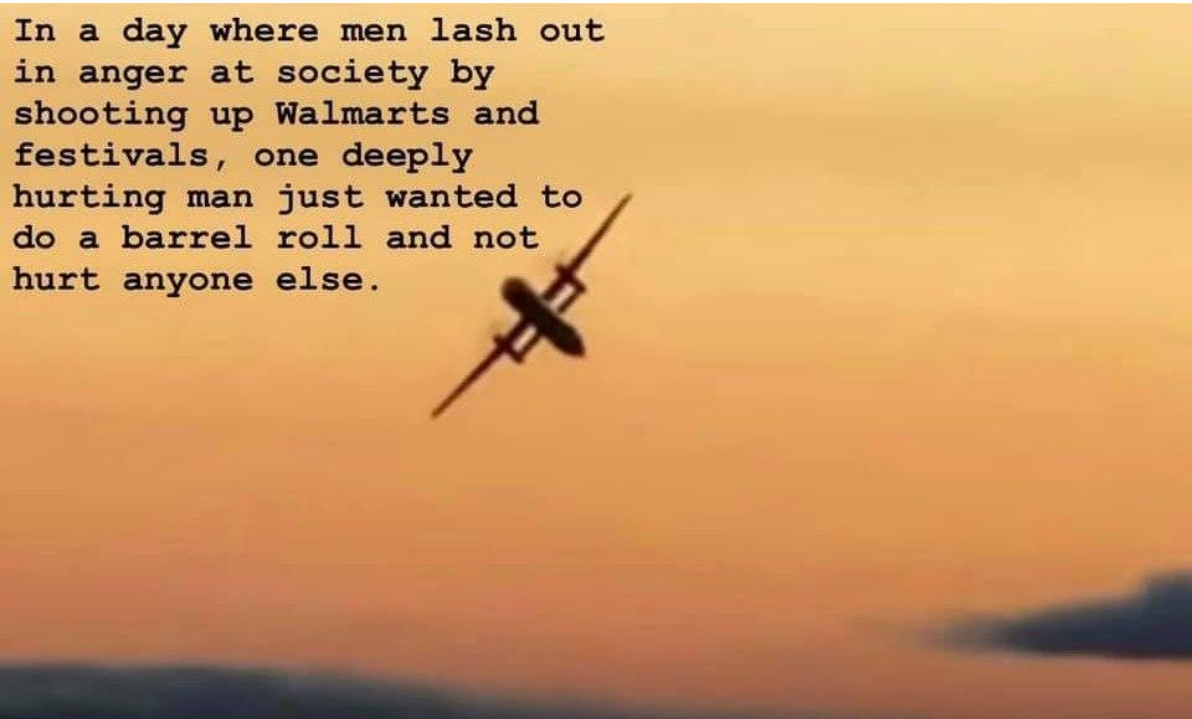


# Sky King Richard Russell's Full Conversation with Air Traffic Control

In a day where men lash out  
in anger at society by  
shooting up Walmarts and  
festivals, one deeply  
hurting man just wanted to  
do a barrel roll and not  
hurt anyone else.



On the evening of August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Richard Russell—aka “Sky King”—took off in a stolen Bombardier Q400 from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. For over an hour, he flew over Puget Sound, speaking candidly with air traffic controllers. His words, at times humorous and lighthearted, at other moments deeply introspective and heartbreaking, offer a rare glimpse into the mind of someone struggling in silence.

Below, you’ll find various transcribed versions of the Russel’s final conversation with Air Traffic Control (ATC), as shown in the documentary #Skyking. This conversation is a powerful reminder of the importance of mental health awareness, especially for men who often feel they have nowhere to turn.

☒ **If you or someone you know is struggling, please visit this Resources Page for support. You are not alone.**

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**ATC:** Aircraft on Charlie lining up on runway one six center, say your call sign.

The Dash eight holding on runway one six center.

The Dash on runway one six center, say your call sign.

Who is the Dash 8 holding on runway one six center?

