

Discipline Breakdowns Cost Lives

By Maj Jim Roy, Langley AFB, Va.

Can there be any other explanation for a wingman running into his flight lead from line abreast formation in an air-to-air engagement except for a lack of discipline? Or isn't a flight lead failing to check his wingman's position throughout an entire engagement undisciplined as well? ...

“The good news is that the pilot ejected and is OK.” As part of ACC’s flight safety staff, we all breathe a sigh of relief when we hear those words. Sadly, we have not heard them very often recently when the mishap was either a midair collision or a collision with the ground. We all know that the Probability of Kill (P_k) of a ground collision is 99.9 percent. For midairs, it’s not quite so high, but even a P_k of around 50 is still not something to take your chances with. We lost seven pilots in fighter/attack mishaps in the Combat Air Forces (CAF) in 2002. All of them were in collisions and all of them could have been avoided.

Avoiding high P_k mishaps is both easy and hard. In most cases, it can be as simple as keeping sight of your flight lead and not running into him. It can also be as basic as not descending into flat terrain while flying at low altitude. For Air Force pilots, this is easy stuff and requires nothing from our engineers, systems designers, or program budget directors to fix. It’s simply a matter of adhering to the fundamentals of being a good fighter pilot whose number one job is not to run into the ground or a member of your flight.

Some might say that our number one job really isn’t that simple or else we would have figured out how to stop having accidents a long time ago? No, it truly is that simple. Look at the Thunderbirds. They fly jets closer to each other and do aerobatic maneuvers closer to the ground and they rarely have mishaps. With proper training, it’s not that hard. Like the narrator at shows tells the audience, “The Thunderbirds are just ordinary guys,” just like the rest of us — right?

In my opinion our main problem is not that we have too many irons in the fire, though this position is contrary to a lot of what has been said on this issue lately. Now, it’s true that if all we had to do was fly around and keep from running into each other or the ground, then we would probably avoid all of the high P_k mishaps. And it’s also true that if we are to effectively employ the jet as a high-tech, warfighting machine, there are tasks that we must accomplish.

These tasks include: running the radar, digging out the target from an infrared display, targeting a wingman through pilot data link, and so on. These are complicated and can easily become task saturating. The list of new tasks just keeps getting longer and longer with each new wave of tactics and technology. The potential for task saturation and channelized attention grows right along with these increases in technology. But still, I don’t think that additional tasking is the primary culprit.

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straight. Discipline means doing the right thing at the right time, and this kind of self-discipline is sometimes hard.

This is why avoiding high P_k mishaps is really not easy at all. It requires looking up from radar to check your wingman’s position even if you don’t have the perfect sort. It requires calling blind when you lose the visual before adjusting the IR gain, even if you’re confident you will find your lead on your next look. It also requires immediately checking your attitude when you get a low altitude warning to confirm you are not descending, even though the bandit at six might get the advantage if you lose sight.

Add to the mix some new technology and discipline gets even more important. The designers, with the help of human factors specialists, need to take into account the impact new systems have upon a pilot’s capacity to prioritize. And the system safety engineers need to continue to explore ways to help over-tasked pilots by providing improved situational awareness and collision avoidance systems. However, despite technology fixes, as long as there are humans behind the controls, flight discipline will always be the critical factor in avoiding mishaps.

Our pilot training programs from Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) to the Weapons School and every upgrade ride in-between must drive this point home. Avoiding collisions is our number one job, and pilots must be trained to keep it at the top of their priority list. This kind of flight discipline will produce habit patterns that will allow pilots to safely maximize the capabilities of their jet. Without it, we will continue to lose friends in mishaps that could have been avoided. ▶

