



Ain't No Danger – Never Was

*Peter v. Agur, Jr., President
The VanAllen Group, Inc.*

Word came during a black night in mid 1969 that we had to fly a mercy mission. Ple Mi (pronounced Play Me), a Special Forces outpost, about an hour flight time northwest of us, had been overrun by Viet Cong. There was no word of survivors. With the support of a heavy team of three Huey gunships and a couple of F100 "fast movers", we were to take in a company-sized relief unit to recover all the friendlies we could find.

Ple Mi was in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam. It was the dry season. The surrounding terrain looked a lot like the rolling golden grassy hills of Northern California. Wooded areas followed the ravines. I'd been there many times and knew some of the guys on the ground. Like most snake eaters, they were a rough and strange crowd who showed a strong affection for the Huey crews who brought them food, mail, ammo and rides back to "the world."

We launched into the pre-dawn darkness, leveled off at about 1,000 AGL and settled into the loose staggered formation for which we were famous, "same day – same way". The five to six rotor disk separation between ships allowed us to support one another with cover fire while not making ourselves easy targets. It also avoided the stress induced by the concentration needed in close formation flying.

As we neared the Ple Mi neighborhood we contacted the Forward Air Controller (FAC) who had been directing aerial activities since the first call for help had come. I had worked with this guy before. He had a good eye and kept a cool head. He rarely exaggerated and knew how to orchestrate his resources.

His situation report was grim. There had been a full breach of the compound's perimeter and the last radio call was to bring all fire, artillery and aerial, onto their coordinates. That kind of scenario was exactly why I chose flight school over infantry training.

The FAC indicated the last team of F100s had just left the area. They had been working the woods just north of the compound and its accompanying 2,500' runway. He asked our gunships to make a preliminary cold run over the compound to assess any activity, friendly or enemy. If the gunships drew fire, the slicks would stand off while the gunners returned the greeting, in force. If it was quiet, we'd be invited to land adjacent to the runway near the gate in the perimeter fence to offload the ground forces.

After two taunting passes our gunnies declared all was quiet. We could bring in the troops. We landed, the grunts jumped out and established defensive positions around our aircraft and began to send small teams in various directions to secure the area, assess the situation and look for survivors. As I shut my ship down, I looked up at the compound's Old West-style gate hanging from its battle damaged hinges. To complete



the façade, the guys had wired a water buffalo skull and horns to the gates' top crossbeam. Etched into the weathered wood was the ironic motto of this destroyed detachment: "Ain't no danger - Never was".

The ultimate denial: "Ain't No Danger - Never Was." Are you and your flight department in denial? Do you know what your business and operational dangers are? Are you aggressively addressing them?

What creates the most risk for the future well being of your flight department? There are four that the best and brightest never take their eyes off of:

1. Strategic alignment,
2. Safety,
3. Service, and
4. Efficiency, in that order

Strategic Alignment is more than matching the number of your landings with the number of takeoffs (safety), always being on time and landing at the right airport with a sedan ever present for the Boss (service), and shaving 10% off of your budget for the third year in a row (efficiency). Even if you and your flight department are doing all those things right - you could still be in deep Kim Chi.

Just as important as doing things right is doing the right things. Just ask any out of work buggy whip maker or DOS programmer if doing the right things could have made a difference. If you aren't creating value by doing the right things it won't make a bit of difference how well you do the wrong ones - you'll still be history.

How do you know you create value, now and in the future? Ask the right questions of the right people. The right people are the ones who either put the flight department into business or the ones who can take it out - trip authorizers and budget drivers.

A quick aside about corporate etiquette (nee "politics"). Talk with the executive to whom you report about your desire to gauge the department's alignment with the company's needs. That's Life Lesson #15: Never go around, go over or surprise your boss. After you've gotten his or her buy-in for the effort, do the same with your chief executive so he or she will be in the loop from the beginning and be more apt to accept the results of your treasure hunt. While you're in the CEO's office you may as well ask for the additional fifteen or so minutes it will take to conduct your interview. When you finish, ask who else should be included in the process. Through the CEO's participation in the project's design and information gathering processes you are more likely to gain credibility and acceptance for your end product.

Among the questions you should include:

- From your perspective, what is the primary purpose of our flight services?
- What do flight services do for you that really hit the mark? Or, what are the most important benefits you gain from using business aviation services (i.e., productivity and quality of life benefits)? Ask the reinforcing questions first. Confirm your flight services' strengths in their minds... and yours.



- How could we hit the mark even better (range, speed, capacity, comfort, style)? Ask the constructive questions in non-technical terms and prod their memories by giving them arenas for thought and response.
- As you look to the next eighteen-to-twenty-four months, what will you and your organization be doing that could be supported by our flight services and how would/could those services be different than what you've gotten in the past (destinations, passenger load mix or size, time or timing of travel).

