

# Pilot-in-Command: Phase V Designation Board

10th Combat Aviation Brigade in action at Forward Operating Base Shank, Afghanistan. U.S. Army photo by CPT Peter Smedberg.



By COL Ryan J. Scott

The Army Aviation Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) contains a detailed outline for structuring a pilot-in-command (PC) program. Based on my time as a battalion commander in the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB), I found the Phase V designation board critical. It helped me assess the candidate, mitigate risk, and reinforce commander's intent. Conducting the Phase V is based on technique, and I'd like to share what I've learned.

The Army Aviation's branch-wide SOP outlines the preferred program for designating PCs. Using a five-phase program, the CAB can grow lethal warfighters.

## PC Program

Listing the phases in detail, Phase I addresses integration into the aircrew training program (ATP). Here, the PC candidate is responsible for advancing to Readiness Level 1 (RL1).

Academic and flight training occurs in Phase II. Often using a unit specific checklist, PC candidates master a series of ATP tasks. Despite being RL1, candidates continue to progress, learning to lead and manage missions under the mentorship of company PCs. Simultaneously, the candidate is building a reputation throughout the company regarding their judgement, maturity, and safety—reputation matters, and word travels fast within a company.

Phase III is the nomination board. Company and troop commanders establish a board of company-level experts who

formally review the candidate's records, PC checklists, and grade slips. Candidates who achieve a board nomination advance to a flight evaluation.

During Phase IV, candidates demonstrate technical and tactical proficiency in flight. Comparable to an annual proficiency and readiness test (APART), the candidate participates in an oral evaluation and mission scenario in all modes of flight with an instructor pilot (IP).

Phase V is the designation board and the candidate's final hurdle. This phase is the battalion or squadron commander's final opportunity to mitigate risk and reinforce commander's intent before assigning the candidate as a PC. Phase V is based on technique. I offer the following as a glimpse into how I

achieved success during the final phase of designating a PC.

## Designing the Board

The designation board's composition is at the commander's discretion. In a formal setting, I formed a diverse board of battalion-level experts—usually the standardization officer, maintenance officer test pilot, safety officer, and aviation mission survivability officer. Additionally, I highly encouraged the company commander and company standardization pilot to participate.

Having these leaders sit on the board served two purposes. First, their presence showed candidates the designation board was important. Second, it was a way to routinely reinforce commander's intent to



"To find yourself, think for yourself."—Socrates (Socrates statue illustration courtesy of Pixabay.com)

my key leaders. Additionally, despite not having a formal vote, I expected the board to provide an alternative perspective.

The designation board was also a venue to personally interact with the PC candidate. Most importantly, I was able to assess if they understood the organization's mission, vision, and my intent. It would be simple for the candidate to use rote memory and simply recite commander's intent or the priorities of the organization. However, I was on the hunt to determine if the candidate understood the "why."

Following a model from the school of advanced military studies, I used open-ended questions (also known as Socratic questioning) to seek clarity, self-discovery, and deepen the knowledge of the candidate. Prior to meeting, I encouraged each candidate to become familiar with Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, "Mission Command," (Department of the Army [DA], 2019), the Army Aviation SOP,<sup>1</sup> and Army Techniques Publication 3-04.1, "Aviation Tactical Employment," (DA, 2020). My goal was to explore the depth of the candidate's knowledge.

The aim was not to trap the candidate. Rather, I wanted to take them on a guided journey through our doctrine. Together, we would understand its significance and how doctrine would enable their success as a PC.

With the right leaders in the room and a solid structure for conducting the board, I was ready for my first candidate.

## The First Candidate

The first candidate to experience a designation board arrived in my office. They were confident and ready to be designated a PC following what they assumed would be a stern warning about reckless behavior. The candidate sat next to their company commander on a round table equipped with a pen, paper, and a digital tablet. Behind them, ready to observe the interaction, were the battalion's senior

WOs. I stood in front of the candidate next to a whiteboard with a dry erase marker in hand.

