

Toxic Senior Military Leaders in the Cockpit

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Military pilots can become toxic leaders both in and out of the aircraft. Such pilots negatively affect a unit's performance, morale, and safety. If not corrected early in their careers, toxic pilots can continue to rise in rank and flight qualifications and can create an adverse environment that extends well outside the cockpit. To address the challenge of toxic senior military pilots, the Department of Defense should 1) improve the initial screening and training of aviation candidates, 2) train aircrew and senior leaders to identify and respond to toxic pilots, and 3) empower anonymous reporting.

On June 24, 1994, a B-52H Stratofortress, call sign Czar 52, crashed during an airshow rehearsal at Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington, killing the crew of four senior US Air Force officers. Aviation safety researcher and retired US Air Force officer Tony Kern's detailed investigation into what Air Force regulation officially reported as a Class A mishap—in this case, an airplane crash resulting in one or more fatalities—cited the causal factor as a senior pilot acting as a rogue aviator who intentionally broke Air Force flight regulations and abused the privileges of his rank and positional authority.¹ Complacent senior leaders further empowered this pilot by refusing to punish him following multiple flight violations and complaints from junior aircrew about his toxic behavior.

As officers, pilots can become toxic leaders both in and out of the aircraft. Such pilots negatively affect a unit's performance, morale, and safety. Within military aviation, a rogue aviator is a specific type of toxic pilot who knowingly breaks rules in the aircraft. Yet a toxic pilot is not always a rogue aviator. Toxic pilots can still operate within their communities' established rules, but their abusive behavior in the aircraft will still impact flight safety. If not corrected, toxic pilots can continue to rise in rank and flight qualifications and can create an adverse environment that extends well outside the cockpit. To address the challenge of toxic senior military pilots, the Department of Defense should 1) improve the initial screening and training of aviation candidates, 2) train aircrew and senior leaders to identify and respond to toxic pilots, and 3) empower anonymous reporting.

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1. Tony Kern, *Darker Shades of Blue: A Case Study of Failed Leadership* (self pub., 1995), <https://conversiontperformance.com/>.

Background

Toxic leaders impact an organization's climate, culture, and morale. Often, junior members can become disillusioned with their organization as their attempts to bring attention to a toxic leader's behavior fail to be addressed by more senior leaders. The problem with toxic leaders worsens when their actions impact people's safety and lives. Toxic senior military pilots are particularly dangerous because they not only negatively affect their squadron and harm their service's reputation, but they also put people's lives at risk.

Within the US military, the Army is the only service to have officially defined toxic leadership, which it refers to as counterproductive leadership. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, describes counterproductive leadership as "preventing a climate conducive to mission accomplishment"; it "leaves organizations in a worse condition than when the leader arrived."² While the Army offers an expansive explanation of counterproductive leadership in the military, this article uses the broader definition of toxic leaders by noted sociologist and social psychologist Jean Lipman-Blumen as "those individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviours and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations, communities and even the nations that they lead."³

Many flight students learn about the Czar 52 mishap during initial flight training, yet toxic senior military leaders continue to be a problem in the military.⁴ Junior aircrew may recognize toxic leadership in the cockpit and rogue aviator characteristics but feel powerless to do anything if the leader is a senior pilot with years of flying experience and advanced flight qualifications.

The Czar 52 incident involved a rogue aviator, a specific type of toxic pilot who knowingly breaks rules in the aircraft.⁵ According to Kern, in addition to commanding a high level of expertise, rogue aviators are "usually popular and respected, possess considerable social skills, and have learned what rules they can break, when, and with whom."⁶ The combination of "this level of sophistication" and "high experience, skill, and confidence" enables such aviators to continue to appear as model pilots to more senior leaders.⁷ Using

2. Headquarters, Department of the Army (DA), *Army Leadership and the Professions*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22 (Washington, DC: DA, July 2019), 8-7, <https://rdl.train.army.mil/>.

3. Jean Lipman-Blumen, "The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why Followers Rarely Escape Their Clutches," *Ivey Business Journal* (January/February 2005), under "Defining Toxic Leaders," <https://iveybusinessjournal.com/>.

4. Jason Lamb, "Why Toxic Senior Leaders Survive—and Sometimes Thrive—in the Military," *Air Force Times*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/>; and Kenneth R. Williams, "The Cost of Tolerating Toxic Behaviors in the Department of Defense Workplace," *Military Review* (July/August 2019), <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/>.

