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What It Means To Be The Black Sheep

by JOSH RITTENBERRY



A black sheep is more than the fuzzy animal in a nursery rhyme; it's an ancient term that can be traced all the way back to the Bible to describe an odd member within a group.

Black sheep tend to stand out in the flock.

Being labeled a black sheep is just a matter of perspective, and not necessarily a slight. It can be a compliment that describes someone as a rebel, a maverick, a trailblazer who makes their own path through life. Where would any of us be if not for a maverick or two?

Adam Plunkett enjoys the benefits that have come from being a black sheep. As a teenager growing up in Northeast Louisiana, Adam could be seen and heard racing hotrods down the streets of his sleepy hometown. Sometimes the local judge could hear him, too.

"Don't race when the wind is blowing east or the judge will hear you," the sheriff would warn Adam after he had been nabbed. Luckily, the sheriff let him off easy, maybe because he was a bit of a thrill seeker himself; he was a pilot.

During the summers of his youth, Adam would spend time at his grandmother's home, and it was there that he was introduced to flying on TV and in movies. Though no one in his family had a career or even a hobby in aviation, Adam knew at a very young age that he wanted to fly. "I knew in my mind that I was going to be a pilot," Adam said.

From there, a black sheep was beginning to show his colors.



Adam's first connection to aviation came from his best friend Randy Rye. Randy's father, B. L. Rye, or "Mr. Luke" as he was known in the community, ran a rice farm where he did his own flying to check water or crop dust. He operated a Pawnee for crop dusting and a Super Cub that was used to check water. One particular Saturday, the asphalt beckoned and Adam took off to race. The next day the telephone rang. Adam's father was in the midst of a serious-sounding conversation. Worried, Adam prepared to be admonished for causing a ruckus racing, but fortunately, it was Mr. Luke asking his father's permission to allow Adam to fly.

"My dad said I could fly with Mr. Luke, but I couldn't go anywhere as long as there were Cs on my report card. After that, I started

making straight As."

As Sundays came and went, Adam became proficient in the air. It wasn't until he entered college that he dug in and started loading an Ag Cat for Bobby Morgan, operator of Pioneer Flying Service. "Eventually I started flying a Pawnee," Adam said. "I flew 250 hours that one summer and I made \$11,000 Ag Flying that whole year."

As Adam built his experience, unbeknownst to anyone, the owner of Ruffin Flying Service contacted Adam and told him he wanted to sell the business, and he wanted Adam to buy it. "I had some money saved up, but the bank said I needed a partner," Adam explained. So together with Randy's brother, Steve Rye, and Mike Lingo, they bought the operation in 1992. At just 29 years old, Adam and his partners had their own operation.



"Steve instilled in me the business side of Ag Aviation. There would have been no business without Steve," Adam said of his friend and partner.

The operation, now under new ownership, came with two worn Cessnas. "But with Steve's vision, he knew that wouldn't be enough to get work done." Adam and Steve then connected with H.P. Moore to trade the Cessnas for an AT401. The operation soon added another AT401, then an AT502-15. When Boll Weevil Eradication was big business, a second AT502 was added, then a couple of AT602s and eventually AT802s.

The initial operation became so successful that Adam was able to buy out his partners to become the sole owner, finally achieving a lifelong dream and fulfilling the vision that Mr. Ruffin had for him. Ruffin Flying Service had become Monticello Flying Service, but now it was renamed as it operates today: Plunkett Aviation Services. Soon more growth was on the way. Adam had the good fortune to



purchase Pioneer Flying Service from his old boss and mentor Bobby Morgan. Another operation was acquired when Adam partnered with Wade Condrey to purchase Precision Air of Franklin, and another with the addition of Delta Dusters in Tensas Parish.

As Adam's operations grew, his interest in racing fell by the wayside. But once his various businesses were up and running, he began racing on the No Prep Racing circuit. It was on those rigorous courses that Adam caught the attention of a television production team. Soon he earned himself an invitation to the small screen as part of Team New Orleans on the Discovery Channel's "Street Outlaws: Fastest in America," where twelve of the fastest racing teams in the country vie for the title of the fastest street racer in America. Considered to be one of the fastest and well-respected street racers, Adam and his racing team, the aptly-named Black Sheep Mafia, were invited back for season two: "Street Outlaws: Fastest in America II." While filming, Adam would hop on a plane back home between races, fly Air Tractors from daylight until dark for four days, then get back on a plane and race at the show's shooting location in Wyoming.



