



# Human Factors— A Personal Look

By LCdr. Eric Soderberg

Every day, with every flight schedule, we assess the readiness and ability of crew members to fly their missions. We also conduct quarterly human-factor councils (HFCs) that assess each crew member's ability to perform his/her duties. I have served as an aviation-safety officer with three different commands that have included aviators from every Navy and Marine Corps helicopter community; I've also participated in dozens of these councils. All of the HFCs were taken seriously, and a good-faith effort always was made to identify any pertinent human factors.

Typically, the HFCs spend much time discussing the aircrew, who, by virtue of their relative youth and junior rank, tend to have more issues to review. The pilots, although the most likely to affect the safety of a flight, receive much less attention from council members than the aircrew. I believe what drives this trend is the unstated assumption that pilots, being relatively more senior and mature, will more accurately assess

themselves. Also, a pilot may be considered better equipped to handle any issues that may arise. These are dangerous assumptions. The very factors that might make it inadvisable for a pilot to fly equally can impair the ability to make that judgment. The following describes a case where I was unable to objectively assess my own readiness to fly.

As a student at the U.S. Navy Test Pilot School (USNTPS), I had the professional opportunity of a lifetime. At TPS, students are given the chance to work with naval aviators from every community, as well as Air Force and Army pilots. We flew a multitude of airframes in regimes normally not flown anywhere else. Also, we had engineers to explain it all: How the systems and airframes worked, why they were built a certain way, and what to expect and look for in the air. The payback for this wonderful opportunity was a workload that, over the span of an entire year, has not been matched at any other Navy command I've been at during my 13 years of service.

The typical TPS day was split in two, with one-half dedicated to academic classes and the other half dedicated to flying. The “third” half was when we wrote the voluminous test plans and test reports. Besides the professional workload, my wife and I had a new baby daughter to care for. I can imagine the commentary, “Suck it up; family and high workloads are the norm in the Navy.” That is just what all of us in the class did: suck it up. For the first half of the year, I was well ahead of the power curve. The academics were not a problem, and the flying was challenging, yet, very enjoyable. I managed to slowly slog my way through the many pages of writing required by the syllabus.

About halfway through the yearlong course, my father’s cancer, which had been in remission for the last year and a half, came back with a vengeance. Having exhausted all of the standard treatments, he signed up for a last-chance experimental-treatment program. His treatment was at the NIH Bethesda Hospital, about an hour and a half from NAS Patuxent River. When given the chance to see my father while I could, I did, which amounted to a couple times each week while maintaining my regular work schedule. I would take off after work or on the weekend, fight through the Washington, D.C. traffic, and visit my dad for three to four hours, then head home.

“Visit,” however, does not quite capture the true flavor of what happened. In reality, I simply was watching the man I loved and respected most, crumble and die before my eyes. He constantly was tired, nauseous, afraid, and either in severe pain or heavily medicated. Over the course of several months, he had gone from a physically active, professionally successful, happy individual to an emaciated figure who fought for every breath and needed assistance to do anything more than lift his head. The last straw was the guilt associated with something a well-meaning family member told me. My father was enduring the treatment program with the goal of surviving long enough to see his only son graduate as a Navy test pilot; it was too much.

How did I deal with this stress at work? I didn’t. I completely ignored it. I did not even tell anyone at the command about Dad until I thought I might need to go med down for a week or so to donate bone marrow for a trans-

fusion related to the treatment. I had options to reduce my workload and took none of them. Many of the flights at TPS are not required for graduation; they are simply for proficiency and to allow students to further refine the test techniques we’d been taught.

The command had a well-established rule that any flight could be cancelled at any time without question. I’d done it many times for weather or maintenance, and no one ever had asked for a justification. There I was, personally and emotionally overloaded; yet, I flew every flight I was scheduled for, even those not required for graduation. I flew challenging flight profiles, very often with copilots who were not helicopter pilots, or even pilots at all. I could have gone to the command and requested to be scheduled for a bare minimum of non-syllabus flights. A reduction in flights would have had little adverse effect on my progress through the program. However, my exposure, and that of my copilots, would have been limited to relatively high-risk flying while I was at less than 100-percent capability.

Canceling those flights would have provided a direct reduction in risk and also would have given me a needed respite. With the extra free time, I would have been better focused during the required syllabus flights, as well as in class, while writing my reports.

It was some time later before I could look back with any objectivity and realize I had been functioning below par and to see what would have been a better and safer coping mechanism than complete denial. As it happened, I managed to successfully make my way to graduation, albeit with a level of performance somewhat below what I’d maintained for the first half of the course. The only “X” I missed was the graduation ceremony itself; I took leave to be with my father, who died a few weeks later.

As a result of my experience, I try not to assume so readily that my fellow pilots will be able to accurately assess themselves. Also, while recognizing there are many times when “suck it up” applies, particularly in the military, it is not the optimum solution in every situation. Watch yourself, watch your shipmates, and, when appropriate, throttle back. 

L.Cdr. Soderberg flies with HS-8.