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## **‘Flying the friendly skies:’ Why US commercial airline pilots want to carry guns**

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**ABSTRACT**

Previous studies of social systems have shown that organizations develop mechanisms to defend against anxiety inherent in the system. This article uses field theory, systems psychodynamics and a participant observer methodology to examine certain defenses that became activated within a US commercial airline in the post-11 September 2001 period. In particular, it analyzes forces affecting the event of arming pilots with handguns at work. This article’s central claim is that pilots’ desire to be armed resulted from a combination of external and internal pressures, personal valencies and work life changes.

**KEYWORDS**

applied group relations ■ commercial airlines ■ field theory ■ participant observer methodology ■ 11 September 2001 ■ systems psychodynamics ■ Tavistock Institute

### **Introduction**

Why have handguns become the symbol of security, prestige and trustworthiness for US commercial airline pilots in the post-11 September 2001 (9/11) period? While many European air carriers and pilot unions have resisted, what motivated US airlines and pilot unions to rush to be armed with little research into the causes or repercussions? Is the American public

really ready to turn *civil* aviation into paramilitary transportation without further investigation?

In the following article I suggest that US pilots' desire for handguns can be understood as a complex interaction among pilots' personal valency<sup>1</sup> to play the hero, peculiarly racialized fears of 'foreigners,' and the salience of guns in American culture as a specific way to 'take action' and restore order. Using a group-as-a-whole perspective for analysis enables us to see how the operationalization of phantasy and illusion at work helped pilots mitigate anxieties arising from a sense of shame for not stopping the hijackings, guilt about the crashes and personal fear of death at the hands of terrorists.

The 'linking of the social and the unconscious has a history almost as long as that of the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious itself' (Mosse, 1994: 2). Previous studies of social systems, such as the early work of Jaques<sup>2</sup> (1952), Menzies (1959), Miller and Rice (1967) and Rice (1958, 1963, 1965) have shown that organizations develop mechanisms to defend against anxiety inherent in the system. Partly, such defense mechanisms enable organizational members 'to deal with disturbing emotional experiences [through] methods which are built into the way the organization works' (Menzies Lyth, 1988: 101). Other authors<sup>3</sup> have explored further the psychological aspects of group life in organizations.

In her foundational article, Menzies (1959) described how high levels of tension, distress and anxiety in the work life of hospital nurses often led to high turnover, frequent sick days, and a professed sense of feeling undervalued and unappreciated. Similarly, in this article, I contend that high levels of anxiety and an overwhelming sense of responsibility for elements often outside their sphere of control can lead commercial airline pilots to feel isolated, lonely and hopeless. These emotions can trigger a fear of loss of control and heighten perceived victimization in some pilots, who may respond with anger and the need to 'take action' to restore order. I believe that this sequence of emotional events, coupled with an overwhelming need to 'take action,' occurred in the commercial airline pilot group in the US in the weeks following 9/11.

### **Theoretical framework and methodology**

This study employs a *field theory approach* to examine organizational psychodynamics within the pilot group. A field theory approach regards behavior as determined by a field of interrelated forces including structural, social, cultural and interpersonal. Field theory postulates that events

occurring within any organization are best understood using a holistic perspective, which considers for analysis a complex set of external and internal forces that influence organizational dynamics. For example, as Jaques (1952) noted in his pioneering study at Glacier Metal:

To describe the effects of introducing a piece-rate system or a scheme of joint consultation into a factory, it would be necessary, in terms of this approach, to take into account the setting in which these events occur at the time, such as the general morale situation in the particular factory concerned, the rates of pay, the structure and nature of working groups, and the quality of supervision, and equally the larger social forces emanating from the general economic situation, the competitive position of the factory, and the characteristics of the local community.

(pp. 4–5)

Similarly, the present study situates US pilots' desire for handguns within the setting of the airline industry in the post-9/11 period, linking with indications of pilot morale, the changing structure, pay and nature of pilot work, and the larger social forces activated during this time.

Field theory differs from more widely recognized quantitative methods in several ways. First, traditional quantitative methods treat the facts generated by research as self referential, whereas field theory refuses to treat behavioral facts as transparent. Instead, it uses a variety of clues as data with which to discover what is going on in the organization. The data include observations about 'material things,' such as the shape and design of the work environment as well as readings of 'individual and group behavior and interactions, not just what [people] do or say but how they do or say it' (Gabriel, 1999: 268–9). In other words, field theory situates data gathered in research in an interpretive framework, which treats these 'facts' as indirect indicators of the psychic state of the organization. Second, traditional quantitative methods treat the researcher as a passive recipient of information about events. Field theory recognizes the active role that the researcher plays not only discovering different forces affecting organizations, but also interpreting the ways relationships among these forces facilitate or inhibit social behavior.

Of course, studies that rely on field theory, beg the following question: By what authority can the researcher claim to understand the organization's dynamics better than the organizational members understand themselves? (Gabriel, 1999). *Participant observation methodology* attempts to address this concern. As a member of the organization, the researcher already

possesses a good working knowledge of the organization from the inside and this role enables him or her to move within and between groups, collecting data relatively unnoticed.

The present study employs participant observation methods within a field theory framework to study pilot behavior. Its sources of data include 18 years of experience as a pilot in both military and commercial aviation organizations, including six years at a major US carrier, hundreds of informal interviews conducted with fellow pilots, and an historical survey of cultural trends.

