

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

"Flying is the most fun you can have with your pants on!"
-Old Aviation Truism

October 14, 1947 – Captain Charles Yeager climbed into his day-glow orange rocket powered aircraft “Glamorous Glennis” and belted himself in for the flight of his life. His aircraft was strapped under the belly of a huge World War II vintage B-29 bomber, that is flying at approximately 20,000 feet above Edwards Army Air Corps Base in southern California. When the experimental aircraft “Glamorous Glennis” is finally dropped into the frigid air of 20,000 feet, Captain Yeager ignites both rocket engines and soars into history as the first human being to fly faster than the speed of sound.

October 15, 1947 (The next day) – Leland McCown (Me) is born. Five years later, I joyously discovered “*Flying*” when my father’s friend took me on my first-ever flight in an old Stinson two-seat monoplane. From then on, flying was all there was, is, and will ever be.

June 12, 1968 – I was drafted into the US Army, and scared out of my ever loving mind. This was the height of the Vietnam War. I already had several high school buddies sent over there, and they never returned, alive. I just knew that this whole episode was the beginning of the end, my end. A lot of kids my age were moving to Canada to avoid “The Draft.” Even though I was petrified, I knew that my duty to my country was more important than fear.

The first four months of the lovely Army life were extremely alien to my totally civilian, lard-butt mentality. But I made it through the most physically and mentally demanding thing I had ever experienced in my entire 20 years on this planet.

Then I found out that the Army was going to send me to Vietnam as an INFANTRYMAN! The average life expectancy for an infantry soldier at that time was about two months. I used to think I was scared before, but this topped that period. It was at this point that my Guardian Angel finally woke up and started doing his job. I discovered that my mental aptitude tests indicated that I was qualified to apply for and attend US Army Flight School.

Needless to say, I jumped wholeheartedly on that band wagon for two big reasons; I loved flying, and I did not want to be an infantryman. After nine months of some of the most intense mental, physical, and technical training created by man, I graduated from US Army Flight School in late 1969 as a qualified helicopter pilot. I then spent the next six months in Kansas, where even the snow complained of the cold weather.

In early 1970, I finally made it to Vietnam. I was in hog-heaven. The Army gave me a \$300,000.00 aircraft and all the gas I wanted . . . just to fly. What more could I want? Fortunately, during my first few months "in country," no one was shooting at me. That made the flying even more wonderful.

Every morning, my roommate Mike Baker and I would alternate one of our unit's missions. We alternated because our aircraft required only a single pilot. The mission was to fly out to a base in the jungle, pick up an Army Colonel, and fly him back to our headquarters so he could brief the 3-Star General. Later one of us would fly him back out to his base in the jungle. The first leg of this mission was very early (0500 hours) in the morning, really dark. The second leg was around 0800 hours, really light.

The Colonel was an Infantry Officer. Because the aircraft required only one pilot, the Colonel sat in the front seat beside either Mike or myself during the mission. It is very important to understand that the Colonel was not a pilot!

During every return flight to his jungle base, the Colonel was constantly questioning, degrading, and criticizing our flying, the aircraft, and our professionalism as Army aviators. We were expecting him to begin criticizing us as persons also. Both Mike and I had tried on numerous occasions, and in many direct and indirect ways to enlighten and educate the man; unsuccessfully. I had even tried to get him to ride in the backseat instead of the front. That idea almost got me hit, so I dropped it.

Mike and I finally realized that more severe and direct communication techniques were called for.

Point of Fact: Helicopters and parachutes DO NOT MIX! Because of the simple nature of helicopters and the principles of rotary wing flight, parachutes are not worn by flight crewmembers in helicopters because of the danger. It is much safer to stay with the aircraft during most all emergencies. Mike and I were betting that the Colonel, even though not an aviator, would also know this simple fact. We had scrounged a parachute from the US Air Force a few weeks before, and used the silk canopy to decorate our quarters. It was a totally non-functional parachute.