5. Kern, *Darker Shades*.

6. Kern, under "Section One: Introduction, Key Concepts: Airmanship, Rogue Aviators, Leadership, and the Culture of Compliance."

7. Kern.

existing safety mechanisms to report toxic pilots can prove ineffective if the individual is a senior leader who is highly regarded by more senior officers.

The B-52H Disaster

The B-52H, Czar 52, crashed when the pilot turned the aircraft beyond a 90-degree angle of bank, exceeding established aircraft limitations. This caused the bomber to stall, which was unrecoverable at only 250 feet above ground level. The crash occurred following the completion of the airshow rehearsal as the crew was maneuvering the aircraft for a landing. Lieutenant Colonel Arthur “Bud” Holland flew as the pilot in command and was likely at the controls when the aircraft crashed. His reputation as a gifted aviator and his years of experience had earned him the position of chief of the 92d Bomb Wing Standardization and Evaluation branch, responsible for the enforcement of B-52H flight and evaluation standards within the wing. Yet despite his position and reputation, in the three years leading up to the accident, Holland knowingly exceeded aircraft limitations seven times in airshows, training exercises, and flyovers for change-of-command ceremonies.⁸

Lieutenant Colonel Mark McGeehan, the co-pilot and also the 325th Bomb Squadron commanding officer, had made several attempts to ground Holland for his unsafe behavior. In fact, McGeehan would allow his aircrew to fly with Holland only if he was in the aircraft as well.⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Ken Huston flew as the navigator since the navigator initially assigned to the air show crew refused to fly with Holland. Colonel Robert Wolff, the 92d Bomb Wing vice commander, flew as a safety observer. The wing commander added Wolff to the flight the morning of the mishap.

A Deadly Course of Events

During the three years preceding the mishap, the high turnover rate within the 92d Wing’s senior leadership and failure to document and properly punish Holland for his repeated flight violations created an environment in which his rogue aviator characteristics could flourish. Despite these violations and multiple warnings from other B-52H aircrew about Holland’s conduct, 92d Wing leadership kept Holland in his position and allowed him to keep flying. The Czar 52 mishap stands out as a tragic incident in which senior leadership ignored all signs pointing to Holland as a toxic senior pilot and, worse, created an environment in which his toxicity could continue unchecked. Junior aircrew lost faith in their senior leaders as they saw a lack of consistency and fairness within the 92d Wing leadership. Established rules seemingly applied to every B-52H pilot except Holland.¹⁰ The crash and resulting deaths of four Airmen was thus due to a single toxic

8. Kern.

9. Kern.

10. Tony Kern, *Czar 52: A Prelude to Disaster*, n.d., <https://www.hptc-pro.com/>.

senior pilot enabled by a group of senior leaders who failed to establish a healthy command climate and did not take disciplinary actions against a subordinate's misconduct.

Lessons Learned

The lessons learned from the Czar 52 crash and events leading up to it apply to any organization where a senior toxic leader can have an adverse impact that at its most extreme can turn deadly. The most significant and dangerous impact of toxicity in the cockpit is on flight safety. In this case, Holland had become a rogue aviator. He knowingly violated Air Force flight regulations and created an abusive cockpit environment in which no other aircrew could question his actions. Outside the aircraft, Holland used his rank and positional authority to dismiss any complaints against his behavior and harass anyone who spoke out against him.¹¹

Rogue Aviators

Rogue aviators, especially those who are senior officers, can inspire equally bad behavior in junior pilots. The investigation into the Czar 52 crash noted that over the years, other junior B-52H pilots had attempted to emulate Holland's aggressive and unauthorized flight maneuvers in the aircraft. Despite many junior pilots refusing to fly with him, others viewed Holland as a role model.¹² Because junior pilots tend to look up to their more experienced colleagues, a toxic role model, specifically one who goes unpunished, can negatively inspire junior pilots who will possibly pass damaging behaviors on to the next generation.

Toxic Leaders

A toxic senior pilot damages the reputation of an entire organization. Squadron pilots opposed to Holland's behavior perceived a double standard in which wing leadership refused to acknowledge and punish the unprofessional airmanship of a pilot in charge of standardization and evaluations.¹³ By not correcting toxic behavior, whether out of ignorance or willful neglect, the wing leadership eroded their credibility and trustworthiness.

