

The policy of flight

Patrick Tremblay | DCMA Public Affairs

Navy Capt. Drew Swenson, Defense Contract Management Agency Aircraft Operations executive director, brings 25 years of aviation experience to his role, including more than 1,500 hours of military flight time and a master's degree in space systems engineering. (Graphic image by Cheryl Jamieson, DCMA Public Affairs)

On the first floor of the Defense Contract Management Agency

headquarters at Fort Lee, Va., a small group of professionals navigate the policies and procedures of defense-related aviation. Piloted by Navy Capt. Drew Swenson, DCMA's Aircraft Operations Directorate develops and deploys agency level policy which guides flight testing and acceptance of government aircraft.

"We support contracts for four different services, dealing with more than 35 different aircraft types at more than 50 different contractor facilities," said Swenson, executive director of Aircraft Operations. "Our primary purpose is to reduce risk across the Aircraft Operations enterprise."

Swenson is a career naval flight officer and aeronautical engineering duty officer who joined the Navy after graduating from Purdue University with a degree in aerospace engineering. In his 25 years of service, he has accumulated more than 1,500 flight hours in more than 20 types

of aircraft, including nearly 50 combat missions, primarily in the F-14A. He's also an experienced civilian pilot, adding another 1,200 hours in 10 types of aircraft to his total flight time.

Through his career, Swenson has developed a cumulative understanding of the importance of risk assessment and safety. "Every job I've ever had has an influence on what I do today," he said.

"Test Pilot School gave me the analytical tools to analyze, compare, assess and understand aircraft systems. I was able to put these tools to use working at VX-30 (Air Test and Evaluation Squadron)."

Swenson continued, "My most recent position was as the Naval Air Systems Command 4.8 military director. Here I became an expert in working in a matrix organization to get long term success." NAVAIR 4.8 is the engineering technical authority for Aircraft Launch and Recovery Equipment and Support Equipment.

DCMA's mission is to provide contract administration services to the Department

of Defense and ensure the delivery of quality products and services, on time and cost, to the warfighter. Doing this can be a challenge, as these are often highly specialized products that require uniquely trained personnel to perform final testing and acceptance.

This is the case with military aircraft. The few that are qualified to assess flight of an aircraft are in uniform, and the highest levels of control and safety are necessary to mitigate potentially expensive or dangerous risks.

About a third of DCMA's 600 uniformed service personnel work in aviation. Because these aviators, flight representatives and maintenance managers are drawn directly from the ranks of the warfighters, a Tri-Service Agreement delineates each services' role in flight testing and aircraft acceptance. The agreement spells out the services' requirements to provide military manpower and training before a military member is assigned to DCMA AO.

The Tri-Service Agreement has been

Aircraft Operations in action



Army Chief Warrant Officer 4 Sean Gilland, a DCMA Boeing Mesa, Ariz., ground flight representative and Army acceptance pilot, prepares to take an AH-6D Apache Longbow helicopter on an inspection flight.

“We take out brand new aircraft and make sure they function as required by the contract,” said Gilland. “It is a rewarding experience knowing I’m checking out the Apaches before they go to their respective units – but there is also a big sense of responsibility. These are going to units I know and could be flying with in the future.” (Photo by Matthew Montgomery, DCMA Public Affairs)

around since the 1960s, and is reviewed at least every three years before being signed by the acquisition assistant secretaries at the Army, Navy and Air Force and the DCMA director. The most recent iteration is now being prepared for DCMA Director Charlie E. Williams, Jr.’s, signature.

“The new version looks a great deal like the 1965 version, which is a tribute to the logic and completeness of its original drafters,” said Swenson, noting that improvements have been made in two areas. “The new TSA is the first document signed by the services that recognizes the importance of government ground representatives in the successful accomplishment of aircraft operation’s contract administrative services. Government ground representative positions must be filled wherever DCMA has that mission.”

The other key area is in identifying who, within the services, is responsible for ensuring funds are available to train those government flight representatives and government ground representatives coming into a new DCMA assignment. “In the past, though the services have always tacitly acknowledged funding for training was their responsibility, we have never been able to nail down the organization specifically assigned responsibility for the

funds,” said Swenson. “The new TSA does this.”

