

Needless Incentives For Unmanned Aerial System Controllers

Captain JD Callicoatt

Major CB Lynn, CG 15

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Would you consider an online gamer playing a combat video game the same as a Marine engaged in actual combat? That is essentially what the Department of Defense is doing in an attempt to increase the number of unmanned aerial system controllers. The use of unmanned aerial systems on the battlefield has increased exponentially during the last decade. As the number of unmanned aerial systems continues to grow, the need for personnel to control these systems will also rise. The proliferation of unmanned aerial systems has accelerated more rapidly than the number of controllers trained to operate them. In an attempt to close this gap, incentives, normally reserved for pilots and aircrew, have been made available to UAS controllers. Controllers of unmanned aerial systems do not assume any of the risks inherent to flying, are not in current flight status and require much less time to train; therefore, they should not receive aviation incentive pay or be eligible for aviation awards.



Incentive Pay

Aviation career incentive pay and hazardous duty incentive pay, for enlisted crew members, were established because of the amount of training time pilots and aircrew endure and because flying is an inherently dangerous occupation, both in peace time and in war. Incentive pay is designed to encourage more continuous participation in flight operations. It is designed to keep pilots and aircrew in the military, despite the risks involved, from seeking more lucrative jobs outside of the Department of Defense after years of training. Incentive pay helps to keep well trained pilots and aircrew in the military.

The training pipeline for pilots takes years to complete, while the syllabus for the most advanced unmanned aerial systems takes only months. The Air Force has already begun planning for additional controllers: "It will open two new training centers early next year producing 300 qualified unmanned drone pilots during the four-month period, up from 150."¹ Because they can mass produce unmanned aerial system controllers, incentive pays are unnecessary. In four more months three hundred more controllers will be available to choose from. It would take years to produce three hundred

¹ Teri Weaver, "Finding Pilots Who Won't Fly," *Stars and Stripes*, 12 October 2008, <<http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=58065>> (29 November 2008)

pilots, which is one of the reasons incentive pays are offered to pilots.

The Air Force is the first branch of the military to offer incentive pays to controllers of unmanned aerial systems. This sets a dangerous precedent for the rest of the Department of Defense. Recent incentive pay authorized for Air Force unmanned aerial system controllers is bordering on the absurd. At Creech Air Force base, about 40 miles northwest of Las Vegas, NV, the Air Force has already offered incentives for airmen to stay at their primary unmanned aerial systems base. "If an airman stays beyond three years, the monthly payment more than doubles to \$750 for as long as the person stays at Creech."² For a pilot, who is actually flying and risking his life in an aircraft, it would take fourteen years of aviation service to surpass this amount and enlisted crew members on board the aircraft will never see this amount of money for their flight duties.³

Comparing a pilot and aircrew in an aircraft to a person, who could possibly be located thousands of miles away in an air conditioned building, controlling an unmanned aerial system is not a realistic comparison. If an unmanned aerial system crashes, the controller may be in some trouble administratively,

² Bruce Rolfsen, "It pays to stay at Creech — \$750 a month," *Air Force Times*, 21 July 2008, <http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2008/07/airforce_creech_bonus_071808/> (7 December 2008)

³ United States Code: Title 37(Pay and Allowances of the Uniformed Services), Chapter 5, paragraph 301a, http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/uscode37/usc_sec_37_00000301---a000-.html (7 December 2008)

but at the end of the day he will most likely be going home to his family. If an aircraft crashes the pilots and aircrew will at a minimum suffer injuries, or in a worst case scenario will die. They assume this risk because, unlike controllers of unmanned aerial systems, they are in the aircraft.

A person who is remotely controlling a machine cannot possibly assume the emotional or physical trials of flying. In recent attempts to increase their number of unmanned aerial system controllers, the Air Force has advertised, "Wanna fly safely, from the ground? The Air Force is looking for non-pilot officers interested in piloting unmanned aircraft."⁴ In this case, the individuals controlling the unmanned aerial systems are not rated pilots and have never experienced flight. Because they are not rated pilots, according to United States Code, they to not rate aviation incentive pay.

