

how time flies

AEROBATIC AVIATOR SEAN D. TUCKER LIVES AN INTENSE LIFE THAT REQUIRES KEEPING HIS EYE ON THE CLOCK. BY ROBERTA NAAS

It's hard to imagine entrusting more than a select few with your life. It's one thing to put faith in a commercial pilot, but it's a whole other situation to take to the skies with aerobatic aviation legend Sean D. Tucker—a master of rolls, loops, spins, and hammerheads.

"The air-show business is tough," says the 60-year-old Tucker. "Of my three great mentors, two are dead—and they were champions. You have to be quick, sharp, and never be a second late."

Tucker, who founded the Tutima Academy of Aviation Safety in King City in the Salinas Valley, has a keen interest in saving pilots' lives and equipping them with the knowledge and hands-on flight practice they need in aircraft control. "It isn't just about aerobatics, it's about knowing what to do in an out-of-control situation."

Having flown more than 24,000 hours, Tucker has had to bail three times, deferring to his parachute while watching his plane go down. And even that was perfectly timed. "You have to know that a jump takes X number of seconds, and a parachute takes another X seconds to open. You have to be able to think clearly, look at your watch, and gain altitude while you can to make the jump," he says. "The higher you are, the more time you have."

"I work in units of time—I know when the engine's running, I'm burning fuel. I know it takes 10 minutes to warm up, six minutes to taxi, and 13 minutes for a main air show. I can't function without a watch," says Tucker, who always wears a Tutima. "And it has to be an analog watch. I need to see the hands that show time passing."

Even when he doesn't have an air show, Tucker flies three times a day in order to keep his body accustomed to the intense g-forces it must tolerate. He also allots time every day to walk through his routines and visualize every moment of them. "You have to have a reverence for the sky," he says. "Flying is truly a privilege, and all of us at the academy know and respect that and work hard to honor the privilege."

Tucker—an inductee in the National Aviation Hall of Fame—has received the Living Legends of Aviation Award and is an honorary Thunderbird, Blue Angel, and Snowbird. He is one of the only civilians to ever fly in formation with the Thunderbirds and Blue Angels, and he has an impressive roster of world-class awards and accolades. An active heli-skier and cave diver (where he has also saved a life or two), Tucker is constantly



Master of the skies
Sean D. Tucker



pushing his own personal limits, recently summitting Mount Kilimanjaro. But aviation is his true love, evidenced by the time he spends developing new maneuvers for air shows and perfecting his training methods.

"It's all about knowledge and safety," says Tucker, who insists on synchronizing watches every day with his team of flight instructors and those with whom he flies in formation. The pilot is never without his watch, and he is *never* late. "If you're late, you're not professional. Minutes lost can translate to lives lost." **LAC**

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