

Corey Andrew Powell ([00:02](#)):

Author and aviation expert Peter Zaccagnino's bio reads like a Tom Clancy thriller. The four time air racing gold champion has traveled to all countries, but one and somehow managed to survive being held at gunpoint with rifles and AK 47s aimed at his head in Pakistan. I'm Corey Andrew Powell, your host, and Peter joins me today for a very intriguing Motivational Mondays. I'm joined today by Peter Zino. Peter is an accomplished author, an aviation hall of famer, and a four-time air racing gold champion, Peter. Welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Peter Zaccagnino ([00:37](#)):

Thanks Corey. It's awesome to be here.

Corey Andrew Powell ([00:39](#)):

Thank you for joining me. Now, let me just begin by saying, you are the first Motivational Mondays guest I have ever had where I've looked at their pre-interview notes and my mouth dropped open. Like <laugh> I was like, I thought I was reading like a Tom Clancy novel. So just to give people a little reference for that, like just a little summary, you've been held at gunpoint with rifles and AKs in Pakistan and you've been detained and you had to bribe Nigerian officials I believe to get away. Is that sort of how that happened? Uh, you managed to... let's start with that one. Is that what happened? You bribed them?

Peter Zaccagnino ([01:12](#)):

You know, bribe is a strong word, Corey, that we don't like to use. <laugh>

Corey Andrew Powell ([01:18](#)):

You negotiated your release -constructively.

Peter Zaccagnino ([01:21](#)):

Finances were used to negotiate that release. <laugh>

Corey Andrew Powell ([01:25](#)):

Oh, okay. Yes, yes. We have to make sure we classify that properly. <laugh> I understand. And then you sort of managed to then get out of Russia after being refused exit, which is equally as terrifying. Not sure what method you used to get out of that, but you did. And then you've prevented kids from getting kidnapped in Guatemala. That all blew my mind and then it sort of got topped off with, oh, and he also sold a \$50 million private jet to the owner of a major league baseball team. So you have a well rounded, <laugh> a well rounded existence. Peter, you are an aviation expert. Let's just begin though with that. Sure. How did you begin with your interest in aviation?

Peter Zaccagnino ([02:06](#)):

Yeah, Corey, I mean, as far back as I can remember, I wanted to design, build and fly airplanes. There was no single event and something just drove me. It was in my blood and I really don't know how. There's no parent involved that supported that effort in the sense of like a pilot or something to that effect. My mom was super supportive, but yeah, I just wanted to do that. So it led me to working on airplanes, um, doing my undergrad in aeronautical engineering. So I had that component covered and of course, getting all the pilot credentials I needed to at least get started and go down a very circuitous career path, uh, to say the least. And, uh, it's been a fun run.

Corey Andrew Powell ([02:44](#)):

Yes. I mean, you've completed as I've read here, you've completed 23,000 hours and flights that've been over like 270 Aircrafts. You've flight tested over 685 Aircrafts and you've built three of them yourself. So that's more than a passion, I think. I mean, that's just really, you feel like that's a calling almost when you're into it at that degree.

Peter Zaccagnino ([03:07](#)):

Yeah. I've never used the reference to calling, but I like that. I think I have had a calling of some kind and it's been an opportunity to lead others and not with a typical career path and share with them, Hey, you don't have to do the normal inside the box and there's nothing wrong with that, but there are other opportunities you can be creative about it even in a very technical area like aviation certainly is it's a very high tech mm-hmm <affirmative> area, but it was, um, definitely a calling in the sense that there is a reason that I still really haven't answer, but I enjoy the creative aspect of the design

concepts. I enjoy the adventure of flying around the world in a variety of aircraft with a variety of routes and challenges. And, you know, being detained in Nigeria isn't exactly desirable, but it does make for a good story.