United States Code: Title 37 states:

(1) Subject to regulations prescribed by the President, a member of a uniformed service who is entitled to basic pay is also entitled to aviation career incentive pay in the amount set forth in subsection (b) for the frequent and regular performance of operational or proficiency flying duty required by orders.

(2) Aviation career incentive pay shall be restricted to regular and reserve officers who hold, or are in training leading to, an aeronautical rating or designation and who engage and remain in aviation service on a career basis.⁵

⁴ Weaver

⁵ United States Code: Title 37

Because UAS controllers are not rated pilots and will not be working towards an aeronautical rating, according to United States Code: Title 37, they are not eligible for aviation career incentive pay.

Some may argue that incentive pays are offered in many career fields in the military, so why not unmanned aerial system controllers? The incentive pays in the military are usually reserved for jobs where replacing certain skill sets is so expensive and time consuming, or jobs where the risk is so great that it makes sense to offer incentives. Controllers of unmanned aerial systems can be trained so quickly and assume minimal risk in controlling their unmanned aerial systems, incentive pays are unnecessary.

Aviation Awards

Aviation awards, such as the Air Medal and Distinguished Flying Cross, are intended for aviators or aircrew for actions performed while flying. They are designated specifically for pilots and aircrew who are currently in flying status. Air Medal award's order states:

Awarded to individuals who, while serving in any capacity with the Armed Forces of the United States, distinguish themselves by heroic or meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight, under flight orders.⁶

The only individual, not under flight orders, that may be eligible for the Air Medal are:

Certain other individuals whose combat duties require regular and frequent flying in other than a passenger status or individuals who perform a particularly noteworthy act while performing the function of a crew member but who are not on flying status.⁷

It is clear that the Air Medal award is intended for personnel who are actually aboard the aircraft and not for someone in a remote location far removed from the field of battle.

The Distinguished Flying Cross has similar flight requirements, with more stringent heroism criteria:

⁶ NAVY AND MARINE CORPS AWARDS MANUAL, SECNAV INSTRUCTION 1650.1H, 22 August 2006, 2-28

⁷ NAVY AND MARINE CORPS AWARDS MANUAL, SECNAV INSTRUCTION 1650.1H, 22 August 2006, 2-24

To justify this decoration for heroism, an act in the face of danger, well above those actions performed by others engaged in similar flight operations, is required; for achievement, the results accomplished must be so exceptional as to render them conspicuous among those accomplished by others involved in similar circumstances.⁸

Circumstances where a controller of an unmanned aerial system could meet the requirements for either of these medals are unimaginable, yet that has not stopped the Air Force from awarding an Air Medal to unmanned aerial system controller. An Air Force Captain with the 11th Reconnaissance Squadron was awarded the Aerial Achievement Medal – the Air Force’s equivalent to the Air Medal – for safely landing a Predator unmanned aerial system after its engine seized. In his account of the ordeal the Air Force Captain said, “This emergency felt no different than any airplane, the same emotions were there.”⁹ It seems impossible to believe that the same emotions are felt by a person in a building hundreds of miles away as the emotions felt by a pilot and aircrew strapped to the aircraft. If a pilot makes a mistake it may cost him his life, as well as the lives of his aircrew. If a controller in a building hundreds or thousands of miles away makes a mistake it may cause him some embarrassment, but it will not cost him his life. The two are not the same thing. The controller does not have the stress of

⁸ NAVY AND MARINE CORPS AWARDS MANUAL, SECNAV INSTRUCTION 1650.1H, 22 August 2006, 2-24

⁹ Airman 1st Class Monica Munro, “UAV ‘Pilot’ Receives Air Medal,” *Air Force News*, 1 December 1997, < http://www.fas.org/irp/news/1997/n19971201_971531.html > (29 November 2008)

possible death to deal with, while the pilot and his aircrew do. Comparing the two is ridiculous.

