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<http://www.delawareonline.com/newsjournal/local/2004/12/28dovershortpilot.html>
PHOTOS and lots of links at webpage – they have consistently covered this issue well with lots of background info including info on squalene

Dover short pilots since vaccine order
Dozens of valuable fliers walked off; squadron remains below full strength

By HIRAN RATNAYAKE and LEE WILLIAMS / The News Journal
12/28/2004 When the military ordered all military personnel bound for Korea and the Middle East to be inoculated with the anthrax vaccine, pilots staged a massive walkout at Dover Air Force Base, where the Air Force's largest cargo aircraft are flown.

That was more than five years ago.

Today, with Dover playing an integral role in the war against terror, the base is still strapped for qualified pilots, former pilots say. Lt. Col. Jay Lacklen, in charge of hiring pilots for the 326th Airlift Squadron in 1999, says his former squadron is still "about 10 short of full strength." The other reserve squadron, the 709th Airlift Squadron, suffered an equally debilitating loss. No information was available on how it has since fared.

After the Clinton administration order to get the vaccine, 55 of 120 pilots at DAFB's two flying reserve squadrons failed to show up for drills during two weekends in June 1999. That spring, Brig. Gen. Peter Sullivan, wing commander at the base, ordered C-5 pilots to cease duties unless they received the vaccine during drills.

Only one of the 55 pilots showed up during the next six months, Lacklen

said. Of the other pilots, some quit the Air Force altogether, others traded their flying jobs for staff jobs. Only a handful resumed their C-5 duties. Reserves can leave the unit if they refuse to take the shot, unlike active-duty pilots in the base's 436th Airlift Wing who can be punished if they disobey orders.

Current commanders at DAFB would not comment about the walkoff.

The controversy at Dover, and the sudden drop in response readiness, was little noticed outside the military.

Status of Resources & Training Systems, known as SORTS, informs the Pentagon on the strength of military units. SORTS has five categories. Category 1 means a unit is full combat ready. Category 5 is the lowest, and means a unit is "not prepared to undertake the mission set for which it is organized or designed," according to a 2003 Air Force SORTS report, the most recent available.

Reviewed by The News Journal, the report said that because of a lack of pilots, both reserve flying squadrons of DAFB were downgraded to the lowest category after the 1999 walkoff. The SORTS report assessed the 326th Airlift Squadron's most current strength as Category 2, or fit for "most of the wartime mission(s)," but still suffering from a loss of "flexibility."

Retired Master Sgt. Karen Ploof, a wing manager for SORTS at Westover Air Reserve Base in Chicopee, Mass., said she heard of other bases that suffered pilot losses because of the anthrax vaccine issue, but none as severe as Dover.

"If you lose half your pilots, you've just lost a lot of money," she said. "You've got a problem."

Based on pilot training cost estimates, the military lost between \$49.5 million and \$55 million during the walkoff.

The C-5 pilots who did not show up for drills in June were still listed on unit status reports for six months in case of a national emergency, in which time they could be re-qualified with two or three training flights. Sullivan, wing commander at DAFB from 1998 to 2002, says the walkoff was a disruption but it is being mischaracterized by Lacklen and other Dover pilots.

"In my recollection, they did not leave in large enough numbers at one particular time to give us a SORTS rating where it would warrant an outside investigation," Sullivan said. "It was manageable for me as a wing commander."

Now a major general and mobilization assistant at the Pentagon, Sullivan said reserve pilots left their flying duties for a "combination of events," such as war concerns, family pressures, retirement eligibility and the anthrax vaccine.

"In a series of events in their lives, the uncertainty of the safety of the anthrax vaccine was just another reason," he said.

Lacklen, who lives in Dover, said most pilots left primarily because of anthrax. Retired Dover commander Col. Felix Grieder told The News Journal earlier this year that he believes his troops were the subjects of illegal experiments. Grieder temporarily halted the program, a move he says ended his military career. The military later admitted the anthrax vaccine administered at Dover contained squalene.

Neither the military nor the Food and Drug Administration test for squalene, a substance that occurs naturally in the body and has been used to boost a vaccine's effect. Some experts say even trace amounts of squalene in vaccines can harm the immune system, causing arthritis, neurological problems, memory loss and incapacitating migraine headaches.

