

# Compartmentalization and Your Family, Part 1

**James Albright** June 15, 2022



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As we've seen in our previous articles, it is important that we learn to place what we do in aviation into a compartment that can be isolated from the rest of our life, and that social pressures deserve special attention in this effort. Competition for our attention from family also deserves attention. Your family can provide a solid foundation from which all other aspects of your life benefit, or family problems can detract from what you do. It is to every aviator's advantage to make sure the "family compartment" supports the "aviator compartment," so you can give aviation your complete focus when it demands it.

## Getting Family Support

We often dismiss the risks of our occupation to put our families at ease and that is in many ways the right thing to do. Or is it? You may modestly believe that flying airplanes is no more dangerous than many other occupations, and reason the risks are



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certainly no greater than being a firefighter or police officer. We undoubtedly deal with life and death situations, but no more than does a doctor or other medical professional. But there are key differences. Not many occupations require complete focus from their practitioners in such fluid environments. It is the classic “hours of boredom interrupted by minutes of terror” syndrome. When things go wrong, or even when they go right, we are required to come up with the right answer in an instant. We don’t have the luxury of calling a time out or withdrawing until we can get help. That is why our hours of study and our demands for quiet during rest periods are critical. If your family doesn’t understand this, your efforts at building an aviation compartment will meet resistance.

### Be Honest About The Risks



The 1966 crash site of an XB-70 Valkyrie near Edwards Air Force Base, California. Photo credit: USAF

How do you get the family onboard when it comes to allowing you the free space needed for your aviation compartment? And how do you do that without causing them undue stress, stress that could lead them to pressure you to find another way to earn a living? Perhaps a quick story is in order.

The United States Air Force has made great strides over the years to improve the safety of flight training. When I went to Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) in 1979, things were better than they had been, but not as good as they are today. That year the Air Force lost four of their Cessna T-37B primary jet trainers and four of their advanced Northrop T-38A advanced jet trainers. We had four deaths at my base that year, the first occurring just before I started

flight training. I never brought that or the next two deaths up to my wife and she never mentioned them until our next-door neighbor was the fourth to perish. We talked about it briefly but didn’t dwell on it.

A few years later, when I was flying the Boeing KC-135A tanker, she asked me about a recent crash at our base. The KC-135 had averaged between two and three losses a year up to that point in its history. I explained that most of the crashes were due to pilot error and that her pilot spent a lot of time trying to avoid those kinds of errors. She accepted that and I assumed nothing more needed to be said about it.

After I left the Air Force, I overheard a conversation she had about my 20 years as an Air Force pilot and all the deaths. “Of course, I was worried sick,” she said, “but what could I do about it? I just had to trust that he knew what he was doing. I’m just so happy that part of his flying is over.”

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention that the Air Force has gotten its act together in the way it trains pilots and losing eight training aircraft in a single year these days would grind the entire operation to a halt. They don’t accept these losses as normal operating costs anymore. But it does beg the question, how do you let the family know this isn’t just a normal office job while assuring them that you are taking all the necessary precautions?

First, be honest about the risks. While the accident rate in commercial aviation has fallen over recent years, it isn’t zero. Moreover, the rate in general aviation is still much higher. Explain that a vast majority of these crashes were caused by pilots who were not sufficiently trained, rested or serious about their profession. That is why you work so hard at training, getting proper rest and studying.

Second, discuss any recent and notable crashes that may cause them concern or can help illustrate why the aviation compartment deserves the space you give it. As a Gulfstream pilot, I pay special attention to any crashes involving Gulfstream aircraft. On May 31, 2014, a Gulfstream GIV crashed at the end of the runway at Hanscom Field, Bedford, Massachusetts (KBED). It was an unsurprising result given the pilots failed to

disengage their gust lock, failed to complete a flight control check, failed to run any checklists and failed to properly execute a takeoff abort. There were a lot of links in that accident chain, and most could be traced to the pilots.

