



Growing Up Right:

The Culture of Safety and the Dichotomy of War

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The night air is cool, a sweet relief from the scorching heat of the daytime, strength-sapping temperatures in the low 100s. Calm pervades the flight line; nary a bird spinning, skid or PHROG. Suddenly, the serenity is pierced by the distinct tone of a ringing bell. The Red Dragon flight line springs to life—mechanics, avionics troubleshooters, and aircrew emerge from the squadron spaces like so many bees from a hive. Cries of “Urgent CasEvac!” can be heard reverberating through the area. Thus begins the race against time—the race to save a fellow warrior.

This is my first deployment, my first war. I arrived in Iraq in August, with just under 400 hours of flight time. I was a relatively experienced copilot with high-light and low-light night-vision-goggle qualification, just enough time in the air to have developed bad habits, yet still be

malleable. The six months spent flying CasEvac (casualty evacuation) during Operation Iraqi Freedom II will be my formative flight hours—the basis from which all my habits, both good and bad, are forged.

The opinions about flying in combat, specifically how it differs from peacetime flight, are as varied as they are numerous. If there are identifiable ideologies among these assertions, they can be broken into two distinct categories: belligerents and conformists.

The **belligerent view** believes that safety takes a distant second to operational readiness and performance during wartime. This view is represented by the following remarks, heard around flight lines throughout the theater:

“I get to do things here I never could do at home...I know it is dangerous, but we are in a war...”



“I press to get in every landing...wave offs are not a good idea; it just gives the bad guys another chance to shoot at you...”

“I’ve expanded my ‘comfort zone;’ everybody has... we have to...we are at war, people’s lives are at stake, we are no longer ‘just training’...”

“I’d rather have a mishap than get shot.”

Unfortunately, this attitude is not limited to the aircrew. It can be prevalent among maintainers and aircrew alike:

“I need to get this done now... sure, I would not do it this way at (MCAS Miramar, San Diego, Calif.), but we are in Iraq.”

“It does not matter if it is safe, as long as I get the job done...”

“Speed is more important than safety right now...”

we’re at war...the rules have changed...”

In contrast, **conformists** subscribe to the view prevalent on my flight line, exemplified by the large sign hanging over our ready door. Emblazoned on the red sign in yellow 12-inch block letters is the missive, “No S@#\$\$% Flying.”

What does “No S@#\$\$% Flying” mean? Simply, it means war changes very little. It means that the aviator’s greatest threat still is himself. Limitations, standard-operating procedures, tactics techniques, and procedures established during training all exist for a reason; use them.

Three cases in point, two of which I was part of, and one I observed while writing this article:

1. On the evening of Oct. 20, the Red Dragons received a call to launch in support of an urgent CasE-vac. Our crew responded in typical fashion. We raced to the aircraft, readied for flight, and had the rotors turning in less than five minutes. By minute six, we were taxiing for takeoff to our pickup zone, the Surgical Shock Trauma Platoon Hospital (SSTP), located at the other side of our camp. During the start-up sequence, the aircraft radios developed a high-pitch squeal of medium volume. We still could communicate over ICS and over the radios (with moderate annoyance) with the controlling agency and our wingman. Initially, we considered the degraded communication merely an inconvenience.

Fate or fortune was smiling on our crew that evening. As we set down on the pad at the SSTP, the whining radios developed a louder squeal, and ICS and radio comms became intermittent. A brief discussion between the crew and an assertive crew chief led us to the conclusion we were out of the fight. A quick

call over our squadron common frequency let our wingman know he had the mission, and the aircrew in the turning backup would be his wingman.

2. Later that month, on Oct. 30, I was the copilot on a CasEvac mission that launched only minutes before our shift changeover. As day turned into night, our aircraft set down on the CasEvac pad at our camp. Flipping down my night-vision goggles, I was preparing the cockpit for night flight as the radio came alive, “Mercy 01, this is Firestriker (our camp SSTP), the patient is crashing, stand by.”

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The waiting game began. The medical staff at the SSTP returned the patient to the operating room, trying to stabilize him. After 40 minutes of spinning on the pad, the decision was made. The helicopter aircraft commander, after considering our typical 14-hour crew day had been extended by an hour, and that executing the mission would have pushed our day to 16 hours, decided the oncoming night crew should spin-up and relieve us.

3. Finally, on the evening of Nov. 11, a night with questionable visibility and pilot reports of “It’s dog S&*\$, but workable,” our ready room came to the consensus that no launches would be made unless in response to urgent CasEvacs. This decision meant canceling the nightly “milk run,” which moves routine and priority medical patients from battalion-aid stations to higher-level care facilities.

Each of the aforementioned scenarios, taken on their own, may not be noteworthy.

However, taken together, I believe they demonstrate clearly the culture of safety that is being fostered in one Marine Corps squadron. Although you never can prove a negative, I submit the actions taken in each of the three instances detailed above broke the “mishap chain.”

We never will know for certain what might have been, but I do know I am being exposed to an effective safety culture, one that is molding its young pilots. These pilots stand to return to this war two and three more times and to be safety conscious, despite the threats inherent in war.

Ultimately, the question all of us are asking, from maintainers to aircrew, is, “How are we going to operate in the wartime environment?” I believe the best answer is “business as usual.” Maintenance standards and procedures should remain unchanged. Flight procedures should not vary. Develop solid and thorough SOPs, using operational risk management (ORM); the benefits will become apparent.

Successful performance is wrought from a legacy of coherent planning. ORM, properly implemented during peace, develops effective and functional standard-operating procedures (SOPs). Successful training, conducted thoroughly and frequently enough to habituate squadron personnel, is derived from well-established SOPs. Effective training breeds familiarity and confidence, producing the skills essential to performing and surviving in combat.

Young pilots should be fostered in an environment that teaches the cliché, “You practice like you play.” Applying the lessons of training, specifically the fundamentals of flying taught in the safety of a training environment, engenders safer, more effective flying in a combat zone. After all, it’s not a cliché because it is false. A pilot who learns to think and act in that environment will be a capable combat pilot and a competent flight leader. A pilot who grows up in this type of environment will grow up right. 

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