

# Air Boss Listens to Concerns of T-45C Pilots, Extends Operational Pause

*Defense-aerospace*



***T-45 Goshawks from Naval Air Training Command. Student pilots fly the T-45s during Field Carrier Landing Practice before they head out to a carrier for their first aircraft deck landings. (US Navy photo)***

SAN DIEGO - Vice Adm. Mike Shoemaker, Commander, Naval Air Forces (CNAF), is visiting T-45C training commands across the fleet April 6 to April 8 to address recent concerns.

Shoemaker is visiting Naval Air Station (NAS) Kingsville, Texas, NAS Pensacola, Florida, and NAS Meridian, Mississippi, to talk face-to-face with instructor pilots (IPs) and student pilots about their physiological episodes (PEs) experienced in the cockpits of T-45C training aircraft. Shoemaker will listen to their concerns and communicate the ongoing efforts to tackle the problem.

On Friday, March 31, roughly 40 percent of flights in the T-45C training commands in Meridian, Pensacola and Kingsville were canceled because of the operational risk management (ORM) issues raised by local IPs.

"Our instructor pilots were implementing a risk management practice we require they do prior to all flights," Shoemaker explained. "It was important for me to come talk with my aviation team members and hear their concerns as we work this challenging issue together. We ask a lot of our pilots, and we owe it to them to ensure they understand we are doing everything we can to fix this problem and that they have access to top leadership."

"This will remain our top safety priority until we fully understand all causal factors and have eliminated PEs as a risk to our flight operations," Shoemaker continued. "The NAE [Naval Aviation Enterprise] has been directed to expedite solutions for PEs and to prioritize those efforts."

Engaging with aircrew face-to-face at their home stations is only the most recent in a series of activities undertaken by CNAF and the NAE to deal with PEs. Even before the concerns were raised by the pilots, CNATRA had scheduled expert engineers to visit the training sites and educate them on the ongoing efforts to fix the machines, and to enable the engineers to hear pilot feedback directly.

The Navy implemented an operational pause for its T-45C fleet Wednesday at the direction of Shoemaker in response to the T-45C pilots' feedback about the potential for PEs. That operational pause has been extended to allow Naval Aviation Leadership time to review the engineering data and developing a path forward for the fleet that will ensure the safety of its aircrew.

"We have the right team of NAVAIR [Naval Air Systems Command] program managers, engineers and maintenance experts in conjunction with Type Commander Staffs, medical and physiological experts immersed in this effort working with the same sense of urgency to determine the root causes of PEs," Shoemaker said. "To tackle this as effectively as possible, we are using an 'unconstrained resources' approach to the problem, meaning we have not been nor will we be limited by money or manpower as we diligently work toward solutions."

As far back as 2010, NAVAIR established a Physiological Episode Team (PET) to collect data, investigate occurrences of PEs and coordinates with technical experts to identify and develop solutions based on root cause determinations. Naval Aviation has provided training and encouraged reporting of PEs since the development of the PET.

Finding the causes is a challenging problem on a complex, highly sophisticated platform. Though the number of components and configurations of the aircraft make finding "smoking guns" difficult, Naval Aviation has continued to implement multiple lines of effort across over the past couple years to mitigate the risks. Naval Aviation requires pilots train in the simulator using a Reduced Oxygen Breathing Device to improve aircrew recognition of physiological symptoms related to hypoxia.

The improved On-Board Oxygen Generating System (OBOGS) material, known sieve bed (filter) material has been installed in all T-45, and new oxygen monitors are being fielded as part of an operational test in Pensacola. Sorbent tubes, devices that detect contaminants in breathing gas air, are also being provided to pilots and, as soon as our inventory supports, will be required on every flight to help ensure we capture any PE event that might yield clues to the contamination agent.

Other mitigating efforts in place include: refinements to aircrew procedures; improved maintenance practices and procedures for better system reliability; releasing Air Frame Bulletin (AFB)-794, which changes inspection intervals to improve the rate of component failure detection; procurement of a cockpit pressurization warning system.

In one of his many previous messages to the Force, Shoemaker explained that, "Our aviators must be able to operate with confidence in our platforms and in their ability to safely

execute their mission. To help ensure we eliminate this risk, collection and reporting of event data and your continued leadership is critical."