The TSA ensures the services provide qualified personnel, and AO works with DCMA Human Capital, Operations, International and Special Programs to identify and fill positions at the various flight-specific contract management offices.

Swenson said personnel management can be a challenge, calling aviation manpower a “constrained national resource” due to operations overseas and Defense Department force structure changes. “Each assignment to DCMA demands a perfect fit to ensure the agency gets a specifically trained individual, in the correct place at the proper time, with the right training and the ability to remain current and proficient.”

Meeting strict proficiency requirements can be difficult as well. “Our crews are constantly accepting newly built or repaired aircraft for the government and then delivering those aircraft to the warfighter,” said Swenson. “There isn’t a pool of DCMA aircraft that our pilots and aircrew use to remain current and proficient. In most cases training and proficiency has to be accomplished while conducting our acceptance and delivery mission.”

Getting properly rated and qualified people to the CMOs is only part of AO’s challenge. The directorate has to make sure its people and the government aircraft they are responsible for are safe. Aircraft are complex machines, and come at a high dollar value. Even minor damage incurred during flight carries the potential for expensive repairs. More importantly, there is potential for injury to personnel.

The Ground and Flight Risk clause of the Defense Acquisition Regulations Supplement, or DFARS, provides federal guidance on the relationship between aircraft contractors and DCMA working on behalf of the government. The clause gives specific definitions of who is liable for loss during the critical period of initial tests and test flights of a government airplane, helicopter, unmanned or other aerial vehicle.

More specific to the agency, DCMA Instruction 8210.1 establishes requirements for ground and flight operations involving all contracted work performed on aircraft, as well as procedures to be followed by government flight representatives. The instruction also establishes policy and procedures to be followed by government flight representatives, and the process for approving contractor’s aircraft ground and

flight operations procedures.

Other initiatives over the past few years have been successful in mitigating risks. A rising mishap trend in fiscal year 2010 prompted an AO enterprise wide safety stand down in 2011. "This allowed us to take a day and focus on aviation safety by reviewing our policies and procedures and teaming with our contractors to improve our safety posture," said Swenson.

Last year, AO was tasked by the DCMA director to reduce mishaps by 10 percent from the previous year. "We were able to meet that goal and are continuing to see a downward trend in FY12," said Swenson. "Most notably, we had no aircraft related injuries to the AO DOD workforce in FY10-11."

The Aircraft Operations Inspection is the backbone of the directorate's risk assessment process. Swenson said AOI refinements now center on standardization. "In the latest policy update we added AOI process guides

to our tool box. The guides keep our inspectors focused on the same items, with the same standards and with the same focus from site to site."

The teams now walk away from an inspection with a more standardized report, resulting in improved decision quality data. Swenson said this translates to more effective safety training. "We've seen that training pay huge dividends at the CMO level with some excellent aviation programs being noted during our AOI process."

Enterprise-level courses are offered to government flight representatives and government ground representatives, most of whom come from outside of the acquisition community. These courses not only increase knowledge of the contract and procedures review processes, they also provide additional focus on safety, including how to identify contractor operations which are not safe and effective and actions that must be taken to reduce

risk to lives and government property. This year DCMA headquarters joined Long Beach, Calif., as a site for this standardized training, reducing travel costs for East Coast CMOs.

Swenson said all of AO policies, procedures and training are ultimately related to safely accomplishing the mission. More than systemic, safety has to become "cultural."

"A positive safety culture is essential to our success in Aircraft Operations. We periodically conduct formal aviation safety culture assessments to gauge our safety culture and use the results to implement or revise strategies." The last survey was very positive, and the directorate has the agency director's continued support with periodic 'safety sends' and On Point messages to the AO enterprise.

"Safety, policy, risk assessment and training are the pillars of what AO does," said Swenson. 



For Army Maj. Dan Henzie, DCMA Boeing Philadelphia chief of CH-47 flight operations (left), the ability to impact the final product being delivered to the warfighter is very rewarding.

"I know a lot of the guys, the end-users around the world, who rely on these machines. That really brings it home." Henzie said being involved in the aircraft's production has made him a better pilot. "Seeing it being built gives me more confidence in the aircraft, particularly knowing the care that DCMA people put into their work." (Photo by Army Maj. Daniel Henzie, DCMA Boeing Philadelphia)

Aircraft Operations in action