

# Make Aviation Fun Again

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Army aviation has a retention problem. Experienced veteran pilots are leaving the Army mid-career to pursue employment with the airlines and other opportunities in the civilian sector. Fully training and developing each aviator reflects a staggering financial investment, but the many years of experience a fully qualified pilot brings to the profession is immeasurable. The Army tried financial incentives, offering bonuses paying tens of thousands of dollars a year to sign contract extensions and calls to Active Duty for experienced National Guard and Army Reserve pilots to sign on, also with financial bonuses. When all that didn't work, additional ADSO contract extensions mandated pilots to stay in the Army longer to complete minimum contractual service obligations. Frustratingly, none of this seems to be working. Even after offering these great bonuses and financial incentives, why do our best Army Aviators continue to leave the Army and fly for the airlines?

The Army's problem with retaining experienced pilots is declining morale coupled with low job satisfaction, which is ultimately related to neglecting the psychology of the pilot. This psychological problem cannot be remedied by simply throwing money at it. We need a cultural change in the Army regarding how the Army treats, views, educates, and manages pilots from a psychological perspective. This must include reorienting the philosophy of education regarding the organizational identity of Army Aviation. Simply put, the Army needs to make aviation fun again.

**The Army must comprehensively reimagine this problem of pilot retention, placing high priority on the psychological aspects of a military aviator's core identity.**

**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** It is widely accepted as one of the primary psychological theories of workplace motivation. Maslow's theory arranges human needs in a hierarchy, commonly expressed visually as a pyramid with the most basic physiological survival needs at the bottom. In contrast, the more creative and intellectually oriented 'self-actualization' needs were placed at the top.

Maslow argued that survival needs must be satisfied before the individual can satisfy the higher needs. The higher the hierarchy, the more difficult it is to satisfy the needs associated with that stage because of the interpersonal and environmental barriers that inevitably frustrate us. Higher needs become increasingly psychological and long-term rather than physiological and short-term, as in the lower survival-related needs (McLeod, 2024).

Relating Maslow's theory to Army aviation, we realize that bonuses, pay incentives, and ADSOs cater exclusively to the lower physiological survival and safety/security needs of the Army Aviator but fail to address the higher needs of the Army Aviator, such as Sense of Belonging, Self-Esteem, and, at the peak, Self-Actualization. Because their continued service meets these higher-level psychological needs, pilots are exiting the Army to seek other organizations to support these higher-level needs on their ultimate quest to self-actualize.

An unfortunate perception remains among Army aviators that 'Big Army' doesn't like pilots. At first, this



may seem absurd. How could the Army of all organizations not like pilots or have even the perception of not liking its aviators? Whether or not one agrees with this perception, it is prevalent and regularly heard in the general grumblings of disgruntled Army pilots.

Attending Flight School at Fort Rucker back in 2008, a novelty patch was going around depicting one guy kicking another in the crotch with the words “Crack!” “Welcome to B Co. Morale stops here.” The patches were wildly popular but, of course, were immediately banned by command staff. While the command was angered and upset at the B. Co. flight students for distributing such an irreverent patch, had they looked inwardly, they may have realized a greater morale problem slowly growing in Army Aviation.

One might ponder, where does this negative perception come from? The perception comes from the squashing of individualism. Years of misguided efforts to implement doctrine and policy requiring pilots to look the same as the typical soldier have effectively taken away that individual identity that we pilots used to have. Pilots imagine some high-level decision maker thought pilots had too much cockiness or swagger and sought to take our collective egos down a notch. While that goal may have been achieved, it compromised an essential psychological key to pilot identity.

**What is pilot identity? More specifically, what is the identity of a military pilot? Aviator identity is steeped in tradition spanning decades.**

Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Hiram Bingham knew this instinctively when he was involved in creating the United States Schools of Military Aeronautics and the Army Air Service. In his 1920 memoir *An Explorer in the Air Service*, he wrote much regarding the pilot’s identity: “The pilot is more like the knight of old... He must first be an officer and a gentleman. He must be the kind of man whose honor is never left out of consideration.” “He must be resourceful, keen, quick, and determined.” Also, “...that polo players and football quarterbacks made excellent pilots.” “...the first necessity [is] to get the right type of personnel: fellows of quick, clear intelligence, mentally acute and physically fit” (Bingham, 1920).



