

Transforming Naval Aviation

By Dan Steber



It's essential that future leaders of Naval Aviation understand the whole process.

Editor's note: The author recently did an interview with VADM Wally Massenburg, Commander, Naval Air Systems Command, on recent and future changes in Naval Aviation and maintenance. VADM Massenburg had plenty to say about Naval Aviation in general, about past performance measures, and about the impact of these changes on aviators, maintenance and readiness. The Mech portion of the interview, printed in the Fall 2005 issue, can be viewed at: www.safetycenter.navy.mil/media/mech/issues/fall05/.

We present below part of the interview that will be of interest to the readership of Approach. Included are comments from PR2 (AW/SW) Jason Moore of AIMD North Island on changes he has seen. Some readers may already be aware of the changes referred to, but the rest of the fleet soon will feel their full effects.

In a conference room just off his office at the NAVAIR headquarters building at Patuxent River, Md., VADM Wally Massenburg discussed with us the need for fundamental change in the way Naval Aviation does business. It didn't take long to see and feel his passion for the Navy, the Marine Corps and the need for change.

"We had it wrong for so many years," said Massenburg, pausing shortly before asking a rhetorical question. "What happens at the end of every fiscal year? We think that we have to burn up that gas, we've got to use up those hours, because if we don't get to zero we'll get fired." He went on to explain that we did this without focusing on a specific training goal or a specific return on investment. Success was to fly as much as we could.

The admiral recalled a time when he was part of that process. "At the bottom of every CO's fitness report," he said, "we reported the number of flight hours flown and mission capability rates, and the more

the better. The goals, metrics and measurements for years simply had been on mission-capable/full-mission-capable rates, flight hours, and sortie-completion rates. We were grading performance on a number, not on how useful those hours were or how well the numbers were managed."

"At an aviation executive board meeting," recalled Massenburg, "the CNO put up a slide that showed traps per fiscal year. He was frustrated and wanted to know from the aviators what was driving up those numbers each year. CNO believed it was a behavior of consumption without understanding why they were consuming."

He continued, "If you truly asked yourself what we were doing, you'd simply say we're using up the flying hours. What the CNO said was, 'You are burning up my air force and I won't have it when I need it.' He then turned to VADM John Nathman, COMNAVAIRPAC at the time, and said, 'You, sir, are now are in charge of all Naval Aviation.'"

That initial step helped to fuel the fire for change and provided one of the first successes. “If you ask me why we’ve been successful with the transformation,” Massenburg offered, “it’s because a single-process owner was given the responsibility and accountability, and what I call ‘fire-ability.’ If you can’t be fired you can’t be a success. And he was charged with fixing Naval Aviation.”

The admiral told a story about VADM Mike Malone and the moment when he understood the transformation. “Malone stood up at a meeting and humorously said, ‘Hi, I’m Mike and I’m a readiness abuser. I’ve got X-number of hours and X-number of traps, and I’ve been abusing readiness for 30 years of my life, and I’ve



had it wrong and we’re going to change.’ That admission took some courage, but it was the necessary acknowledgement of the transformation from a consumption-driven approach to a results-driven method concerned with quality and the

effective, efficient use of assets.”

These first steps led to the formation of the Naval Aviation Readiness Integrated Improvement Program (NAVRIIP) and later to the Naval Aviation Enterprise, or NAE, which is the vehicle for fundamental change in Naval Aviation. There are a number of steps, processes and terms used in the NAE, including AIRSpeed, Boots on the Ground (BOG), NAVRIIP (now a cross-functional team under the NAE), Lean, Theory of Constraints (TOC), and Six Sigma. VADM Massenburg explained these terms and others in straightforward succession. While some have been around for several years, they may sound like a strange foreign language, but they all have a place, and fill a need in the overall transformation effort. They are worth the time to learn about.

One early effort that showed success was NAVRIIP

and its BOG events. NAVRIIP began in August, 2001, when CNO appointed VADM Nathman, then Commander, Naval Air Forces. The regular BOGs are an effort to get senior leadership out and around the fleet, leading transformational change from the front. Massenburg explained how and why these efforts have been successful.

“Shake 1,000 Sailors’ hands” was his metric for success with BOG. “Senior leaders have to get out from behind a desk and go face the customers. Everything that ‘providing organizations’ do starts with Sailors and Marines and ends with Sailors and Marines. If you aren’t always focused on them, you have missed the boat.”

The NAE has evolved from NAPPI (Naval Aviator Pilot Production Improvement) and the AMSR (Aviation Maintenance and Supply Readiness) through NAVRIIP and its BOGs after the Navy’s earlier attempts to recapitalize the force fell short. “People with good hearts said the only way to get new equipment is to get rid of the older equipment quicker,” said Massenburg. “But we mortgaged our future on the backs of our Sailors and Marines in the attempt to recapitalize our force.”

