

TAILHOOK LIVES

The Bond Outlives the Scandal By Commander Ward Carroll, U.S. Navy (Retired)

In 1989, I was the editor of *Approach* magazine at the Naval Safety Center, and among my duties was running the command's booth at the annual Tailhook Association Convention in Las Vegas. I arrived a day before most of the masses and had a chance to get better acquainted with many of the association's officers I'd only known as voices on the phone. They were just as helpful and professional in person. They were sincere, and it was obvious they loved the community and what it stood for.

Tailhook '89 was pure joy for me. I ran into people from all walks of my past, many of whom I hadn't seen for years. Catching up was exhilarating. We drank frozen concoctions by the pool; we walked the convention floor; we attended the panels and engaged in heated debate with our seniors, including flag officers. And we didn't sleep much. It seemed like good, clean(ish) fun. By the time I flew back to Norfolk I was sure there could never be a better forum for a community to gather and celebrate itself.

'A Slightly Different Affair'

Hook '90 was a slightly different affair, one that showed some of the elements that would cause big problems the following year. The Las Vegas Hilton's third floor was crowded—too crowded. While there was nothing mean-spirited about anyone's conduct in particular, the crush of people caused unpleasant tension.

I was also struck by the enthusiastic presence of two groups I hadn't really noticed at Tailhook '89: officers attached to the training command (both instructors and students) and Marine Corps RF-4 guys (recognizable by their headbands festooned with rhino horns). I found it ironic that the most boisterous of the attendees were folks who most likely had few if any arrested landings.

Then Desert Storm happened.

Between Tailhook '90 and '91 the U.S. military participated in a brief but definitive conflict that yielded some of what the post-Vietnam generation of aviators had been by-in-large lacking: real combat experience, which begets real heroes. Suddenly, our peers were POWs and MiG-killers. We weren't just the stuff of movies. We were the stuff of actual war—and a victory at that.

I didn't attend Hook '91 because I had rolled from *Approach* into another Tomcat squadron about to go to sea for six months. But a number of my squadron-mates did, including my skipper. They came back with the usual stories, including reports that the Hilton's third floor had once again been extremely crowded. But nothing in the recounting foretold the scandal that was about to erupt.

'Inappropriate Conduct?'

Lieutenant Paula Coughlin complained to her boss that she had been subject to inappropriate conduct while trying to navigate the third floor. His "boys-will-be-boys" response was unsatisfactory to the lieutenant, and she took her complaint aggressively up the chain of command. It got ugly fast, and stayed that way a lot longer than anyone could have predicted.

As official scrutiny increased, allegations emerged that painted a picture of barbarians rather than heroes. Several other females corroborated the story that a "gauntlet" had been formed along one corridor and that they had been groped as they attempted to pass.

This wasn't the "boys-will-be-boys" narrative that might have been met with indifference or even tacit approval by Pentagon officials or the general public. This was sexual battery.

But the details remained sketchy. The Naval Investigative Service (NIS) took a ham-fisted approach that caused the carrier aviation community to close ranks. As is often the case with sexual-harassment situations, the victim found herself on the defensive. Allegations had Coughlin sleeping with a different male each of the convention's three nights; she had dressed provocatively and been too drunk to identify her attackers. Hazy factoids that floated out of the investigation added up to next to nothing.

Amid the chaos, what struck me as most unfathomable was that bad behavior had apparently gone completely unchecked. Usually when animal acts turned ugly, cooler (and more sober) heads intervened. How had this malicious wolf pack formed (and been sustained)?

Whatever rowdy conduct the Tailhook staff and senior-officer attendees thought might be possible from the junior officers in the hospitality suites, it didn't include sexual battery. While ultimately the scandal was viewed as a failure of senior leadership, it was actually the juniors who let everyone else down. But absent guilty parties, that fact was marginalized.

Old Guard vs. Women's Rights

The inquiries wore on, and sides formed. Old-guard zealots were convinced the scandal was nothing more than a land grab by opportunists looking to shake up the male-only status quo. They squared off against the political machinery behind the women's rights movement and other progressive groups convinced that all facets of the military needed to be opened to women and that the boorish, perhaps even criminal, conduct at Tailhook was evidence of it.

Frustration increased up the chain of command beyond the Chief of Naval Operations that there was no clear party to blame. Nets were cast wider. Just being at the Hilton was implication enough. And those in positions of authority—especially the flag officers in attendance—were held particularly accountable.

Inevitably, the correction led to overcorrection. The informal fabric of carrier aviation's culture was challenged like never before. Call-signs were reviewed for hidden meanings or double entendres. Squadron names and logos were modified. Hours of sensitivity training were mandated.

At the same time, in large part because of pressure applied to the Pentagon by certain lawmakers, a gender-integrated Navy happened in a matter of months rather than years. Within an availability period, ships were modified to accommodate female crew members. Training pipelines and career tracks were changed to get female aviators to carrier-based squadrons. And military careers were ended. It was all too much for naval aviation's anti-change agents who elected to resign their commissions, convinced that the culture had been ruined forever.

The Navy soon severed all official ties with the Tailhook Association, and membership sagged as officers with career aspirations feared that joining would be viewed as an act against the Navy. "Tailhook" was reduced to a punchline for late-night comics. There was little chance the organization would survive.....But it did!

Tailhook Lives

I returned to the Tailhook Convention in 2005, arriving there an hour into the Bug Roach mixer, the kick-off event. I had retired from the Navy a few years before, which gave me a semi-outsider's perspective for the first time. I studied the junior officers in the crowd, fully prepared to find them subdued compared to those of us who'd served in the pre-scandal Navy. It had to be tough to enjoy yourself in a politically correct, risk-averse world.

But they were enjoying themselves, and not just in some by-the-numbers way. The squadron esprit on display rivaled the best I'd seen in my career. In fact, it's fair to say that their camaraderie was more focused, more productive than ours had been. By this time most of the active-duty tactical-air attendees had real war experience, something few of us could boast during our Cold War careers. They just skipped the sexual-battery part.

The Tailhook Association survived where lesser organizations would have folded because of the bond among those who've served in carrier aviation. That bond outlasts the revolting conduct of a few bad actors or the judgment of politicians who deign to care as long as it serves them. That bond is what continues to accomplish the mission, whether it's putting bombs on target in Afghanistan or bringing a Super Hornet safely back aboard the ship on a stormy night.

A few hours after the mixer wound down I awoke in my hotel room, body still on East Coast time. I was hungry and decided to find breakfast somewhere in the Nugget complex. I made my way through the main casino, past dozens of blackjack tables all jammed with players wearing flight suits. They were going strong, laughing and high-fiving each other after a good hand.

I checked my watch and smiled to myself. It was just after 0500. Tailhook lived.

Commander Carroll is editor of Military.com. A former F-14 Tomcat radar intercept officer, his debut novel, *Punk's War*, was published by the Naval Institute Press in 2001.