The military's organizational culture consists of a rigid hierarchy and strict observance of established rules governing the interaction between junior and senior members. As a result, junior members may be reluctant to speak up when confronted with a toxic senior leader. Incidentally, this reluctance can be made even worse when reporting a toxic senior pilot, particularly one highly regarded by senior officials. Junior members may believe they might jeopardize their flight progression by challenging an experienced pilot with advanced flight qualifications.

11. Kern.

12. Kern.

13. Kern.

In addition, a pilot's reputation can inhibit senior leaders from objectively assessing toxic behavior. Holland's role as the 92d Bomb Wing's chief of Standardization and Evaluations and reputation within the B-52H community as a skilled pilot led the wing's multiple senior leaders to willfully ignore valid complaints about his behavior. Each new senior leader saw Holland's flight violations as a single incident and not a series of repeated infractions.¹⁴ As Kern notes, "While outgoing leaders didn't fulfill their responsibility to inform new commanders, incoming commanders didn't ask the right questions."¹⁵ By failing to document Holland's incidents and pass that information along to their replacements, and by neglecting to investigate prior complaints about Holland, the 92d Wing leadership enabled a toxic pilot's behavior and created an adverse command climate.

Tragically, toxic leadership continues to be a causal factor in fatal mishaps. A US Air Force C-17 crash on July 28, 2010, had disturbingly similar characteristics to the Czar 52 mishap.¹⁶ More recently, toxic leadership was identified as a factor in the fatal crash of a US Navy T-45C on October 1, 2018, and the midair collision between a US Marine Corps F/A-18D and C-130J on December 6, 2018.¹⁷ The Air Force and other services have likely not yet solved the problem of toxic leaders in the cockpit.

Recommendations

This article proposes three recommendations to identify, correct, and, if necessary, prevent a toxic pilot from growing in rank, authority, and flight qualifications. Military organizations at all levels must implement processes and procedures to address toxicity and minimize its impact. Taking a multifaceted approach, starting with initial recruitment and continuing throughout an aviator's career, the three recommendations involve selection and recruitment, training and awareness development, and empowering anonymous reporting for leadership accountability. Leadership expert George E. Reed offers similar suggestions when discussing how to mitigate toxic leadership.¹⁸ These also include followers and supervisors identifying and directly confronting toxic leaders and supervisors providing personal counseling for an identified toxic leader. The following recommendations aim to identify and correct toxic traits prior to or early in an aviator's training and ensure such traits do not emerge over the course of their career.

14. Kern, *Darker Shades*.

15. Kern, under "Section Four: Conclusions and Implications, The Senior Leadership Positions Did Not Speak with Continuity."

16. Stephen Trimble, "C-17 Crash Report Exposes Cracks in USAF Safety Culture," Flight Global (website), December 17, 2010, <https://www.flightglobal.com/>.

17. Mark D. Faram, "Leadership Failures in Navy Pilot Training Squadrons Led to Tennessee T-45 Crash," *Navy Times*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.navytimes.com/>; and Megan Eckstein, "Marine Corps Finds 2018 Crash Investigation Had Flaws, Proposes New Safety Measures," United States Naval Institute (USNI) News, July 2, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/>.

18. George E. Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

Selection, Recruitment, and Initial Training

The initial selection and recruitment phase should include an in-depth psychological screening of potential candidates that identifies toxic behavior. These screenings should specifically target narcissistic traits as they seem most common within toxic leaders in the military and are often the hardest to identify.¹⁹ Observing and assessing candidates in role-playing scenarios designed to identify toxic behavior will also help complement any findings from a psychological screening. Depending on the toxic traits identified, a candidate could be denied entry into the service or made aware of this negative behavior and receive appropriate training to correct these deficiencies. This detailed initial assessment would be an extension of the more comprehensive leadership evaluation programs that many of the US military services are incorporating for their field grade officers.²⁰

Correcting toxic leadership is much easier when the pilot is still junior in rank and flight qualifications. Research into toxic or destructive behavior has shown that it can be resolved with the appropriate intervention and help. A 2018 study recommends that first, “the destructive leader behavior needs to be assessed to understand it in terms of the target of the behavior and the level of hostility”; this should be followed by specific interventions, “for example, personal coaching for the leader can work on the specific harming behaviors.”²¹ If toxic leadership traits are identified early and the individual is provided tailored training, a potentially toxic leader can be turned away from the dark side of leadership. Specific to pilots, continuous assessments throughout flight training should be provided to any flight student identified as potentially toxic. If someone fails to show improvement, they should be removed from the flight program and possibly military service.

