

Reflections of a Senior Flight Surgeon:

Special Kinds of Aviator

By Capt. Frank E. Dully, Jr., MC

EVERY squadron commander could benefit by a pocket checklist that identifies behavioral deviances in his charges that would signify the need for special attention. Obviously there is no such gouge. But we have ample experience in other's mistakes that offers a framework against which actions can be compared.

We have identified:

- The Stressed Aviator
- The Failing Aviator
- The Youthful Exuberant
- The Impulsive Kid
- The Bridled Opportunist
- The Maker of the Simple Mistake

The Stressed Aviator

The Stressed Aviator will have to be quantified on a case by-case basis. This man's problem is that his flying abilities may be temporarily compromised by preoccupation; he is unable to bring his many talents to bear on a particular flight challenge.



The distraction need not be severe or prolonged; it need only come at a bad time. The nature of the problem is such that the aviator is unable to adequately compartmentalize the distraction out of his consciousness, and he ends up with divided attention in an arena that will not allow it.

The Stressed Aviator makes many judgments about coping with everyday stresses colored by a superimposed template of whether his travails are normal or abnormal.

He looks upon some problems as originals, as one-time events that have been visited upon him but not on others. He grapples with them in silence because the flier believes such events involve a certain culpability.

Irreverent hoots await someone who admits to difficulty on post-deployment reintegration into his family. Healthy aviators are not allowed such problems.

The resumption of flying after years in successive staff jobs can be a most threatening experience. These men return to the fleet in highly visible leadership position in testimony to their superior performance ashore. Picture the prospective XO who is expected to sail through CQ and hurry out there, but has only flown in the back of an Eastern Airlines 727 for the last seven years. This man is a prime example of a Stressed Aviator -- and for good reason.

The Failing Aviator



One type of Failing Aviator is a transitory aberrant whose marriage is in a tailspin. His problem is that he failed to see the importance of his primary support system (his spouse) until it was withdrawn. He may ultimately use the expensive tools of his occupation to inappropriately attempt to counteract this deeply personal, non-occupational problem. He is a unique risk-taker, and will ignore normal elements of discipline in aviation. We know what he looks like. He can be helped.

The Failing Aviator's failure begins in his home and ultimately spreads into every compartment of his life. His spouse's expectations go unmet, and, frequently, his own expectations are also compromised. Her anger and disappointment becomes aimed directly at him. In her bitterness, his failure is molded into something quite concrete: He has failed as a man.

He sets out on a manly series of ventures designed to prove to the world that he is, indeed, very masculine and very much in command. His antics will take place at the bar, in his automobile, on the playing field, at parties, in leisure activities, in bedrooms and ultimately in his aircraft. This person is not aware that there is a pattern and design to his behavior. The prudent CO will hold a human factors board to confront him. The board may recommend removing him from flight status, insuring that he understands what he has been doing and why, and then give him the time required to restore order to his life by whatever non-destructive means he chooses.

The cop-out response by decision-makers is to simply ground every aviator who has marital discord in his life. Though this is seen in some aviation communities as the safe way to approach the problem, it is wasteful.

The Youthful Exuberant



Many enter naval aviation, where professional precision is symbolized by the tailhook, because the mere adventure of being such a professional is a special magnet. Like the Failing Aviator, the Youthful Exuberant is clearly at risk for behavioral aberrations likely to make him a statistic because he never outgrows his immaturity. He identifies himself by constantly being at the edge of acceptable behavior.

This man will respond to the continuous pressure of others to conform. He ultimately conforms either because his own black-and-blue has taught him the necessity of behavioral limitations or it was made crystal clear to him by important people that his antics were unacceptable.

The Impulsive Kid



Resident in each of us is an impetuous undisciplined Impulsive Kid. He is the one who sails through stop signs and yellow lights. This sublimated youngster is the antithesis of the professional aviator. Education and training in adulthood, if completely successful, would subvert any likelihood of this childhood vestige surfacing. He issues himself a waiver of rules that have heretofore applied. This one time, he says, won't make any difference, and besides, no one will know.

What the Impulsive Kid fails to assess is that in opting to perform in an arena where he is inexperienced, he is placing himself in the very same jeopardy that he assiduously avoids in all other arenas of his life.

Maybe one of our problems is that the "system" subtly allows such activity. Witness the closing of the ranks in either one of two directions when the flagrant deviation occurs. We would be much better off recognizing that without regard for who did it in the past and got away with it, it's not tolerable, period. You don't educate people into this, you pressure them. It takes a hammer, not a book.

The Bridled Opportunist



Perhaps there is one kind of aviator for whom the discipline of the trade I speak of correctly comes closer to being seen as punitive than for the others. This is the Bridled Opportunist. Given the chance, he is regularly going to break the rules. The solution is involvement in a team where flagrant deviance from standard procedures would instantly get him in trouble with the group. When he thinks he can get away with it though, he will be the sand blowing flat-hatter. As long as he believes that the climate in which he operates would openly disapprove, he will conform. Are there clues to the existence of the Bridled Opportunist? Can anyone tell in advance that this person would regularly seek to violate the rules for no other reason than that the rules are there? How can you diagnose, in advance, this Forbidden Fruit Syndrome? The answer is to keep track of how close he has come, how many times; know what forces are arrayed that prevent him from crossing the line, and ensure that they are in place. Sometimes we fail to give "the system" sufficient credit for its keeping the behavior of its members within expected parameters. For the Bridled Opportunist, it is what's keeping him alive.

The Maker of The Simple Mistake



Last, but not least, are mistakes — honest, unpredictable mistakes where a wrong course of action was selected. The use of the retrospectoscope to reconstruct events is the way to identify a mistake. Dispassionately selecting options on Monday morning for what should have happened during Saturday's chaos is both easy and objective. The system must be set up so that the simple mistake becomes something from which all can learn. But to punish for a mistake is wrong. If some mistakes are so basic as to indicate severely flawed competence, that is an issue deserving special remedial attention in the training command. The same mistake, such as an approach turn stall behind the boat, requires quite different handling. Neither of these is punitive.

Every blackshoe knows that if he hazards his craft, if he so much as sucks bottom sand into his intakes, he's gone. They'll replace him with somebody who won't. The commanding officer's responsibility in the surface Navy carries a harsh and traditional accountability that surprises no one. What surprises me is that an aircraft commander feels no such accountability. The aviator, like the destroyer man, may well be told to go into harm's way, but not frivolously or not on an ego trip. And not to be part of a system that would let a Youthful Exuberant get in over his head; let a Failing Aviator try to use operational assets to prove an unprovable thesis; or let a damn fool Impulsive Kid behave irresponsibly, even once.

What this occupation lacks is precisely what turned off my students at Monterey. It is discipline in all its subtleties. With it, accountability would be alive, well and living in Naval Aviation.

Capt. Dully is assigned to the Naval Postgraduate School. He is well known for his lecture "Sex and the Naval Aviator," which deals with the personality and various mental and physical stimuli of flight crews.