This methodology has several precedents. Theories considering the group as a holistic system emerged at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Tavistock Institute) in the post-Second World War period and provided the basis for studies such as Jaques' at Glacier Metal, Rice's at Calico Mills in Ahmedabad, India, Trist's in British coal mines and Menzies' of hospital nurses. These groundbreaking investigations explained the inter-relationships among external and internal forces on group dynamics and offered a general theory of social behavior paving the way for developments in the field of group relations and, more recently, *systems psychodynamics* theory.

Systems psychodynamics emerged at the Tavistock Institute in the late 1980s as an interdisciplinary field integrating three perspectives: psychodynamics, group relations and open systems. Looking 'simultaneously at the relationships between the individual worker and the work group, the work group and the organization, the organization and its environment' (Fraher, 2004: 80), systems psychodynamics evaluates collective group behavior within the system as a whole. Gould (2001) noted 'the systems psychodynamic framework is specifically intended to convey the notion that the observable and structural features of an organization – *even quite rational and functional ones* – continually interact with its member at all levels in a manner that stimulates particular patterns of individual and group dynamic processes' (p. 3, emphasis added). Similar to dynamics evident at group relations conferences, a spectrum of unwanted group feelings, anxieties and experiences can be split-off and projected onto other groups and individuals who collude in carrying them for the organization.

The multilayered approach of systems psychodynamics provides a number of research advantages. As Jaques (1952) observed, a holistic perspective reveals 'how unconscious forces in group behavior, and the unwitting collusion between groups for purposes of which they are only dimly aware, are important factors in the process of social adaptation' (p. xxi). French and Vince (1999) added that research that focuses at the systemic rather than only at the individual level 'emphasizes that the whole

and the parts are dynamically interrelated in complex and important ways' (p. 6).

The use of methodologies sensitive to the interaction between external events and internally processed feelings can enable the researcher to delineate unconscious factors otherwise ignored, but which are critical to the effective performance of organizational tasks. These include 'the emotional, relational, and political dimensions of organizational experience which often remain unconscious or are considered unnecessary or undesirable' (French & Vince, 1999: 4). To this list, I would add the importance of addressing the influence of social and cultural *history* on group dynamics. In other words, by recognizing the complex, collusive, emotional, relational, political and historical dimensions affecting the organizational life of commercial pilots, we can better assess their desire to be armed at work.

### **Airline industry**

The application of systems psychodynamics to the airline industry is not new. Although they did not use that term, Miller and Rice (1967) launched such an analysis in their seminal volume *Systems of organization* where they examined the import–conversion–export process, task awareness, boundary management, and anxieties operationalized within the airline as a system. The present article builds on their insights in light of the changes in the airline industry in recent years.

As Miller and Rice (1967) noted, 'The primary task of any commercial airline may be defined in general terms as the transport of passengers and/or cargo by air at a profit' (p. 184). Although customer service representatives, baggage handlers, dispatchers, mechanics, caterers, managers and administrators all play key roles within the organization, the major responsibility for the accomplishment of the primary task lies with the pilots. The pilots have primary responsibility to transport passengers and cargo from one location to another safely. Therefore, in the daily operation of the airline, it is the pilot population that bears the 'full, immediate and concentrated impact of stresses arising' (Menzie Lyth, 1988: 46) from the accomplishment of the organization's primary task. Thus, even before the events of 9/11 challenged the pilot psyche, the pilot's average day at work was filled with stress.

Some of the routine situations likely to evoke stress in pilots are familiar to most air travelers: bad weather, mechanical problems, air traffic delays, late arriving aircraft, and gate changes. Other stressors include the challenge to overcome these obstacles by increasing pressure for on-time

arrival, saving fuel through flight management profiles, or reducing mechanical wear on the aircraft through appropriate flying techniques. Additional concerns include performing these tasks while trying to meet the perceived expectations of others. In other words, pilots are expected to maintain an image that everything is 'under control' for the benefit of the jittery traveler or nervous flight attendant. As Miller and Rice (1967) noted, 'passenger anxiety is a major problem . . . it interacts with and mobilizes the anxiety of airline employees and ramifies through the organization in unexpected and undetected ways' (p. 193). As a result of these stressors, the work environment arouses very strong and complicated feelings in some pilots, which can result in splitting off 'bad' images and projecting these split-off objects onto others, including coworkers, passengers and others.

Feelings of power and being in control can, of course, lead to a positive self-image and contribute to a sense of success for a job well done. This positive feeling can spread to positive feelings towards the passengers and the organization that makes these good feelings possible. Yet an awareness of these positive feelings can also accentuate a negative response in the form of feelings of helplessness or a loss of control when things outside of one's purview, such as the weather or mechanical failures, negatively affect one's job performance. In this case, feelings of guilt and anxiety about not performing perfectly stimulate feelings of hostility and resentment, which can be transferred onto the passengers and the airline organization considered to be responsible for the arousal of these strong feelings of inadequacy. As Menzies Lyth (1988) pointed out, such object relations bear 'a striking resemblance to the phantasy situations that exist in every individual in the deepest and most primitive levels of the mind' (p. 46).