Training and Awareness Development

Aircrew should receive initial and annual training focused on developing techniques to identify and address toxic behavior in the cockpit. With a toxic leader in the cockpit, some members of the aircrew may assume the role of followers who can further empower the toxic leader. A detailed analysis on such dynamics states that followers can “give credibility to the leader and provide resources they need to continue to lead regardless of how destructive that leadership is. . . . These followers are usually the recipients of destructive

19. J. A. Bourgeois et al., “An Examination of Narcissistic Personality Traits as Seen in a Military Population,” *Military Medicine* 158, no. 3 (March 1993), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>; and Michael Piellusch, “Toxic Leadership or Tough Love: Does the U.S. Military Know the Difference?,” War Room—Army War College, August 25, 2017, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/>.

20. Philip Athey, “New 360 Degree Review to Start with Just 200 Marines,” *Marine Corps Times*, November 27, 2021, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/>.

21. Ellen A. Schmid, Armin Pircher Verdorfer, and Claudia V. Peus, “Different Shades—Different Effects? Consequences of Different Types of Destructive Leadership,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018), under “General Discussion, Practical Implications,” <https://doi.org/>.

behavior and tend to experience considerable harm.”²² Despite suffering under a toxic leader, aircrew who do nothing to identify, correct, and report this behavior become followers who enable that leader to continue their unsafe and unprofessional behavior.

Training to prevent aircrew from becoming followers who enable toxic leaders should start with studying, analyzing, and discussing previous aviation mishaps caused by a toxic pilot. Each service’s respective aviation safety center should conduct the initial ground training and provide additional training material to squadron safety departments. Aviation safety centers can access years of relevant mishap data, receive current mishap reports, and provide unbiased training about toxic pilots and commands.

During advanced flight training and as part of annual aircrew training, the syllabus should include a flight training event in which an instructor simulates being a toxic pilot who negatively impacts flight safety. This specific training would focus on how to identify and address a toxic pilot during a flight. Aircrew should be trained to treat toxic behavior like any other safety-of-flight issue. The first step is to verbally identify the issue and offer constructive feedback to correct this behavior. If a pilot persists in behavior and actions which could jeopardize flight safety, the other crew members should directly express the intention to stop a flight maneuver or end the flight.

To clearly communicate a safety concern, standard aviation phraseology must be used. During a flight, the Air Force and many other services use the phrase “knock-it-off” any time an unsafe condition occurs.²³ This phrase is just as applicable to a situation involving a toxic pilot’s unsafe behavior. Treating toxicity in the cockpit as a safety-of-flight issue allows aircrew to use an existing standardized approach to identify a hazard, make appropriate corrections, and, if needed, end the flight.

Military aviation is a highly demanding profession in which aircrew must build resiliency to operate their aircraft in a high-stress environment. To build such resiliency and avoid the misperception of toxic behavior being an instructional technique, aircrew training should emphasize the difference between constructive practices and destructive behavior to ensure that toxic conduct is properly identified. This will also help prevent junior pilots from attempting to emulate a toxic pilot when they gain instructor flight qualifications. The strong emphasis that aviation has on safety demands that no one should tolerate bad behavior in the cockpit.

The goal of this combination of ground and flight training is to ensure aircrew of all ranks and qualifications feel empowered in their assigned role in the aircraft to identify toxic behavior and respond to and report it appropriately. Having the tools and knowledge to identify toxic behavior is a good first step. The next step is practicing employing those skills in the aircraft to prevent aircrew from becoming followers who enable or mimic

22. Ivana Milosevic, Stefan Maric, and Dragan Lončar, “Defeating the Toxic Boss: The Nature of Toxic Leadership and the Role of Followers,” *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 27, no. 2 (2019): 131, <https://doi.org/>.

23. Secretary of the Air Force (SAF), *Flying Operations: Air Operations Rules and Procedures*, Air Force Instruction (AFI) 11-214 (Washington, DC: SAF, July 8, 2020), <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

toxic behavior. If properly trained, junior aircrew can stop their commanding officer from unsafe conduct in the aircraft.