Corey Andrew Powell ([03:52](#)):

<laugh>, You know, most of us will never even get to Nigeria. So let alone, <laugh> having a moment like that where might not even get out of Nigeria once you're, there is pretty intriguing. As a leader, you are in charge of many teams, I would imagine because you have many different aspects to your business. You are the founder of the High Performance Aircraft Group, which manages several corporate jets, provides clients with like customized travel excursions also does the full like testing and that's in both the us and in foreign militaries. So as a leader, how are you able to manage all that and make sure your teams are set up for success because those are very volatile areas to work in. I would imagine.

Peter Zaccagnino ([04:35](#)):

Yeah. You know, just managing a private jet for somebody you're responsible for a lot of financial concerns and you're responsible of course, for the flight and the management of an asset that no one wants to see depreciate, and you need to be surrounded with the right people. You need to ask the right questions of those people to ensure that we're on task. And when we're not on task, absolute full disclosure, hey, there was an error here. We're fixing it. This is how we're fixing it. We own it. And, uh, we're getting back to the goal at hand, even if it's just simply getting a plane from the United States to Europe during COVID times, there's a lot of opportunity there for mistakes. And so when you're leading that team, they have to be accountable, but they also have to have the tools. And I use the questioning process a lot to discover, are they getting what they need?

Peter Zaccagnino ([05:29](#)):

Are they giving what they feel is important to the goal at hand, in this example, just getting a jet across to Europe during a COVID and so yes questions, and then you allow them to do their job and perform the task. And if they're not the biggest thing is they have to disclose it and say, I don't know something about this, and I need some help. And that's an important philosophy that they're comfortable to ask for help because they just don't know. And sure you can look up something on the internet, but we're talking about bigger and more important details than just looking up on the internet. And we want them to say, I don't know, I need help. Who can help me with this task and give it to, and then show 'em show 'em the path to success.

Corey Andrew Powell ([06:10](#)):

That's an important contribution to the conversation about leadership, because so often it's put on the leader. We have to also say, when we don't know something, we have to also let that be known because otherwise, how will someone be able to assist us and especially dealing with, I mean, that's sort of potentially dangerous in aviation, right? I mean, it's like, oh, I don't know this, but I'm just gonna connect this blue wire over here and hope for the best <laugh>. Yeah. You know, that's not good.

Peter Zaccagnino ([06:36](#)):

No, that account ability is driven throughout the whole program. It's not just that one trip. It's also the management of the airplanes maintenance. Cause it's complicated. It's not a simple task and mistakes are made and people sometimes will say they did something more than they didn't. And it, yeah, usually it's because it was just a mistake and the honest mistake, but you have to have that feedback, that loop to verify in an industry that's so technical, but also the consequences are extreme. I mean they are unfortunately, yeah. And so breeding that culture is important and it begins the moment someone starts flying or management or hiring or whatever the case may be, you know, and we've to the extreme level with air racing, cuz boy, it doesn't get much more accountable than that. <laugh>

Corey Andrew Powell ([07:23](#)):

And you're like the four time champion air racer. So what is air racing? What does it entail?

Peter Zaccagnino ([07:28](#)):

Really? So I'll describe the championship for you. There's six classes and each class has their own set of rules. And we race at the same location for the championship in Reno, Nevada, but it's on three or four different race courses depending on the class. Now I race in two classes, the sport class and the jet class and the basic races start out with eight aircraft being maneuvered into a starting position in flight. And then what we call being released onto the course and the pace plane releases us. We enter the course at near race speed, but not exactly race speed. We're still accelerating. And uh, off we go.

So we have eight planes that go around in the, uh, jet class to use that example, a roughly 8.1 mile circular course. And we're flying between 50 and 200 feet at, uh, speeds in the gold glass of over 500 miles an hour.

Peter Zaccagnino ([08:25](#)):

And so it's cooperative formation, but you have to be accountable to the person you're racing against. So you're competing with them, but you're also trusting them. And it's a huge difference and a different type of competition because of that, because, you know, we have the ground below us, 50 feet, we have a plane next to us about five feet away and you're doing this at a very high speed in a less than friendly environment. And so, oh my gosh, it takes some, uh, um, reliance on your competitors and we do have that. And it also takes reliance on your team that they're doing everything they've been asked to do to have that aircraft ready for the race.

