Adam Kress
Hi, everyone, and welcome back to another episode of Aerospace Unplugged. I'm your host, Adam Kress. I want to start today with a question, and the answer to that question is what we're going to discuss today. Now here it is. Have you ever wondered what fighter pilots do when they retire?
Well, I have a special guest today that's going to tell us about his journey from being an F35 fighter pilot and then transitioning into a successful career in the private sector. Is there anything in the corporate world that can mimic the rush of flying a fighter jet?
Well, I tend to doubt it, but we're going to find out and see what he has to say. So joining us today is Ben Hutchins, a Senior Director on the government relations team at Honeywell Aerospace. Ben is a retired U.S. Marine Colonel with over 2 decades of distinguished military service.
He was commissioned in 1996, earned his wings as a naval aviator and flew Harrier aircraft for the famous Black Sheep Fighter Attack Squadron. Ben is a weapons and tactics instructor with over 3200 flight hours, including 750 combat hours.
His staff assignments spanned Marine Special Operations Command, the F35 Joint Program Office and the Joint Staff, where he served as director of the Joint Capability Division. So Ben, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for joining us today.

Ben Hutchins
Thanks for having me, Adam.

Adam Kress
All right, let's jump into it. So I I generally ask everyone on this podcast this question, and I think it's especially apt for you. But how did you first get into aviation? Take me back when you were a kid. Did you did you fall in love? How did it start?

Ben Hutchins
Yeah, that's a great question. Actually, my father was a doctor in the Navy and he was, became an avid pilot in the civilian side to the point where he ended up being one of those doctors that flies around with one of the most dangerous people in civil aviation. And so we had an airplane growing up which really kind of got the juices flowing for me moving through that that time frame. And of course, you know, being a product of the born in the 70s, you know, kind of coming to my former years in the 80s, I have to admit that the Top Gun did play a little bit of a role in in what I wanted to do.

Adam Kress:
OK, what's your preference? The original Top Gun or the newer one?

Ben Hutchins
Well you know, I I think the original one, you know when you become a live that world for so many times you tend to find a lot of the things that maybe aren't as exactly correct like 5th Gen. is out for this. So we can't use the F35, you know type of role that was in the new model. But yeah, I I I really they're both good maybe.

Adam Kress
Yeah.

Ben Hutchins
But I enjoyed the first one.

Adam Kress
Yep, Yep, agreed. All right, we're going to get into more about your experience in the military, but tell me in a nutshell what what you do now in Honeywell Aerospace.

Ben Hutchins
Sure. So my job is really to translate into the Pentagon, both the Navy Marine Corps, which was kind of my background coming out of the active duty as well as up on the staff level for now called Office of Secretary of War. So translate in what our Honeywell capabilities are. And then how Honeywell can best support the warfighter moving forward. So a lot of engagement with senior leadership and then as well as facilitate a lot of our senior leadership to have those one-on-one engagements to make sure that we are continuing staying astep and abreast with what the department needs and delivering those vital capabilities to the warfighter.

Adam Kress
OK, excellent. If we go back to your time in the service, you had quite the journey. I ran through a couple different things you did, but you know, give me, give me the high points of it. What what was best about it?

Ben Hutchins
You know, like I said, I I I always wanted to fly. I wasn't sure what which pathway I was going to take. Initially I was a naval midshipman in college and then ended up during the Clinton downsizing. I was having too much fun in school. So they said if you don't have an engineering degree, you're not going to fly. So the Marine Corps said, hey, we'll take you over here.

And that was really a blessing because I think one of the most powerful things that I saw in my career was having the opportunity to work with people and the all of the military, but especially the Marines is quite a swath of Americana from all different economic backgrounds, diversity and cultures. And you really come together to work for one purpose and one focus, and it was a really, really neat to work with people and be part of that team in the military is what I really took out. Flying was great, but I can tell you that what was more rewarding was coming back and telling those young maintainers all what they had done or Intel people to prepare us to really achieve the objectives and it was really a good collaborative team effort along the way.

Adam Kress
OK, so take us inside the cockpit now. Could you even describe what it's like to someone who's not a pilot?

Ben Hutchins
You know, it's I I think that the best way to say it is it's a roller coaster. You're always kind of flying around with your pants on fire. And I I think as you become more accustomed to it, things slow down a little bit. So that kind of sports analogy where you see the game, things can slow down a little bit.
You know, I I was an attack guy most of my career. And so to my friends who are watching this, they're going to probably chuckle when you call me a fighter pilot because I did get to fly the F-35 later in my career. But that was more when I was an 06 and I had a 4 F-35 squadrons underneath me. But the advances in technology, the advances in capabilities are really eye watering. I mean, I was around literally when Boeing was delivering us brand new Harriers and at the end of my career I was around when Lockheed Martin was delivering us brand new F 35s. And so the advancements in pilot workload, the advancements in sensing. The advancements in ranging of your capabilities have gone really just just you know to the to the moon I I would say you know it's we're we're now having conversations where we're having airplanes gonna be getting updates from satellites in flight through beyond line of site communications.
Things that when I first started flying, you know we were limited to the radio distance that your FM or radio could talk. So it's UHF was our primary, but it was really now SATCOM then came and and now we're talking BLOS. So the advancements have really come a long way and are really exciting to see where they're going in the future.