I began by asking the candidate if they were familiar with the Aviation SOP's description of the Phase V designation board. The candidate paused.

Rather than force them to guess, I encouraged the candidate to use their digital tablet to reference the SOP verbatim. With a slight hesitation, the candidate said the designation board ensures the candidate has thorough understanding of their commander's intent. "Yes," I exclaimed. Startled and uncomfortable, the candidate waited for the second round of questioning.

I explained to the candidate that it was my responsibility to assess their understanding of my intent. How you answer the questions during our dialogue would inform the outcome of your PC designation, I said. The candidate acknowledged, and we proceeded with the discussion.

I then prompted the candidate to list the doctrinal materials they used to prepare. As expected, the candidate listed the recommended references. I captured their response on the whiteboard. I then asked for the doctrinal meaning of "commander's intent." What is meant by purpose, key tasks, and end state? Where is this definition in our doctrine? Why does this matter to a PC? Again, rather than have the candidate blindly guess, I told them to find it in the doctrine and we discussed the meaning together.

## Doctrinal Crosswalk with the Candidate

Every mission you execute has a commander's intent, I explained. The PC writes a doctrinally correct mission statement on the first line of the unit's risk common operational picture (RCOP). I

began sketching a graphic to link concepts. I showed the candidate how the purpose for their mission, key tasks that enable mission success, and the desired end state are all embedded within the RCOP. I then described the RCOP as a binding contract, like an operations order. Therefore, it's the PC's responsibility to execute the mission within the left and right limits of the RCOP. The candidate's wheels were visibly turning. We moved on to mission command.

I asked the candidate to list the principles of mission command—again, encouraging them to search the doctrine rather than guess. I told the candidate that as a PC they will inevitably see that no plan will survive contact with the enemy. Sometimes the enemy is maintenance, bad weather, or enemies we encounter in combat. I impressed upon the candidate if they understood and applied the principles of mission command, the likelihood of mission success would be higher. Applying the principles, I added, was both the responsibility of the commander and their subordinate.

The first principle, he said proudly, was competence. I captured his answer on the board and clarified that if he was competent as a PC, and I was competent as a commander assigning the mission, the likelihood of success when things inevitably go wrong would be higher. Next, he said, was mutual trust. I followed in-turn. If I trust you as a PC to execute the mission, you trust I will support your decision making, and



Army AH-64 Apaches use Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, as a stopover on their way to Fort Drum, New York. U.S. Air Force photo by Tyler Greenlees, 88th Air Base Wing Public Affairs.

<sup>1</sup> Please contact the author for more information on the Aviation SOP referenced in this document.



then the likelihood of success will be higher if things go wrong. Shared understanding followed. Then commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and finally risk acceptance.

By the 45 minute mark, the whiteboard reached capacity. More importantly, the candidate acquired a thorough understanding of my intent for them as a PC to be a doctrinally sound aviator who executes their assigned mission through the principles of mission command.

The final step remained—the candidate's designation as a PC. Going around the room, I solicited feedback from all the board members. Considering their feedback, the final decision was mine.

As the candidate sat nervously waiting for my determination, I looked them in the eye and congratulated them on achieving PC.

### A Better Way

Over the next 2 years, I repeated this process with every newly designated PC candidate. Each time, the candidates shared their experience with peers. Candidates dug deeper into the doctrine. They were getting better. The process also evolved. Depending on the candidate's role in the organization, I tailored the discussion to suit officers, WOs, and future air mission commanders.

When I first made PC as a CPT, my commander brought me in his office, told me

a scary story, and handed me the keys. I appreciated the story, but he missed an opportunity.

Alternatively, by the end of my tenure in command, my intent had percolated throughout the battalion. The Phase V designation board became my most effective risk mitigator for newly assigned PCs.

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#### Biography:

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Alaska Army Aviation conducts training near Colony Glacier. Alaska National Guard photo by Robert DeBerry, Public Affairs.

