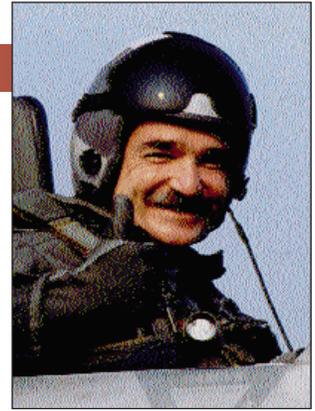


Keeping the Faith

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A great deal of attention has been focused this past year on retention and the associated challenges of improving professional and personal quality of life. In response to your concerns, we formed a joint Bureau of Naval Personnel/Air Warfare Retention Working Group to investigate Naval Aviation retention issues. The group has completed visits to the East and West coast fleet readiness squadrons. The invaluable feedback you provide will help us continue to resolve key issues.

Our demanding profession calls for great effort and much personal sacrifice, which is part of what we signed up for. If it wasn't a tough challenge, anyone could do it. But in this time of great change and reduced resources, we must do everything possible to maintain appropriate balance between our personal and professional lives and to keep Naval Aviation's "fun meter" in the green. The feedback we are receiving will help us improve your ability to do your job, and address morale and quality-of-life issues.

Your concerns fall into two areas: first, the issues that must be addressed through funding. We must ensure that every dollar is spent in the most efficient manner on those programs that have the most positive impact on warfighting capabilities and on the quality of life of our Sailors. The second area concerns the real reasons we became aviators: being part of a winning team, the camaraderie of our shipmates, and flying better than anyone else—the intangibles that make us unique, valued and extremely proud to be part of Naval Aviation.

One of the most promising things we've done recently is to reallocate

money from far-term acquisition programs to current readiness accounts. For operators in the fleet and training commands, this translates into more flying hours, more spare parts and eventually more "up" aircraft on the ramp. The bottom line: we've increased our readiness accounts by over \$4.2 billion over the next five years. Though FY 98 will be another challenging year, a \$350 million plus-up by Congress will help establish the correct glide slope this year regarding flight hours and aircraft readiness. While this increase will not solve all our challenges, it will, in time, make a positive impact. Like flying the ball, a correction made now requires some time to take effect.

Permanent change-of-station (PCS) funding is another area where we can and must make a difference. Experience shows that PCS funds too often run out before the end of the year. As a result, some of our moves must be rescheduled into the new fiscal year. Our goal is to move our Navy families when it is more advantageous for the family to avoid disrupting children at the beginning of the school year. We're making progress: we are now in the process of reprogramming over \$180 million to fully fund the PCS accounts for this year. The end result will be a reduction in delayed moves and enhanced quality of life for your families. Another area of high visibility to leadership is compensation for our people when they're on the road for temporary duty—whether on a weapons detachment in Fallon, Nev., conducting counterdrug operations in Puerto Rico, or completing training requirements away from home. We are currently reassessing the funding of

temporary duty accounts to ensure our Sailors receive both equitable and adequate compensation.

Many of our challenges aren't strictly tied to the budget. The capabilities that Naval Aviation provides our nation are truly unique. As we daily continue to demonstrate these capabilities, we find ourselves engaged in more missions in more regions of the world. It has always been in our culture to say "Can do," and we can't afford to lose that spirit. As the force and budget continue to be stretched, we must more closely control the operational tempo and workload, as well as monitor and control how much time our people spend away from home, especially between deployments. We are presently developing a new method to track personnel tempo in order to ensure our Sailors spend more quality time at home after they return from deployments.

Clearly, there are many more fleet concerns, which I don't have room here to discuss. We hear your concerns and everyone in the chain of command is working hard to fix those things that we can, as soon as we can. I am continually impressed by your dedication to service and your complete professionalism. You do the hard job every day, and you do it extremely well! I want you to know that it's greatly appreciated, and we are all committed to your professional and personal well being. Morale and retention issues are constantly in my scan. Keeping high-quality and motivated people is fundamental to our vision of Naval Aviation. I give you my unwavering support to achieve this end.

Fly safe! Be the best!