Flying, racing, and even running a convenience store, cannot be done alone; it's a team effort. Adam's wife Paula is a retired teacher and helps daughter Hailey Plunkett Russell run the family's bustling convenience store. Kirsti Plunkett Parks, another of Adam's daughters, manages the bookwork for all of the family's businesses, while daughter Whitney Plunkett works closely with farmers on the aerial application side of things. As if

his hands weren't full enough, Adam's two granddaughters and one grandson keep him on his toes.

With a staff of 20, including Adam and his family, across multiple operations, primary crops treated are cotton and rice, then more recently corn and soybeans after prices went up.

"In my little corner of the world, I'm not concerned about much. Just get a fair price for what you do."

There are a number of motivating words that have kept Adam going over the years. "It doesn't matter what you do, do it to the best of your ability," being one. But perhaps Adam's most sage words of advice came at the end of our conversation: "If you are willing to do the things others won't do, you'll have the things others don't have."

Rather than focus on being an odd member of a group, with some hard work and determination, this self-proclaimed black sheep has instead become a maverick who hasn't found it difficult to stand out in the flock.



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My Friend, Dick Reade

by BRETT DICKERSON



In early 1988, I was 30 years old and living in the small central California town of Turlock. I was working in a field that, while paying the bills, was not providing me the enjoyment I was hoping for. The one love of my life, outside of family, was aviation. I had learned to fly at a crop duster strip in the local area and ag aviation had been what drew me to airplanes in the first place. I had subsequently worked as a flight instructor and had flown a 340 for a local company for a couple of

years, but that had ended a year or so before.

Searching for an avenue back into the aviation game, preferably ag aviation, I placed an ad in one of the trade publications. Rather than run down my flight experience, which was not particularly overwhelming, I closed it with words to the effect of: "If you have any use for a guy who would rather work in ag aviation than pursue an MBA, give me a call."

Lo and behold, I get a phone call from someplace in Missouri called Hayti. The voice on the other end identified himself as Dick Reade. He said he had seen my ad and wanted to talk to me. We had a very nice conversation and, at the end, he said he would like to fly me out to his neck of the woods so we could talk in person.

I was already aware of Dick Reade from an article Gordon Baxter had written about him in *Flying*

magazine back in the mid-'70s. Given Baxter's gift for lyrical prose, it had seemed like the perfect place for someone interested in the ag aviation industry. Travel arrangements were made and within a few days, I was winging my way to Memphis. I picked up the rental car and was soon heading north on I-55.

After about 90 minutes, the signs told me that Hayti was the next exit to the right. I was wondering if I would have any trouble finding the place. My fears proved unfounded. As I entered the off ramp, there to my right sat three rows of ag aircraft. There was probably 20 of them there, consisting of everything from Pawnees to Ag-Trucks to Thrushes, Ag-Cats and Air Tractors. The lettering on the building said, "Mid Continent", although to my eye, it might as well have said "*Nirvana*." Yes, I had a wife and a daughter who needed to be on board with a move of that magnitude, but in that moment, I made the decision to take any job offered.

I went in the building, introduced myself and sat down. Within a few seconds, here came Dick down the long hallway. We went to his office (a veritable aviation museum in its own right) and talked. We then went to the Curtis Café for lunch. By the time the afternoon was done, an offer had been made and tentatively accepted. I flew home, talked to my wife and before long, my brother-in-law and I were making the U-Haul drive from California to the Bootheel. Diane and Rachel arrived by plane shortly thereafter and so began my time as part of Mid-Continent Aircraft.

After I had been there a couple of days and was settled in, Dick called me in and gave me my first project. He wanted me to search the entire facility and find a Stearman sponson. He didn't need it. He just wanted to see if I could find it. My first order of business was to find out what it was. Fortunately, from the MCMD Stearman days, there were still specifications to be found and I was able to learn what a sponson looked like. Shortly after beginning my search, the Director of Maintenance, Dan Westbrook, saw me wandering around. He asked if he could help. I told him the task I had been assigned. He said I was not the first person Dick had asked to do that. He told me where it was.

