

**"I thought I heard a tree branch break,
but what I had heard was actually my C7
vertebrae shattering"**



Tom at the Sydney Prince of Wales
Hospital before his surgery

A LESSON IN RESILIENCE

As the industry continues to navigate the uncertain path of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hannah Dowling speaks with ex-airline pilot Tom Caska to impart his wisdom on resilience, entrepreneurship, and moving on after a great loss

WRITER: HANNAH DOWLING

As 2021 is still yet to deliver the hope and promise of a post-COVID world that we dreamed of in 2020, many may still find themselves at a crossroads. The pandemic has presented a generation of those in the aviation industry with one of the greatest tests of mental resilience in recent history.

For pilots, who are used to being assertive and decisive, this period may be quite challenging. You may wonder if it's time to cut your losses and retrain into a different field of interest. You may wonder what to do with your spare time, now that you have been stood down, or had your hours cut to a fraction of your usual. You may wonder, what do I do now, if I can't have the career or life that I have worked so hard for?

In an attempt to give you some answers – and some solace – Australian Aviation spoke with someone who knows these feelings all too well.

Meet Tom Caska

Tom Caska is perhaps one of the industry's greatest success stories when it comes to true resilience in

the face of adversity. Perhaps like you, Tom had to face the reality that his life was soon going to look very different to the one that he invested heavily into once upon a time.

Today, Tom shares his story with Australian Aviation, in the hopes to assist anyone who might be coming to terms with leaving the career they love – in search of brighter horizons.

In 2014, Tom was a QantasLink pilot, flying the Dash 8 Q400 out of Cairns. Prior to QLink, Tom racked up thousands of flight hours as a bush pilot, and then worked in corporate charter. By 2014, he still had decades of his career left ahead of him.

But then, something happened that changed his life, and his plans, for good.

“About six years into the job, I got really into kitesurfing – it was just a hobby of mine that I loved. I was out kitesurfing one afternoon when I did a really big jump, and then this gust of wind caught me off guard. I fell out of the sky from about 15 metres up and landed straight on the top of my head,” he says.

“I thought I heard a tree branch

break, but what I had heard was actually my C7 vertebrae shattering. After that I was basically knocked unconscious and paralysed to the left side of my body, and was lying face down in the water.”

Tom was brought to Cairns Hospital, before he was quickly moved onto a CareFlight aircraft to be flown down to Sydney Prince of Wales Hospital for an emergency surgery on his spine. After the surgery, Tom stayed at the Prince of Wales Hospital for another month, before finally being released, where he had to undergo many more long months of rehabilitation.

“It took about 12 months to begin feeling semi-normal again, after the accident. A lot of that time was spent in rehabilitation centres; re-learning basic movement, how to walk, how to be mobile. After I got through that, I still had to spend a lot more time working with physios, so it was a process,” Tom says.

Not surprisingly, after experiencing such a traumatic and life-threatening incident, Tom had to cater to more than just his physical health and recovery.

“Obviously, with the nature of the accident, there was some post-traumatic stress associated with being involved in such a big and serious accident. I kept on reliving that experience in my head all the time, so that was definitely something I had to deal with,” he says.

“I got some professional help and counselling to get through that part, and relied on some really strong and supportive friends and family around me, which helped me a lot.”

Coming to terms with a new reality

After months of intensive rehabilitation efforts, Tom had come to terms with the fact that he, unfortunately, was not going to be able to continue his career as a pilot. “I had pretty much assumed from the severity of the accident that I was going to lose my medical, which after going through all the necessary processes, I did,” he says.

“I had other complications with my injuries as well, so it wasn’t just the spinal cord, I had nerve damage, I had paralysis, I couldn’t feel my fingers and I lost all my dexterity - so I knew that manipulating the aircraft controls and such just wasn’t going to happen,” Tom adds. “I lost my peripheral vision as well as vision impairment, so there were a whole bunch of complications from the accident which had to be worked on.”

Despite the complications, Tom was feeling grateful. “I’m lucky to walk away, honestly. I’m lucky to be alive first and foremost, and then I’m also lucky I’m not a quadraplegic,” he says. For Tom, the first six months after the accident were the hardest, however it was at this time when he began to find out what other interests he had, aside from flying.

“For the first six months after I came out of hospital, I couldn’t really do anything apart from maybe go for a very gentle walk on the beach or something like that, but this is where I started to take interest in drones,” he says. “To start, I bought a drone and attached a little GoPro camera on it, and started flying it around the beach, looking for sea life and all sorts of things. And that’s where I suppose it sparked my interest.

