

Training Day

Military pilot to relay valuable techniques to attendees at SSA Foundation Forum.

By Mark Wright

Anthony “AB” Bourke was stuck in Vermont. He had an event to get to and a speech to deliver there, but his commercial flight was grounded. In fact, all commercial flights were grounded. It was September 11, 2001.

An F16 pilot for the California Air National Guard, Bourke looked across the tarmac in Vermont and noticed a squadron of F16s sitting idle. He crossed the field, volunteered on the spot, and spent the next week flying missions protecting New York City—one of the first fighter pilots to get up in the air that day for homeland defense.

For Bourke, who will be the featured speaker at the 2014 SSA Foundation Forum on September 10, it was just another instance of using what he had learned from both his military and business careers to help bring control to an out-of-control situation.

He developed that action-oriented, take-command skill set during five years of active duty flying F16s, followed by 15 years in the reserves.

“When you go from active duty to an Air National Guard or reserve squadron, the commander welcomes you and says, ‘Now go get a job,’” said Bourke. While he loved aviation, he decided not to follow many of his reserve squadron mates into airline pilot jobs. Instead, he pursued his other passion: starting and building great businesses.

He first built a mortgage banking company, followed by a low-tech startup that manufactured paint. The paint business took off when he figured out how to sell his product to Home Depot. After launching sales through one Home Depot location in Los Angeles, his company garnered a product footprint in every store west of Minnesota, grossing \$65 million in just three years.

“I realized a big part of our success was coming from everything we were doing to train and motivate our people—and that those practices came from my experiences flying F16s,” Bourke said. “So, I teamed up with two fellow pilots and built a management training business called Afterburner.”

Military Management

After 10 years as Afterburner’s CEO and president—a decade in which the company was honored by twice being named one of *Inc.* magazine’s 500 fastest-growing companies—Bourke gradually realized he had even more to share from his fighter-pilot background.

“There are a lot of stereotypes about fighter pilots,” he said. “But I believe pilots are made, not born. The guy with good hand-eye coordination, who doesn’t get motion sickness, who was quarterback of his high school football team, is not always the person who becomes a great pilot.”

He credits the military with effectively identifying the specific traits needed in the people they’re hiring as fighter pilots, using a rigorous assessment process followed by an intensive two-year training program that is reinforced every day in a squadron.

The training process that made him and his fellow pilots into top performers was, Bourke realized over time, vital for success in business. That epiphany drove his concept of developing a training company.

“There are a lot of people with gifts,” he observed, “but so often people don’t develop a plan or a strategy or a process to really hone and apply those gifts. The tools and techniques we learn in order to fly jets and lead people into combat apply beautifully to the corporate world as well.”

All of these insights led Bourke to develop Mach 2 Consulting, where he teaches what he calls “military management 101.”

“I teach people how fighter pilots quickly execute their missions in rapidly changing and complex situations, and help business people apply those lessons to their own challenges,” said Bourke. “I’m going to share with SSA conference attendees some very specific and actionable tools they can take back home and execute in their business the next day.”

Specifically, he will talk about the importance of a feedback loop, which is a fighter pilot’s way of bringing control to an uncontrolled world.

“We believe in a regular cadence of briefing and debriefing,” he explained. “You may be the best pilot in the world and have the greatest plans in your head, but if you haven’t found a way to communicate them to the people who fly with you—you’ll be flying solo.”

Bourke described how pilots use the process. Just before execution, they sit down and hold a briefing to be sure that



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when they climb into their planes they're aligned, flying in formation and executing at the highest possible level. He will show SSA conference participants how they can use this briefing approach daily, weekly and at key times in their business.

"I don't care how good we think we are, how good we plan, how good our technology is," said Bourke, "no pilot has ever flown a perfect mission. And no one in the self storage industry will ever have the perfect day, the perfect meeting or the perfect event. We learn from the mistakes and victories of today's mission and then improve as individuals and leaders going forward."

The Debrief

Bourke said many of his clients turn into long-term relationships because they want to bring these concepts into their business. They want to identify and address their biggest threats, their primary objectives and learn how to handle contingencies. The debriefing process enables clients to analyze their performance and ask, "How did we do against our objectives?"

He calls the debrief "the most underutilized tool in the business world. Businesses spend almost all their time looking forward and very little time debriefing. Why is it that almost every organization where performance really matters has some system for debriefing? Professional athletes watch countless hours of film. Fire and police units debrief regularly. And yet business—where the stakes are high and a way of life is often hanging in the balance—rarely uses this technique."

Bourke said a lot of people look at fighter pilots and think the stakes of flying in combat are higher than what people confront in their businesses or lives.

"But it's not true," he said. "I can sweep things under the rug and not lose my life. But if you do that in business, you can certainly lose your way of life. The cost of not improving can be quite high.

"That's why you have to make time to hold a debrief," he said. "You'll always find something else to do if you don't build it into your schedule. In a fighter squadron, the debrief always happens 30 minutes after a flight. In your business, taking time even just once a week will make you much more effective and efficient.

"The debrief also gives your employees and partners a safe environment in which to say things that need to be said but can't be talked about during the heat of battle," he added. "I'm the best wingman I can be during the week, because I know there will be a time when we can work through this."

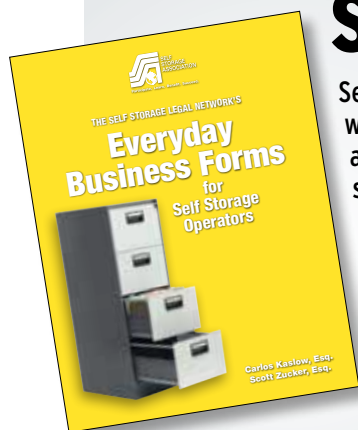
Bourke recommends conference goers do a little homework prior to his presentation in Las Vegas by visiting his Mach 2 Consulting website (mach2consulting.com) to watch a short video of his message, read the lessons in leadership posted in his blog, and peruse case studies where these exact concepts have been applied in the business world.

After spending 18 years traveling all over the world, speaking about 50 times a year, Bourke gives no indication that he wants to slow that Mach 2 pace.

"This is my passion," he said. And it's a passion he looks forward to sharing with everyone at the SSA Foundation Forum event in Las Vegas this September. ❖

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