The admiral explained that 1999, 2000 and 2001 were bleak years as the Navy and Marine Corps fought to recapitalize its assets. He mentioned the efforts to get out, to see the fleet, to talk about ways to improve readiness, and to make use of dwindling dollars. “I visited every Naval and Marine Corps base each year for four years in my role as a logistician,” he said. “It was an opportunity for the Sailors to vent. There weren’t supply parts on the shelf; support equipment was older than stuff we were flying; tech pubs were falling apart with no replacements in sight. We even had NATOPS manuals that hadn’t been updated in three years. We had to do something.”

He went on to explain that as the budgets went down and our buying power went down, the cost of aircraft and equipment went up. “We had to get the money from someplace,” said Massenburg. The current scenario made it clear that the effort to recapitalize was going to be tough.

This point, though, was that the initial transformation strategy had to change. A catalyst for that effort was the then-new CNO, Adm. Vern Clark. With a little stick-and-rudder and some

seasoning as NAVRIIP, the Naval Aviation Enterprise was born. Formed as a group effort between CNAF, CNAL, NAVAIR, CNAFR, CNATRA, OPNAV N78, and HQMC aviation, the work has continued and has shown tremendous success in depots and intermediate-level commands. These industrial types of activities were the right places to begin the process to change the way we look at maintenance, readiness, funding, and success.

That effort would take place and a force now was being assembled to deal with it. "Consumption was killing us in the current readiness world and also in the future readiness world," said Massenburg. "It was about production, not what you produce. In 2003 we made a fundamental change in what we valued. It was apparent that we were taking good care of current readiness... maybe too good. That's when we made the decision to get us out of the business of consumption and into an understanding and culture of readiness. That decision changed the single-driven metric from aircraft ready for tasking to aircraft ready for tasking at reduced cost."

"We had to learn to live with less, and as you learn to live with less, you change the rheostats of your future. Now, with good conscience, we moved money out of readiness accounts, because we knew we could live with less, and into recapitalization accounts. This move led to the vision statement in the NAE: 'To deliver the right force, with the right readiness, at the right costs, at the right time—today, and in the future.' It is a much more mature understanding of the connections to all the pieces. You have to take care of the current readiness needs and all the logistics elements so you can safely fly your air force, but at the same time you're driving your cost down because you're more productive. These steps allow you to get to the future. How do we understand the connections so can we get the most recapitalization while taking care of current readiness? That question helped lead us to the NAE, which was born in July 2004."

These early programs and successes also led to Enterprise AIRSpeed, which uses the tenets of Lean manufacturing, TOC and Six Sigma. AIRSpeed is teaching aviators and maintainers a new language that includes a variety of tools and terms, such as value-stream mapping, the 5 S's, Kaizen events, Kanban, Six Sigma, and a host of others.

These terms, functions or processes are part of a new revolution in Lean thinking that is now a critical part of the NAE. Even young enlisted personnel are understanding and liking the change.

"Enterprise AIRSpeed has had a huge impact on the way we do business," said PR2 (AW/SW) Jason Moore of AIMD North Island. "It was a major shift in the way we think and act. Before AIRSpeed, we might work on every part, regardless of priority. Now, we concentrate on high-priority parts and don't work on 'pri 3' parts with little or no demand."

He explained that the time saved through that approach, and a reorganization of work flow, tools, and consumable parts, has allowed AIMD North Island to make dramatic financial savings while simultaneously producing a greater number of items of higher quality.

"In our T-700 engine shop, we reorganized the flow of work, put the right tools into our maintainers' hands, increased and moved consumables closer to the worker, and made tremendous improvement," Moore said. "The turnaround time went from 72 to 48 days, using the Theory of Constraints and then from 48 to nine days, using Lean and Six Sigma."

This transformation in Naval Aviation truly is dynamic and ensures that effective, efficient and more productive work is being done to improve current and future readiness. But Petty Officer Moore said the biggest change is that maintainers are now being empowered to make change.

"AIRSpeed has changed the way we think and work," said Moore. "Earlier efforts didn't have buy-in from junior troops. Now E-1s through O-5s meet in team meetings where junior Sailors interact with senior members, get a voice in the final decision and can see their suggestions come to life. That is real change."

Although our resources are limited, the national commitment requires us to meet the challenges ahead. That will require fundamental changes in the way Naval Aviation does business, and VADM Massenburg and the NAE are taking the steps to make those changes. 

For more information on the Naval Aviation Enterprise, AIRSpeed, NAVRIIP, and the Lean tools mentioned, visit the Naval Aviation Enterprise website at: <http://www.cnaf.navy.mil/nae> or the NAVAIR site at: www.navair.navy.mil/navairairspeed—Ed.