

Incentivizing Crew Chief and Flight Engineer Development and Retention



A CH-47 Helicopter Repairer (15U) works to replace a combining transmission (C-box) on a Chinook at a Fort Hood Airfield. U.S. Army photo by SGT Sydney Mariette.

By LTC Robert H. Wells

Introduction

Across Army Aviation military occupational specialty (MOS), 15U helicopter repairer special qualification identifiers (SQI) F-coded (flying status) positions (CH-47F non-rated crew member [NRCMs]) are undermanned. While the aggregate number of 15U basic MOS-qualified personnel are understrength across the Army, the ability of the division to project combat power is most felt by shortages in the 15U SQI-F positions. Undermanning of 15UF positions is due to a lack of external incentives for Soldiers to develop the necessary skills and experience for career progression as a 15UF and achieve designation as flight engineers (FEs). Current inability to fill requisite 15UF positions directly results in a 45 percent loss in CH-47 combat power within the division. To re-incentivize progression as a 15UF, modifications to enlisted promotion processes and incentive pay programs are recommended.

Background

Current CH-47 Company modified tables of organization and equipment (MTOEs) authorize 20x 15UF E5s (SGT) and 6x 15UF E6s (SSG) to serve in crew chief (CE) and FE positions, with 3x 15UF E7s (SFC) assigned as platoon sergeants. These 29 positions are filled

from the same MOS pipeline as the 15U CH-47 repairers assigned to aviation maintenance and aviation support companies. Historically, experience gained in maintenance companies by junior enlisted 15Us sets conditions for rapid progression as CEs and FEs upon assignment to flight companies. Understanding aircraft systems and attainment of maintenance level (ML) 2 (sustainment) proficiency enables CEs to focus on flight-related requirements with a solid foundation in maintenance and rapidly progress to FEs. While initial assignment to maintenance companies builds foundational proficiency, the assignment creates a culture that disincentivizes follow-on assignment to flight companies. Additional duties and requirements associated with CE/FEs create external stressors not readily experienced outside of flying positions observation.

From my personal observation and sensing session feedback, it's clear that the additional requirements of 15Us assigned to flight companies increase personal, family, and career stressors compared to those assigned to the maintenance companies. In addition to proficiency in maintenance tasks, CE/FEs are required to conduct off-duty self-study to understand and perform aircraft flight-related tasks. Crew chiefs and FEs have both day and night tasks. As a result, they do not work an 8am to 5pm schedule in garrison, compared to

most peers. Schedules vary week to week at the individual level, rather than based on the overall training schedule. Weekly variations in the duty day, to facilitate supported mission requirements, creates disruptions in family routines and scheduling.

Serving in low-density CE/FE positions, coupled with requirements to support higher headquarters-directed training events, limits opportunities in which Soldiers can attend professional military education, participate in self-development opportunities, and use authorized leave. Currently, insufficient external incentives exist to motivate 15Us to look past these external stressors and volunteer for assignment in a flight company, taking on duties and requirements above and beyond their peers.

The Army should incentivize 15U to 15UF career progression by developing policies focused on streamlining career advancement opportunities and incentive pay for 15Us volunteering for flying duty. Department of the Army policy change is necessary to apply these incentives across the force, creating a culture in which competing for flying positions within the 15U population is the norm.

Proposal

I propose that the Army utilize a two-prong process—focused on streamlin-

ing career advancement opportunities and incentive pay—to reward 15Us for attaining the designation of Readiness Level 1 CEs and further progression as FEs and flight instructors (FIs).

Career Advancement: The Army should adjust skill identifiers and promotion points based on additional Soldier qualifications as seen in the following bullet points:

- Retain the A1A (enlisted flight crew-member and non-crewmember) and E1A (highly trained/qualified FEs) personnel development skill identifier (PDSI) for CEs and FEs, but remove current E5 and above grade restriction on the E1A PDSI. While an FE additional skill identifier (ASI) is being proposed for Headquarters, Department of the Army consideration, if approved, it should allow awarding of the ASI, regardless of grade or skill level.
- Create an *aviation advantage and airborne advantage* (Department of the Army, 2024, para. 3-16e), in which

Scenario	Additional Points
CE (15U/T) serving in position authorized Hazardous Duty Incentive Pay (HDIP) for flying duty	20
FE (Soldiers awarded PDSI of E1A [certified CH/MH 47 FE]) serving in position authorized HDIP for flying duty	40
FI/Non-rated standardization instructor (SI) (Soldiers awarded ASI of N1) serving in position authorized HDIP for flying duty	60

Table. Proposed aviation advantage example (Wells, 2025).

Soldiers assigned to authorized 15UF positions receive an additional number of promotion points without regard to the maximum point rules (Table).

Incentive Pay: Enlisted flight personnel receive special duty assignment pay (SDAP) in addition to current HDIP, which is tiered to the level of increased responsibility associated with their operational position. Recent U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence proposals for similar pay have been submitted for Army decision. The following list represents an example of a potential tiered

SDAP program:

- Retain current HDIP for flying duty crewmembers of \$250 per month
- Create additional NRCM SDAP, scaled against flying duty position and corresponding level of responsibility
 - o CE: No change to HDIP (\$250/month)
 - o FE: \$250/month in addition to HDIP (\$500/month total)
 - o FI/SI: \$400/month in addition to HDIP (\$650/month total)

Conclusion

Incentivizing 15U personnel to attain 15UF designation is critical to readiness. Unit culture and locally developed policies can contribute to increased 15UF manning within flight companies, but they are insufficient to meet required readiness levels. Development of career advancement and incentive pay schedules will incentivize 15U personnel to pursue the attainment of 15UF designation and significantly increase the ability of divisions to project combat power.

Biography:

LTC Robert Wells was commissioned in Army Aviation from the University of North Dakota in 2006. Assigned and deployed in both ground and aviation units, LTC Wells has served in staff and leadership positions from the platoon to division level. In 2023 he returned to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, as the G5 for the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). LTC Wells is currently the commander of 6-101st Aviation Regiment.



U.S. Army Soldiers installing torque tube bolts on a CH-47 training aid. After the 17-week Advanced Individual Training, they will become qualified MOS skill 15U, CH-47 Chinook helicopter repairers. U.S. Army photo by SSG George Prince.

References:

- Department of the Army. (2024, June). *Enlisted promotions and demotions* (Army Regulation 600-8-19). https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN43303-AR_600-8-19-001-WEB-2.pdf
- Wells, R. (2025). *Proposed aviation advantage example*.