

Vice Chairman Healing Opening Statement for HASC Readiness Subcommittee Hearing

03 December, 2020

Good Morning. Chairman Garamendi, Ranking Member Lamborn, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. It is an honor to be here today with Chairman Cody to deliver the National Commission on Military Aviation Safety's findings and recommendations.

I also want to thank the Department of Defense and the Services for their support, and I echo Chairman Cody's comments about the outstanding men and women in uniform that the Commission met with over the past two years. We should all be thankful for their devotion to duty and daily commitment to the defense of our nation. I'd also like to thank Congress and this committee for establishing the Commission. I'm confident that the outcome of this Commission's work will contribute to protecting our most prized national assets, our men and women in uniform.

Chairman Cody's opening statement went into detail about what the Commission has found over the past two years, and he responded to the first four tasks given to the Commission by Congress. I would now like to go over the Commission's recommendations, as required in the fifth task in our charter. I will not cover all of our recommendations in this statement, but have chosen a few of the more significant ones to highlight.

Pilots & Aircrew

Due to the significant investment of time and resources required to train and sustain fully qualified aircrew, and a commercial marketplace competing for such high-demand talent, Congress, DoD, and the Services must regard and manage aviation as a specialty, and its mastery as a career-long pursuit. The Services must develop better personnel management processes that account for the complexities of aviation and promote aviation safety and readiness, as well as account for the demands of a high OPTEMPO.

Aviation professionals must be allowed to focus on their flying duties, maintain currency in aviation fundamentals, and achieve proficiency in crucial warfighting skills. Specifically, the Commission recommends that the Services restore flight hour minimums to not less than Fiscal Year 2010 levels for schoolhouse and operational units. The Commission further recommends that the Services centrally track waivers, create a baseline for their use, and monitor them to identify trends, assess risk, and predict potential problems and resource shortfalls.

In an effort to increase pilot retention, and maximize the Services' return on the investment required to produce a high-quality pilot, Congress should grant the Services standing authority to increase the aviation bonuses from up to \$35,000 per year to up to \$100,000 per year, in exchange for an additional commensurate service commitment.

Human Machine Integration

With regards to the challenges identified with the human-machine interface, the Commission found modern aviation technology placing unprecedented stress on human physiology. While some progress has been made, the DoD and the Services must adopt an aggressive, proactive approach to understanding the physiological needs of aviators. They must develop advanced capabilities to improve the human-machine interface, including a focus on aircraft and cockpit design, testing, and subsequent modifications. In this vein, the Commission recommends:

That aviation program offices address human physiology concerns, and analyze physiological effects, throughout the aircraft testing phases for T-7, B-21, Future Vertical Lift, and other next-generation platforms. This should occur early in the initial aircraft and cockpit design, and with any subsequent materiel modification of the aircraft.

That DoD and the Services develop physiological standards for each airframe to use in screening and training, to ensure that the pilot/operator is able to successfully perform at optimal levels across the spectrum of the weapon system's capabilities.

That DoD, with input from each of the safety centers, update and modify the Force Protection key performance parameters (KPP) to better incorporate Aviation Human Systems Safety.

That the Force Protection Functional Capability Board include representative capabilities such as ground and other aircraft collision avoidance; cockpit voice and flight data recording; biometric sensing for aircrew; and a spatial disorientation recovery system used for instrument meteorological conditions and brownout.

Maintainers

Maintainers require initial and ongoing training in highly-specialized, perishable skills. Mid-level personnel are particularly sought after in commercial aviation, and Congress, the DoD, and the Services must do what they can to improve retention and preserve experience levels within maintenance units. Maintenance must also be considered a unique specialty, with DoD and the Services recognizing maintainers' technical achievements and providing dedicated career paths. Maintainers must be able to focus on their flight line duties, sustain their current skills, and take advantage of opportunities to reach proficiency and fully utilize their experience.

Maintenance and Sustainment

Aircraft availability is not only critical to readiness and the success of missions, but is also necessary for aircrew and maintainers to develop and advance their skills. It is directly impacted by delays in maintenance, whether due to a lack of experienced personnel, inadequate parts and tools, or insufficient facilities.

To ensure timely availability of spare parts, improve maintenance efficiency, increase mission capable rates and better sustain the investment made in aircraft, DoD and the Services must improve their planning, contracting, and program management processes.

The Services must also take measures to improve sustainment management systems, particularly for legacy aircraft and service life extensions, and provide better visibility on expiring parts and production upgrades.

OPTEMPO

Policy at all levels must reflect and acknowledge that aviation is a high-demand, low-density specialty, which routinely has insufficient capacity to satisfy the demand placed on it. The aviation force is overextended beyond sustainable levels, resulting in the kind of chronic fatigue and burnout that negatively impacts morale and retention. The crushing OPTEMPO is also forcing the Services to shortchange safety to accomplish current missions. The Services must increase aviator and maintainer capacity, reduce additional duties, and focus on proficiency to mitigate the risk.

Funding

The Commission's primary fiscal concern is not the amount of money currently allocated to military aviation, but rather the lack of predictability and reliability of the funds.

Congress and the administration must recognize that consistent, reliable, and timely funding is key to sustaining military aviation readiness and safety.

The Commission recommends Congress and the administration take measures to ensure predictable and reliable funding for military aviation, and eliminate the increased risk of accidents and fatalities resulting from continued use of CRs to fund national security, military readiness, and aviation safety.

Given the critical importance of adequate resources, the Commission further recommends that Congress utilize the expertise of the Congressional Budget Office, and task them with studying the negative impacts of continuing resolutions on military aviation readiness and safety.

Joint Safety Council (JSC)

Finally, but vitally important, is the fact that DoD is lacking a centralized safety organization – one with senior leadership involvement and the authority to coordinate, monitor, and implement safety measures across the aviation community. Such an organization would be able to address the numerous data collection and data analysis deficiencies that the Commission found, and to do so with Defense-wide solutions in mind.

The Commission is recommending that DoD establish aviation safety responsibilities within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, providing the necessary status, experienced and highly qualified personnel, and adequate funding to be effective in preventing injury, death, and damage.

The Commission recommends that Congress mandate, authorize, and fund the creation of a Joint Safety Council (JSC) that reports to the Deputy Secretary of Defense. The JSC would support and coordinate the capabilities of the Services' safety centers to identify and mitigate safety risks, and to reduce the number of aviation mishaps. To be successful, the JSC must be fully funded and staffed, and charged with developing and overseeing Defense-wide safety policies for the Secretary of Defense.

JSC's operating requirements must include unlimited access to the requisite databases, as well as a program element to conduct further research into determining and mitigating unexplained physiological episodes. This will ensure a coordinated, robust, data-driven aviation safety program – one that incorporates best practices and lessons learned, and is managed proactively, not reactively.

Thank you again for establishing this Commission. We hope that you will fully examine each of our recommendations, which we are confident can improve military aviation safety across the Services.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify today and equally look forward to your questions.

Thank you.