“Around this time, I found out that CASA had cancelled my medical. I ended up eventually going back to work for Qantas fleet

and technical development, so I was on the ground. That lasted about 18 months, but after that I had to retire on medical grounds.”

After a lot of physical and mental work, Tom finally invested further in his newly acquired interest, and started focusing on his next move.

The next step: A new career

After spending some time sitting around on the beach and flying his drone, Tom decided to take his new interest a step further. “I started a drone photography company called AeroLens, and I got another friend of mine involved. It was like a small service business doing a lot of aerial photography and research and development projects for large universities,” he says.

Around the time that Tom was getting involved with drone technologies, he noticed that the drone sector was only growing. “So, at that point I started thinking, what do I need to do now? Should I go back and re-study and learn some

more business skills? Because I knew that I now wanted to progress in this area of drone technology, but I also knew I needed to learn the core capabilities of business and those disciplines,” he says. “I already had a degree in aviation, but I knew I needed further education if I was going to start my own business. So, I enrolled in an MBA at the University of New South Wales.”

While back at university, Tom says he learned a whole range of new skills in business, computer science, entrepreneurship, and more. It’s also where Tom met his current business partner, and co-founder of his very own business called AeroLogix. “Through that degree, and a whole lot of additional reading, AeroLogix was born. That was more than two years ago now, and we’re recently VC funded and rapidly growing and extending,” he says.

AeroLogix is, in Tom’s words, “Uber meets Airtasker but for drones”. Tom and his AeroLogix co-founder have built a full web

Tom is airlifted from Cairns to Sydney on a Learjet 35 with CareFlight for emergency spinal surgery



interface, as well as iOS and Android apps and, perhaps most impressively, their own automated drone flight navigation systems.

“There’s an estimated 1.2 million people in Australia who have consumer drones that we can tap into, and AeroLogix gives them the ability to sign up through our platform, download the app, and they can be told about ‘missions’ in their area. So, then we can help facilitate for them to carry out the missions by using a flight navigation system which they get for free,” he says.

Though, as Tom describes it, the AeroLogix platform is a lot more than that. “It’s got some deep tech in there that we’ve been building, so using AI and machine learning to look at the drone data and derive really interesting information from it. So right now, we’re also working with insurance companies doing roof reports and have recently signed a major contract with one of the world’s largest telcos to assess thousands of their sites,” he adds.

“We have a drone fly around their site and we extract all sorts of information for them about the tower, their asset, for all sorts of different purposes. We’ve also been working with emergency services doing surveillance operations. Also, recently, as a consultant, I set up Surf Lifesaving New South Wales’ drone program, which is really exciting. So, we monitored 1,700 kilometres of coastline, and we had hundreds of flights per day looking for sharks!”

The practical stuff

Now that you’ve listened to Tom’s success story, you may be wondering “Well OK, he did it, but how am I supposed to?!”

Well luckily for you, Tom has not only managed to turn his life around, find a new passion and successfully run his own business, but he’s also taken it upon himself to help others who might also be feeling a little lost, like he once was, and is full to the brim with practical advice for fellow pilots who may find themselves at a crossroads.

“I think moving forward and upskilling is really critical here,” he says. Tom notes that many pilots may not feel qualified to do anything apart from fly, or may not know how to transfer their skills into

other ventures. However, the way he sees it, the nature of being a pilot is actually quite helpful when it comes to tackling the road ahead.

“Being a pilot, by nature, you’re generally pretty mission oriented, and you’re so used to making progress. You’re gaining hours. You’re getting type rated. You have simulator checks. You’re constantly progressing and keeping your skill level high,” he says.

“When that’s all of a sudden taken away from you, you just need to find something else, whatever it may be, that you can progress in and work at, so you can feel like you’re achieving things. I know that this can really help a lot.”

He continues: “For me, I took on short courses at university, as well as rigorous training programs using apps like Strava, all so I could really quantify what I was doing, and so I felt like I was moving forward and progressing. I also took on music lessons, guitar and piano, things I never would have done otherwise.

“But it really helped me build myself up again, it gave me a new sense of self, and it helped me feel like I was moving forward in my life again.”

Tom notes that in 2021, there’s likely a lot of pilots still out there thinking ‘what do I do now?’ with no idea where to start. “Even just starting can seem daunting, too

“There’s an estimated 1.2 million people in Australia who have consumer drones”

hard, insurmountable,” he says. “So, I think that just starting small, and doing little things to upskill, can make a huge difference. I’ve been recommending to the pilots who seek out advice from me to go and get their RePL drone licence. It’s a one-day course, and any of the airline guys that I know who have done it have really enjoyed it. And there you go, you’re upskilled, you’ve progressed, you’ve got something new under your belt.