Corey Andrew Powell ([09:05](#)):

So like wing to wing, there's like five feet between the two planes?

Peter Zaccagnino ([09:08](#)):

Basically. Oh yeah, absolutely.

Corey Andrew Powell ([09:09](#)):

At 500 miles per hour. Yeah. I'm like freaking out like just taking off what I'm going to like to Fort Lauderdale on vacation. <laugh>, you know, just like the takeoff is killing me and you're like, that's really intense. You know, you also mentioned the, well, I mentioned the custom tailor made excursions. You do for private clients. And I'm curious to know if you can share like an example of what one of those high intensity world tours would entail.

Peter Zaccagnino ([09:36](#)):

One of the most recent ones, you know, COVID of course had an impact on us. And one of the most recent ones, we did a world trip for a customer and we took 'em to very unique locations, to engage with the local communities at these unique locations. See if we can go surfing in the break there, depending on how it was and find a surfboard. So it was kind of a let's play it by ear. And that was intentional part of it to be surprised at what you find. And so the trip took seven weeks. It was an around the world trip. We went east. So we went to Iceland and surfed Iceland. Then we went into Europe and then surfed India with all of the challenges that go on with some of these unique countries. And then we went through Asia dove in Thailand, uh, Singapore of course, surfed Bali and Indonesia. And then Australia surfed the coast, uh, the gold coast there and then into New Zealand back out and then up through the Philippines, Japan, Russia. And then, uh, back to the US.

Corey Andrew Powell ([10:42](#)):

One of the main things I think travel of course, outside of America, teaches us is empathy and how to interact with other cultures. And I think if more of us did that, we would be in a much better place when it comes to the issues we're having with ethnic divide or divisiveness with race, et cetera. So that means empathy has to play a role. Yep. How does that parlay into the role of a leader?

Peter Zaccagnino ([11:05](#)):

I think it's significant because I'm very much an advocate for experience challenge, the norm challenge, what you're being told. Don't just take it from, and it doesn't have to be political. It's just your viewpoint genuinely. And you know, if your boss is telling you something at your nine to five job and you don't agree with it, bring it to his attention because either he's gonna learn from it or you're gonna learn from him. One of the two, if it's an open environment, if it's not an open environment, that's a different discussion. But where that comes back to your original question though, is when you genuinely are experiencing a culture and a community and really engaging with them. And you know, there's my questions I ask that start the engagement. I like to learn from these cultures and these people because the world really doesn't know what's going on.

Peter Zaccagnino ([11:58](#)):

That's what I've learned in traveling everywhere and traveling everywhere, multiple times, dozens and dozens and dozens of times, the world really doesn't know what's going on. And uh, some of the video channels that people rely on, they certainly aren't relaying the accuracy and people. They wanna do the right thing and, and the empathy, they feel that. And it's funny because if you're in the Philippines, in this remote island where their daily income is something like \$1 or \$2 a day, there's some of the happiest people there, it's amazing culture and they don't want you to, to give them a \$20 tip. That's not the empathy they're looking for. They want you to feel their experience and know that they are rich in ways that we're not rich.

They are wealthy in ways with their family, with the fresh food they have on a regular daily basis from the ocean and the jungle and all those other sources.

Peter Zaccagnino ([12:51](#)):

They want you to feel that their culture is rich in so many different ways than we measure in a Western community, in a Western culture and really experience that the adventure is with the people. It's not because we surfed on this cool island in the Philippines, the adventure was, we surfed with these people that really showed us their, their culture and how and why the was important there on this little island. That's the empathy I think I've experienced in, in so many places, Pakistan, India, Africa, you name it is understanding their perspective on the world.

Corey Andrew Powell ([13:28](#)):

Yeah. You've been to every country, but one I've read. Yeah. Yeah. And so I am curious to know what is that last remaining country. And would you say you had a favorite one out of all the ones you did visit?

