

Is Naval Aviation Culture Dead?

By John Lehman

The swaggering-flyer mystique forged over the past century has been stymied in recent years by political correctness. We celebrate the 100th anniversary of U.S. naval aviation this year, but the culture that has become legend was born in controversy, with battleship admirals and Marine generals seeing little use for airplanes. Even after naval aviators proved their worth in World War I, naval aviation faced constant conflict within the Navy and Marine Corps, from the War Department, and from skeptics in Congress. Throughout the interwar period, its culture was forged largely unnoted by the public.

It first burst into the American consciousness 69 years ago when a few carrier aviators changed the course of history at the World War II Battle of Midway. For the next three years the world was fascinated by these glamorous young men who, along with the Leathernecks, dominated the newsreels of the war in the Pacific. Most were sophisticated and articulate graduates of the Naval Academy and the Ivy League, and as such they were much favored for Pathé News interviews and War Bond tours. Their casualty rates from accidents and combat were far higher than other branches of the naval service, and aviators were paid nearly a third more than non-flying shipmates. In typical humor, a pilot told one reporter: “We don’t make more money, we just make it faster.”

Landing a touchy World War II fighter on terra firma was difficult enough, but to land one on a pitching greasy deck required quite a different level of skill and sangfroid. It took a rare combination of hand-eye coordination, innate mechanical sense, instinctive judgment, accurate risk assessment, and most of all, calmness under extreme pressure. People with such a rare combination of talents will always be few in number. The current generation of 9-G jets landing at over 120 knots hasn’t made it any easier.

Little wonder that poker was a favorite recreation and gallows humor the norm. In his book ‘Crossing the Line’, Professor Alvin Kernan recounts when his TBF had a bad launch off the USS Suwanee (CVE-27) in 1945. He was trying desperately to get out of the sinking plane as the escort carrier sped by a few feet away. Looking up, he saw the face of his shipmate, Cletus Powell (who had just won money from him playing blackjack), leaning out of a porthole shouting “Kernan, you don’t have to pay. Get out, get out for God’s sake.” No wonder such men had a certain swagger that often irritated their non-flying brothers in arms.

Louis Johnson’s Folly By war’s end more than 100 carriers were in commission. But when Louis Johnson replaced the first Secretary of Defense, Jim Forrestal—himself one of the original naval aviators in World War I—he tried to eliminate both the Marine Corps and naval aviation. By 1950 Johnson had ordered the decommissioning of all but six aircraft carriers. Most historians count this as one of the important factors in bringing about the invasion of South Korea, supported by both China and the Soviet Union. After that initial onslaught, no land airbases were available for the Air Force to fight back, and all air support during those disastrous months came from the USS Valley Forge (CV-45), the only carrier left in the western Pacific. She was soon joined by the other two carriers remaining in the Pacific.

Eventually enough land bases were recovered to allow the Air Force to engage in force, and more carriers were recommissioned, manned by World War II vets hastily recalled to active duty. James Michener’s *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* and Admiral James Holloway’s *Aircraft*

Carriers at War together capture that moment perfectly. Only later was it learned that many of the enemy pilots were battle-hardened Russian veterans of World War II. By the time of the armistice, the Cold War was well under way, and for the next 43 years, naval aviation was at the leading edge of the conflict around the globe. As before, aviators suffered very high casualties throughout. Training and operational accidents took a terrible toll. Jet fighters on straight decks operating without the sophisticated electronics or reliable ejection seats that evolved in later decades had to operate come hell or high water as one crisis followed another in the Taiwan Strait, Cuba, and many lesser-known fronts. Between 1953 and 1957, hundreds of naval aviators were killed in an average of 1,500 crashes per year, while others died when naval intelligence gatherers like the EC-121 were shot down by North Koreans, Soviets, and Chinese. In those years carrier aviators had only a one-in-four chance of surviving 20 years of service.

