



CHIEF's Sight Picture

18 February 2004

Air Force Safety...the goal is *zero mishaps!*

Over the past 10 years, we have prevailed in combat in Kosovo, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. We have toppled dictators, provided opportunities for democracy to flourish, and destroyed terrorist networks. We have demonstrated time and time again that we are the greatest Air Force in the world. I am very proud of our record in combat and in securing our nation's safety. But we aren't doing enough to keep our Airmen safe.

During those same 10 years, the Air Force has lost more than 1,000 Airmen in accidents that shouldn't have happened and could have been prevented. People are our most important resource and our greatest investment. We have to protect them. It is tragic to lose a fellow Airman and every time we do we also lose a piece of our combat capability. We can do better.

I have rarely heard of an accident that couldn't have been prevented and I'm asking for your help in reducing our mishap rate by at least 50% over the next two years. Secretary Rumsfeld shares this goal, and he established the DoD Safety Oversight Council to review our safety practices DoD-wide. But real change has to start with each of us individually. Commanders and supervisors are accountable for safety practices and performance and must take action to reduce mishap rates. Leaders have to make sure risks are balanced against mission requirements and mitigate the risks or stop operations when those risks become too great. Most important, we all have to get rid of the idea that safety is a concern only when "on-duty." Safety has to be part of every Airman's daily life -- in combat, on the commute to and from work, at home, and on vacation -- anywhere you might be.

Our ultimate goal is "zero mishaps." Some people may think "zero" is simply too hard to be a realistic goal. To my way of thinking, however, any goal other than zero implies that some mishaps are acceptable. But no mishap is. The moment we stop pressing forward we start falling back. Over the past decade, despite some excellent safety programs, we haven't made much progress in making the Air Force safer. Instead, we've been moving in the wrong direction. Another program, procedure, or lecture won't help. Each of us paying attention will. The right attitude about safety in peacetime is no different than how we feel about surviving in war. The difference is that any loss of people or equipment in peacetime means that they will never get to the war.

We know that the mission always comes first and our environment will always be “high-risk.” Plus, the Air Force cannot become so risk averse that we jeopardize the mission. But we cannot fall into the trap of accepting accidents as a cost of doing business, and almost all accidents are preventable. First, we have to turn around the trend in motor vehicle collisions. Off-duty private motor vehicle accidents have steadily risen since FY98 and remain the number one killer of our people. We’re taking action to raise motorcycle safety awareness and skill level, but success depends on our people embracing and then practicing safe riding habits. We also have to decrease the rate of aviation accidents -- midair collisions, controlled flight into terrain, and engine failures consistently drive mishap rates. We’ll do our part to ensure that you get the training and the technology, but you have to put it into practice. Seat belts don’t work if you don’t buckle them; helmets don’t save lives if you don’t wear them. Motor vehicle and aviation accidents drive the statistics, but accidents occur everywhere, like in the workplace and on the sports field.

I have established the Air Force Operational Safety Council (AFOSC), chaired by the Vice Chief of Staff, to oversee safety matters. The AFOSC will monitor safety performance, examine new or emerging technologies from both the operational and safety perspectives, and direct required changes in Air Force policy, programs, and investment. But all the oversight in the world won’t help if our Airmen don’t take each other’s safety -- their survival -- seriously.

I need your help -- let’s get it right on safety.




AIR FORCE
Air & Space Power