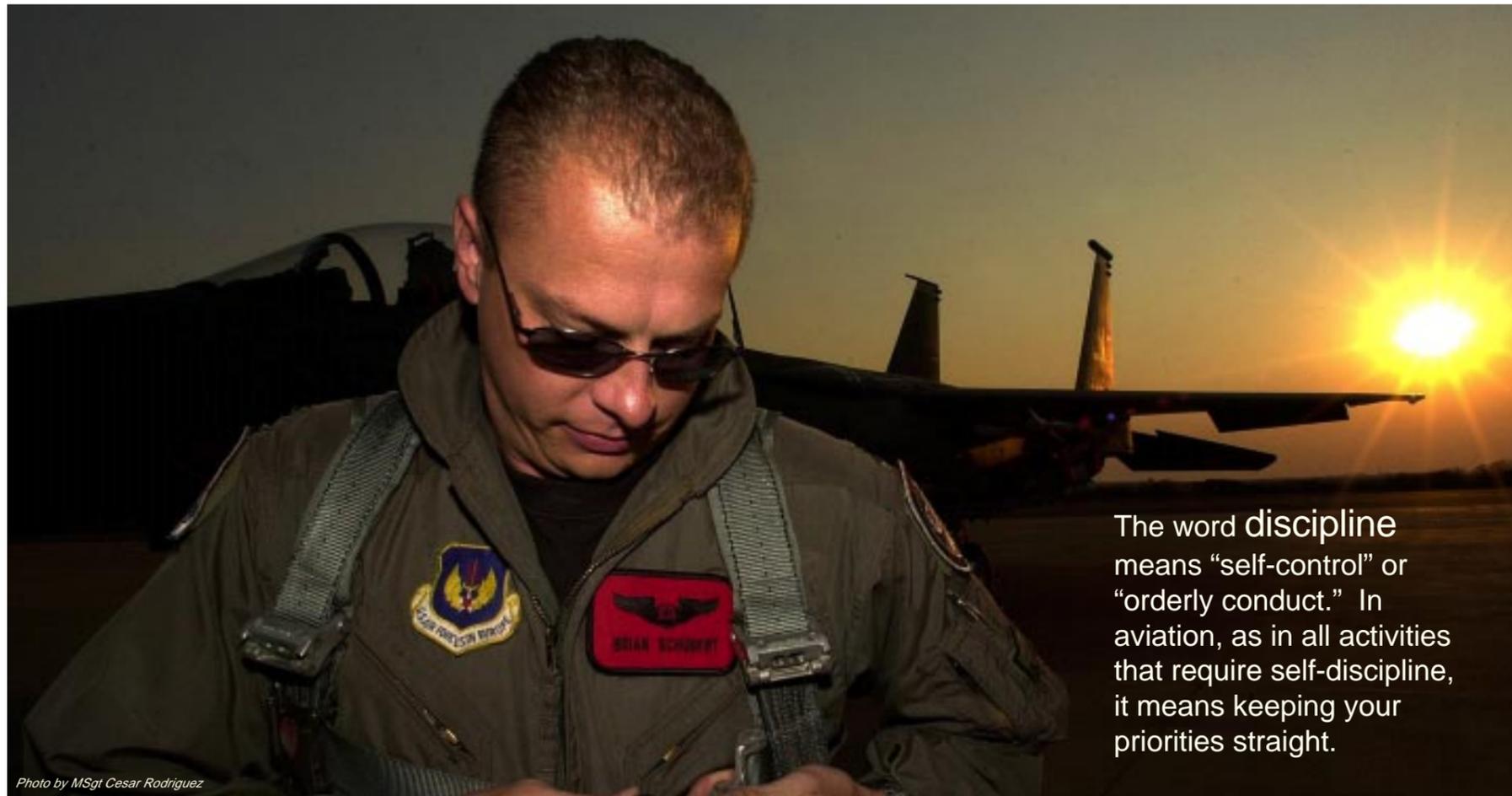


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Our main problem is that our number one job often gets pushed off of the top of our priority list. This is due to nothing less than a breakdown of flight discipline. However, before you object to this blunt conclusion, let me make it clear that I’m not talking about the kind of flight discipline breaches that result in flagrant training rule violations or crashing into your parents’ backyard. We all know there are no excuses for these kinds of “crimes.” But can there be any

other explanation for a wingman running into his flight lead from briefed line abreast formation in an air-to-air engagement except for a lack of discipline? And isn’t the fact that the flight lead did not check his wingman’s position throughout the entire engagement presumptuous, and perhaps undisciplined?

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