“I really think the most important first step is to just do something, and it doesn’t have to be aviation oriented, or drones, just something that you’ll enjoy and that you can feel accomplished at, big or small.”

Australian Aviation has written a fair bit in the past about the almost natural progression from piloting planes into piloting drones, which Tom speaks a little of, considering he made the same transition.

“It’s absolutely a natural fit. Importantly, pilots already have a really good understanding of aviation and airspace rules and regulations. For me, building AeroLogix, we had to work hand in hand with the regulators in Australia – CASA – and also at an international level – ICAO. Having that deep understanding of why the rules and regulations are the way they are has really given me the ability to help manage my team and help build the software so

Tom during his flying days on the Dash 8 Q400 for QLink



australianaviation.com.au

Tom Gaska

I will complement those rules and regulations.”

Tom notes that the drones themselves are an aircraft, obviously of a different sort to what you may be used to, but the skills required to pilot them are very much similar. “When a drone is out flying around, as a pilot, you’ve obviously already got really good situational awareness, which is hugely helpful,” he says.

There’s also the added bonus for pilots who might wish to return to the skies. “When you’re flying those drones, and you’re looking through the screen, it does feel a bit like you’re up in the air,” Tom says. “Essentially, you can bring all of those aviation skills, and you can almost pretend like you’re sitting in the cockpit, and you’re flying around from the beach or wherever you might be.

“A lot of the technology actually complements aviation as well, as they’re sometimes very similar. So, you’ve got GPS slide navigation, you’ve got inertial measurement systems inside the drone. The drone uses barometers and all sorts of other tech, which, being a pilot you not only understand how it works, but you’re used to using it in day-to-day life.”

Could I really start my own business?

As Tom knows, starting your own business is no easy feat. However, he truly believes that the tasks and skills that he developed during his pilot career are what has contributed to him being such a successful entrepreneur.

“If you’re looking at a pilot, and you really think about the day-to-day tasks they do on the job, they are actually doing about 10 different roles in one,” Tom says. “And that’s the exact same as when you’re an entrepreneur, at least to start, you’re doing 10 different roles. If you think about it, as a pilot you’re not just physically flying the aircraft, you’re also managing customers, you’re in charge of a crew, you’re managing resources, like your fuel burn, and not only are you in charge of a team, but you also have to work well within that team.”

All of these are important skills that can be transferred into any future job prospects, but particularly for someone who enjoys the challenge of starting and running their own brand-new business.



experiments and expect to fail. Now, obviously, you can’t afford to take risks as a pilot, unless maybe you’re in a simulator, so I think that’s one of the biggest learning curves,” he says.

“The issue of risk-taking has actually come up time and time again when I’m speaking to different pilots, but really, you’ve got to. You’ve got to learn to take risks, and that can be calculated risks, but as an entrepreneur, a businessman, you definitely do have to take risks and really think outside the square.

“There’s also, a lot of the time, no procedure for what you’re doing.

Tom met his business partner while studying his MBA, and the two set up his drone company Aerologix

“The way I look at it, in the flight deck, you’ve got your executive management team that you need to work beside. Then you’ve got your ‘cash flow’, which is your fuel burn, that you need to manage efficiently,” Tom says.

According to Tom, the only stark difference between your skills as a pilot and those as an entrepreneur, is your ability to take risks, and getting used to failing, and trying again.

“The only meaningful difference I can see, if you’re a pilot, is that you’ve got to learn to take risks to be an entrepreneur, and you’ve got to run



So, you've really got to design things from the ground up, and that's probably been one of the biggest things for me to learn and to deal with it and to be able to feel comfortable with the uncertainty."

The mental hurdle

The issue of mental health and wellbeing, often considered the 'elephant in the room' in the aviation industry, is fast becoming a more serious problem, particularly in light of the extreme impact that the pandemic has had on the industry, and thus, on a lot of people's identity.

"I've talked to a fair few pilots over the last year, and it's safe to say that a lot of them have their moments and a lot of them are really struggling. It isn't surprising, considering the extent of the damage to the industry from the pandemic," Tom says.

"But the issue of mental health isn't often talked about, it's quite personal, and particularly for men, it can be really quite difficult to open up and talk about things, when they'd rather just brush it under the table.