Vietnam and the Cold War

The Vietnam War was an unprecedented feat of endurance, courage, and frustration in ten years of constant combat. Naval aviators flew against the most sophisticated Soviet defensive systems and highly trained and effective Vietnamese pilots. But unlike any previous conflict, they had to operate under crippling political restrictions, well known to the enemy. Anti-aircraft missiles and guns were placed in villages and other locations known to be immune from attack. The kinds of targets that had real strategic value were protected while hundreds of aviators' lives and thousands of aircraft were lost attacking easily rebuilt bridges and "suspected truck parks," as the U.S. government indulged its academic game theories.

Stephen Coonts' "Flight of the Intruder" brilliantly expressed the excruciating frustration from this kind of combat. During that period, scores of naval aviators were killed or taken prisoner. More than 100 squadron commanders and executive officers were lost. The heroism and horror of the POW experience for men such as John McCain and Jim Stockdale were beyond anything experienced since the war with Japan.

Naturally, when these men hit liberty ports, and when they returned to their bases between deployments, their partying was as intense as their combat. The legendary stories of Cubi Point, Olongapo City, and the wartime Tailhook conventions in Las Vegas grew with each passing year.

Perhaps the greatest and least known contribution of naval aviation was its role in bringing the Cold War to a close. President Ronald Reagan believed that the United States could win the Cold War without combat. Along with building the B-1 and B-2 bombers and the Peacekeeper missile, and expanding the Army to 18 divisions, President Reagan built the 600-ship Navy and, more important, approved the Navy recommendation to begin at once pursuing a forward strategy of aggressive exercising around the vulnerable coasts of Russia. This demonstrated to the Soviets that we could defeat the combined Warsaw Pact navies and use the seas to strike and destroy their vital strategic assets with carrier-based air power.

Nine months after the President's inauguration, three U.S. and two Royal Navy carriers executed offensive exercises in the Norwegian Sea and Baltic. In this and subsequent massive exercises there and in the northwest Pacific carried out every year, carrier aircraft proved that they could operate effectively in ice and fog, penetrate the best defenses, and strike all of the bases and nodes of the Soviet strategic nuclear fleet. Subsequent testimony from members

of the Soviet General Staff attested that this was a major factor in the deliberations and the loss of confidence in the Soviet government that led to its collapse.

During those years naval aviation adapted to many new policies, the removal of the last vestiges of institutional racial discrimination, and the first winging of women as naval aviators and their integration into ships and squadrons.

‘Break the Culture’

1991 marked the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the end of the Cold War. But as naval aviation shared in this triumph, the year also marked the start of tragedy. The Tailhook Convention that took place in September that year began a scandal with a negative impact on naval aviation that continues to this day. The over-the-top parties of combat aviators were overlooked during the Vietnam War but had become accidents waiting to happen in the postwar era.

Whatever the facts of what took place there, it set off investigations within the Navy, the Department of Defense, the Senate, and the House that were beyond anything since the investigations and hearings regarding the Pearl Harbor attack. Part of what motivated this grotesquely disproportionate witch hunt was pure partisan politics and the deep frustration of Navy critics (and some envious begrudgers within the Navy) of the glamorous treatment accorded to the Navy and its aviators in Hollywood and the media, epitomized by the movie *Top Gun*. Patricia Schroeder (D-CO), chair of the House Armed Services Committee investigation, declared that her mission was to “break the culture,” of naval aviation. One can make the case that she succeeded. What has changed in naval aviation since Tailhook? First, we should review the social/cultural, and then professional changes. Many but not all were direct results of Tailhook.

‘De-Glamorization’ of Alcohol

Perhaps in desperation, the first reaction of Pentagon leadership to the congressional witch hunt was to launch a massive global jihad against alcohol, tellingly described as “de-glamorization.” While alcohol was certainly a factor in the Tailhook scandal, it was absolutely not a problem for naval aviation as a whole. There was no evidence that there were any more aviators with an alcohol problem than there were in the civilian population, and probably a good deal fewer.