**Russell:** Seattle Ground. Horizon guy, about to take off. This is going to be crazy.

**Russell:** Hey, Horizon Ground, you on? Seattle Ground, I mean.

**ATC:** Who is transmitting on Ramp?

**Russell:** Sorry. Horizon guy, 449 Quebec X-ray.

**ATC:** Yeah, 449. Did you just take off?

**Russell:** Yeah.

**ATC:** And you’re not supposed to be on that aircraft?

**Russell:** Uh, no.

**ATC:** What’s going on? Are you flying the plane?

**Russell:** Uh, I did a kind of a bad thing. Kind of a selfish thing. Uh. Hah! But it’s all good. I’m gonna go check out Rainier.

**ATC:** Yeah, 449. So, you hijacked the plane is what you’re saying?

**Russell:** Uh, yeah.

**ATC:** 449, say again.

**Russell:** Yeah, I’m afraid I did. You know, I don’t want to take up... take up this channel. What’s another good one to talk to?

**ATC:** 449, stand by. I’m getting a frequency for you.

**Russell:** Hey, copy that. I appreciate it. Hey. Any idea if a Dash 8 Q400 can do a barrel roll?

**ATC:** The gentleman flying the Q400, can you hear me?

**Russell:** Hey, you on?

**ATC:** Yeah, Seattle Approach here.

**Russell:** — Hey. — Too low terrain. — I keep getting a weather... — Pull up. like a weather thing. I just want to talk to you.

**ATC:** Okay, and you’re in the... You’re in the Dash 8 that just took off Sea-Tac?

**Russell:** Yeah, affirmative.

**ATC:** And do you have a call sign?

**Russell:** Nah man, I’m a ground service agent. I don’t know what that is.

**Russell:** Yeah I never really learned how to land the plane. I did a lot of research on like how to start it up and get it to go. Did a couple of hours, I guess. But, yeah, I wouldn’t know how to land it. I wasn’t really planning on landing it.

**Russell:** Hey. Can you get a Q400 expert on, or just some guy who knows all about it?

**ATC:** Ok, ah. Nobody here knows how to fly one of those aircraft, but we'll see what we can do and get you in contact with somebody.

**Russell:** Alrighty, um yeah I just kind of want to do a couple maneuvers, see what it can do before I put her down you know.

**ATC:** Okay, and what's your name?

**Russell:** That's a question I've been asking my whole life. Identity issues.

**ATC:** Just so I can talk to you, what's your name so I can reach out to you a little easier?

**Russell:** Sorry, my mic came off. I threw up a little bit. You know—

I— Hold on— Shoot. Man, I'm sorry about this. I hope this doesn't ruin your day.

**ATC:** No, no. You're not ruining my day. I just— can I just get your first name so I can, I know what to call you? So it'll be a little easier to talk to you.

**Russell:** Yeah, Richard Russell.

**ATC:** Okay, Rich, appreciate that.

**ATC:** As far as just flying the plane around, you seem comfortable with that?

**Russell:** Oh, hell yeah, it's a blast, man. I've played video games before, so I— You know, I know what I'm doing a little bit.

**ATC:** Okay, and— and you can see all the terrain around you? You've got no issue with visibility or anything?

**Russell:** Nah, everything's peachy, peachy clean. Just did a little circle around Rainier. It's beautiful. I think I got some gas to go check out the Olympics. And, yeah.

**ATC:** Okay, and Rich, do you know, are you able to tell what altitude you're at?

**Russell:** I don't know if I want to return this plane because I threw up all inside of it. It's bad.

**Russell:** Hey, FAA guy, Andrew, you on?

**ATC:** Yeah, I'm still here, Rich. Rich, can you hear me?

**Russell:** How'd you get your job?

**ATC:** You asked how I got my job? I just applied for it online.

**Russell:** No way, straight off the street?

**ATC:** Well, I had some experience prior.

**Russell:** Right. Yeah, what kind of experience?

**ATC:** Just military service.

**Russell:** Hey, thanks for your service.

**ATC:** Thank you.

**Russell:** I was too fat. Well, yeah, I'm too fat to join. I was thinking about it and probably a good thing I didn't.

**Russell:** Hey, what's your name, FAA guy?

**ATC:** Rich, my name is Andrew. And— Is there any chance that I can give you some headings or some control instructions to help you out here?

