

# A Look into the Future of Army Aviation

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Soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 3rd Aviation Regiment (Attack Reconnaissance), 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, conduct routine maintenance on an AH-64 Apache attack helicopter during maneuvers training exercise at 7th Army Training Command's Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, March 15, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Nathanael Mercado)

Noncommissioned officer leadership remains the cornerstone of aviation maintenance. My observation is that our NCOs in the AH-64 world are empowered to perform their duties and are held liable for that prowess. Sergeants are developing techniques and procedures that are upheld throughout Army aviation, providing a strategic effect.

## **Need for Competent Leaders**

The environment in Europe offers numerous challenges to maintenance and logistics. Austere sites, harsh environments, and limited access to strong logistical support require NCOs to react

ness, harsh environments, and limited access to strong logistical support require NCOs to react and plan for maintenance events. Our combat aviation brigade integrates with adjacent units and invests in efforts to build relationships and interoperability. Many of the training areas require collaboration with NATO forces and other U.S. military services. Our NCOs need to be adaptive and agile, allowing them to effectively work with our allies in order to provide vital assets to our brigade.

As senior NCOs, it is our responsibility to train Soldiers, specifically in their technical field as 15R attack helicopter repairers. We all know the importance of a well-trained Soldier, let alone a well-trained unit.

The need for competent leaders who are empowered to make critical decisions at their level cannot be overstated when performing aviation operations. Understanding that we need competent leaders is one thing; how we fill that need is a separate effort.

### **Becoming a Leader**

As I began to write this article, I looked at what I have learned from my military career and Army publications; aviation maintenance is an exceptional environment to develop leaders, because of the level of accountability Army aviation has established to ensure quality work.

There have been vast technological advances in Army aviation, but the human factor is still required for operation and upkeep of aviation assets. For aviation to be a reliable combat multiplier, highly effective leaders must be on the job. Such leaders cannot be mass produced or produced only when the need arises. Competent leaders make the mission happen, and cannot be replaced.

Field Manual 6-22 ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/fm6\\_22.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/fm6_22.pdf)), *Leader Development*, states, "Working in real settings – solving real problems with actual team members – provides the challenges and conditions where leaders can see the significance of and have the opportunity to perform leadership activities."<sup>1</sup>

This sentence describes the environment in which Army aviation Soldiers and NCOs conduct their daily operations. The demand for aviation assets creates endless opportunities for leader development at all ranks and levels of responsibility.

The benefit of competent leaders is diminished if those leaders are not empowered with the authority to make critical decisions at the speed needed to accomplish the mission. It's unrealistic to expect a young NCO who has the authority to cancel a mission to also need approval to conduct repairs if he is truly to be effective in his role. To develop junior leaders, supervisors need to empower them with the responsibility to make critical decisions without oversight.

If Army aviation is to remain a combat multiplier and an asset in high demand, we have to

afford young leaders the opportunity to make critical decisions, provide them with the resources needed to complete complex tasks, and give them honest feedback on their performance. This will ensure Army aviation has the leaders it needs to thrive in any operational environment.

### **Preparing for Future Leadership**

Let's start by realizing that there are challenges with providing adequate maintenance training and development to an entire generation of leaders. This has resulted in Army aviation becoming far too reliant on contract maintenance; moreover, it has impacted the development of the NCO aviation corps.

There are good reasons as to why the Army has become reliant on contract maintenance. Over the last decade, operations tempo, reset, and manning constraints have all affected maintainer training. But, the question that faces us now is, "What are we going to do about it?"

It starts with leaders identifying the size and scope of this problem. Leaders at all levels need to take a step back, look at the maintenance process and periodically ensure we've got it right. If not, develop a plan and train our Soldiers.

Leaders in the field need to take responsibility to fix what they can. NCO enhancement seminars cannot solve this problem alone. Over the last decade we've streamlined courses and greatly reduced the length of time Soldiers spend in the institutional training environments.

We have to realize time will always be our enemy when using institutional Army training. There often is not enough time to train everything that we would like to. Consequently, Army aviation relies heavily on units, through operational assignments and self-development, to give Soldiers the necessary skills to operate effectively.

Leaders need to deliberately plan maintenance training. Training takes time and resources to accomplish and it's no different for training Soldiers on maintenance tasks. Are we putting maintenance training on the calendar? Do we have training objectives defined and have we certified our trainers? Are we training the right Soldiers on the right tasks? Those questions are easier to ask than answer, which is why it is important. As leaders, we need to ensure maintenance training gets the same level of planning that an air assault or a deliberate attack does.

Finally, we need to invest in both the technical and leader development of our Soldiers. As the complexity of aircraft continually increases, so does the complexity of maintenance procedures. For some of the technical skills, repeating a task can aid a Soldier in their proficiency.

For many tasks, we can send Soldiers to Army depot facilities to work with master craftsmen who can give them hands-on training. Other tasks require an in-depth knowledge of systems in order to troubleshoot appropriately. Army Aviation and Missile Command can assist here as

well, by providing the same training to 15Rs that logistics assistance representatives receive. Regardless of where Soldiers receive training, it is critical that leaders have a training plan. It will not happen on its own, and no one wants to pass along an untrained Soldier to the next unit.

## **Our Current & Future Environment**

It is clear from the new update to Field Manual 3-0 ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN6687\\_FM%203-0%20C1%20Inc%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN6687_FM%203-0%20C1%20Inc%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf)), Operations, that our military occupational specialty needs to be more flexible and adaptable than ever before. As the operating environment continues to change and evolve, Soldiers and leaders must be agile in adapting to new environments. Consequently, the enterprise must begin to adapt now in order to train our Soldiers and leaders for the future.

The complex future environment will require access to subject matter expertise to conduct repairs of intricate systems at the point of need. Training and certification programs must be hosted in an online environment where, not only unit managers can track better but, our branch and human resource representatives have access to manage personnel.

A branch should work towards a training plan for maintainers that matches the aviation aircrew member readiness level progression process. If done right, it will not only ensure we are investing in our force, by providing the right training when needed to meet mission requirements, but also aid in placing the right people in the right jobs.

All I want is to see the next generation of 15R attack helicopter repairer and crew chiefs grow and thrive, as they become the future of Army aviation. I believe that leaders at all levels are committed to ensuring that Army aviation has the resources necessary to train our force. We must accept this opportunity, this challenge, and move forward to address and correct the maintenance training deficiencies within our ranks. For the more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war, and the sooner we come home.<sup>2</sup>

## **Notes**

1 FM 6-22, *Leader Development* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2015).

2 Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, quoted in *The Daily Telegraph*, for Remembrance Day, November 5, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/11189802/remembrance-day-quotations.html> (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/11189802/remembrance-day-quotations.html>)