Mission accomplished.

Dick also employed some interesting methods for training new salespeople. One day, after I had been there a month or so, I came back from lunch to find a video camera in front of my desk, pointing at my chair. It was running.

Odd.

I sat down. A moment later my phone rang. It was Dick, pretending to be a customer. The call went on for about 10 minutes. He seemed most interested in a Thrush, but refused to commit. When I hung up, I muttered that revered staple of the airplane sales industry: "*Tire -kicking %&@.\$#+@.*"

Knowing the tape was going to be reviewed, I immediately questioned if that had been a good move. We went into the conference room across from my office and put the tape in the VCR. Dick was actually sitting on the floor, right in front of the TV, watching it and offering up critiques and advice on how to improve. When we got to the end, I steeled myself for the response I would receive to my assessment of him as a legitimate buyer.

The memory of him rolling onto his back, absolutely *convulsed* with laughter is an image that, thankfully, will never fade. Looking back, I think our friendship was set in stone at that very moment.

As part of my job, I attended numerous state conventions as well as the National convention in Las Vegas. Because I was usually with or around Dick, I was privileged to meet and tarry with some truly great people in the industry: Breakfast with Edgar Hobbs; cocktails with Bern Prewitt. I spent a couple of hours exchanging jokes with Dick and Jack Keahey (my first time hearing about *Boudreaux and Thibodaux*); I even rolled dice with Mabry Anderson. There are so, *so* many others that are just far too numerous to mention. Our lives are enriched by the people, from all over the United States, that we remain friends with to this day. None of it would have happened if not for Dick Reade and Mid-Continent.

I had been at Mid-Continent for a bit less than a year, when I made the decision to return to California and take over my father-in-law's real estate business. Dick was not happy when I left. My family and friends know that I have spent the last 30-plus years second guessing that decision. Nonetheless, I remained in contact and, ultimately, began making almost yearly trips back to Mid-

Continent to visit our friends and play in the museum Golf Tournament in Olive Branch. These are some the best memories Diane and I have. My wife, as a novice golfer, would never participate in our local bar association tournaments, but she never hesitated to play in the Museum tournament. This one fact speaks volumes as to the quality of people in the ag aviation industry and is why I continued to find myself drawn back. Ultimately, she and Sharon Watkins commandeered the drink cart on a permanent basis, dispensing soft drinks, beer and Joe Tannehill's legendary Bloody Marys, a food group in and of themselves.

My money was absolutely no good when we were with Dick Reade. If I tried to pick up a tab, he would get a bit . . . shall we say. . . *testy*. Being a cheapskate, I taught myself to get over it.

Not surprisingly, much of the business acumen Dick imparted to me is still paying dividends. One day we were talking about sales. He said, "Brett, when you are in sales, you have to be a chameleon. You have to be able to adapt to each person you are talking to so they feel comfortable." That was some of the best advice I ever received. It worked for me in airplane and real estate sales, and it has served me well in my law practice. The importance of making those you are dealing with feel at ease, even those occupying an adversarial position, cannot be overemphasized.

Little did I know when I picked up that call from him back in 1988, that it would turn into a lifelong friendship and would add a dimension to my family's lives that would have never come to pass without it.

My dad taught me from an early age that none of us are getting out of this alive. Dick Reade has moved off of this mortal coil into whatever waits beyond. I cling tightly to the belief that we will all meet again one day in that land where, as the gospel song promises, we will never grow old. I expect to see Dick there.

Until then, rest in peace.



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Congratulations to Ryan McCallister on the purchase of his Turbine Thrush. Ryan is underway with his first season as an operator. We wish Ryan the best on his new endeavour! Pictured with Ryan is aircraft salesman Stan Hunter.

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On May 21 the Hayti Rotary Club dedicated a stone bench at our facility to honor Richard "Dick" Reade, a founding member of the club. Dick Reade served the community with distinction for over 60 years.

