

# **Aim Point**

An Air Force Pilot's Lessons  
for Navigating Life

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## Chapter 32

### Our Need for Reinvention



*Major General Nick Williams, 21st Air Force commander, presenting me with the Legion of Merit award at the conclusion of my two-year tour in command of the 19th Air Refueling Group. The next day I flew to Germany to begin a six-year stretch of three different assignments focused on supporting U.S. military operations in Europe. Every one of those assignments required me to reinvent myself. On the right is Colonel Barb Faulkenberry, my replacement in the 19th. While I was not involved in this decision, I could not have picked a better officer to take over for me.  
(U.S. Air Force)*

As I described earlier, I survived pilot training, my mother's alcoholism, my abusive sixth-grade teacher, my divorce, and my struggles with infertility. All of us know, though, that life is much more than merely surviving. I believe we are meant to thrive. We are meant to enjoy life. Just like that night at pilot training in 1978, though, our lives can change in a heartbeat.

Jobs go away, and different opportunities arise. Relationships end, and new ones begin. We live in an environment where change is a constant.

This frequent change requires us to reinvent ourselves. That night in Texas, the runway I needed to land on changed. There was an unexpected wind shear, and when I found myself in a very dangerous situation, I couldn't continue flying my approach as I had planned. It was obvious I needed to make instant, dramatic changes. Even in the immediacy of that moment, though, I still needed to create a new plan, trust in my abilities, and have the discipline and skill to carry it out. And I needed to do all of it very quickly.

Life has clearly shown me you don't have to change jobs to need to reinvent yourself. For 30 years, I had the same employer: The United States Air Force. yet, during my career as an officer, the Air Force assigned me to numerous positions requiring radically different skills and knowledge from anything I had ever done before. While I started off as a pilot, throughout my career the Air Force wanted me to do a wide variety of high-visibility jobs that had nothing to do with flying.

I had 16 different assignments while I was on active duty. Besides packing up and moving each time, my new assignments required me to reinvent myself, as I needed to master new skills, learn a new body of knowledge, and refocus my efforts. My biggest reinvention, however, was when I reached my 30-year maximum service limit in the Air Force. At age 52 and with a daughter getting ready to go to college, I had to completely reinvent myself as a software development program manager, a job I had to learn from scratch.

My story is not unique by any means. Every one of us goes through change. That often means we need to reinvent ourselves. Most jobs we do today weren't even dreamed of when I graduated from college in 1977. And if the job is still with us, it's being done in a radically different way. All of us need to update our skills and learn something unexpected and new to continue moving forward and thriving. This means reinventing ourselves.

There are different ways to approach change. We can view it with fear and indecision where we see ourselves as victims without any control of the decisions and direction in our lives; but approaching change from this

perspective would be akin to letting go of my aircraft controls and trusting everything will work out perfectly. And while it's very important to have faith and trust in the goodness of the Universe, there are times when we need to take decisive action. That night in Texas, I could not let things unfold any further and see what would happen. I needed to act. If we are in a situation where we feel inspired to reinvent ourselves, the best way to approach it is with an attitude of positive action and the intent to take control of our lives.

Sometimes, like that night in Texas, an immediate decision is required. If that's the case, follow your instincts, decide what to do, and take action. Don't look back. Almost always, though, there is time to gather data and make an informed decision. This does not mean procrastination; although there are times when you might be faced with bad alternatives and the best course of action is to wait a bit longer to see if something better develops. If that's where you find yourself, it may be wiser to make a conscious choice to delay your decision.

Apart from these situations, the best alternative is almost always to take positive action. The best way to do this is often from a deliberate, holistic perspective. What's important in your life? Have you reconnected with your values and principles? Where do you find inspiration? Do you need to rekindle your inspiration? Answering these questions can help you retake control of your life in a situation where you might feel powerless. They can help you find your own personal aim point. I'll talk more about my "AIM POINT" in the next chapters. Taking control also allows you the freedom to feel inspired by your choices rather than feeling as if you've been pushed into something you don't want.

Look at the changes you are facing right now. I know they can feel overwhelming. At the end of my career, the Air Force assigned me to a position completely different from anything I had ever done. I became the Chief of the Office of Defense Cooperation at the American Embassy in Brussels. My team of officers and I worked directly for the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium. I had little knowledge regarding what the roles and responsibilities of the position entailed, yet there I was: the guy in charge. Not only that, the Air Force had sent my wife and me to French-language

school so we could at least attempt to talk with the Belgian military and government representatives in their own language. And, of course, our family had to move from the United States to Europe; this even included our two family cats. As exciting as all of this was, it was also overwhelming.

And then one of my life's most embarrassing events occurred. During my first week on the job, I was meeting with a Belgian defense contractor in downtown Brussels (the capital of Belgium). I remember having difficulty even finding the restaurant, not to mention a parking space, among the narrow, winding backstreets of the city, so I was a little late. While the contractor and I were talking and eating lunch, a piece of meat got stuck in my throat, clogging my windpipe. It soon became clear I was choking. The gentleman I was meeting with got up and slapped me on the back. That was enough to do the trick. It helped dislodge the piece of meat and I started breathing normally.

While I didn't die physically, I did nearly die of embarrassment. It was a terrible start to what turned out to be a fantastic assignment. And there's no question in my mind that my choking at the restaurant was directly related to me feeling choked and overwhelmed by the responsibilities and requirements of this new position I held.

