

# TO HELL AND BACK

## A pilot's journey to regain mental health

Three years of torment followed Pete Blake witnessing his workmates' deaths in a wire strike. Now he helps other men talk openly about their mental health issues.

**F**or CAA inspector and former agricultural pilot Pete Blake, 12 December 2016 began like any other.

He was on a sowing operation near Wairoa when another pilot, a good friend and workmate – who'd been topdressing on a neighbouring farm and was on his way to his next job – flew near Pete's aircraft to say 'see you later'. They acknowledged each other, and Pete turned to head back to the airstrip.

"When I looked back, I saw my friend's aircraft trailing a wire from the wing. I contacted him on the radio, but there was no response. I thought I'd better follow them – he had his loader driver with him – back to the airstrip to make sure they landed safely. But I watched them fly into the ground and the plane go up in flames.

"There isn't much more I want to say about that day."

So began Pete's journey down into and up out of mental and psychological hell, which eventually put him on the path to becoming an advocate for men's mental health. »

// Pete loves flying in the sunrise.  
"It feels like a fresh start each day."

Photo courtesy of Pete Blake

## » Just pushing on

Initially though, like most Kiwi guys, says Pete, he just pushed on. “The day after the funeral I finished the job I’d been doing when the accident happened, with the burned plane still poking out of the ground looking at me.

“But I didn’t want to let anyone down – there was work to do, a family to support, and bills to pay.”

Getting ‘back on the horse’ Pete worked right up until Christmas 2016, after which he went to four ‘automatic’ counselling sessions arranged through his employer.

“I was told I didn’t have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and that I was doing okay – that anything I was feeling was to be expected. So after those four sessions, I stopped the counselling. I acted as if everything was normal, I told people I was ‘doing great’.”

## Not doing great

But Pete started having trouble sleeping and when he did sleep, he often had nightmares.

Flying gradually became a ‘day nightmare’.

“I would be anxious every day I was working that someone else would be killed in a crash. I actually started hallucinating sudden wires appearing just beyond the aircraft windscreen, and other ag aircraft in the distance crashing. It would be only a split-second hallucination but it was really terrifying.

“I’d spend most workdays crying in the plane from the sadness of losing a mate, and for the guilt I felt for both men’s deaths. I’d been focussed on the operation and had forgotten to tell them about the set of high tension, hard-to-see, wires running across the farm – that meant I was responsible for what happened, I felt.

**// Life got more and more stressful, but I kept it all to myself. Every day got harder, but I told everyone things were going great. //**

“At home I was lifeless and not much fun to be around, but generally no-one knew I was going through this turmoil.

“I started to be scared of flying, which isn’t great when your job is flying. Life got more and more stressful, but I kept it all to myself. Every day got harder, but I told everyone things were going great.”

## The ‘break’

Then, over two months in 2018, Pete experienced an unusual number of serious occurrences – a massive bird strike and an associated elevator stall, a compressor stall on takeoff, and a flight control lock-up on takeoff. Spring contracts were increasing his workload.

Then finally, one otherwise perfectly ordinary Monday in August 2018 – 21 months after the tragedy – Pete says he “broke”. It was his fifth consecutive day working around the 2016 crash site and his fear became overwhelming.

“I was sure something bad was about to happen, I just didn’t know what. So instead of landing, I flew past the strip knowing I had to get out of the plane. I don’t remember it, but I apparently told my loader driver that, ‘I’m heading home – the guys have hit me hard’. I had a panic attack during the flight and was hyperventilating and crying uncontrollably.

“I wasn’t sure I’d be able to fly the plane safely back home or if I’d end up in the ground. I texted my boss ‘HELP’. After landing they found me under the plane crying. I spent most of that day telling everyone I was sorry for stuffing up their lives and for killing my workmates.”

## The first step

The next day, after an old friend and mentor intervened, Pete saw a doctor and “came clean – no more hiding and thinking it will all fix itself”.

“The next two steps were hard. Phone the CAA, phone the boss. It had to be done, it was the right thing to do, but I felt like I was giving up everything I’d worked so hard for, I felt like I was losing my identity and I felt like I was letting everyone down.

“The CAA doctor was great and arranged for the PAN (peer assistance network – see sidebar) to get in touch the next day.”

Pete thought that things would get better quickly, but in fact, depression, social anxiety, and stress all kicked in.

“After being a pilot for the previous 16 years – logging more than 12,000 flying hours, and even twice flying around the world – I was no longer a pilot.

“I would have to start again.

“It sounds weird, but although I didn’t really want to fly again – I was scared of it – I also didn’t want my breakdown to be the reason I left flying. It was important to me to retire from flying, if I had to, on my own terms.”

So Pete set himself the goal of getting his medical back, despite plenty of people saying he would never fly again. Pete says there’s a commonly held myth in the aviation community that if you lose your medical on mental health grounds, you never get it back.

### Dark places

Despite his determination, things were far from easy. There were many dark, lonely moments. “I got sick of feeling a bit better, then have it all come crashing down because of some small thing. I hated the feeling of going backwards.

“I was now a stay-at-home dad, and slowly working on getting myself a new identity. Despite all my family’s love and support, I would still feel alone, and lost. I would feel useless and unneeded. I would hide away from my friends and family and avoid talking to people as much as possible. I hated being asked, ‘What are you doing now?’ and, ‘When are you going back to work?’