**Russell:** Yeah, that's all mumbo jumbo. I have no idea what all that means. I wouldn't know how to punch it in.

**ATC:** But if I were to give you like a heading, maybe you could look at the compass. If I gave you a heading that would be what the compass says.

**Russell:** Oh, right near the jets? You're going to take me to the jets?

**ATC:** No, I'm not taking you to any jets. I'm actually keeping you away from aircraft that are trying to land at Sea-Tac.

**Russell:** Oh, okay, yeah, yeah. I don't want to screw with that. I'm glad— glad you're not uh... you know, screwing up everyone else's day on account of me.

**ATC:** Okay, Rich, do you have an idea of how much fuel you have left?

**Russell:** Damn! I already burned like a thousand pounds, so I'm down to 2,100. I started at like 30 something.

**ATC:** Rich, you said you're at 2,100 pounds of fuel left?

**Russell:** Yeah, I don't know what the burn it, burn itch, burnout is like on, uh, on takeoff, but, uh, yeah, it burned quite a bit faster than I expected.

**ATC:** Okay.

**ATC:** Okay, Rich. And, instead of bringing you back to Sea-Tac, there is the runway just off your right side in about a mile. Do you see that? That's the— that's McChord Field.

**Russell:** Oh man, those guys would rough me up if I tried landing there. Oh! They probably got anti-aircraft (laughs)!

**ATC:** No (laughs), they don't have any of that stuff. We're just trying to find a place for you to land safely.

**Russell:** Yeah Not quite ready to bring it down just yet, but holy smokes, I gotta— I gotta stop looking at the fuel because it's going down quick!

**ATC:** Okay, Rich, if you could, could you start a left-hand turn and we'll take you down to the southeast please?

**Russell:** This is probably like jail time for life, huh? I mean, I would hope it is. For a guy like me?

**ATC:** Well, Rich, we're not going to worry or think about that, but could you start a left-hand turn, please?

**Russell:** ... That bug me.

**ATC:** And Rich, here in a second, there's going to be another pilot that comes on. And he's a— he's a pilot of a Q400. And he's gonna try and help you out here a little bit, okay?

**ATC:** And I think you might have some questions Rich uh I've got a pilot on with us and uh if you got any questions you can ask him now.

**Russell:** Hey uh... well first off you're a little a little breaking up a bit um maybe I'm too far away, what's the distance on this frequency?

**Russell:** You are a very calm, collect voice. Not saying the wrong things. I know— you don't got to beat around the bush with me though. I'm not a sensitive kind of guy. So—

**ATC:** 400 apparently is the grounds crewman with the horizon, I guess, and uh... Okay, very good, thank you. Right now he's just flying around, and uh, he just needs some help controlling his aircraft.

**Russell:** Very good nah I mean I don't need that much help I've played some video games before uh I would like to figure out how to get this cabin altitude like I know where the box is I would like to get some uh make it make it pressurized or something so I'm not so light-headed.

**Captain Bill:** Rich what's your altitude?

**Russell:** Yeah I don't know anything uh I don't know anything about the autopilot I'm just kind of hand flying right now.

**Captain Bill:** Okay, do you know how fast you're going?

**ATC:** What were you thinking? You thinking you want to try and land?

**Russell:** Hey, I'll go on record for saying, you know, if you asked me why I did it, it's probably because... probably because not making minimum wage. We'll chalk it up to that. Maybe that'll grease the gears a little bit with the higher ups? Maybe— Yeah.

**Russell:** I think I lost you behind some hills a little bit. I'm coming back though.

**ATC:** Rich, are you still there?

**Russell:** Yeah. Hey boys.

**ATC:** Ok, Rich. Uh, do you have an idea of how much fuel you have left?

**Russell:** Aw, man, I'm sick. I'm throwing up quite a bit.

Andrew, I want you to whisper sweet nothings into my ear.

**ATC:** Rich, I don't think I can do that for you.

Can you tell me, do you know how much fuel you have left?