"So, for people who may be feeling really down and blue, I think the

most important thing to recognise is that you're not alone, and help is out there. It's OK to talk about how you're feeling, and even if you're only comfortable doing that with your peers, they probably feel a bit the same as you and even that could help.

"I think the biggest message to really understand is that we are living in unprecedented times, and it truly is OK not to be OK. So, get some help if you need it, wherever you think that help may be."

In addition to recognising your feelings and talking it out, Tom shares some more practical strategies he used, which he believes helped him overcome his own mental health struggles and PTSD.

"My support network was really important, and I felt comfortable opening up to them about where my head was at after the accident, which I think helped. I also engaged in a lot of high intensity training and exercise, when I physically could, and I know plenty of people say it but it's true, that really does help and I think it got me through some of the really tough times," he says.

A word you may have seen or heard a fair amount over the last 12 months is 'resilience'. While it might be easier said than done, there are ways to channel and practice your skills in resilience, which are key to overcoming the mental hurdle, and rerouting your life back onto a new, and clear path.

"Having a positive mindset can be complicated at a time like this, but especially if you've just had loss, but it's really important that you acknowledge what's happened and accept it," Tom explains.

"And this may take time. But firstly, just acknowledge and then tell yourself 'right, I'm moving on, and I'm coming up with a new plan'.

"One you're at that stage, you have to have goals and set goals to work towards, I think this is critical, especially for a pilot. And then the next stage is to really work on upskilling yourself as much as possible."

Ideally, Tom says, if you can find another arena that you're passionate about, that's going to make a world of difference, as you may need to spend a lot of time and energy on this new career goal and progression.

Tom Gaska

“Especially if you want to start your own business, passion is so important, because you’re going to be working extremely long hours, and to keep it going you’re going to have to be quite interested in that,” he adds.

However, Tom knows that changing your mindset and finding a new passion isn’t going to happen overnight. In the meantime, focus on the little things.

“You’ve got to stay fit and healthy, and don’t go down any rabbit holes or let yourself be negative; it just isn’t useful to you. A positive mindset and vigorous exercise regime, they really are the best places to start,” he says.

“I found what also really helped me was to get involved in group activities, and give new activities a go. I joined sports clubs, I got into cycling, and that way I felt a part of a team again. This sort of played into those tips I was talking about earlier, as being in a team, we were very goal orientated, so that gives you that sense of achievement, which as we know is really important.”

