

# Case Study/Table Discussion: When Leaders Fail To Lead

Fairchild Air Force Base  
Spokane, Washington  
1991-1994

From "*Darker Shades of Blue: A Case Study in Failed Leadership*"  
by Tony Kern

Videos clips used in this  
presentation can be found here:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch  
?v=YQa4PpIkOZU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQa4PpIkOZU)

# Background

- Story of Lt Col Bud Holland, leaders, and followers at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Wing, Fairchild AFB
- Lt Col Holland was the Chief of Standards and Evaluation and “one of the best B-52 pilots in the Air Force”
- Story goes through a chronological sequence of events, impacts, and actions – or more importantly non-actions – surrounding each event
- Shows that incidents don’t just happen – they are complex and build up over time, and have roots in leadership

# Prologue

# 1991 Fairchild AFB Airshow

ATFS\_Crash™

**1991 AIR SHOW**

**19 MAY 1991**

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# 1991 Fairchild AFB Airshow

- Violations
  - banking and pitch technical limits of the B-52
  - regulations restricting flights over airshow crowds
  - altitude restrictions
- The Leaders
  - Commanders personally witnessed clear violations but took no action
- The Followers
  - Began silently questioning why the entire Bomb Wing staff watched him violate rules w/ no obvious repercussions

# 1991 Change of Command

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**325 BOMB SQUADRON**

**CHANGE OF COMMAND**

**12 JULY 91**

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# 1991 Change of Command

- Violations
  - banking and pitch technical limits of the B-52
  - altitude restrictions
  - “wingover” maneuver
- The Leaders
  - Commanders possibly verbally reprimanded, but no clear documented punishment
- The Followers
  - Felt no need to report or complain because the entire Bomb Wing staff was again watching

# 1992 Fairchild AFB Airshow



# 1992 Fairchild AFB Airshow

- Violations
  - banking and pitch technical limits
  - altitude restrictions
  - “wingover” maneuver
- Failure to review and approve flight plan during mandatory planning session
- The Leaders
  - New Deputy Commander 7 days after airshow, and he threatened Lt Col Holland with permanent grounding if he violates again - but no documentation
- The Followers
  - Assumed that command was now approving violations of established limits

# 1993 Overseas Training Mission

- Violations
  - regulations regarding close flight formation
  - permitting crew member to leave main crew compartment to video a release of live munitions from bomb bay door.
- The Leaders
  - Deputy Commander of Operation when made aware of incriminating video said "Okay, I don't want to know anything about that video – I don't care"
- The Followers
  - When asking questions about the violation of regulations, were told by Lt Col Holland that the Wing Commander had instructed him to do "whatever you need to do to get good pictures"

# 1993 Fairchild AFB Airshow

- Violations
  - More extreme banking and pitch technical limits
  - altitude restrictions
- The Leaders
  - No action whatsoever.
- The Followers
  - Later that year, younger less skilled pilots twice attempted to copy Lt Col Holland's performances and nearly crashed in Kamloops, BC and Roswell, NM

# 1994 Yakima Bombing Range



# 1994 Yakima Bombing Range

- Violations
  - Most extreme of altitude restrictions and personnel safety
- The Leaders
  - An investigation, including testimony from crew members and specific video evidence, led only to a verbal reprimand and a promise by Lt Col Holland not to break any more regulations
- The Followers
  - Near mutiny on-board the aircraft; a number of squadron crew members vowed to never again fly with Lt Col Holland
  - Squadron Commander Lt Col McGeehan restricted anyone from his squadron except himself to fly with Lt Col Holland

# 1994 Airshow Practice #1



# 1994 Airshow Practice #1

- Violations
  - banking and pitch technical limits of the B-52 despite specific direction from the Wing Commander to not exceed these limitations
- The Leaders
  - Following the practice session, the Deputy Commander of Operations told the Wing Commander that “the profile looks good; very safe, well within parameters.”
- The Followers
  - Several crewmembers refused to fly the airshow; concerns went up to the Bomb Wing Chief of Safety, who stated “Lt Col Holland was a good pilot and that the maneuvers had been done before”

# 1994 Final Airshow Practice

- Lt Col Holland presented plan to leadership that clearly violated technical limits; Wing Commander quickly told him he was to follow technical limits.
- Lt Col Holland was clearly not pleased, and Deputy Commander of Operations continued to provide Wing Commander with false impression and lack of real information.

*"I may have someone senior in rank flying with me - he may be the boss on the ground, but I'm the boss in the air and I'll do what I want to do."*

# 1994 Final Airshow Practice



## A Few Themes...

- Technical limits were known but violated repeatedly
- Standards and policies were not enforced, so thus not followed
- Channels of communication were shutdown; some leaders didn't listen
- Senior leadership positions did not speak with consistency
- Key position was filled with the wrong person
- Leaders stopped leading
- Some followers stopped following

# Discussion Points

- Have you personally seen examples of leaders failing to lead appropriately? What happened?
- Who is the “Lt Col Holland” on your current project? What do you need to do about it?
- What aspect of this case study resonates most with you regarding your own approach to project leadership? What should you start doing better right away?

# Final Messages

- If you have “Manager”, “Director”, “Leader”, or equivalent in your title, people are looking at you to lead – all the time. Your leadership is ALWAYS “ON”, good or bad.
- When in a position of leadership, inaction and/or inconsistent action poses significant risk to your project and team.
- As a leader, hearing pushback from your team is a clear signal that something is not right.

# Remember the story of Lt Col Holland