Anonymous Reporting

If not already implemented, all squadrons should have anonymous reporting programs in place to give every member an opportunity to voice their concerns without fear of retribution. Anonymous reports help raise awareness of toxic behaviors and can be a valuable resource for commanders to evaluate personnel performance and morale. Access to anonymous reporting is typically limited to select members within a unit's safety department and the commanding officer. This helps protect anonymity and empower commanding officers with how they choose to address any identified issues within their command. Unfortunately, this limited access also allows a commanding officer to ignore or dismiss complaints about toxic leadership and behavior within their command or associated with themselves, thus creating a toxic barrier.

To ensure anonymous reporting can overcome such barriers, military organizations should introduce clear mechanisms and standardized procedures that make commanding officers accountable for monitoring their command climate and promptly addressing reports of toxic behavior among personnel. Yet while command climate surveys can be used to anonymously gain inputs about the health of a command and its leadership, the results of such surveys are limited to the commanding officer. This can present another barrier if the results are ignored or dismissed. As such, there should be a standardized procedure for bypassing any possible obstacles to reporting toxic behavior. Safety departments should be empowered to take any reports to their next higher headquarters if they feel their commanding officer is not correctly addressing identified concerns.

Filing an inspector general (IG) complaint is another option to report abusive behavior. Providing education on this process can serve as another means of improving reporting and holding toxic senior pilots accountable. Due to its legal requirements, the IG complaint process is more formal and lengthy than anonymous or direct reporting. Yet again, there are limitations to this process; the IG or the commander responsible for reviewing the IG investigation and determining what actions should be taken could dismiss the complaint.

In the case of Holland, it seems unlikely the wing leadership would have pursued any such reports, considering they dismissed evidence and other complaints about his toxic behavior.²⁴ Before this process can work, then, senior leaders must be receptive to feedback that impacts the command climate. Research discussing ways to detox organizations proposes that senior leaders must develop a strong "willingness to follow the goals of an organization instead of focusing on oneself, the ability to maintain a culture of transparency,

24. Kern, *Darker Shades*.

belonging, and accountability, and the courage to defend it. The latter might require disposing of toxic leaders who are harming the organization's reputation."²⁵

For personnel to use anonymous reporting and develop trust in an organization and its leaders, personnel must see that their leadership handles anonymous reporting promptly and takes accusations of misbehavior seriously. Any reports of the commanding officer exhibiting toxic behavior should be automatically brought to the next higher headquarters. This higher command can then determine if the anonymous report comes from one disgruntled individual or several members making a justified complaint and begin to track if reports of toxic leadership become an unresolved trend within a command.

This should not be grounds for immediate removal from command, and the commanding officer should be allowed to defend any accusations of toxic leadership. For accusations of toxic behavior within a group or wing staff, the reporting should also go to the next higher headquarters. It is unknown if anyone outside the 92d Bomb Wing knew about Holland's bad behavior. Although too late, following the Czar 52 investigation, the service punished several leaders within the 92d Bomb Wing for dereliction of duty.²⁶

Considering the damage and potentially deadly consequences a toxic pilot can have on an organization, it is worth the small investment in screening aviation candidates for toxic behavior, training aircrew to identify and respond appropriately to toxic pilots, and empowering anonymous reporting to prevent toxic leaders from negatively impacting flight safety and squadron culture.

Conclusion

The Czar 52 tragedy should have never happened. Despite multiple incidents proving Holland to be a rogue aviator, the 92d Bomb Wing's leadership failed to properly correct and prevent this toxic senior pilot from continuing to fly and exerting his influence over the wing's junior aircrew. The wing leadership also created a toxic environment in which Airmen began to lose faith in the institution over a double standard and refusal to acknowledge their legitimate concerns about a toxic pilot. The analysis of the crash and ongoing problems with toxic senior leaders in the cockpit in the 30 years since the incident reveal such leaders persist in gaining seniority in rank and flight qualifications.

Militaries with aviation communities must improve initial screening and training of aviation candidates to identify potentially toxic behavior, train aircrew on how to identify and respond to toxic pilots should an incident happen in flight, and finally empower anonymous reporting to hold a commanding officer accountable. At best, the failure to address toxic leadership in the cockpit can compromise the immediate and long-term health of the Air Force. At worst, it can have fatal consequences. → ✳

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25. Merja Hoppe, "The Problem with Toxic Leadership and How to Detox Organizations" (working paper, ETH Zurich, February 2021), 9, <http://dx.doi.org/>.

26. Kern, *Darker Shades*.