In addition to splitting and projective identification, Weick (2001: 130) noted, 'stress can produce regression'. In Freudian theory, regression is considered 'a defense mechanism characterized by a return to an earlier life stage of attitude and behavior in a threatening situation. It is sometimes an unconscious attempt to gain control' (Corsini, 1999: 821). For example, in tense situations, some individuals may tend to regress to a particular stage of development when confronted by uncomfortable situations such as fear, surprise, anxiety, or trauma. Pilots are no exception.

One early childhood stage of development that I have observed often on the flight deck, and perhaps even participated in myself, is a pilot's regression to the *heroic individualistic character*. This phallic stage character constructs the organization in his or her mind 'as an arena for heroic exploits where distinction and excellence may be achieved' (Gabriel, 1999: 74). These thinly veiled regressive phantasies interject meanings and symbolisms in organizational life, which create psychological contracts between the

individual and his or her organization. As Gabriel (1999) noted, 'Phantasies, and especially illusions, can undoubtedly sustain individuals in organizations, enabling them to overcome difficulties, to cope with adversity and to infuse their activities with meaning' (p. 76).

Yet these illusions, though important psychological defenses, can also create barriers to reality, carrying hidden psychic costs and real danger. For instance, in order for a pilot to maintain an image of the airline as an organization worth protecting, and him or herself within it as the hero, he or she 'must be prepared to overlook much evidence that clashes with such images' (Gabriel, 1999). Such evidence could include financial crises generating large numbers of employee lay-offs. To question this image of the 'good' organization, and one's purpose or role within it, undoubtedly causes additional stress, which could become unbearable or produce unanticipated results if the psychological contract is proven false. As a result, energy gets invested in perpetuating the phantasy even at the risk of personal safety.

This analysis raises compelling questions about the purpose of, and requirement for, psychological illusions and defenses within organizational life. As Gabriel (1999) questions: 'Is life in general, and organizational life in particular, without illusions possible?' (p. 76). Organizational theorists are not in agreement about whether it is possible to have organizations without illusions. Most observe that irrationality will always be present and that phantasy is in the very nature of organizational life because transferences are generated by organizational structures through their various levels of authority, roles and status within the system. Czander and Eisold (2003) noted that there is no way to avoid this phenomenon in work life, 'the corporation is a mosaic of transferences' (p. 480).

Yet, most authorities on organizational life agree that an individual's irrationality can be kept in check within organizational life.<sup>4</sup> To accomplish this, a person must become self-aware and risk investigating one's image of the organization, and one's purpose or role within it, so that one can balance one's illusions about organizations with reality. Although this process itself is stressful, it can also free up psychic energy that had been consumed in sustaining the phantasy in the first place, allowing for a more balanced image of the organizational culture to emerge.

### **Defensive techniques in the cockpit: core of the pilots' anxiety**

In developing an organizational culture, the organization is influenced by a number of intersecting elements such as the organization's primary task,

current technologies, the social and psychological satisfactions of its members, and support for their struggle with the inherent anxiety found in any work situation. The need for organizational members to manipulate the culture, structure, and procedures in the 'struggle against anxiety leads to the development of socially structured defense mechanisms, which appear as elements in the organization's structure, culture and mode of functioning' (Menzies Lyth, 1988: 50). Menzies Lyth contended that this social defense system develops over time largely as the result of unconscious collusive interaction between members of the organization.

Although anxiety is present in every organization and work setting, the particular form in which anxiety manifests itself varies. The core of most pilots' anxiety lies in their unconscious fear of death. I say unconscious because this fear, although vivid and obvious, remains largely unacknowledged and often denied in the aviation culture that forbids pilots from showing signs of weakness or vulnerability. But as Miller and Rice (1967) observed, 'Paradoxically, a denial of anxiety is often an expression of anxiety, especially if it is an unsolicited denial' (p. 191).

In addition, this fear of death is interwoven in a complex fashion with the pilot's fear of failure to accomplish the primary task. In other words, if the pilot does not accomplish the task, to transport people and cargo safely from one location to another, chances are quite likely they might die trying. Few jobs create stakes this high.

Pilots are taught to be task-oriented individuals. Their awareness of unconscious processes is often very low and their defenses are very strong in part because the primary task requires them to *compartmentalize*, or leave their thoughts and concerns outside the cockpit door. In addition, a very high percentage of commercial airline pilots have previously been military pilots. Many of these military pilots flew single-seat tactical jet aircraft. As a result, their airline job might be their first experience sharing the cockpit, and therefore their anxiety, with another individual. Showing weakness, indecision or vulnerability in public creates additional anxiety for these pilots.

During the course of primary task accomplishment at an airline, one pilot must rely on the other to assist him or her to safely execute their duties. For instance, each pilot fly's a leg – a take off to landing segment – while the other pilot conducts the non-flying-pilot duties such as monitoring aircraft performance, conducting checklists, talking to air traffic control on the radios, making public address announcements to passengers, and coordinating with the flight attendants. The pilots then switch duties on the next leg. As a result, each pilot must to some extent trust and rely on the other to help him or her cope with their fear of failure, death, and their resulting anxiety.

A relationship of sorts develops between one pilot and the other; each

depends on the other for his or her life. Although this relationship of trust could be enhanced over time as pilots got to know one another, economic, scheduling, and standardization rationales make the frequent reshuffling of crew assignments the industry norm. Once a trip is over, which might consist of one leg or a series of legs over consecutive days, pilots and flight attendants may never fly again together – or even see one another – again. This frequent reassignment allows schedulers the greatest flexibility to maximize crew utilization, flying pilots the maximum amount of time within legal limits. It also keeps flight operations standardized by preventing crews from forming cliques who fly together frequently thereby developing their own *unauthorized* ways of operating.

