
A Navy pilot's take: The Air Force doesn't have a pilot crisis, it has a leadership crisis

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Best Defense guest columnist

The United States Air Force is facing a crisis, seemingly a recent one, which will define the service for decades to come.

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This “Dear Boss” letter is instructive for describing exactly why so many pilots are choosing not to stay in the Air Force, and are instead leaving to go to the airlines. There is a deep lack of faith in leadership at all levels of the Air Force, but especially at the Squadron Commander and above levels, and, from within, it seems that the organization is promoting toxic managers (not leaders) who are not promoted on their merits, but instead on how well they toe the party line.

Complaints range, but highlights are; a lack of accountability, protection of the deficient leaders at all costs, overemphasis on promotion versus performance, and too much “queep” (an Air Force term for paperwork). There is no *single* root cause for pilots bailing out in such large numbers, and the issue contains much more nuance than simple bad leadership, but there is a glaring problem that is a significant contributor, and helps illuminate the distinct lack of Air Force leadership: In the USAF pilots are not provided the opportunity for meaningful leader development. I will explain.

First, I need to lend some context. While I am a naval aviator, I have spent as much time with the Air Force as I have the Navy. I went to Air Force pilot training, known as UPT, I spent my operational tour in the only navy unit on Andersen Air Force base, and I am even married to an Air Force Officer, which gives me a slightly more in-depth view of the flying branch, and has allowed me to juxtapose some of my experiences against those of my Air Force compatriots. In the Air Force, junior officers, majors, and even higher ranking officers are pilots and only pilots. The Air Force values tactical and technical expertise, and therefore the center of an Air Force pilot's world until he or she, with rare exception, is put in command of a squadron honing the skill of employing their weapon system. The Navy, however, out of necessity does things very differently.

To explain, let me summarize some of my experiences as an operational junior officer.

After my third deployment, I had come home and been put into the role Search and Rescue Officer. This was my “ground job,” one of many collateral duties assigned to every pilot. As SAR-O I was responsible for writing policy, maintaining pilot currencies, tracking missions launched and lives saved, and ensuring that all of my roughly 75 rescue swimmers were receiving the right training and qualifications, were on career progression, had all of their various paperwork in-order, and that their personal lives were copacetic enough for them to continue flying.

To do all this required daily interaction with pilots, enlisted aircrew, maintenance personnel, and every other office in the squadron. While this was not my first leadership role, (on my first deployment, only a few weeks in the squadron I was put in charge of some 30 maintenance personnel) I still made many mistakes, and to keep me on track I had a senior enlisted Master Chief, and several Petty Officers. My Master Chief had been in nearly 30 years, and mentored me, kept me out of trouble, and in a few instances gave stern and needed course corrections. I carried the lessons, both my mistakes and triumphs, into every consecutive leadership role, and forward to this day.

As you can see, Navy flying squadrons are structured differently from those of the Air Force. Everything that is needed to function away from home on deployment is included within maintenance, admin, etc, because of the shipboard environment. While this system is imperfect, it allows for leader development for its pilots from day one.

In the Air Force, pilots do none of this. Leadership, like **strategic thought**, is not something that can be taught in a short Command and Staff course, or a few weeks of Squadron Officer's School. Leadership is a continuous development process that requires making mistakes, and assuming increased responsibility over a long period of time, and it cannot occur by "just doing what the last guy did."

The first time most Air Force pilots are in real leadership roles, they are usually assuming command of a squadron, where instead of simple tactical proficiency being what matters, it is now leading and managing people that is crucial, a skill they have not had time to hone in the same way they have employing their weapon system. The Air Force does not have a pilot crisis, it has a leader development crisis, one in which leaders are not enabled to succeed because they are never given the tools to do so. You can't learn leadership by osmosis or entirely from a book, you learn it through **experience**.

To be fair, this answer may be unsatisfying to most Air Force personnel, because there is no easy fix, as current career tracks are well worn, and squadron composition is unlikely to change any time soon. The argument also does not address many of the cultural problems within the organization, notably that the only means to the highest levels of command is by being a pilot, which constitute a minority of personnel. It does not address the fact that expecting every leader to be **Robin Olds** is not a recipe for success. And it does not fix the queep.

But to begin fixing a problem, you have to be honest about the realities of the problem you face. The Navy also has its share of issues. In fact, my alma mater is one of the most fraught squadrons in the whole fleet, proving that not all leaders in the Navy are good. We also have a pilot shortage, albeit a less severe one, much of which derives from fatigue in pilots and aircraft due to significantly longer and more frequent deployments. However, at the end of the day, the fundamental mechanics and experiences that make an effective military leader can be found in the career of a Navy pilot, from day one. To build trust in leadership you have to have leaders who understand what it means to lead, not just to fly and fight.

Lieutenant Jack McCain, U.S. Navy, is a helicopter pilot with operational experience in Guam, Japan, Brunei, the Persian Gulf, and the Western Pacific. He graduated from the United States Naval Academy and Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He is currently assigned as an instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy. The opinions he expresses in this article are his own and represent no U.S. government or Department of Defense positions.

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The Air Force has made some progress, and has now brought the maintainer shortfall from its high of 4,000 down to about 200. But many of those new maintainers are less-experienced, with a skill level of 3, Venable said. Those 3-levels can do some work, and more-experienced 5-levels can do more advanced repairs, he said. And if it doesn't, experts agreed, it could drive more pilots out and exacerbate an already alarming pilot shortage. The Air Force needs about 20,000 pilots across the total force, but despite taking many steps to retain them, the service remains about 2,000 pilots short. Stephen Losey covers Air Force leadership and personnel issues as the senior reporter for Air Force Times. Recommended for you. {{headline}}.