The next mission, we flipped a coin, and Mike won the toss. The Colonel's training class would begin the next morning, with Mike as his instructor. The pick-up from the jungle base went without any problems. The Colonel went off to brief the General. Then we began the "preparations" for that day's communication lesson for the Colonel.

I took the parachute out to the helicopter and placed it in the battery compartment on the left rear side of the aircraft (the Colonel's seat was in the left front of the aircraft). While I did that, Mike "prepared." He began to rub his eyes vigorously for about 20 minutes until they were blatantly bloodshot. Then he put some white powder in his black hair, which drastically aged him. So far, so good.

When the Colonel arrived for his flight back to his base, he "saw" Mike for the first time that day (it was dark on the first leg), and was noticeably shocked by the gray hair and bloodshot eyes. In addition, Mike would make a "low moan" once in awhile. The Colonel looked apprehensive and knew something was "not right."

As Mike and the Colonel walked out to the aircraft, Mike would look at the sky and shake his head; and moan. By this time, the Colonel was watching Mike more closely than where he was walking, which is why he tripped and almost fell. When they arrived at the aircraft, Mike helped the Colonel get strapped in to the left front seat of the aircraft (right next to the pilot's seat). Afterwards, Mike just stood there, next to the Colonel, outside of the aircraft, looking at the sky, looking at the aircraft, looking at the sky, ... and moaning. The Colonel was watching Mike very intensely. Sweat broke out on his upper lip, and he tightened his seatbelts some more.

Finally, Mike said, "Oh, well. I guess there's no choice." He walked back to the left rear battery compartment and took out the parachute (we had stuffed it with a pillow to make it look real). The Colonel strained to watch Mike while still seat belted in the aircraft. Mike carried the parachute back up to stand outside the aircraft, beside the Colonel. Mike then began putting the parachute on (Thank goodness we had practiced the night before). The Colonel tried to get his seatbelts tighter, and his eyes grew obviously larger as he closely watched Mike.



things began “happening.”

Mike then climbed into the aircraft pilot’s seat and started it up. The Colonel continued to stare at Mike’s every action and move, becoming more edgy. So far, everything seemed to be going “OK.” Once they took off and were safely enroute to the Colonel’s base,



Mike would look outside, so would the Colonel. When the Colonel looked outside, and could not see what Mike was doing, Mike jerked the flight controls, causing the aircraft to “jump suddenly.” This action caused the Colonel become more openly agitated, and he held his seat even tighter.

While the Colonel was watching him, Mike began tapping some of the instruments, as if something “might” be wrong. After a few moments of this activity, Mike looked outside the aircraft, seeming to “search” for possible emergency landing sites. When

Mike did this several times. Each time this occurred, Mike’s “distress” became more and more pronounced. Mike then started physically striking the instruments with his fist. Whenever the Colonel looked outside, Mike jerked the controls, and the aircraft jumped. Mike was not sure how much more the Colonel could take.

Mike took his “final” look outside the aircraft. When the Colonel also looked outside, Mike locked the controls in their position (so they would not move unsafely). When the Colonel looked back inside the aircraft, Mike let go of the controls and reached for his seatbelt release

mechanism, obviously preparing to jump out, with his (and the only) parachute.

At this point, the Colonel's face was bleach white and covered with sweat. His eyes seemed the size of saucers. Controlled by sheer unadulterated panic, the Colonel reached over and grabbed Mike's left arm with both of his hands in a vice-like grip, and screamed, spitting, "DON'T YOU LEAVE ME, DAMMIT!!"

By the time the aircraft landed at the jungle base, the Colonel was soaked in fear-based sweat. His crisp jungle fatigues were like a wad of wet dish rags. As he left the aircraft, the Colonel had noticeable difficulty maintaining his balance.

It took over two weeks for the bruises on Mike's left arm to fully heal. After that flight, the Colonel cancelled the mission forever. He said something about feeling safer "on the ground" in a jeep.

Effective communication is possible, and can take many forms.

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