The airline system aims to manage the stress it inflicts on pilots by authorizing the airplane captain to have full authority for the safe operation of his or her aircraft. The *Flight Operations Manual* in this example airline states that the captain ‘has full responsibility and is the final authority for the safe operation of the airplane’ (*Flight Operations Manual*, 2003, p. 4.10.1). In the execution of these duties the captain’s power is, in a word, *absolute*. As a result of this responsibility, the captain often feels the system’s anxiety most acutely but is often unable to address it.

One first officer, or co-pilot, recounted a flight during which the captain continued to manipulate cockpit controls even though it was the co-pilot’s turn to fly. The co-pilot proclaimed, ‘Oh, so when you fly it is your leg, but when I fly it is *our leg*.’ This example illustrates what Miller described as a blurring of the lines between what is inside the individual, in this case the captain’s anxiety about relinquishing control of the airplane, and what is outside, which is a competent professional co-pilot trying to do his or her job. The anxiety in this situation can be exacerbated further when one pilot is not of the same demographic category, labor union status, religious or political affiliation as the other pilot and might therefore be viewed with even less trust and greater suspicion.

Although providing captains with absolute authority may assist them in managing their work stressors, it creates other stress within the system. For example, almost all first officers at this major US airline have extensive experience as captains themselves either at a previous airline or in the military. But their position as co-pilot by definition precludes them either from challenging the captain’s authority or, often, even making the simplest of decisions. As a result many co-pilots feel underutilized and therefore undervalued, as Menzies Lyth (1988) observed, ‘the more mature and capable [the pilot], the greater the problem . . . thus the overprotection built into the social defense system itself evokes stress’ (p. 111).

In another example, the social defense system protects pilots against

stress and difficulties that many of them are quite capable of handling successfully – flying and landing the airplane. Clearly, the most difficult part of a pilot's job is safely landing the airplane especially in challenging environmental conditions. Yet the flight profile for landing at most major airports worldwide is rigidly managed by air traffic controllers (ATC). It is not uncommon for ATC to keep the airplane above profile at a fast speed in order to sequence aircraft closer for landing, reduce noise pollution in residential areas, or avoid other aircraft taking off or landing. This rigid system of work organization adds to pilot stress by not allowing them to fly the profile as they would like and does not allow them to deploy their personal capacities fully.

The system does provide some loopholes by which some senior pilots can avoid some of these anxiety-producing situations. For example, pilot flight schedules are bid one month prior and assigned in seniority order based on years of employment with the company. Therefore, senior pilots can mitigate anxiety by flying with co-pilots they know and therefore trust. Management pilots who spend most of their day in the office supervising pilots and pilot instructors, who train pilots in flight simulators, also have this luxury. When they decide to fly, which is usually once every other month, they often choose to fly with a friend or colleague that they trust and have flown with before. As a result the more junior a pilot is, the fewer choices he or she has and the more vulnerable he or she is within the system.

To cope with the anxiety inherent in the work life of an airline, pilots typically respond in one of two ways. One faction develops intense pairing relationships with fellow airline pilots who are often people they either flew with at a previous airline or military squadron. One pilot confessed to this pairing, describing how he spoke to one of his fellow airline pilots on a daily basis. These types of pairing relationships can help to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness inherent in the airline system. Miller and Rice (1967) observed that these types of pairing relationships are 'perhaps the most satisfying, and certainly the most productive, of all human relationships. But the satisfaction can be diminished by the conscious or unconscious guilt that usually accompanies promiscuity' (p. 58).

Similar to the work experience of pilots, Miller and Rice (1967) described the pairing relationship that develops between sales representatives and their customers. For instance, like pilots, when the sales representative is doing his or her job, he/she feels autonomous and independent of company control. While both pilots and sales representatives are independent operators free to make decisions, albeit minor, about task accomplishment, they are not necessarily free from feelings of being constantly monitored. In the

accomplishment of their task, the sale representative, like the pilot, may feel power, prestige, accomplishment, and security. But the weight of the responsibility of their task can also make them feel anxious and worried. In the case of the pilot, it may once again arouse anxieties about the fear of death.

The other way that pilots typically cope with the anxiety inherent in the work life of an airline is to develop strong bonds with friends and family outside the airline world. These relationships rejuvenate the pilot's psyche and allow him or her to tolerate the anxiety created by the workplace when they are once again immersed in it. Pilots often talk about coaching their children's teams, volunteering in organizations or churches, playing sports, or managing their own companies. Of course, as pilots find meaning in their life outside of work this enhanced quality of life and increased sense of purpose can foster separation anxieties about leaving for work.

In summary, Miller and Rice (1967: 64) noted the result of these complicated feelings of anxiety and transient relationships is that

activities related to task performance take place within a boundary that is unlikely to satisfy completely any [pilot], unless he is an individual whose personality needs are at best dealt with by a lonely, affectionless work life, in which pair relationships are promiscuous and transient.