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9679.2 A/F TT, 350 Gallon Hopper, Bantam GPS w/ G4, Light Bar, Intelliflow, Stainless Steel Boom, Nozzles, CP-03, Smoker, Air Conditioner, bottom Load Fuel, New Side Windows

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1988 AIR TRACTOR AT-301 N69WN

8,900 A/F TT, 600 HP, 530.0 SPOH, 320 Gallong Hopper, Ag Pilot X GPS, Flow Control, Smoker, Stainless Steel Boom, Air Conditioner, VGs, Lane Electric Brake, Botton Load Fuel, 25-Inch Gate, 2 Each Spreaders

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1996 THRUSH S2R-G1 N2237D

9688.0.0 A/F TT, Hatfield Bottom Load Fuel, A/C, Vortex Generators, New Satlock Bantam, Flow Control, Stainless Steel Spray System, AFS Check Valves, CP Nozzles, Agrinautics Pump, Lane Electric Brake, Aircraft Radios, Fresh Eddie Current, Spar Caps 3220 of 6,200 Hour Life

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1998 AYRES S2R-G10 N2146S

4909.0 A/F TT, New Fuel Spline, Bantam GPS, Lane Electric Brake, Smoker, Fast Start, A/C, No Heat, Stainless Steel Boom, Nozzle CP-09, Comm Radio, Trac TXP with ADS-B Out, New Wing Spar May 2016, Annual 2-21

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2019 THRUSH, S2R-T34 N1009F

750 SHP Pratt & Whitney PT6A-34AG Turboprop Engine, Constant-Speed Hartzell Propeller, MVP-50T Glass Panel, Garmin G5 Attitude Indicator, 510-Fallon Fiberglass Hopper, 250-Amp Starter/Generator, Spray System w/ 41-inch Stainless Steel Gatebox For Dry Applications (seeding and fertilizer) and Emergency Liquid Dump Capabilities, Sherwin-Williams JETGLO Paint, Two-Inch Stainless Steel Spray System, Flve-Blade Weath-Aero

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**1988 AIR TRACTOR AT-301
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8,900 A/F TT, 600 HP, 530.0 SPOH, 320 Gallong Hopper, Ag Pilot X GPS, Flow Control, Smoker, Stainless Steel Boom, Air Conditioner, VGs, Lane Electric Brake, Botton Load Fuel, 25-Inch Gate, 2 Each Spreaders

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**2013 THRUSH S2R-T34
N3043V**

3,398 A/F TT, Engine 3,398 SNEW, Concord Batter, CP Nozzles, AM-SAFE Seat Belts, GPS, Bird Lights, Stainless Steel Spray Valve

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**2012 THRUSH S2R-T34
N986MM**

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**1998 Air Tractor AT-802A
N5094H**

12,152.6 A/F TT, 1230 HP, 2000 SPOH, Reabe Digital Hopper, Quantity & Spray Boom Pressure, E-TEC Inc Fast Start System, Comm Radio, Hemisphere G4 GPS, RT Side Boom Shut Off, Smoker, Hydraulic Gate, Air Conditioner, Wipaire Vortex Generators, Wingman Wing Due at 15,823.2, Gear Due at 12,798.2, Eyebolt Stabilizer Due at 14,798.2, 4479.7 Hobbs

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**2010 Dream Tundra,
N523MM**

90.0 A/F TT, Aerosport IO375 210 HP, PMA-8000B Switching Panel with 4 Place Intercom and Three Light Markers, Garmin SL-40 Com, Garmin 430 GPS, Garmin GTX-330 Transponder, Garmin 496 GPS (Panel Mounted), Digiflight II Autopilot w/ Altitude Hold, PFD/MFD

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**1997 Ayres, S2R-G10
N773CC**

6500.0 A/F TT, 400.0 SPOH, Cool Start System, Hatfield Single Point Fueling, ATS-VGs, Ag-Tips-Marburger, Kawak Hydraulic System, Satloc, G4, Load Hawg

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Mid-Continent Aircraft Corp. is located in Hayti, Missouri, 80 miles north of Memphis, Tennessee. Although Hayti is not the geographical center of our nation, Mid-Continent is the center for all ag aviation needs. With excellent daily truck freight lines, air freight, Federal Express, and UPS delivery capability, MID-CONTINENT has and will continue to cover the world.