Adam Kress
Yeah, I guess if you if you fast forward to someone maybe like yourself now who's just getting into the service or just starting to fly, you think about 6th generation fighters, where

do you, what do you predict will happen when it comes to the capabilities over the next say 10, 20 years?

Ben Hutchins
Yeah, I think you're going to find more work in the autonomous space, in the collaborative space between manned and unmanned teaming. CCA is collaborative combat collaborative aircraft moving forward. So I think you're going to start to see a lot of different ways that we can kind of, I would say flood the zone with lower cost.
Yeah, aircraft that are able to either be sensing to be able to potentially be magazines, airborne magazines for engagements as well as airborne tankers and to kind of keep that pacing going. And I think as we see advancements in AI and you know what they're going to be able to do, it's really going to put that kind of man, person in the loop as a quarterback and really kind of project that out and then have the ability to, you know, stay, stay in the air longer than we can. We, you know, 8 hours in an airplane can be a long time when you're strapped into an ejection seat. I think the longest I ever did was about 12 and I'm telling you, I could barely walk when I got out of the airplane, so
those are things and limitations that technology is able to overcome and provide the same capabilities and then really augment what we bring as fighter pilots to the to the equation.

Adam Kress
Yeah, it's interesting to think how the role and this is outside of the military too. Obviously we Honeywell Aerospace does work across commercial business, aviation, defense, everything. But we talk more and more about autonomy and you know, taking tasks off the pilot's plate and I think that's, that's apt regardless of what kind of plane we're flying, we'll see more and more autonomous capabilities.

Ben Hutchins
I agree. Yeah, I think we're also going to see some, a lot of abilities to navigate outside of the the general GPS. You know, Honeywell's kind of leading the charge there with our alternate PNT technologies as well as, you know, as you put more things out doing more capabilities, you know, we kind of think, well, what do pilots need at?
Aircraft, they need to have, you know, the situational awareness, but they also, you know, from a man perspective, oftentimes we talk about we got to have environmental control systems and OBOGs and things like that, which you know, our F35 PTMS was kind of revolutionary in the fact that it could do 14 of those functions, but at the same time, you know.

One would say, well, maybe you don't need that in an unmanned aircraft. I, you know, I

think if you look back and say, well, actually you do, because the big joke about the F35 was it was the the coolest airplane I ever flew in, literally like from an environmental perspective. But that was because the the three computers sat right behind my ejection seat and they were the ones that needed to be cooled. So think about all the electronic things. We're doing in the future electronic warfare. They all require power, they all require cooling and those are two bedrock areas that Honeywell Aerospace is really kind of leading the market in right now.

So Ben, you had mentioned the F35 and the PTMS or the power and thermal management system. I know that comes from Honeywell, but there's a lot more on that aircraft as well. Can you talk about some of those?

Ben Hutchins 20:20
Yeah, we do a lot of work in heat exchangers for the Bravo model. The fan duct heat exchangers were were quite the airplane I flew. So I flew the F-35B, which is the aircraft that's called the short takeoff vertical land. So not only did we have content on the the total F-35 fleet, but for the airplane.
Besides main engine controls, main fuel throttle valves, the three BSM which is the swivel in the back that helps that aircraft hover is a Honeywell product along with some of the roll post actuation system. So again thinking about how you take an airplane that normally generates lift through over the wing and has to now.
Use a powered system. We're definitely right in the middle of that that technology. We also through our navigation that are right in the middle of the navigation through our Aegis system, so embedded global positioning GPS system and then the 10s, the tactical navigation system is is a definite Honeywell product and then.
Through a recent acquisition of a company called CAES, which is now what we call EDS Electromagnetic Defense Solutions, we provide components through BAE for the EW, the ASQ 239 as well As for the radar, the APG 81. So a kind of total picture for both valving both power thermal management and then electronic warfare and navigation. So it's kind of a touches a lot of the cores of our business here at Honeywell Aerospace.

Adam Kress
Yeah, absolutely. All right. I want to transition to talk about the job transition, leaving the military, getting into the private sector. So now, now that you're in a civilian role, how do you leverage your experience and the connections that you built all those years in the military and apply them to your current work?

Ben Hutchins
Yeah, so connections are very important and understanding the customer. And so in this case understanding what the military customer is going to need moving forward, having lived in that world, having had the opportunity to see it from a requirements perspective, which is what I did when I retired out of the joint staff, I also got to work as a a short stint as a civilian in between getting out and coming to the Honeywell with R&E. So seeing how that test and evaluation and how technology is is maturating and then really taking that to some acquisition experience that I got to do in the service, how those fuse together, how can we understand what the customer needs, how can we bring a technology rapidly to bear and then how can we do deliver in a timely and a cost effective to the customer mentality. I think those even you know on the military side, it's same type of scale but in Honeywell side, I mean I'm just blown away at how big our reach is from subsurface all the way to space. So having those understandings of where the customer needs to go and then being able to kind of direct our team here and what those engagements look like to try to advance both our company's perspective in that space, but as well as meet and attain what the customer needs in a timely manner to win and win together both as a military and industrial based team.