The airline system attempts to offset pilots' feelings of anxiety about its lonely, affectionless work life with its transient and promiscuous pairing relationships by regimenting tasks and training pilots to be interchangeable. For example, a co-pilot who is qualified to fly the 777 could be assigned a domestic or an international trip to one of a hundred locations around the world on just a few hours' notice.<sup>5</sup> In order to achieve this flexibility, to the maximum extent possible, checklists that are completed at specific points throughout the flight control pilot's tasks. Very little actual decision-making is left to pilot's discretion.

As a result of this ubiquitous standardization, pilots are discouraged subtly from using their own discretion and initiative and quickly develop a lackadaisical attitude towards improving the work culture. Simple changes to corporate culture or work routines that could easily increase pilots' quality of life or save the airline time and money go unreported. It becomes an additional source of anxiety to try to change the system, so most pilots do not bother, adding to their sense of hopelessness.

## Homeland security in the wake of 9/11

On 11 September 2001 the airline industry changed forever when four commercial airliners were hijacked and intentionally crashed into three US destinations. In the wake of these events, government and aviation industry leaders rushed to support legislation designed to calm the stressed American public and bolster its eroding confidence in the safety of air travel. For example, President George W. Bush quickly authorized the expanded use of state National Guard and federal military reservists to patrol the nation's airports in full military garb armed with M-16 rifles. Over 9000 soldiers were deployed to airports around the country during the 2001 holiday period at a cost of \$205 million (United Press International, 10 November 2001).

The blueprint for a new federal security system, known as the Homeland Security Bill, was signed into law by President Bush on 26 November 2002. The bill authorized the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, resulting in the largest federal government reorganization in the US since the creation of the Department of Defense in 1947. Among its goals were reduction of America's vulnerability to terrorism and prevention of further terrorist attacks (United Press International, 26 November 2002; [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)).

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) was created as one of several new departments that would now operate under the control of the Department of Homeland Security. Its mission was 'to protect the Nation's transportation systems to ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce' ([www.tsa.gov](http://www.tsa.gov)). Challenged with this daunting task, the TSA successfully completed the largest peacetime mobilization in US history by hiring and training 45,000 federal screeners to be positioned at every one of America's 429 commercial airports.

One part of the Homeland Security Bill was the Arming Pilots Against Terrorism Act. This act authorized the establishment of a Federal Flight Deck Officer (FFDO) Program and earmarked \$8 million for the deputizing of pilot volunteers from US air carriers, training them to defend the flight deck of their aircraft with a handgun against 'acts of criminal violence or air piracy' (H.R. 4635, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)). Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Don Young (R-Alaska) endorsed this program noting:

The events of 9/11 have dramatically changed how we must defend our planes and passengers. We now face a possible situation where the Department of Defense may be forced to make the difficult decision of having our own Air Force shoot down a plane full of innocent

passengers due to a terrorist takeover. I strongly believe that under these new circumstances, we must allow trained and qualified pilots to serve as *the last line of defense* [emphasis added] against such a potential disaster.

(www.whitehouse.gov)

In the first steps toward enforcing this ‘last line of defense,’ 43 men and three women pilots completed their FFDO training at a cost of \$800,000 and prepared to return to their flight decks when the first class graduated on Easter Sunday, 20 April 2003 (DiNunno, 2003). Some experts estimated that these first graduates ‘will be followed by tens of thousands more airline pilots who are expected to seek the special gun permits in years to come’ (Shenon, 2003: A1).

Although a small group of pilots have been lobbying for years – even before 9/11 – to carry weapons at work, airline management and law enforcement groups resisted, insisting that guns in the cockpit posed obvious safety issues and could distract pilots from their primary duty to fly the aircraft. As Miller and Rice (1967) noted ‘in any human activity there must come a point at which the requirement to utilize yet another device or to observe still another regulation actually adds to danger by distracting those responsible for the activity from what they have to do’ (p. 186). Yet, in the aftermath of 9/11, attitudes shifted in favor of arming pilots as the ‘last line of defense’ in the war on terrorism.

The fact that the American public and airline community changed their stance toward arming pilots, pressuring law-makers to approve legislation and appropriate funds, indicates the emergence of what Bion (1961) described as a ‘dependent’ group culture:

The basic assumption in this [dependent] group culture seems to be that an external object exists whose function it is to provide security for the immature organism. This means that one person is always felt to be in a position to supply the needs of the group, and the rest in a position in which their needs are supplied.

(p. 74)

In other words as a result of the events of 9/11, American society, as a group, was searching in a dependent way for heroes to step forward and lead it out of its sense of crisis.

The emergence of this dependent group culture, where the majority relies on the skills of a few, and the resultant leadership instinct to either *fight* the perceived outside threat or retreat (basic assumption of fight/flight, *baF*)

may not be surprising. As Gould (1997) noted *baF* often arises when a group fears persecution by powerful enemies:

The essential cognitive structure of a *baF* group is that of undifferentiated members who are either loyal or traitorous (the essential part-object qualities that the group recognizes), accompanied by an idealization of the in-group, and a splitting off of all aggression and hostility onto a despised out-group which is feared and hated.

(p. 22)

This aggressive effort to take action provides comfort for the in-group and assurance that the aggression waged against the hated and feared out-group is warranted.

Some might argue that this type of response was necessary in response to the events of 9/11. Yet what remains curious, and will be the focus of the remainder of this article, is how the *baF* activated in many Americans in the post-9/11 period manifested itself specifically in hundreds, if not thousands, of pilots demanding the right to carry a handgun at work.