**Russell:** Damn it, Andrew! People's lives are at stake here!

**ATC:** Now, Rich, don't— don't say stuff like that.

**Russell:** Nah, I told you I'm not— I don't want to hurt no one. I just want you to whisper sweet nothings into my ear.

**Russell:** You think that'd be better than trying to land it? Like I know how to put the landing gear down.

**Captain Bill:** Your power, that's probably 50%, that'd be the two top gauges right in the center on the glass display there and then press uh well tell me uh do your power at 50% or tell me what you got.

**Russell:** Yeah I got it like 20 idle.

**Captain Bill:** Well that's too slow bring it up to like 50. On the other side on the bottom it says HDG and it's got a little blue uh M on it. You can crank that around and uh and uh you know what tell you what let's just do this um push you see the HDD HDG button uh right by that little thumb wheel?

**Russell:** I didn't know you could do that with these things uh... so what would... if you were to do it how would you do it?

**Russel:** Uh... Where do I see that at?

**ATC:** Yeah, he's at 300 knots over the ground.

**Captain:** Okay, well, try not to go any faster than that because that's hard on the airplane. We don't want to hurt the airplane.

**Russel:** Oh, gotcha. Hey, pilot guy- You think- You think this thing can do a barrel roll?

**Captain:** Well, I'd try to figure out how to use the autopilot first.

**Russel:** Boring!

**Captain Bill:** Not concentrate so much on flying here.

**Russel:** You think if I land this successfully, Alaska will give me a job as a pilot?

**ATC:** Uh... You know, I think they would give you a job doing anything if you could pull this off.

**Russel:** Yeah, right! Nah, I'm a white guy.

**Russel:** Sorry, we won't get political.

**ATC:** Yeah, we don't talk about religion and politics on the flight deck.

**Russel:** Yeah (laughs).

**Russell:** Yeah, you do, man. Hey, FA, you got engine, you off.

**ATC:** Yeah, I'm still here, Rich.

**ATC:** Hey, Rich. How do you feel about just flying over Puget Sound for a while?

**Russel:** That'd be a good place to shoot me down, huh?

**ATC:** Well, it'd be a soft place to land.

**Russel:** Uh... I wouldn't want to drown.

**ATC:** Everybody's out sailing tonight. There'll be a million sailboats to pick you up.

**Russel:** That sounds nice, but I don't think a sailboat would get to me before the guys with the guns.

**ATC:** Well, there's plenty of life jackets on that aircraft, so you wouldn't have to worry about having to swim.

**Russel:** I don't want to have to deal with the repercussions. It's just kind of easier to just nose down, close my eyes or something, you know? It's sad, but kind of not either.

**ATC:** Well, Rich, just like you said, you don't want to hurt anybody, and we don't want to see you get hurt either.

**Russel:** Hey, where are the jets at? I want to see those guys flying around.

**ATC:** If you wanted to land, probably the best bet is that runway just ahead and to your left. Again, that's the McCord Field. If you wanted to try, that might be the best way to set up and see if he can land there. Or just like the pilot suggests, another option would be over Puget Sound into the water.

**Russell:** Dang. Did you talk to McCord yet? Because I don't think I'd be happy with you telling me I could land like that, because I could mess some stuff up.

**ATC:** Well, Rich, I already talked to him, and just like me, what we want to see is you not get hurt or anybody else get hurt. So, like I said, if you want to try to land, that's probably the best place to go.

**Russel:** Hey, I want the coordinates of that orca with the... you know the mama orca, with the baby? I want to go see that guy.

**ATC:** Now just— just off your right and behind you, there is another aircraft. Would you be willing to talk to them if they're on the frequency and maybe they can help you land?

**Russel:** Um. Sure. I mean, I'm always down to talk to people. Uh... I'm super thirsty though. I threw up pretty much everything I had, so I kinda gotta go in the back and get some water.

**Russell:** Hey, what's that airport right there behind me? Like to my left.

**ATC:** Okay, Rich, well first of all, we just need you to keep flying the aircraft. So if you could just stay there and keep flying the aircraft. The airport you just passed over on your left, that's the Tacoma Narrows Airport. I mean, that's also an option if you want to try going there. But, like I said earlier, McChord, that's a bigger runway. if you wanted to try to land there.