After you've gathered the information sit down with the executive to whom you report and discuss the impact of the answers you've gotten:

- Confirm your strengths and how you will keep them in tune.
- Identify immediate opportunities for improved impact and discuss various options for meeting those challenges. Low hanging fruit are especially easy to pluck and give you and your customers a quick sense of achievement. Act on them as rapidly as practical.
- Confirm more difficult and longer-term challenges as well as the value gained from addressing them (if there is insufficient value to be gained – don't do it). If at all possible, you should develop multiple approaches for achieving the ones worth doing.
- Report back to top management on the results, actions, and seek guidance on their preferred solutions to the more difficult issues. Propose only those solutions you are willing to live with. Otherwise, you may get what you didn't wish for.

Remember, the best way to stay strategically aligned is to anticipate changing needs and get top management to participate in defining what blend of services and resources create the greatest value. You will then be certain you and your department are doing the right things. Then you can concentrate on the second half of your job, make sure you are and your department are doing things right.

Safety is described in a lot of ways:

- "Safety is Job One."
- "The three most important tasks around here are safety, safety and safety."
- "Our highest priority is safety."
- "We invest in safety - then we manage costs."

For all that talk and good intentions, there isn't an operator or an operation whose safety margins cannot be improved. And the managers who seem to be the most paranoid about safety are usually the ones that do the best to achieve it. The ones who take safety for granted have a false sense of security.

Safety and risk management have a lot to do with perceptions and culture. Many great companies and executives have assumed they were very safe in their company aircraft based on a history of no damage and no injuries. More than one chairman or CEO has told me he was sure his operation was safe because "We've ridden through some of the worst thunderstorms imaginable with our guys. I'd put my pilots up against anyone's." Or, "We've never cancelled a flight or not gotten to our scheduled destination." Or, "Our pilots aren't suicidal and I give them all the support they ask for,



so we are safe." In stark raving reality, there is no connection between any of these declarations and the assurance of safe operations.

Safe performance is a perpetual process of orchestrating policies, processes and resources to a clear and ever improving set of standards - day in and day out. I have been flying since the mid-60s and have never flown a perfect flight. My friends would say that statement is not only understandable but should be obvious, given the quality of the aviator.

However, I have heard dozens of the finest professional aviators in the world say the same thing. If they haven't done it, how can we expect "average" folks to do it? We can't. But what we can do is give them the policies, procedures, the resources and the training to do it the best they can. And then, trust but verify. That means you must audit, review, observe, critique and correct.

I challenge you to find even one business aviation flight operation (FAR Part 91 or Part 135) that incorporates even two-thirds of the "best practices for safety" that exist today. The rationale for not doing them all runs the gambit from pure ignorance ("I didn't know about that." or "How do you find out what any given best practice is, anyway?"), to selective exceptions ("We don't need a flight attendant if we're not serving a meal or don't have any guests onboard."), to the rationalization of poor practices ("I know that isn't permitted in the FOM but if we don't do it the Boss will be disappointed." or "What are the odds of losing an engine on takeoff, anyway?").

DuPont takes its risk management very seriously. You would too if your core business was manufacturing gunpowder during the 1800s. In reality, the downside risk of poor safety practices is every bit as explosive in business aviation.

Service is what most executives declare they want, need and expect from their business aviation investments. They often define service as

1. Getting where they need to go
2. When they need to go
3. In their preferred style,
4. Reliably.

If you fail to deliver on these points, within the constraints of safe operations, you have mortgaged the value you create.

The primary benchmark used by many executives to measure the performance of their flight department's services is the commercial airlines. Face it, that isn't much of a hurdle to clear. But if you want your services to create the greatest value you don't want to just beat the airlines at what they do badly, you do what your customers want, extremely well.

Consider that a trip's duration is not takeoff to arrival, nor is it door-to-door. It lasts from reservation to remittance. The airlines do an adequate job of carrying passengers block-to-block. The other airline experiences of booking, airport surface travel, parking,



check-in, baggage, security, and boarding processes all suck. With those weaknesses in mind, if your flight department is only focused on carrying passengers block-to-block you are missing great opportunities to add value and raising the barriers to threats to your department.

Support the door-to-door trip experience for your customers. If you don't handle ground transportation you should at least coordinate and confirm it at both ends. Some flight departments are going so far as to provide maps and highway/street advisories to their passengers on a near real-time basis.