It is my thesis that romantic notions of heroism were activated in the American psyche in the post-9/11 period, manifesting themselves in an expressed need for retaliation on behalf of the group and willingness to reassert social control through violent means, if necessary. America's desperate search for heroes activated a valency in many Americans, and the commercial airline pilot population in particular, to heed the call to combative action. Arming pilots to lead this fight/flight charge not only satisfied America's need for heroes, but also gave pilots a means to help contain their workplace anxiety, allowing them to defend themselves against perceived aggressors.

### **The mobilization of pilots' anxiety post-9/11**

Social scientists in America have been studying the long-term effects of the traumatic events of 9/11. Goode (2003) reported one study 'found that people who experienced two stressful events since the Sept. 11 attack, like divorce or the death of a family member, were 47 times as likely to have persistent symptoms' (p. A13) of post-traumatic stress. People who had experienced only one stressful event were still 4.5 times as likely to have continuing symptoms. Researchers also concluded that persistent symptoms of post-traumatic stress were common amongst those who reportedly felt 'another terrorist attack was likely' (Goode, 2003).

It could be argued that nearly all the airline pilots in America experienced some post-traumatic stress after terrorists hijacked four airplanes, killing dozens of fellow crewmembers, and stranding thousands of people around the world as the entire US air traffic control system screeched to a stop for five days. It could also be argued that by wanting to carry a handgun at work, pilots were indicating that they believed 'another terrorist attack was likely.'

A second stressful event occurred shortly after 9/11 when the airline under examination declared bankruptcy resulting in the lay-off of tens of thousands of employees (pilots included), the early retirement of thousands more, and the renegotiation of every employee group labor contract with huge wage concessions.

A third stressful event occurred when company stock, which was issued as part of a retirement plan touted as a revolutionary employee-ownership program, dropped to a value of pennies on the initial dollar investment. Many employees close to retirement were devastated as personal retirement plans vaporized. 'The company has said it plans to emerge from Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection by late this year or early 2004, at which time its shares are expected to be worthless' (*New York Times*, 2 August 2003: B2). If Goode (2003) is correct, this combination of stressful events could perpetuate some pilots' state of post-traumatic stress, feeding their regression to the *heroic individual character*.

Throughout the organization in the months following 9/11, one heard all manner of unauthorized retaliatory measures being discussed openly by anxious pilots grappling with their fears. Many pilots claimed that if a terrorist were onboard his aircraft he would hit the terrorist with the cockpit's crash axe, which is a bulky steel tool designed to assist in emergency egress and fire-fighting. The fact that it is nearly impossible to swing this 25 pound steel object back-handed from a seated position in the cockpit without hurting oneself, or the other pilot, seemed irrelevant. Many captains instructed their co-pilots to sit with the crash axe in their lap the entire flight, 'just in case.'

Other pilots claimed they would use tactical maneuvering techniques that they learned in the military to 'bounce the terrorists' off the aircraft ceiling. Although obviously chances were better that it would be flight attendants and parents walking babies, the people usually up during long flights, who would be bounced off the ceiling. One very senior captain even refused to fly his 747 until the entire top deck was sealed off from passenger access. Since this section usually seats business class passengers with a long history of travel, this irrationality cost the bankrupt airline hundreds of thousands of dollars.

At the same time pilots sought possible weapons in their work areas to use for defense, the airport security system changed drastically in ways that had a direct impact on pilots' work life. Tools pilots were *required* to carry prior to 9/11 such as a leatherman<sup>6</sup> and multi-purpose pocket knives were now forbidden. In fact, if a pilot carried a nail clipper he or she was required to remove the nail file from inside the clipper. The absurdity of this new regulation was made even more ironic when, for months, one could still purchase a nail clipper *with its nail file* at almost any airport convenience shop inside the security perimeter. In addition, these illogical requests were only enforced sporadically. The small pocket knife a pilot carried through security in San Diego might be confiscated by security inspectors in San Francisco.

To this day, only pilots and flight attendants undergo this increased security regiment. Baggage handlers, mechanics, ramp employees and customer service personnel – who all have access to airplanes – can pass through airport employee entrances unexamined by security measures simply by showing an airport identification badge. Pilots and flight attendants, who work at dozens of airports throughout the world, do not have access to a local airport identification badge for each location and therefore must pass through passenger security posts at every airport.

In addition to local airport and airlines employees avoiding increased security measures, an individual authorized to carry a firearm, such as an airport police officer, national guardsman, or air marshal can also bypass the security screening process. Obviously, one reason for this is because their firearm would cause a positive indication on the security devices. Another presumption would be that this individual is armed and in uniform to protect the American public and therefore to be trusted. They are, in a sense, beyond reproach.

Many pilots complained that the heightened security screening they receive in contrast to the local airport employees or the 'trusted' individuals makes them feel that America still holds them responsible for the terrorist acts that occurred on 9/11 because, after all, the terrorists were 'pilots'. As an example of the impact of this irrational treatment, one captain mentioned that although initially he was not interested in carrying a handgun at work, the combination of loss of trust and increased scrutiny led him to change his mind in the months following 9/11 and now seek FFDO training. But why did these increased stressors translate, in particular, into a desire to carry a handgun?