**ATC:** No, no, no, no. Rich, if you could just stay in the seat, stay in the cockpit and stay with me on the radio, please.

**Russel:** Yeah, yeah, I already did it once, it's cool. But I just— (laughs) I got to step on my throw up, that's disgusting. One sec.

**Captain:** Hey, Rich. This is Captain Bill here. We're still listening. My airplane's doing just fine. How's yours?

**ATC:** He just stepped out for a second. He'll be right back on.

**Captain:** Okay.

**Russel:** Alright, I'm back.

**ATC:** All right, Rich. Welcome back. So, did you give any extra thought as to what you want to do? Do you want to try and land at McChord? Or were you thinking about on the water? Or what are you thinking?

**Russel:** I kinda fly by the set of my pants. Pun intended. I'm not quite sure what I want to do yet. I do want to see if I can land. That'd be cool, but I don't feel like living anymore, so... that's kind of the problem that I'm dealing with.

**ATC:** I said it would be a better option, I think, if you tried to land it or even land it on the water.

**Russell:** Yeah. Hey, is that pilot on? I want to know what this weather's going to be like in the Olympics.

**Captain Bill:** Well, if you can see the Olympics, the weather's good. I can see the Olympics from my window, and it looks pretty good over there.

**Russell:** All right, because I hit some, it felt like turbulence around Rainier, but there's no clouds, Harvey.

**Captain Bill:** Oh, that's just the wind blowing over all the bumpy surfaces there.

**Russell:** Oh, copy that.

**ATC:** But Rich, if you could, maybe start a left-hand turn, start turning back around because if you get too close to the Olympics, you won't be able to hear us anymore. 33.65 again.

**Russell:** Road, you too.

**ATC:** Turn back around here, like I said, I just want to keep talking to you. And if you keep going towards the Olympic Mountains, we won't be able to hear each other.

**ATC:** Turn back around so we can stay in contact with you.

**Russel:** I got a lot of people that care about me, and it's going to disappoint them to hear that I did this. Um... I would like to apologize to each and every one of them. Just a broken guy. Got a few screws loose, I guess. Never really knew it until now. Um... It's, you know—

**ATC:** Well, Rich, you know you seem to get— you seem like you're getting down on yourself but there's no need to do that.

I mean, we're— we all get down on ourselves a little bit, but, there's no need to get upset with ourselves about it, you know.

**ATC:** Want to uh come in here and start talking to Rich as well?

**Russell:** ... is that shit easy to come by?

**Russel:** Man, have you been to the Olympics? These guys are gorgeous. Holy smokes!

**ATC:** Yeah, I have been out there. It's– It's always a nice drive.

**Russell:** Think I might have ...

**ATC:** Yeah yeah I bet you do, I haven't done much hiking over there and uh, but if you could if you could start a left turn And turn back towards the east. I know you're getting a good view there, but if you go too much further in that direction, I won't be able to hear you anymore.

**Russell:** Alrighty, hey, pilot guy, can this thing do a backflip, you think?

**Russel:** Yeah, I don't think I'm going to land it. Like, in a safe, safe kind of manner. Think I'm gonna try to do a barrel roll, and if that goes good I'll just go nose down and call it a night.

**Captain Bill:** Well, Rich, before you do that, let's think about this. I've got another pilot coming up, Pilot Joel, here in just a minute or two, I hope. And we'll be able to give you some advice on what to do next.

... We call it a bug. It's like a little blue rectangle that's somewhere around the compass. Do you see that?

**Russell:** Um... Just kind of lightheaded dizzy um...

**Russell:** Man, and you know, the sights went by so fast. I was thinking I'm gonna have this moment of serenity. You know, be able to just take all in all the sights, and– there's a lot of pretty stuff, but I think they're prettier in a different context.

**Pilot Joel:** The right hand side, above you, on the right hand side air conditioning panel, you'll see it. It's a big panel. There's three switches along the top of it. Make sure all three of those switches are in the down position facing the nose of the airplane.