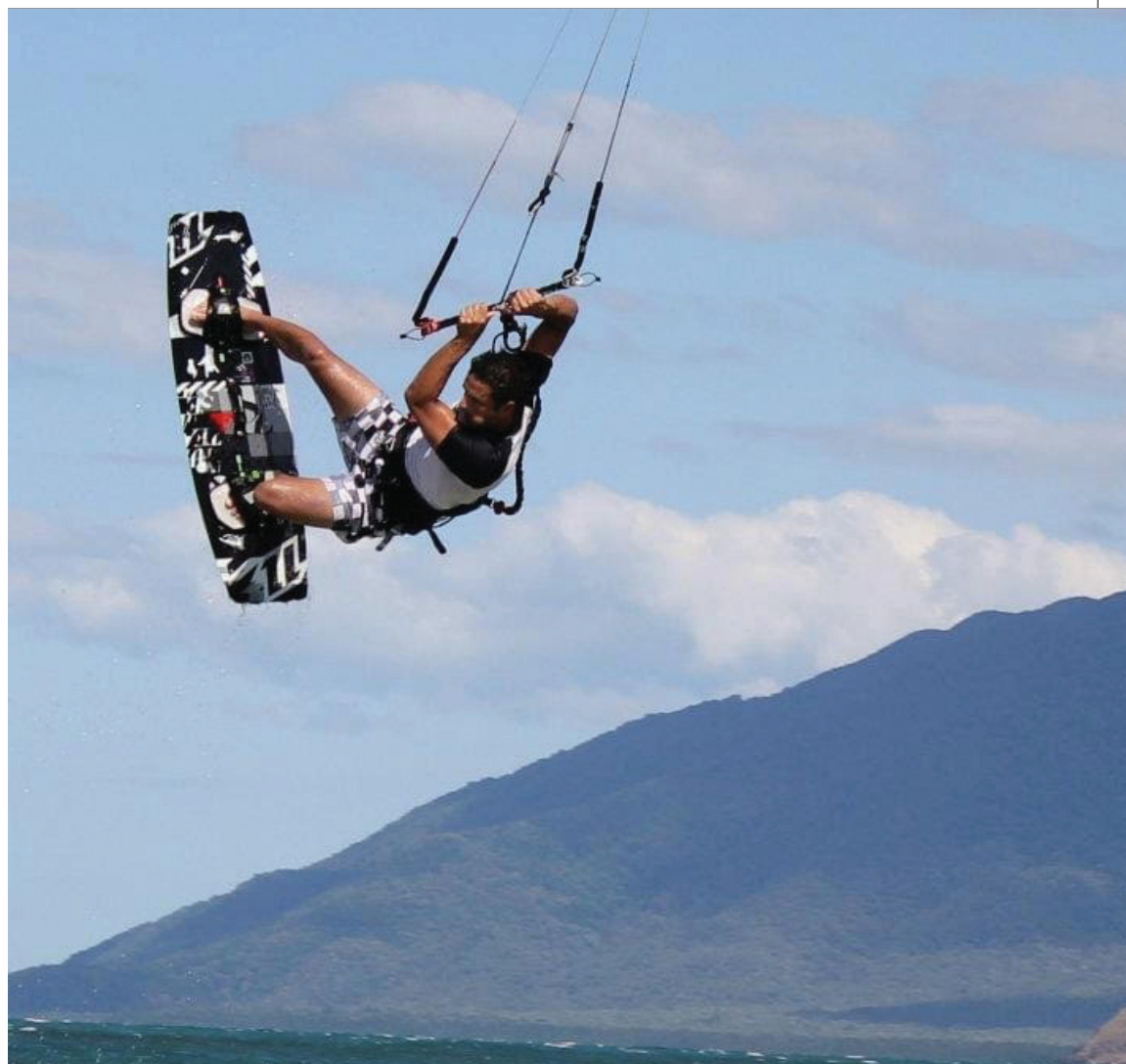
The backup plan

As you now know, Tom has spent the last year speaking with and helping out a range of pilots both from Australia and overseas. He notes a common theme that’s come up in the questions that he gets asked, which largely revolve around the same fear: even if I get my job back, who’s to say another disaster doesn’t strike?

Tom understands that fear, and knows that is completely valid. This is the importance of a backup plan. And now might be the best time to invest in one, while you have the down time.

“Some of these pilots that I’ve spoken to are now prepared to go back to uni, some have already enrolled in courses doing anything from economics to MBAs and things like that, and I think that’s a fantastic idea,” he says.

Tom adds, “I think also, look at this time in your life as an opportunity, rather than just an awful situation that happened to you. It’s an opportunity, while you’re not flying, to give something else a go, something completely new. I’ve spoken to a lot of pilots who have done this, and they’re working either in their dad’s business or they’ve just taken a job opportunity temporarily that’s completely different.



Tom Kitesurfing before the life-changing accident

“And they’ve all said to me either ‘I really enjoy this’ or ‘I’m really grateful that I’ve got this opportunity to do this now, as I wouldn’t have done it otherwise’. So, these are people that have changed their mindset, and embraced those silver linings, even if it’s only until they can jump back in the cockpit again.”

Something special about the work Tom, and others, have been doing, is getting pilots to think differently about their roles, particularly with how intertwined a pilot’s identity can become with their career.

“We’ve now got this generation of pilots who are really starting to think outside the cockpit, and they’re looking at flying is not their only occupation, or their only career option,” Tom says. “Instead, they can recognise that flying is something they love, and they might be able to do full-time again, or maybe it will only be part-time, but either way, it isn’t always reliable, and it isn’t their only option.”

The bottom line

One of the most common questions that Tom receives from pilots who have been furloughed or let go from

their roles is this: all I know how to do is fly, what else am I supposed to do? But little do you know, is that there is already so much more that they are capable of doing, apart from flying a plane.

“I think it’s really important for people to realise that you’re not just a pilot, and your skill set lends itself to a lot more than you might think,” Tom says. “If you’re a pilot, you’re a really great project manager. You’re also a strong problem solver, who is used to working well under pressure. Being in that multi-crew environment, you’ve got great communication skills, leadership skills and even HR skills.

“Your dealings with customers and passengers and representing the airline means you’ve got great PR skills, too, and shows you’re used to working with different stakeholders, all of which is important in any business or any workplace, not just in aviation.

“So, I think it’s really important for pilots, who may be confused or concerned right now, to really realise and appreciate that they’ve been doing so much more than just flying a plane for a long, long time.”

“I think it’s really important for people to realise that you’re not just a pilot”