### **American cultural history: guns and the myth of the hero**

Images of contemporary media lead one to believe that every American owns a gun, or two. Yet, in reality, only one-quarter of the US population owns

such a weapon. Among gun owners, the 35 percent who own handguns tend to be male, White, divorced, politically conservative, and between 40 and 65 years of age. Handgun owners also are more likely to have had some college education and be in a higher income bracket compared with other gun owners (Sugarman, 2001). The majority of commercial airline pilots happen to fall into the same demographic group. For instance, at my airline, which contains one of the most diverse pilot populations in the airline industry, nearly 84 percent of the approximately 10,000 pilots fall into this group.<sup>7</sup>

It is often assumed that America's fascination with guns dates back several hundred years to the country's rebellious birth and its frontier heritage of rugged individualism. Yet, not until 1835 and Samuel Colt's invention of a reliable, inexpensive, easy to use handgun called a *revolver* did guns start to gain widespread popularity in the US. Initially unable to find much demand for his revolver in a market accustomed to rifles, he developed one of the cleverest marketing strategies in history. An avid adventurer, Colt appealed to the psychological side of gun ownership by engraving his revolvers with romantic scenes of macho heroism such as a pioneer fighting off Indians or elaborate hunting scenes (Hosley, 1999).

Thirty years later, the American Civil War (1861–5) completed what had become a gradual paradigm shift about guns when many Americans, particularly Whites living in rural areas, came to believe that guns were necessary for self-defense and social control. White southerners were especially fearful that the recently freed Black slaves and other *undesirables*, such as White immigrants, might obtain firearms and successfully lobbied for the enactment of legislation forbidding it (Funk, 1999: 392).

More recently, the gun industry has continued to exploit people's fear of violent crime and social unrest through marketing strategies aimed at convincing Americans that handguns are synonymous with self-defense, inspiring a sense of safety and security (Funk, 1999; Sugarman, 2001). As an indication of their success, there are now approximately 71 million handguns in the hands of private American citizens (Anderson, 1996).

These macro-cultural factors, outlined in broad strokes, link the appeal of gun ownership to romantic notions of heroism and fear of 'the other' in American society. In addition to these general factors, it is important to consider the particular psychological dimensions of the vulnerability of American masculinity today and the impact of these on pilots' desire to carry guns.

Recent social studies have observed that the heterosexual American White male seems to have been experiencing an identity crisis over the past few decades.<sup>8</sup> As more diverse groups have become empowered, traditional forms of dominant White masculinity have become less central in American

society. Wicks (1996) noted that many American White men have found it difficult to adjust to their loss of power and prestige and to cope with societal changes in expectation. As a result, Robinson (2000: 5) noted that we are left with 'an enduring image of the disenfranchised white man' as a 'malicious and jealous' protector of the status quo.

Kimmel (1996: ix) observed that American men's current quandary has had a long history and that this dominant group's pattern of aggressive responses to real or perceived threats has been 'startlingly consistent'. Throughout history, Kimmel argued, American men have been afraid that others will see them as 'less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened' (1996: ix). Haunted by fears that they are 'not powerful, strong, rich, or successful enough,' (1996: ix) American men defined their masculinity, not in relation to women, but in relation to other men, ever fearful of 'not measuring up to some vaguely defined notions of what it means to be a man' (1996: ix).

The need to prove one's self time and again in a relentless test of manhood has deep roots in American culture. Fear of being shamed or humiliated in front of other men, or dominated by a stronger male, seems a core element of American masculinity. As a result, 'many men are haunted by feelings of emptiness, impotence and rage. They feel abused, unrecognized by modern society' (Horrocks, 1994: 1).

In his article 'The white man unburdened', American social critic Norman Mailer (2003) supported this assessment noting the Bush administration's haste to find justifiable reasons for America to go to war with Iraq as an example of the White male need to take action and restore order. Mailer observed the 'ongoing malaise of the white American male' who has been taking a 'daily drubbing' at the hands of special interest groups over the last 30 years, claiming that 'as a matter of collective ego, the good average white American male had very little to nourish his morale' (p. 4). In response to these, and other, psychic blows such as corporate scandals, increasing unemployment, a sinking economy and slumping stock market, Mailer noted how 'wantonly, shamelessly, proudly, exuberantly, at least one half of our prodigiously divided America could hardly wait for the new war . . . because we very much needed a successful war as a species of psychic rejuvenation' (p. 4). War, Mailer claimed, was the only solution because 'when we fight, we feel good' (p. 6).

The question is: Why did guns become the symbol of security, prestige and trustworthiness for pilots in the post-9/11 period? My argument has been that the stressors caused by the events of 9/11 coupled with the company's bankruptcy and pilots' sense of loss of trustworthiness combined with their valencies to play the hero led to the laudable, though misguided, effort to satisfy unrealistic expectations projected by the American public.

As a subgroup, pilots took on the American public's need to 'take action' in retaliation for events occurring on 9/11.

Rather than attempting to contain their anxiety in a manner which might have allowed alternative responses and creative solutions to emerge from the chaos, pilots charged into action. The airplane hijackings by foreign terrorists activated a retaliatory response that seemed only satisfied by armed heroic action. I suggest that a combination of factors such as the social history of guns in America, White men's valency to 'fight' in order to 'feel good' and feelings of malaise within American society contributed to the mobilization of pilots' desire to be armed.