This story has a happy ending. I learned the responsibilities of my new job without further medical incident. After about one year in my position, both the U.S. and Belgium asked me to preside over a bilateral conference between our two air forces. The issue at hand was the Belgian desire to purchase American-made targeting pods for their F-16 fighters. This was important to the U.S. military far beyond the small size of the Belgian purchase.

Since Belgium was our country's first North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally who was purchasing the American-made targeting pod (instead of the European version), it would help the U.S. defense industry to make inroads into this market. More importantly, it would make Belgium's air force more compatible with the U.S. Air Force since we would all be using the same equipment. It would also set the stage for our other, larger European allies to buy the American pods. Everyone wanted this to happen.

The problem was, since this was the first time Lockheed Martin was going to sell their targeting pods to someone outside the United States, the U.S. Air Force contracting community attached expensive setup costs to this contract, per their regulations. These additional fees increased the overall program cost from \$21 million to \$31 million. Because of political forces and financial constraints within Belgium, if the price couldn't come down to \$21 million, the Belgians would have to purchase the significantly cheaper European targeting pods. In a last-ditch attempt to come to an agreement, we all gathered at Robins Air Force Base in the United States for a three-day negotiation to see what might be done. I sensed there was little optimism on either side going into the negotiation.

Fortunately, though, I was the senior officer present and was able to set the proper tone right off the bat. I began our conference by reminding everyone of our common goal: to come to a mutual agreement on this contract all parties would embrace. I assured them my goal was to ensure everyone present had a chance to voice their opinions and concerns. I also emphasized there would be no pressure on anyone to accept a position they were uncomfortable with.

The relief in the room was palpable. After three days, the Belgians had pulled back some of their requirements, reducing the overall costs somewhat. American acquisition representatives adjusted their perspectives on what they considered Belgium's fair share of the setup costs — this reduced the costs tremendously.

By the time we finished, we negotiated the price down to \$21 million and everyone left happy. The senior Belgian officer present approached me afterwards to tell me he was in disbelief we had come to an agreement — he didn't think it was possible before the meeting. Four months later, a similar situation arose on a different contract regarding purchase of modern helmet-mounted displays for the Belgian F-16s. The first thing the Belgians and the Americans did was arrange for a negotiating conference. Both sides asked for me specifically to preside over the gathering. I went from choking to chairman in a little more than a year. Not bad.

But that's often how it goes when you reinvent yourself. You start by being the new person and not even knowing where you're even supposed to sit in the office, much less wondering what you're supposed to be doing at that moment. You wonder why you even made this change. You may want to quit. All these thoughts have gone through my head when I've had to reinvent myself.

Before long, though, people are coming to you for advice. After that, they see you as the expert. Then you become the visionary. The next thing you know, you're giving the keynote address at the annual convention. You may think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not. This can happen to you. The first step is accepting that you sometimes need to reinvent yourself. The best place to start your reinvention process is by defining your own core guidelines and principles. This is what AIM POINT is all about.

## Chapter 33

### Finding our Aim Point



*Speaking to a gathering before I retired from the Air Force. The move from career military officer to software program manager was the biggest reinvention challenge of my life. So far.*

Just like when I was flying in the Air Force, every one of us needs a guidance system to go where we want to go. Once I finished the first four parts of this book describing the events and people surrounding my life, I thought about my guidance system. I wanted to share my insights with you.

I've summarized my guideposts into an easy to remember eight-letter acronym: AIM POINT. When a pilot lines up on final approach, he or she needs to pick an aim point in the runway's touchdown zone to make a safe landing. Just like that pilot, we all need to have aim points throughout our lives. Here are my aim points, my guideposts — I will write about them each in a little more detail in the following chapters:



## CHAPTER 33: FINDING OUR AIM POINT

A = Appreciation

I = Integrity

M = Make a Decision

P = Prioritize Play

O = Set Objectives and Goals

I = Inspiration

N = Nurture

T = Trust

My life has been amazing, exhilarating, satisfying, and joyful. My life has also been frightening and humbling, and I've made many decisions that were far from perfect. yet I believe I've approached each set of circumstances intending to do the best I could and for that, I feel grateful.

As you continue to read, I invite you to look at the circumstances of your life. Look at the people in your life. Do you appreciate them as much as you can, even when they're difficult? Do you approach your life and the decisions you make with integrity? Are you making decisions, making yourself known — do you offer your thoughts and opinions to others? Do you make play a priority, so your energy is renewed for other areas in your life? Do you have objectives and goals and are you happy with them? Do you seek out inspiration in your work and in your personal life? Do you nurture others and allow others to nurture you? Do you trust others; do you trust in a higher spirit?

There are no wrong answers to any of these questions. I offer them only as a way to do a self-inventory regarding where you are and compare it to where you want to be. The great news is that by becoming aware of these guidelines, you can help chart your own personal aim points and achieve your goals in life. Just as important, you can help create more joy in your life by creating an environment more consistent with what you want. This is the first step in reinventing yourself — determining what's important in your life, what inspires you, and reconnecting with your core values and principles. The next eight chapters in this book introduce each of the AIM POINT guidelines, so you can have a clearer idea of my perspective.