'm still there. I call that home. I bought a home there and yeah. Yeah. But it's home to me. And, and, and my future wife, obviously

Andrew ([20:31](#)):

The dog and the dog. Yeah. That's important. Yeah. It's, very clear why you stopped those reasons why you stopped. And just back to that meeting that I mentioned the other day, Roger Healey was in it. And, u Roger always says these pearls, you know, Roger, yes. We were talking about, you know, why we stopped and why, sorry, what, why we started drinking and everyone's trying to work all this out. And then Roger, just out of the blue, as he does, he said, well, it's like the pickle analogy. And of course, everyone just stopped. And we said, well, what's the pickle analogy? And he said, well, you go into the supermarket and you get a jar of pickles. Now you open up the jar and you could sit there and go, well, when did that cucumber become a pickle?

Andrew ([21:27](#)):

Was that when the pickle first went into the jar or was it an hour after the jar or when I took the pickle out of the jar, it doesn't matter. You wouldn't go up to the guy working at the supermarket and say, Oh, excuse me, when do you reckon this cucumba became a pickle? And he'd look like you like, you're an idiot, obviously. So in the end we were saying, it doesn't matter when you change from a cucumber to a pickle. And we all agreed on that. And then we all sat there thinking we're just happy to be pickles. And that's what Roger probably tells us as Roger does. He tells those sort of stories pretty, pretty well. Yeah. So a lot of remote area work, that's been your bread and butter over the years. That, that can be pretty tough on a recovering alcoholic.

Andrew ([22:21](#)):

You know, as far as bonding with others are concerned and i found my time in GA was a long time ago. We didn't have Skype and access to social media and so on to connect. You know, we were out, like for example, I flew for a little while at Victoria River Downs station, fixed wing Heli Muster. And, we'd all sit around just drinking or, I can't even remember if that stage I was giving it a go of not to drink or I was drinking. It was that pattern of as , but always found if, there wasn't that, that bonding through alcohol, around the campfire or whatever, there's a dormitory. And we all stayed in. It was a pretty lonely existence. Now you spent a lot of time now in these remote areas and you're, you're forced together with these people on occasion and next thing, an esky or whatever will come out or Thursday Island, that's got a huge drinking culture there. How do you deal with that? These days being that the sober man, because it's hard to find people in sobriety often in these areas.

Hylton ([23:30](#)):

Yeah. It's surprising. I deal with it in a couple of different ways, but I don't find it threatening. I, and to say I didn't at first, wouldn't be true. I first I thought, Oh my goodness, how am I going to deal with this?

At first I jumped into roles behind bars,, things like that, drinking water and lemonade and all that will suffice for a little while, but tends to become quite unattainable for me. I don't, if you're there for long periods, it just was, you'd become bloated and wouldn't enjoy it to assimilate, started to become normal, to be, not drinking was the norm. And, and certainly these days, I don't, it's not any sort of barrier at all. I just, there is in particularly these days, I think it's getting even better. there's non-alcoholic beers available now.

Hylton ([24:16](#)):

I'm not saying that's for everybody, but that's an option. And it's a pretty good option these days. And I've even noticed in the last couple of years, people who are starting to worry are starting to take up that option. and just so that they fit in just, you know, they can assimilate with other peoples there's. I think there's a couple of options there now, and I didn't really do anything different other than the , you know, to say that I didn't make me nervous to be around a lot of people that the whole world was drinking. It did, but it was, it was uncomfortable. And you had that feeling of not fitting in initially at first, but, looking it soon goes, and there's always somebody there and strangely enough, a lot more than you think that aren't actually drinking as well.

Andrew ([25:01](#)):

Yeah, it's amazing. Yeah. I found that when I was drinking that everyone drunk. Yeah. And then when you stop drinking, Oh, . He doesn't. And he doesn't, and you never noticed these people until it happens. Sometimes it's just being comfortable with our own company for a while. It's not forever, so, yeah. So, um, big day coming up in a few weeks, uh, you do know, hopefully, you know what I'm talking about.