LTC Hiram Bingham was a type A personality, and his description of the ideal military aviator still rings true today.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), people with a type A personality may have the following traits:

- Highly ambitious
- Thrive on a sense of competitiveness
- Motivated by achievement
- Operating at a more urgent pace than others
- Frustration or irritation with delays
- Ability to multitask
- Assertive/Aggressive
- Extroverted
- More likely to feel stressed when faced with delays or other challenges that affect success

The Army must understand the unique psychological aspects of its aviators and tailor the profession to build an aviator's career, feed motivation, and encourage the self-esteem and self-awareness of the pilot's identity. Attainment of these higher-level psychological needs, such as the sense of belonging to a group and promotion of self-esteem, is crucial to the aviator reaching his pinnacle of success. Self-actualization is what one needs to experience true work satisfaction.

In Maslow's theory, as we ascend the pyramid of needs, the potential for individual output grows. This increased personal output is a force multiplier that the Army is not tapping into. Pilot identity is emotional, intangible, and difficult to measure. Incorporating a new culture that harnesses pilot psychology will result in an aviator who is more motivated, more confident, more professional, and more lethal.

A belief in the Army aviator that he is truly the best, the confidence that Army Aviators are better than any other branch or nation. That we are truly at the very top of our game.

Currently, the Army is completely missing the mark. We are not developing pilots to reach their highest potential.

So pilots leave the Army to join the airlines or some other job in the civilian sector where they are treated better, respected for their profession, and treated as elite. The type A personality seeks the highest level of self-actualization of Maslow's pyramid. To get there, we must have the other higher yet secondary and tertiary needs met—the sense of belonging and self-esteem needs.

What exactly are the airlines offering pilots that meet these higher psychological needs than the Army does? First off, pilot identity. Airline pilots get to look like pilots. The airline flight uniform is immediately



recognizable by everyone who sees it. Pilots are treated with and receive the respect they so desperately crave. One can spot an airline pilot by his uniform as he strolls proudly through the airport and can recognize by the bars on the sleeves or epaulets if he is a First Officer or Captain.

The civilian public is generally in awe of and greatly respects pilots. Little kids dream of being a pilot one day. Pop culture has done the job of ingraining the legend of military aviation into our collective memory and permanently etching into all our minds what an army pilot looks like. Tom Cruise in *Top Gun* immediately jumps to mind, with the iconic green flight suit and the patches. The pilot persona is adventurous, sexy, and exciting.

Contrast this to the current uniform of an Army Aviator. Army pilots are not even allowed to look like pilots. With the creation of the AACU, the Army took away a critical piece of unique pilot identity to make everyone look the same. Sometimes, people ask, “Why did the Army take away the flight suit from aviators?” They make the differentiation by asking specifically about the Army because in other military branches, pilots still proudly wear the one-piece olive drab flight suit... lovingly nicknamed the “pickle suit.” In every other armed service branch, the pilots look like pilots; they all have green flight suits and flight patches, but for some reason, not in the Army.

The iconic green one-piece Army flight suit is truly nostalgic and classic. This iconic uniform should be returned as the official battle uniform of aviators, along with a corresponding update to AR 670-1. The classic green flight jacket should accompany the flight suit.

Morale Patches are also extremely significant to aviators. Aviation unit patches (interchangeably called “morale patches”) are currently authorized by some unit commanders at their discretion. The problem is that we need that authorization standardized into 670-1. Imagine the extreme demoralization that aviators experience when, after a change of command, we are told we must now remove our patches.

The Unit Patch should be worn on the flight suit and flight jacket in the following way: RL1 aviators are authorized to wear the patch. This becomes a high motivator for pilots to achieve and maintain RL1



status. Once RL1 is attained for the first time, the coveted patch is presented to the pilot. Commanders may incorporate a ceremony to present this patch to highlight this achievement. Upon advancement to Pilot-in-command (PIC), Aviators earn a call sign. This is usually a nickname given to pilots in command in the unit, often accompanied by a two-digit number identifier, used in radio communication. Upon advancement to PIC, the aviator is now further authorized to add his/her specific call sign to his patch uniform. Some units may add this to the patch by additional custom stitching or embroidery, or some may choose to possibly add an additional rocker to the patch.

Aircrew members such as crew chiefs and flight engineers are authorized to wear the aircrew flight suits with a subdued patch, and pilots are permitted to wear the full-color patch. The green “pickle suit” and flight jackets should also have the classic leather aircrew nametape with aviator wings.

With the implementation of the Army Green Service Uniform (AGSU), the Army is returning to a proven, traditional, nostalgic uniform theme. The one-piece green flight suit is a perfect complement to the AGSU. It will be welcomed enthusiastically as we collectively honor our rich history and past, bringing aviation tradition into the future.

Envision an aviation program that incorporates Maslow’s psychology and pilot identity into our doctrine, focusing on the critical needs of a sense of belonging and esteem. With higher psychological needs met, experienced aviators will stay in the Army, supported in their pursuit of lifelong self-actualization to be above the Best.

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