

AVIATION ACES

BY PATRICIA LUEBKE

BRAD HAYDEN: of Robotic Skies



"My dad bought me a tool box with a King Radio sticker that I still have."

Brad Hayden's destiny was to be involved in the avionics industry. He was born in Olathe, Kansas, where his father, Steve, worked for King Radio.

"Steve was employee No. 9 with King and started when it was still in the farm house," Hayden said.

Hayden's father had an avionics bench in their home garage and worked at King during the day and did freelance work at night. "I'd go sit with him on the bench when I wasn't watching TV," he said. "I'd also go to the airport with him and hand him tools."

When his father left King, Steve flew as a contract pilot for a while and then went to work for Bonzer where he also was an early employee. It was there, too, where Steve crossed paths for the first time with Monte Mitchell, the first full-time executive director of the Aircraft Electronics Association. At Bonzer, Steve was involved with testing radar altimeters. "He'd fly grids back and forth testing for different reflective surfaces," Brad said.

Throughout his childhood, Brad was exposed to aviation. His grandfather's brother, Harold Hayden, flew C47s in World War II, the Berlin Airlift, and then for the Strategic Air Command during the early days of the Cold War. His father's brother, Dave, also joined the Air Force and then returned to work at King Radio. "Aviation was the family business," Brad said.

Brad has a vivid memory of testing radar altimeters at his grandparents' farm in Kansas. "They'd mount radar altimeter



ABOVE: Brad Hayden (left) and his uncle, Dave Hayden, fly a Piper Cub. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** A 2-years young, Brad is pictured at his father's bench.

sensors in a platform using a water bladder as weight with a parachute attached, triggered to open at a preset radar altitude,” Brad said. “Some of the altimeters failed and exploded at ground contact.” Brad noted that they would put Bonzer decals on the airplane fuselage for each radar altimeter that failed and exploded, as if they were aces shooting down airplanes.

Steve also bought a gyrocopter, which he tried to get flying. “There was always something going on that was about aviation,” Brad said. In addition to a growing interest in aviation, it was at his grandparents’ farm where Brad developed another life-long interest – in military history. “My grandfather was a farmer, but also a brilliant amateur military historian; he would give me lessons, and then rigorous verbal tests to make sure the dates and facts stuck,” he said.

In 1969, Steve launched out on his own and opened Kings Avionics at Johnson County Airport.

“The name didn’t come from King Radio, but rather for the FBO at the airport that was named King’s Flying Service, owned by Bill King,” Brad said. “What’s funny is that my dad would often get packages intended for King Radio that were misdelivered to him.”

Five years later, Steve moved his family to Casper, Wyoming, and opened a second location of Kings Avionics.

“Uncle Dave and Gary Morris, another Kings partner, took over management of the Johnson County location and eventually bought him out,” Brad said. “When I was younger, everyone was expected to chip in and help. I would sort parts, sweep the hangar, and do shipping. When we moved to Casper, I learned you could sweep a hangar, but the Casper wind blows the dirt and tumbleweeds back in as soon as the hangar door is opened.”

He also remembers his brother, Doug, now a salesman at BendixKing, skateboarding on the hangar floor. “The hangar was a playground for us,” Brad said.

As Brad got older, his responsibilities increased. “I worked on my first airplane when I was about 12,” he said. “My dad bought me a tool box with a King Radio sticker that I still have. Of course, I was supervised closely, but I learned to take off access panels, headliners and bulkheads. Avionics repair work was my after-school job.”



RoboticSkies

Continued on following page

AVIATION ACES

Continued from page 53

When it was time for college, Brad enrolled in the University of Wyoming, but graduated from the University of Utah when the oil glut hit Casper, the shop closed, and a new shop was opened in Salt Lake City. As for a career in aviation, Brad chose something different.

“My father, uncle and brother were naturals when it came to troubleshooting avionics,” he explained. “It was something I did and enjoyed, but it didn’t come to me naturally. They could look at an airplane and know what was wrong, but I did not have that innate ability.”

Brad then decided to pursue something he could do well – marketing.

After a stint as a technical writer, his first job in the high-tech industry was for Megahertz, a company that made PCMCIA modems for laptops. At Megahertz, he set up the creative marketing department that produced all the packaging, brochures, data sheets and the company’s first website. That was 1994 when corporate websites weren’t common, so he taught himself HTML and built the site by hand.

A series of corporate acquisitions ensued, and Brad ended up in the San Francisco Bay area working in high tech for companies like U.S. Robotics and 3Com. One of his offices overlooked the approach path to San Francisco Airport. He watched airplanes take off and land, which spurred him to return to the aviation industry. That opportunity came in 2007 when he moved to Albuquerque as director of the then-new Aspen Avionics.

