



**JEFF SKILES**  
COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



# End of the Line

Time to bring Contrails in for a landing

BY JEFF SKILES

**MAGAZINES OF ALL INTERESTS** generally follow a tried and true formula. The middle of the magazine will host multipage feature articles of the latest and greatest. Those features will generally be sandwiched front and back with tech articles and columns to fill out the issue. Advertising — which, of course, pays the freight — will be liberally sown through all.

Lately I've been thinking about that little picture of me at the top of this column. The "headshot" in the vernacular of the industry. Every column generally has one so that you, the reader, can feel a bond with me, the writer.

People buy magazines off the news rack because they're interested in the feature articles. People buy magazine subscriptions because they're interested in following the columnists. That's not me talking. I'm paraphrasing Mac McClellan, and Mac is certainly among the most experienced aviation writers and editors alive today. It's a bit of a cult of personality. That's why the headshot is so important. It helps the reader form a bond with the columnist visually, as well as through the columnist's words.

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#### THE HEADSHOT

My headshot was cropped from a photo taken of me in the back seat of a U.S. Air Force F-16. I was offered a ride in Thunderbird 7 and jumped at the opportunity. The photo must have been taken before the flight because I still have a rosy complexion and not the greenish hue I undoubtedly displayed when I returned. I look remarkably relaxed, frankly, considering what was about to unfold.

I had always intended to update my headshot periodically. I think we all have had the experience where a favorite columnist updates his or her picture after, perhaps, 10-plus years. It can be a bit jarring. We all get older, but when it happens all at once it threatens that bond and makes the reader question whether they really knew the columnist at all.

My vow to update my headshot never quite came to fruition, however. Thankfully, most of us don't run around collecting pictures of ourselves to use for such purposes, and it admittedly wasn't high on my priority list. I was 50 years old when that photo was taken. Today I look in the mirror and things have changed. Dramatically! I'm balder and grayer. My face has far more lines. Thankfully, though, I'm quite a bit thinner. The contrast between mirror and photo, however, causes me to reflect on Contrails and on my involvement with EAA.

#### WRITING

I had written six or seven articles for a now-defunct aviation publication when EAA gave me the opportunity to write the Contrails column for *EAA Sport Aviation*. At the time, Sully and I were the co-chairmen of the EAA Young Eagles program, and it seemed like a good way to connect with the membership. Not to mention, I enjoyed the creativity of writing.

At first, I was excited about putting down my stories on paper and then reading them in print. But after a while, I felt like I was missing something. I write, I submit, EAA publishes, and that's it. It just wasn't very satisfying not knowing the thoughts and feelings of the people on the other end of this equation, the readers. Do they like what I'm writing, or not? About two years into writing Contrails, I hit upon the idea of including my email at the end of the column. Not a unique idea certainly, but something I hadn't done before. That decision opened up a whole new world for me by connecting with all of you.

#### EMAILS

Every month I receive 10 to 20 emails from readers. Many from around the world. You would be surprised how far-flung EAA's membership is. I respond to every email I get because I enjoy the connection. As you might expect, I occasionally get an email correcting an inaccuracy or mistake on my part. I try to research topics thoroughly, but I'm not an expert, and I apologize for any errors I may have made.

Other emails compliment me on my writing skills, which is never a bad thing to read. But, what I really enjoy is getting emails where people tell me their story. That's when I know that I have really connected with someone. My column has brought forth a pleasant memory of a reader's own aviation adventures long past, and I feel good about that.

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### The relationships I have built with the membership of EAA and the readers of Contrails will always be near to my heart.

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#### THE COLUMN

It's not all wine and roses, though. Writing a column can be a bit of a grind. It's all centered on the calendar. Columns are due on the first of the month, so about the second week of the month prior I start thinking about ideas and coalescing thoughts as the pressure slowly mounts. By week three, I've decided on an idea, and I begin connecting words in my head. Writing paragraphs in my mind. They're just thoughts at this point, but it seems like every spare moment I have is spent thinking about the column. In the last few days of week four, I usually cram write the column with the hot breath of the deadline firmly on my neck. I then submit it only hours before it is due and enjoy a welcome week of respite before it all starts again. Poor time management on my part, perhaps, but there you have it.

I was once telling a budding aviation writer for another publication that every columnist has maybe 10 good columns in them — the rest are ideas you pick up along the way. I firmly believe that statement, but for me, those ideas are becoming increasingly hard to develop. I'm not

immersed in general aviation day in and day out because I'm primarily an airline pilot. In fact, I am writing this column at 3 a.m. on a layover in Tokyo. I have written a few columns about the airline world that seem to resonate with readers, but that is not really what EAA is about, and I try to keep those to a minimum.

#### THE STORY

With a column, you are essentially telling a story, the arc of an idea. The story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, which mirrors everything in life. All things around us are born, ripen, and eventually fade away to make room for an even better story to follow. We should take joy in that because both a beginning and an end are necessary to cast what passes in between with true significance.

#### FAREWELL

I admit I should have been updating my headshot all along to keep up with my reality. Perhaps I haven't been doing so because I have known for some time that — for me — this story was coming to a close. This will be my final Contrails as I clear space in my life and move on to new horizons. EAA took a leap in giving an admittedly amateur writer a chance within the pages of its flagship publication, and I appreciate all the support of the editorial and publications staff along the way. They are all top-notch and produce the finest publication in aviation. It has been a wonderful journey, and the relationships I have built with the membership of EAA and the readers of Contrails will always be near to my heart. You have honored me with your time, and I have felt very privileged to serve you. Thank you all! Rest assured I will continue to see you in the sky and most certainly at Oshkosh! *EAA*

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