Adam Kress
Yeah, it makes sense. What would you say has been the toughest part of the transition? Obviously, you know, the the rigor of the military and and the corporate world, just different beasts, right?

Ben Hutchins
They're a little bit different. You know what? The funny thing is, I I think the hardest part for me was translating into civilian speak or corporate speak what I did in the military. And I thought, oh, well, you know, I have to explain all my acronyms and then to come to the civilian world, we have a lot of acronyms too. So that.

Adam Kress
Yeah.

Ben Hutchins
That was, that was a challenge, you know, kind of learning to translate acronyms to new acronyms, but also to find, you know, how can I be value, how can I apply value to to the team here and and how does that value translate to our objectives as a company moving forward in the aerospace industry?

Adam Kress
What advice would you give to those, you know, considering a a similar move or getting ready to retire from the military? And is there anything you'd tell them that you wish you knew those couple years ago?

Ben Hutchins
I would say plan early again to that. How do you quantify what you do and and understand kind of the space you want to move into. Each industry has different segments, different things that they value more than others and then being able to translate that in a way that can show that value that you bring into the new team. I would say the other thing is you don't have to pay for coffee. I found that out when I first showed up. I was like, hey, there's coffee here, do I have to pay? So you know, it's a different world, but it's all rowing. I get to think in the same direction as what we did in the military, just did a different type of approach.

Adam Kress
Sure, sure. Makes sense. Was there anything, you know, when you moved in into the private sector that kind of surprised you the most or you wondered, geez, why do they do it this way?

Ben Hutchins
Yeah, you know what it was, Adam? It was you call your boss by their first name. That really blew me away. I got, I was sir sandwiching people left and right, and I think they were taken back. Hey, we're more informal here. So I had been inculcated in a certain way for so long. So that was.
The biggest surprise, but you know really from the the the objectives are the same as a military person, we consumed resource as an industry, we provide resource. How we account for that's very similar. Industry counts more on a quarterly basis. You know the government kind of accounts more on an annual basis with a mid-year type of review.
But you know, if you just kind of boil it down and understand the objectives, they're they're very similar in in how they conduct themselves as an organization.

Adam Kress
OK. When you think about the work you're doing now at Honeywell and the aerospace and defense sector in general, what gets you most excited about the future?

Ben Hutchins

I think that for us as a company, the fact that, you know, to be candid, I I didn't really fully appreciate all of what Honeywell brought to bear in the military space. So it gets me excited to educate people that, hey, we're we're more than just a thermostat company that we have content in your submarine marines and in your spacecraft and we've been on every manned NASA mission, those types of things. And I think there's a lot of emerging markets where we have a lot of ability to kind of contribute to us specifically in the maritime market with our our our controls and and valving in areas like that as well as again I mentioned the APNT. The assured position, navigation and timing space. And really how we are going to help the the military and the Joint Force to complete the kill chain through, you know, precise navigation that can operate outside of GPS and in GPS denied environments, how we can connect from a comms perspective from a holding a target in custody and then being able to prosecute that target through different means. And we have roles in each one of those those segments. I think it's going to be really helpful for us and it really the sky's the limit for us right now for this company. Very exciting.

Adam Kress
Yeah, yeah. I've been here close to 9 years now and you can absolutely never know what all the scope of of everything that we do within aerospace. It's it touches almost every aircraft flying. So Ben, I want to thank you so much for joining me today. Just one last question. We call the podcast Aerospace Unplugged.
So when you unplug and you're not worried about work, what do you like to do?

Ben Hutchins
You know, I I kind of like to just unplug myself and and work on things that I get to make, find new ways and creative solutions. So I'm a lot of mechanical cars, but I like to fabricate my own parts. So finding a finding something that needs needs a solution and and then applying some mental rigor.

Ben Hutchins
And making a solution, you know, I mean, it's my garage, it's it's OK, but it is, it does keep me satisfied and keep the brain going, which is I think the most important.

Adam Kress
So do you have like 3 cars in there that don't run or what?

Ben Hutchins

You know I I I am proud to say that I have every car I own is is registered runs and is on the road. But I would be embarrassed to tell you that I have 8 vehicles with multiple car lifts in there and and our President Matt Milas for defense and space he and I discuss often our our car hobby that we both have and.

Adam Kress
Oh.

Ben Hutchins
So yeah, it's a satisfying way to kind of put the pen down and pick up a wrench and move forward that way.

Adam Kress
OK, so if someone in the family is looking for you, it's oh, he's in the garage, right?

Ben Hutchins
That's right. You know, it's not too far. My wife can still grab me out when I when I need to focus more on the family time. So it's not playing golf away. So that's the one, the one way I sell it here.

Adam Kress
Yes, there you go. Very good. All right. Well, thanks again, Ben. I really appreciate you spending the time with us today. And thank you again to all the listeners out there. I hope you enjoyed it and we'll catch you on the next episode of Aerospace Unplugged.