As a group, naval aviators have always been fastidious about not mixing alcohol and flying. But social drinking was always a part of off-duty traditional activities like hail-and-farewell parties and especially the traditional Friday happy hour. Each Friday on every Navy and Marine air station, most aviators not on duty turned up at the officers’ club at 1700 to relax and socialize, tell bad jokes, and play silly games like “dead bug.” But there was also an invaluable professional function, because happy hours provided a kind of sanctuary where junior officers could roll the dice with commanders, captains, and admirals, ask questions that could never be asked while on duty, listen avidly to the war stories of those more senior, and absorb the lore and mores of the warrior tribe.

When bounds of decorum were breached, or someone became over-refreshed, as

occasionally happened, they were usually taken care of by their peers. Only in the worst cases would a young junior officer find himself in front of the skipper on Monday morning. Names like Mustin Beach, Trader Jon's, Miramar, and Oceana were a fixed part of the culture for anyone commissioned before 1991. A similar camaraderie took place in the chiefs' clubs, the acey-deucey clubs, and the sailors' clubs.

Now all that is gone. Most officers' and non-commissioned officers' clubs were closed and happy hours banned. A few clubs remain, but most have been turned into family centers for all ranks and are, of course, empty. No officers dare to be seen with a drink in their hand. The JOs do their socializing as far away from the base as possible, and all because the inquisitors blamed the abuses of Tailhook '91 on alcohol abuse. It is fair to say that naval aviation was slow to adapt to the changes in society against alcohol abuse and that corrections were overdue, especially against tolerance of driving while under the influence.

But once standards of common sense were ignored in favor of political correctness, there were no limits to the spread of its domination. Not only have alcohol infractions anonymously reported on the hot-line become career-enders, but suspicions of sexual harassment, homophobia, telling of risqué jokes, and speech likely to offend favored groups all find their way into fitness reports. And if actual hot-line investigations are then launched, that is usually the end of a career, regardless of the outcome. There is now zero-tolerance for any missteps in these areas.

Turning Warriors into Bureaucrats

On the professional side, it is not only the zero-tolerance of infractions of political correctness but the smothering effects of the explosive growth of bureaucracy in the Pentagon. When the Department of Defense was created in 1947, the headquarters staff was limited to 50 billets. Today, 750,000 full time equivalents are on the headquarters staff. This has gradually expanded the time and cost of producing weapon systems, from the 4 years from concept to deployment of Polaris, to the projected 24 years of the F-35.

But even more damaging, these congressionally created new bureaucracies are demanding more and more meaningless paperwork from the operating forces. According to the most recent rigorous survey, each Navy squadron must prepare and submit some 780 different written reports annually, most of which are never read by anyone but still require tedious gathering of every kind of statistic for every aspect of squadron operations. As a result, the average aviator spends a very small fraction of his or her time on duty actually flying. Job satisfaction has steadily declined. In addition to paperwork, the bureaucracy now requires officers to attend mandatory courses in sensitivity to women's issues, sensitivity and integration of openly homosexual personnel, and how to reintegrate into civilian society when leaving active duty. This of course is perceived as a massive waste of time by aviators, and is offensive to them in the inherent assumption that they are no longer officers and gentlemen but coarse brutes who will abuse women and gays, and not know how to dress or hold a fork in civilian society unless taught by GS-12s.

One of the greatest career burdens added to naval aviators since the Cold War has been the Goldwater-Nichols requirement to have served at least four years of duty on a joint staff to be considered for flag, and for junior officers to have at least two years of such joint duty even to

screen for command. As a result, the joint staffs in Washington and in all the combatant commands have had to be vastly increased to make room. In addition, nearly 250 new Joint Task Force staffs have been created to accommodate these requirements. Thus, when thinking about staying in or getting out, young Navy and Marine aviators look forward to far less flight time when not deployed, far more paperwork, and many years of boring staff duty.