“I was working – being a stay-at-home parent is work, and it’s hard work.”

In the meantime, he was working with a PAN psychologist, who specialised in aviation, to get past his fear of flying. He also started biking and running to help with the recovery.



// Pete has made it a bit of a mission to talk to other men about mental health issues and what they can do about them.

## // Pete learned it was okay to have bad days, and that they wouldn’t last. //

### Growing light

Over time, Pete learned it was okay to have bad days, and that they wouldn’t last. He began to realise the guilt he felt over his workmates’ deaths was unwarranted.

His sleeping improved, and the nightmares slowly stopped. Despite the initial diagnosis to the contrary, Pete was diagnosed with PTSD and he had to learn to overcome “all the stuff that comes with PTSD”, like countering the beginnings of a panic attack triggered by, for instance, certain smells.

“One of the things I learned was to dig my heels into the ground and then count four objects around me, or listen consciously to every sound around me. The idea was to keep me focussed. It was a form of mindfulness or meditation.

“I began to live my new life, focussing on my kids and wife, supporting them as best as I could. The periods between the lows slowly began to get longer. I got more confident and was able to enjoy the small things. Then I started to be able to really have fun again.”

### Getting back in the air

Eventually, Pete’s fear of flying diminished and he wanted to fly again. “I was super-cautious with my recovery and stress levels, so I didn’t return to commercial flying straight away. I took lessons at the local flying school, got my RPL and did some flying for fun.”

In September 2019, almost three years after the accident, he got his class 1 medical back. With his fear of flying a thing of the past, he stopped seeing the PAN psychologist and moved to another counsellor, who helped him deal with his remaining anxieties.

Soon after, he was confidently flying again, aerial surveying in Hawaii. The COVID-19 pandemic brought that to an end, and he moved to the CAA as an inspector. »

# // I realise now anyone can be just one bad moment away from it happening. //

## » “A new person”

“I’ve learned so much about myself through this,” Pete says. “I now have the skills to pull myself out if I feel like I’m disappearing down an emotional hole. I really feel like a new person.”

Pete has made it a bit of a mission to talk to other men about mental health issues and what they can do about them.

“I thought I was bulletproof and thought you had to have something wrong with you to go through depression and a breakdown. But I realise now anyone can be just one bad moment away from it happening.”

Talking directly to his fellow pilots, Pete says, “You don’t need to have witnessed the death of a friend to feel depressed or anxious to the point where you should ask for some help.

“You could have experienced stress over several years, through fatigue or long hours or odd hours or a big workload. Or maybe you lost your job in the lockdowns or are constantly in danger of it. Or you’ve been through a divorce or the death of a loved one.

“Maybe stress was slowly building for me over the years and that would have been enough to break me in the end anyway.

“If you think that might be you, I can only tell you I’ve learned the importance of talking openly, that it’s okay to be not okay. Don’t knock yourself around for feeling bad – and that when you’re going through hell, you’re not alone.”

## “A lot of this is never talked about”

He’s surprised, amazed even, by the number of men he speaks to about his experience, who then open up about their own issues.

“I’d say almost every guy I’ve talked to is worried or anxious or stressed. But they also worry that admitting it is a sign of weakness. I know some pilots who’ve given up flying rather than admit they have a mental health issue. I also know a few guys who don’t get the help they need because they worry about losing their medical.

“So a lot of this is never talked about. But if it was, and I’d known back then the stuff I know now, I would’ve handled things a lot better.”

Pete also has a message for anyone whose mate is going through emotional turmoil.

“I had a friend who checked in with me every day.

He didn’t really know how much I was going through, but he’d call up and we’d just shoot the breeze. I can’t really express how much good that did me. It would change my whole day.”

Pete is part of a Gisborne men’s group that began with just a handful talking about mental health. In the last Taupō marathon, the group – now numbering 130 – competed in the half-marathon.

“They’re from right across the board,” says Pete. “From airline pilots to forestry workers, they’re from all worlds.”

Asked by *Vector* if he believes anyone with a mental health issue – who doesn’t seek help – could ever just ‘spontaneously’ recover, Pete thinks for a long time.

“I don’t really know if that’s possible. Maybe it is, but certainly not in my experience, I feel we all need some sort of help to get there.” ➤

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Comments or queries? Email [vector@caa.govt.nz](mailto:vector@caa.govt.nz)

## // PEER ASSISTANCE NETWORK

Feel like you need a helping hand to get through the day? Work pressures, relationship issues or just overwhelmed?

Visit [pan.org.nz](http://pan.org.nz) to request a confidential conversation with a trained peer, or call **0800 PAN 100 (0800 726 100)**.

## // WOMEN’S ASSISTANCE FORUM

Providing support and information to any woman who may be dealing with the challenges of working in aviation, from work/life balance to sexual harassment. Visit [pan.org.nz](http://pan.org.nz) > **about-us** > **woman's-assistance-forum** to connect with a female PAN co-ordinator. Or phone on the PAN number above.

## // NATIONAL HELP NUMBER

**Free call or text 1737** any time for support from a trained counsellor or go to [1737.org.nz](http://1737.org.nz).