The Army has recently declared controllers of unmanned aerial systems eligible for both the Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross. "Soldiers who operate unmanned aerial vehicles now are eligible for award of the Aviation Badge, Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal."¹⁰ This change in Army policy is a slap in the face to all those who have been awarded these medals for acts on the battle field and for those who have lost their lives in combat as pilots or aircrew. "Nearly 64,000 warriors of the skies (were) killed as a result of enemy action since 1917."¹¹ To date, no controllers of unmanned aerial system have died due to their system being shot down by enemy forces, so to compare the two jobs is ludicrous, to give UAS controllers the same awards as pilot or aircrew... insane.

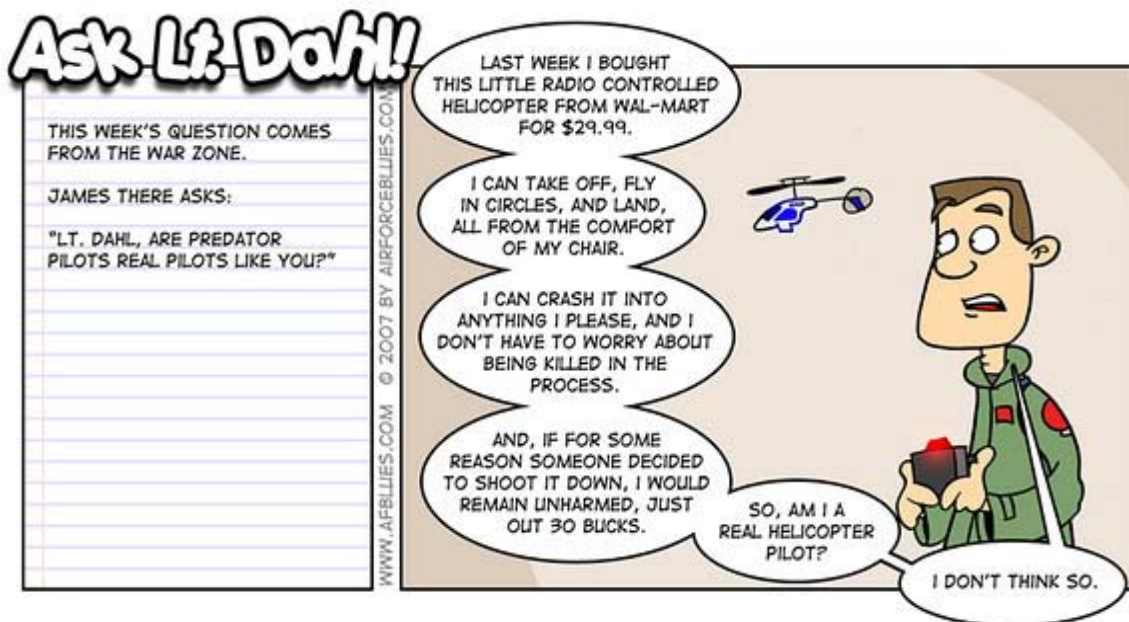
Conclusion

As technology advances, unmanned aerial systems will continue to proliferate throughout the field of battle. Accompanying this proliferation will be the need to find personnel to control them. Initially a gap will exist between the number of controllers to the number of unmanned aerial

¹⁰ Jim Tice, "UAV Operators Now Can Get Aviation Awards," *Army Times*, <http://www.armytimes.com/news/2007/04/army_UAV_awards_070403w/> (6 December 2008)

¹¹ "Winged Warriors: A Tribute to Military Aviators, VFW Magazine 91.3, November 2003, 22(2), Military and Intelligence Collection, Gale, Gray Research Center (15 December 2008)

systems, but this should not create a lower standard for incentive pays and awards to attract more controllers. Pilots and aircrew who for decades have worked hard to achieve their wings and put their lives on the line, in both training and combat, should not have their legacy cheapened by allowing controllers in distant locations, who do not put their lives on the line, to be eligible for the same incentives and awards. Controllers of unmanned aerial systems do not assume any of the risks inherent to flying, are not in current flight status and require much less time to train, therefore should not receive aviation incentive pay or be eligible for aviation awards.



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