Pilots used phantasy and illusion at work in an effort to overcome the post-traumatic stress and difficulties arising from their sense of shame for not stopping the hijackings, guilt about the crashes and personal fear of death at the hands of terrorists. These phantasies allow them to cope with adversity and infuse their activities with meaning. But, they have also blinded many pilots to the devastating repercussions of carrying a handgun at work.

### **Possible ways to proceed**

As this article described, pilots' desire to carry a handgun at work is the result of a complex collusion among American culture, the airline industry and the pilot group itself. As a result of this complexity, it is very difficult to legislate a simple solution. Yet one recommendation, for further research, is to examine ways that the airline, as a system, and leaders within it can better *contain*<sup>9</sup> pilots' anxieties, thereby perhaps reducing some pilots' urge to be armed. Addressing this recommendation, I see three areas worth further investigation: security, stability, and training.

First, since 9/11 airline pilots have become concerned both with their physical and their professional security. One way to help contain pilots' anxieties would be to adopt sophisticated personal identification measures such as eye scans, fingerprint scans or special identification cards. This would alleviate pilots having to subject themselves to the daily hassle of the airport screening process and help restore their sense of prestige. In addition, continuing to improve airport screening methods and security measures – as well as rescinding the military order to shoot down allegedly hijacked airliners – may help pilots regain confidence in the security system, reducing their anxiety about being *the last* – if not only – *line of defense*.

Second, pilots have been concerned about job stability since 9/11. Airline pilots typically work for the same airline for their entire careers – often 30 or more years – amassing seniority which dictates the type of plane,

routes and schedules they fly, therefore the pay check they receive. As many airlines floundered through bankruptcy, mid- and low-seniority pilots were reassigned numerous times resulting in training requalifications, commuting or moving to new domiciles, extensive pay cuts and even furloughs. Addressing the repercussions of this chaotic environment, management and pilot union leaders could create more stability within the system by developing a new strategy where pay and incentives were not directly tied to airplane seat, but perhaps fixed by position (captain or first officer) and years of employment. This would provide greater stability to more pilots throughout the system as a whole, rather than privileging the senior few.

Third, pilots could be trained using experiential learning techniques to understand better group dynamics and their collusion within the system. A training program by which this could be accomplished is already in existence. Called Crew Resource Management (CRM), it was developed in the 1980s when it was recognized that human factors, such as misunderstandings between pilots at critical points, accounted for over 70 percent of aircraft crashes. Addressing this statistic, CRM training espoused teamwork and open communication in the cockpit as ways to avoid accidents (Cook, 1995; Weitzel & Lehrer, 1992). Adding an experiential module to this annual training would be relatively easy and inexpensive and warrants further investigation.

As a group, pilots have overlooked the way that America, in general, and the airline industry, in particular, have set them up to carry the nation's anxieties. For pilots to question their phantasy about organizational life, and their role within it, may be one stress too many in the post-9/11 period. Instead, they perpetuate the myth of romantic heroism, and all that entails, rather than bear the stress of re-evaluation. Such a response may be a healthy defense for an at-risk group. Although legislation authorizing US commercial airline pilots to carry a handgun at work has already been passed, an increased awareness of the repercussions of 9/11 presents Americans with an opportunity to re-examine heroic mythologies and pilots the chance to resist their valencies to become the fight/flight hero. The question remains: Who is flying the airplane?

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## Notes

- 1 Bion (1961) defines valency as 'the individual's readiness to enter into combination with the group in making and acting on the basic assumptions' (p. 116).
- 2 Although Jaques has since redefined his perspective, in 1952 his research at Glacier Metal Company was foundational to social system studies at the Tavistock Institute.
- 3 For example, see Armstrong (1997), Arrow et al. (2000), Diamond and Allcorn (2003), French and Vince (1999), Gabriel (1999), Gillette and McCollom (1995), Gould et al. (2001), Kahn (1992), Klein et al. (1998), Lawrence (1979), Miller (1979, 1993, 1999), Moylan (1994), Obholzer and Roberts (1994), Pines (1983), Shapiro and Carr (1991), Smith and Berg (1987) and Trist and Murray (1990).
- 4 Gabriel (1999) noted, 'Irrational, emotional forces will always surface in organizational life. Yet the majority of psychoanalytic authorities writing on organizations, writers such as Levinson, Zaleznik, Hirschhorn, Diamond, Baum, Kets de Vries and others, suggest that these forces may be tamed and controlled by the forces of reason and rationality' (p. 77).
- 5 This pilot would be designated as a *Reserve* pilot. More senior pilots have fixed monthly schedules.
- 6 A leatherman is a multi-purpose, compactable tool that contains various types of screwdrivers, pliers, scissors, and knives.
- 7 Navigating Change Committee 1999 statistics, which also noted that only 6.4 percent of the pilot population were women and 9.8 percent were from minorities.
- 8 In the wake of the civil rights, women's rights and gay rights movements in the US over the past 40 years, the heterosexual American White male seems to have experienced an identity crisis (Horrocks, 1994; Kimmel, 1996; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998; Wicks, 1996).
- 9 'An idea developed by Bion (1970) to indicate the emotional experience of a relationship in which the subject's anxieties are neither eliminated nor allowed to disable mental functioning . . . groups, leaders and entire institutions can function as containers of anxiety' (Gabriel, 1999: 292).

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