Peter Zaccagnino ([13:39](#)):

I have not been to Madagascar and no reason. In fact, we were going there with a, a certain production company. They want to film this whole thing. And the, we had an engine failure in the airplane had to turn back to, uh, originally Zambezi and then ultimately South Africa. But so I haven't been to Madagascar and, uh, I'm happy to go there at some point. But my favorite country, well, I would have to categorize it a little bit, not to cop out on you, but you know, Thailand is awesome. The people, again, it's back to the people and the food and the culture. I just love Thailand. It's amazing place. I love Italy for the European history. And again, people, food and culture, you know, same stuff. Um, same reason is just different vibe. I never tire of Italy. And, um, Iceland is a spectacular adventure. It's become a little bit popular in the hundreds of times I've been there. It's always had a great, great vibe. And, uh, the people are, it's a unique scene. I never tire of Iceland. I was there a week ago and it was just as great as ever. Oh wow. And of course our own country. I mean, our country's amazing, you know, traveling around here is, is amazing. I finally understood why people are in RVs driving around our country. <laugh>, you know, hopefully.

Corey Andrew Powell ([14:55](#)):

It's definitely, I always say too. I mean, there's so much to see in the US that we haven't yet. So, whereas I'd emphasize the importance of traveling outside of the country, I do also want people to realize, as you mentioned, yes, there's a lot of great parts of the US. I mean, well all of the US, right? We should just try to go and see these other areas.

Peter Zaccagnino ([15:13](#)):

Yeah. And, and still it's learning a different culture. It really is. Oh, I can't leave Columbia, South America. I really like that country a lot.

Corey Andrew Powell ([15:22](#)):

Oh, Columbia. Yeah. Wow. I've only been to South America once, which was, uh, last year to Brazil my first time. And it was an incredible thing because again, I had locals natives from Rio teaching me, talking to me, taking me around to the block parties and it's the way to do it. You have to definitely go and sort of see it through the eyes of people who live there versus going there and looking for something like McDonald's day <laugh>, you know, San Juan, cause all the fast food spots are all there now. Peter, there's also you as the author, which I wanna get into as well, because I know we have limited time, but you have done so many things. And somehow you managed to also write books <laugh> in between 20,000 gazillion hours of aviation and your first book. Well, it's actually, it's a series called Relevant and the first book was actually called Relevant. And it's noted as inspired by top secret, true events and great lessons in leadership. So can you give an idea of what that book is about and why you wrote it?

Peter Zaccagnino ([16:21](#)):

It's certainly a military spy thriller is the quick answer, but the intent of the book was to also through the narrative process, put light on a very delicate topic and ties into our earlier discussion about understanding cultures and, the whys, the metaphysics. I'm big on that. Like why, why, why, why? And also asking yourself those questions. Why am I doing this? Why am I here? And things of that nature. So through the narrative of the book, I took the opportunity to refer to historical references, historical topics, you know, in a hot topic, that's not easy to discuss. And my whole point was, Hey, don't believe anything, but definitely don't believe everything. Go out there and, and be inquisitive and look into the things I said about,

you know, the terrorist topic and that world of anti-terrorism and really learn what is going on in various countries and not just what we see on TV and cable news.

Corey Andrew Powell ([17:24](#)):

Right? Sure. And the internet.

Peter Zaccagnino ([17:26](#)):

Or the internet is even worse cause yeah. For a lot of reasons. But the message was in hope, in a creative way to get a point across that you need to look into things as a citizen of the world. You need to learn things as a citizen of the world so that you are responsible in your actions and responsible in your commentary that affect people like children, peers, spouses, all of that. They do have an impact and people don't realize it all the time. They may say something glibly and without really knowing the topic. And it's my little effort to do that in a creative way. And uh, I really enjoyed the process more than I expected.

Corey Andrew Powell ([18:09](#)):

Thank you for listening to motivational Mondays presented by the national society of leadership and success and available wherever you listen to your favorite podcast. I'm Corey Andrew Powell, and I'll see you again here next week.