"No unit loses 40 percent of its pilots in one month, unexpectedly, without something being drastically wrong," Lacklen said.

Pilots were already short

The exodus in Dover came as concerns about retaining pilots was rising.

Several months before the 55 pilots left, in March 1999, a government official with the U.S. Congressional Budget Office testified on Capitol Hill on pilot retention.

"Both the Air Force and the Navy currently cite shortages of pilots that are expected to persist for the foreseeable future," said Christopher Jehn, then the assistant director for the budget office. "In the Air Force, the shortage will worsen over the next several years."

Jehn noted in his testimony that the cost of training one new military pilot exceeds \$1 million.

During wars, C-5 Galaxys deliver all types of equipment, from tanks to toilet paper. Since these planes are unarmed, the pilot-in-command and the co-pilot controlling them learn defensive tactics to minimize exposure to enemy fire.

All military pilots, regardless of what airplane they will fly, go through 52 weeks of basic pilot training to earn their wings. C-5 pilots get an additional three months of specialized training. After several years of experience, they can enroll in a three-week course to become a C-5 instructor pilot.

According to 2nd Lt. Ashley Norris, a spokeswoman for Altus Air Force Base, the cost to train a C-5 pilot is nearly \$900,000. The figure varies, and includes the costs for training devices, aircraft maintenance, pilot operations and room and board.

During training, retired Air Force Maj. Hans Reigle said he was constantly reminded that millions of dollars were being spent to train him and fellow pilots. Reigle, an instructor pilot, had been flying C-5 planes for 20 years. Anticipating Sullivan's order, he left his flying job for a desk job, where he would not need a shot, before the drills.

"I still have questions on how they could let so many people leave," said Reigle, who lives in Wyoming, Del. "Not only were they losing almost half the reserve wing but they also lost a lot of qualified people who had flown for thousands of hours. It meant they had to find new people to train for the next war."

The hemorrhaging of pilots did alarm commanders.

Sullivan, who interviewed pilots on why they did not submit to his order, wrote Reigle a letter July 12, 1999, urging him to reconsider his decision to leave his job as instructor pilot. "Your squadron, this Wing, our Air Force, and the nation need you and the expertise and experience you possess," Sullivan wrote. "I know we in leadership put a lot of demands on your precious time and put requirements on your plate, but you represent a vital part of our nation's defense. So I am vitally interested in why you are considering this decision."

Reigle continued to be listed as a C-5 pilot on the unit status report. So did Jim "Zeke" Przygocki, another of the pilots who left.

"I have never technically trained for anything else other than to be a pilot," said Przygocki, who lives in Dover and works for commercial airlines. "We were trained for millions of dollars, but all of a sudden we were copy boys. They'd have us sit in the office and answer telephones everyday or look for typos in their publications."

Scramble to replace

In the months that followed, the military grew desperate to replace the pilots who left, Lacklen said. Navy and Coast Guard helicopter pilots were hired in their stead.

"At first we went looking for C-5 pilots but there weren't any of those," Lacklen said. "The helicopter guys were very capable but they didn't have a lot of fixed wing experience. Those were some of the only guys available. It was a terrible hit because it was some of the most experienced guys who left."

"To an extent that's true," Sullivan said. "We had fairly new people and we spent most of our time instructing. But that's not bad, because you get more work as an instructor. It's just more difficult work."

Half the departed were instructor pilots, Lacklen said. His squadron fell from 58 qualified C-5 pilots to the low 30s by the end of June 1999. When December 1999 came around, his squadron still had almost 20 pilot positions

to fill. Sullivan said the base replaced all the pilots who left in 2001. While he said the Air Force should have done a better job of educating its pilots on the vaccine, he does not regret his order, which was passed down to him by superiors.

"I understood the risk involved," he said. "I badly wanted to retain the pilots. I had a personal interview with everyone who left and I listened to them. That was all I could do."

Lacklen said the order to take the shot was the biggest mistake base commanders made.

"It was a severe hit, it was catastrophic," said Lacklen, who saw combat during the Vietnam War. "If they lost that many pilots in the 1970s when I was in strategic air command, there would be a four-star general down here firing everybody. He'd want to know why you'd lost the pilots and then he'd fire everybody for having lost them. But they couldn't do that in Dover because the vaccine was the reason they lost the pilots."

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