**Russell:** ... I don't know where I've been at this whole time.

**ATC:** Okay, Rich, thank you.

**Russell:** 2500 to be exact.

**ATC:** Okay, thank you. And do you have an idea of how much fuel you have left?

**ATC:** Hey. Hey Rich. How much fuel you got left on there?

**Russel:** Oh, man, not enough. Not enough to get by, like, uh, 760– 760 pounds.

**ATC:** Okay, Rich. Thank you.

**Russell:** Just going to do this barrel role real quick.

**ATC:** Well, no need to do that. If you could just start a turn to the right, and then I'll tell you when to stop turning, and then you can keep it level from there.

**Russel:** I think this is part of the reason why I decided to do something so extreme, is just 'cause everything is always business all the time. Even when you know, you're hanging out with people, it's just business.

Um... I just– You know, those real close personal moments are just so few and far between. Um... Yeah, it sucks. So, like, I wouldn't mind just shooting the shit with you guys, but it's all business, you know.

**ATC:** Yeah, Rich. We'd like to talk to you too. So, you've made a turn– a right turn to the west now, so if you could just stop your turn and then keep it nice and level there and then we can start talking.

Maybe we can set up something, maybe a place for you to land.

**Russel:** Alright. Well, I'll keep climbing a little bit. I feel like I need to be– What do you think? Like 5,000 feet at least to be able to pull this barrel roll off?

**Captain:** Really, there's no safe altitude for that. I wouldn't even try it. You're gonna hurt somebody on the ground.

**ATC:** And Rich, you said you didn't want to hurt anybody on the ground. And we don't want see you get hurt either.

**ATC:** If you could, I see you're still turning to the right, do you want to maybe start making a turn back to the left a little bit?

**Captain:** Rich, you'd be a hero if you could pull off a landing.

**Russel:** No, I would just be a public nuisance that goes to jail for the rest of my life. So. I've been kind of weighing my options back and forth, and though I would love three squares a day and just reading books the whole time and I know I'd get some letters from my loved ones. I got a bunch of them out there. Um... You know, it just wouldn't be the best, you know?

**Captain:** You've got a wife.

**Russel:** Oh, you Facebook-stalked me?

**Russel's Mom:** I still can't believe he chose the path he chose, I didn't see it.

**Onlookers filming:** He's turning. He's completely sideways. He's going all the way. He's upside down.

— Oh, my God! — Sh...

Holy shit! Holy shit, man!

Holy shit! Holy shit!

**Automated warning:** Pull up. Pull up.

**Onlookers filming:** Oh, my God. I'm gonna have a heart attack.

Oh, my God. Is he okay? He's okay.

He's okay! He's okay, he's okay, he's okay.

**Fighter pilot:** TOI-1 just completed a barrel roll. Current altitude, 2,000 feet.

**Ground:** ROCK 42, confirm he did a barrel roll.

**Fighter pilot:** Affirm, he cleared the surface of the water by approximately 10 feet.

**ATC Boss:** He did it. He completed the barrel roll.

**Russel:** Hey, is that my jet pilot finally?

**Captain:** Alright, Rich, this is Captain Bill. Congratulations, you did that. Now let's try to land that airplane safely and not hurt anybody on the ground.

**ATC Boss:** All right, ROCK is trying to talk him into landing the airplane now.

**Russel:** All right. Ah, damn it. I don't know. Man, I don't know! I don't want to. I was kind of hoping that was going to be it, you know?

**ATC:** Hey, Rich, how much fuel you got left on there?

**Russel:** Uh... Over 500, like 550.

**ATC:** Okay.

**ATC:** Rich, you still there?

**Russel:** Yeah, not for long. I feel like one of my engines is going out or something.

**ATC:** Okay, Rich, if you could, you just want to keep that plane right over the water? Maybe keep the aircraft nice and low? Can you do that?

41 can you just verify that... that he's still over the water there?

**Captain:** Hey Rich, this is Captain Bill. How's it going up there?

**ATC chatter:** All right, just got a report on another phone that ROCK 41 reports splash.

Okay.

And target fade at 03:48. Target fade.

Western.

Colleen here.

Okay, Jason. Did you hear that?

Yes.

Alright, ROCK 42 reported that he hit the island.

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