Zero-Tolerance Is Intolerable

Far more damaging than bureaucratic bloat is the intolerable policy of “zero-tolerance” applied by the Navy and the Marine Corps. One strike, one mistake, one DUI, and you are out. The Navy has produced great leaders throughout its history. In every era the majority of naval officers are competent but not outstanding. But there has always been a critical mass of fine leaders. They tended to search for and recognize the qualities making up the right stuff, as young JOs looked up the chain and emulated the top leaders, while the seniors in turn looked down and identified and mentored youngsters with promise.

By nature, these kinds of war-winning leaders make mistakes when they are young and need guidance—and often protection from the system. Today, alas, there is much evidence that this critical mass of such leaders is being lost. Chester Nimitz put his whole squadron of destroyers on the rocks by making mistakes. But while being put in purgatory for a while, he was protected by those seniors who recognized a potential great leader. In today’s Navy, Nimitz would be gone. Any seniors trying to protect him would themselves be accused of a career-ending cover-up. Because the best aviators are calculated risk-takers, they have always been particularly vulnerable to the system. But now in the age of political correctness and zero-tolerance, they are becoming an endangered species.

Today, a young officer with the right stuff is faced on commissioning with making a ten-year commitment if he or she wants to fly, which weeds out some with the best potential. Then after winging and an operational squadron tour, they know well the frustrations outlined here. They have seen many of their role models bounced out of the Navy for the bad luck of being breathalyzed after two beers, or allowing risqué fore-castle follies.

‘Dancing on the Edge of a Cliff’

They have not seen senior officers put their own careers on the line to prevent injustice. They see before them at least 14 years of sea duty, interspersed with six years of bureaucratic staff duty in order to be considered for flag rank. And now they see all that family separation and sacrifice as equal to dancing on the edge of a cliff. One mistake or unjust accusation, and they are over. They can no longer count on a sea-daddy coming to their defense.

Today, the right kind of officers with the right stuff still decide to stay for a career, but many more are putting in their letters in numbers that make a critical mass of future stellar leaders impossible. In today’s economic environment, retention numbers look okay, but those statistics are misleading.

Much hand-wringing is being done among naval aviators (active-duty, reserve, and retired) about the remarkable fact that there has only been one aviator chosen as Chief of Naval Operations during the past 30 years. For most of the last century there were always enough

outstanding leaders among aviators, submariners, and surface warriors to ensure a rough rotation among the communities when choosing a CNO. The causes of this sudden change are not hard to see. Vietnam aviator losses severely thinned the ranks of leaders and mentors; Tailhook led to the forced or voluntary retirement of more than 300 carrier aviators, including many of the finest, like Bob Stumpf, former skipper of the Blue Angels.

There are, of course, the armchair strategists and think-tankers who herald the arrival of unmanned aerial vehicles as eliminating the need for naval aviators and their culture, since future naval flying will be done from unified bases in Nevada, with operators requiring a culture rather closer computer geeks. This is unlikely.

As the aviator culture fades from the Navy, what is being lost? Great naval leaders have and will come from each of the communities, and have absorbed virtues from all of them. But each of the three communities has its unique cultural attributes. Submariners are imbued with the precision of engineering mastery and the chess players' adherence to the disciplines of the long game; surface sailors retain the legacy of John Paul Jones, David G. Farragut and Arleigh "31 Knot" Burke, and have been the principal repository of strategic thinking and planning. Aviators have been the principal source of offensive thinking, best described by Napoleon as "L'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace!" (Audacity, audacity, always audacity!)

Those attributes of naval aviators—willingness to take intelligent calculated risk, self-confidence, even a certain swagger—that are invaluable in wartime are the very ones that make them particularly vulnerable in today's zero-tolerance Navy. The political correctness thought police, like Inspector Javert in *Les Misérables*, are out to get them and are relentless.

The history of naval aviation is one of constant change and challenge. While the current era of bureaucracy and political correctness, with its new requirements of integrating women and openly gay individuals, is indeed challenging, it can be dealt with without compromising naval excellence. But what does truly challenge the future of the naval services is the mindless pursuit of zero-tolerance. A Navy led by men and women who have never made a serious mistake will be a Navy that will fail.

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