The basics of service include:

- Show up on time - dressed to play. In our business that means being ready to go before the passengers are. The airlines do not do that well. In many markets the airlines have a delay exceeding fifteen minutes on more than one in four legs. If your flight services are routinely ready to go when they are you are well ahead of the scheduled commercial competition.
- Consistently courteous customer care. One of the greatest variables in service businesses today is the quality of the customer-server interaction. Although "friendly airline crew" is not an oxymoron it is a rarity in today's stress-filled world of travel. You know commercial air travel service is bad when the politicians begin to talk about an Air Traveler's Bill of Rights. If your flight department is relentlessly pursuing every opportunity to anticipate, learn and satisfy your passengers' every reasonable need (for information, comfort, etc.) and if the members of your department see high service as a calling rather than a belittling task, you are on the right track.
- Precious productivity. En route airline time is often seen as relatively unproductive. Not only do most executives perceive their available productive time en route as being less (typically 40% of the time en route on the airlines in contrast to about 80% on a business aircraft) but the quality of the work environment on business aircraft is highly valued for its privacy. Your flight crew (pilots and flight attendants) must appreciate the passengers' needs for privacy or they will unintentionally reduce the much-cherished benefit of productivity most passengers seek.

Some of the most damaging flight department service errors cited by executives include:

- Giving "the customer" the impression that he or she is the enemy rather than a prized personage. "The customer" includes the passenger as well as his or her executive assistant.
- Treating the passengers like packages. If your people would prefer that the passengers would get in, sit down, buckle up and shut up they are missing the opportunity to really make a difference for their customers as well as for the flight department. After all, your customer is an asset, a resource and an ally.
- The devil is in the details. If a passenger has to ask for something more than once, you've missed an opportunity. If they quit asking they have probably not forgotten, they have given up. That is a dangerous place for them to be since the fiscal future of your department is in their hands. I've heard complaints about



everything from crews that didn't know the difference between merlot and port, or were snippy with passengers when they asked about the progress of the trip.

- To some extent, we all judge a book by its cover. At the very least, it is part of our first impression. A crew with slovenly appearance is not reassuring as professionals. The same holds for polite, precise, professional communications. Too casual is too casual. I don't care if the corporate dress code is shorts and sandals, a flight crew has a public responsibility to uphold a professional image.

Efficiency as it applies to the cost of business aviation services is often described by top executives as unjustifiable. If that were true, they wouldn't have business aircraft. What they mean is it is very difficult to define and measure the benefits they gain from business aviation costs when they are held up to the yardstick of relatively low ticket prices for airline travel. However, the full cost of airline travel includes the time cost, an average of about 2 1/2 hours extra per leg in comparison to riding in a business aircraft. Yet, it is common for companies to gladly pay a marginal premium to own and operate business aircraft in order to gain the time-place flexibility they crave.

But even if they agree it is worth it, the company culture or financial fortunes may require that the department participate in corporate cost containment initiatives. To ignore these demands is to arm the arsenal of your detractors. Not only is denial silly, it is self defeating.

When someone says "the price is too high" they may actually be asking to be reminded what the benefits are for the price they must pay. Be ready with the answer as well a recap of the results of your latest cost savings efforts (fuel price and consumption savings, competitive bids on major inspections, etc.). It is true that if there is a high sense of need and value for a product or service there is also low sensitivity to cost. But that low sensitivity to cost can be overrun by high sensitivity to political pressure by determined detractors.

We do not live in a threat-free world. In fact, ours could be called a threat-rich environment. Survival isn't the issue - success is. As long as you align your flight department's purpose to match the needs of your customers, strive to assure safety every minute of every day, adapt your services to meet, or exceed, the needs and expectations of your customers, and then perpetually tweak out the wasted minutes and dollars, you will have addressed the greatest threats to your success as a flight department.

In closing the throttle of my Huey I was committing myself to the same vulnerability shared by the ground troops that were fanning out to secure the perimeter of Ple Me as they began their search for survivors of the previous night's onslaught by the enemy.

As I climbed down from my ship I spotted grungy grunts coming out of the tree line and undergrowth beyond the far end of the ruined compound. Within a few minutes all of the original inhabitants were present and accounted for. The secret to their survival was simple. Not only had they thoroughly set up the normal menu of defenses around



their remote outpost but they had also established secret escape routes and hidey holes that allowed them to avoid being wiped out by the harsh onslaught of their enemies.

No matter how well prepared you think you may be, in a high stakes endeavor it is imperative to be prepared - to be proactive. That means not only taking care of the basics but taking the added steps necessary to be certain you are providing the highest levels of safety service and efficiency practical. When those goals are achieved, you can then proclaim, "Ain't no danger - Never was."

Be Prepared or Be a Victim
And Your Definition of "Prepared" May Be All Wrong