Hylton ([25:32](#)):

Yeah. Strangely enough, I, um, yeah, to get it out there. I am 53. I have never been married. I don't have any children. And, the only thing I've been responsible for is myself. And I'm probably at that stage now where I feel comfortable enough with myself. I have had a dog for the last he's eight now, and that's the only dog I've ever had, but I've met a lady who, obviously care very much about, and we're getting married this year. So that's pretty good. And she has no children. She's never been married. So it's the timing. It's funny how the world just works out, but I'd certainly so happy. And, we both and we both enjoy what we do thoroughly and, I couldn't be in a better place. So, yeah,

Andrew ([26:17](#)):

Yeah, yeah. So the timing was just right. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. That's excellent. And not that it matters one way or the other, she she's a big drinker?, Small drinker?, Or,

Hylton ([26:28](#)):

Uh, actually small. I wouldn't even go medium compared to the old standard. Yeah. But she's quite social, but you're very sociable person. Most of Friday nights, she'll go to the bar or whatever, and yeah, it's just now it's nice. I, kind of liked seeing people being able to do that and enjoy it and yeah.

Andrew ([26:48](#)):

Yeah. I mean, as I've said in the past, you know, I don't go and lecture the evils of alcohol because it's evil for me, but it's not evil for everyone. So It's part of, part of life in a lot of ways, but yeah, we can't force our world on every control, the rest of the world. So that's. Yeah. so never been married before, did that have anything to do with the drinking or was it just the timing? Wasn't right.

Hylton ([27:22](#)):

I've worked remote most my life, but to say that the drinking didn't have anything to do with, it would be pretty incorrect. I think, you know, I'd hate to admit that, but you'd have to think surely I'd have to be part of it.

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

Yeah. You've done really well. You've, you've, you're a successful owner operator. You fly helicopters, fixed wings, sea planes, you know, you're head of tourism bodies in, out in the Outback. And, what's the other one? A music festival out there as well.

Hylton ([27:56](#)):

It's an Outback festival

Andrew ([27:59](#)):

President of that as well. So yeah, the future's all coming together for you. You're, you're living a really fulfilling, sober life and your story of not only managing your life as a sober pilot, but moving forward and overcoming challenges and working hard and persisting is really amazing. You know, you're, you're an inspiration for not only pilots, but those long distance truck drivers or people working on the land or miners or all those people that even though they're not pilots, they're in the same boat as you. Absolutely. Yeah. They're in these isolated areas and, and they're surrounded by those pressures of socializing and so on and limited support. And that's one huge thing there, you know, for you to be out there amongst, a limited number of people and no town nearby that it's really, you're drawing on a lot of strength within there.

Andrew ([28:59](#)):

So that's that's is just fantastic and you demonstrate that self-improvement all the time going from strength to strength from business and marriage and, so on. And the self-improvement is really important, but what I'm starting to see now, getting to know you is that selfless improvement where you're, becoming involved in HIMS and Birds and so on. So there's self, I like to call it 'selfless improvement' with your willingness to help others. So safe travels across those beautiful remote areas where you can be alone with your thoughts and away from the hustle and bustle and all that technology. Has been really great to have a chat.

Hylton ([29:44](#)):

Thank you very much, Andrew, and same to you and all the best. And, yes, for those out there that are sort of struggling with it all, just don't ever lose hope. Pick up the phone or talk to your friends. And that's all it's about is just connecting with people. Everyone we're all the same. So yeah, just stop the hurt and move forward. Take care all the best mate.

Andrew ([30:05](#)):

I find it really inspirational to come across someone with the resilience to maintain a sober life, even with the limited access to support a family or even a recovery group because of their sometimes isolated existence. I'm confident there will be those out there, not just pilots, but others from different walks of life, living in similar environments who will relate to Hilton story. Maybe you'll be able to put some of his advice into practice. I hope you have enjoyed this edition of Flying Straight piloting a sober life. I really

appreciate the feedback and support from a number of you out there that have listened to previous episodes, all comments and tips for improvement and most welcome. You can contact me via email andrew@flyingstraight.com.au. And if you'd like to check out the HIMS websites in Australia, it is aushims.org.au. And for our friends in New Zealand, it's hims.org.nz And our U S friends it's HIMSprogram.com. I look forward to sharing another adventure with you soon.

Speaker 5 ([31:36](#)):

[inaudible].