“I was brought in to brand the company and set up a classic marketing program,” Brad said. “At the time, glass cockpits were prohibitively expensive, and Aspen’s affordable product revived the retrofit avionics industry and gave the repair station channel something to sell in the GA space. It was exciting.”

He was promoted to vice president of marketing for Aspen Avionics in 2010. While at Aspen, Brad launched the com-

pany’s Connected Panel, which synched certified cockpit data with iPads and other portable flight planning aids.

“Now Connected Panel technology is ubiquitous, but Aspen was the first,” he said.

Brad felt strongly about Connected Panel because it reminded him of his high-tech experience – disruptive technology for GA at a time when the use of iPads was being integrated into the cockpit. While at Aspen, an idea for a business formed.

“I had always flown remote-control aircraft and was seeing what was happening with power efficiency and overall capabilities of multirotor platforms,” he explained. “I knew right away this was going to be an exciting growth market for aerospace.”

Brad said it was a tough decision to leave Aspen, but added, “I couldn’t miss out on the drone wave.” As he made the decision to leave, Brad conferred extensively with his friend and mentor, Aspen CEO John Uczekaj, who was supportive of his decision, and the two still talk regularly.

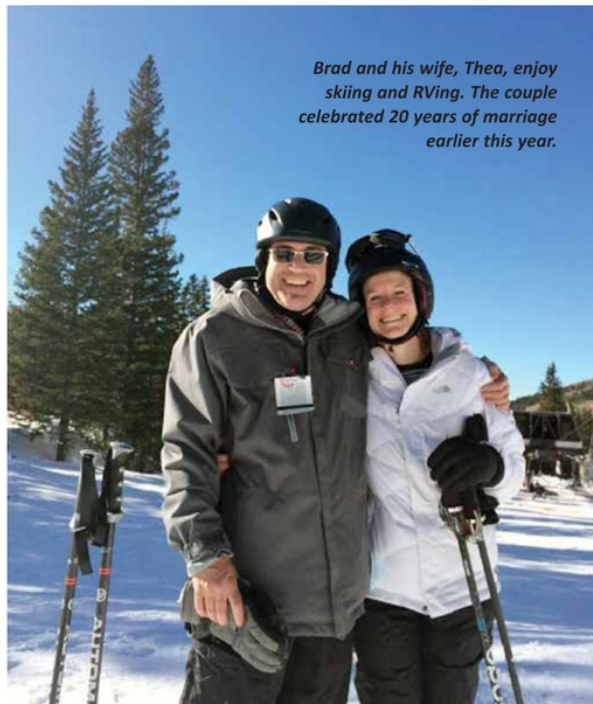
That choice led to the launch of Robotic Skies, an international network of government-authorized repair stations that provide sales, maintenance, field support and other services for commercial UAS manufacturers.

“Robotic Skies is an interesting blend of traditional avionics channel paradigms combined with the new tech-

nology that’s coming into aerospace that will change the way we view aviation,” Brad said. “Drones have democratized aviation for the masses and now everyone can be a pilot. Using photography and sensors, UAS perform interesting missions that otherwise are expensive or dangerous for piloted aircraft.”

With Robotic Skies, Brad believes he has captured a unique segment of an emerging market, working with the existing infrastructure of Part 145 maintenance facilities with a network optimized to support unmanned systems.

“One of the things I saw early on is the volume of equipment we don’t see in manned aircraft,” he said. “The FAA has 670,000 registered drones in its database, and the numbers are projected to go into the millions.”



Brad and his wife, Thea, enjoy skiing and RVing. The couple celebrated 20 years of marriage earlier this year.

Robotic Skies is prepared.

“UAS operators are not regional – we need to have a service center that is, at once, local and global,” Brad said. “We have more than 130 local repair stations in Europe, Asia, South America, Africa and Australia, and expect our footprint to continue to grow with the market. We already have a wide range of customers that include fleet operators and airframe manufacturers.”

Looking back to his days in the high-tech industry, he added, “I knew how to deploy an effective global business program and that’s what we’ve done. The emphasis is not on the United States, but on the global market. One size does not fit all for maintenance solutions. We need local people who know their customers and how local regulations apply to the UAS market segment.”

Brad also is still active in manned aviation, and he is now the president of Kings Avionics. His father, Steve, is the chief operating officer.

On the personal side, Brad, who remains a history buff, also is an avid remote-control pilot. He and his wife, Thea, who is a marketing executive at Dell, enjoy skiing and RVing with their children. “We have three kids at home – a high schooler and twins in junior high along with an older son who lives in Salt Lake City,” he said.

As for the UAS market, Brad said, “We’re not there in force yet, but we’ll be there faster than you may think. The market will continue its accelerated development. The FAA is moving quickly to get regs out and start testing how drones will be incorporated into the national airspace. When this market explodes, there will be a huge demand for certified, professional maintenance services, and we’re prepared for that.” □

To learn more about Robotic Skies, visit roboticskies.com.



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