As the investigation unfolded, I explained to my wife how the GIV and the G450 I was flying at the time were similar, but also where safety improvements had been made. I also explained how these pilots didn't understand their aircraft systems as well as I did, and how they didn't place the same importance on standard operating procedures that I do. She asked, "Why would any pilot be so reckless?" I answered that this kind of seriousness requires hard work and time. It requires a solid aviation compartment.

*Part 2 of this article series discusses how showing your family vulnerability when learning something new, like pursuing a type rating, can be helpful.*

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# Compartmentalization and Your Family, Part 2

**James Albright** June 16, 2022



A United Airlines Boeing 747 departs San Francisco International Airport. Photo: Phillip Capper

*[The first part](#) of this article series talks about talking about risk with your family.*

After several years of accident-free flying, passed check rides, and yet another type rating, your family may normalize the fact you defy gravity for a living and think that you have it all mastered. Modesty is a fine trait, and your family probably admires the humility you display even while doing something everyone else considers one step removed from magic. However, it may not hurt to reveal what goes on behind the curtain every now and then.

The Air Force decided in 1986 that I needed to be a Boeing 747 captain, so I was sent to United Airlines with instructions to earn an Airline Transport Pilot certificate with a 747 type rating. At the time I held a commercial license with Boeing 707 and 720 type ratings. How hard could it be? I heard that the airplane check ride was easy, but you couldn't experience that until you passed the simulator check, which was known for a high bust rate. Our last Air Force pilot failed the sim check because he couldn't clear the obstacles departing Runway 28L at San Francisco International Airport, California (KSFO) following an engine failure at  $V_1$ . My first attempts ended with simulated crash trucks and an actual "Unsat" on my grade reports. "Don't worry, you'll get it," I was told. The simulated aircraft was at maximum gross weight and the conditions required a very gentle 3-deg. per second rotation to a very precise angle. Rotate too quickly or too high and you stalled. Rotate too slowly or too low and you didn't clear the hills just north of the airport.

With each failed training session, I became more and more frustrated. I was also consumed with studying for the four-hr. oral exam. We were moving from Hawaii to the mainland and our plan was for me to go solo for the first two weeks and for my wife to join me for the last two weeks so we could enjoy the Denver area together. I started to think that was a mistake because I just didn't have the time for anything but my studies.

As the check ride neared it became apparent that I was under a level of stress my wife had never witnessed before, so she finally asked. I admitted that the  $V_1$  cut could do me in. Her perfect pilot husband, she learned, was not so perfect.

With just one simulator session to go before the sim check, the pressure was on. The engineer in me took over and analyzed my previous failures. I wasn't rotating too quickly or not quickly enough. My rotation angle was always on target. Always. So, what was causing enough drag to prevent the jumbo jet from climbing as Boeing had intended? That's when the light came on. My sloppy rudder technique was causing the rudder to hang out in the wind and that was robbing us of acceleration.

During the last training simulator session, I managed to be smooth while applying enough rudder pressure to keep the aircraft flying straight, even with an outboard engine failure. We cleared the hills as the performance charts predicted. I repeated that for the simulator check and after the flight check was awarded the ATP with 747 type.

Years later, for another type rating, I overheard my wife chase our children away from the study. "Give daddy his space," she said. "His mind will be somewhere else for a while until he memorizes another airplane." As it turned out, my struggles with her as a witness paid dividends beyond the new license and type rating. I believe my family understands the flight compartment has a special place in my life. I owe them something special in return.

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# Compartmentalization and Your Family, Part 3

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When you release the brakes and unleash the Jet-A into the burner cans to accelerate from zero to more than 100 miles per hr. in a matter of seconds, what you are doing at that moment is paramount. If you make a mistake, nothing else matters. That's why you have an aviation compartment. When you are sitting at your desk studying aircraft abort procedures and your son walks in and says, "Dad, I have a problem," then where does that aviation compartment fit in the big scheme of things?

Maybe you need a dad or mom compartment too. A son or daughter compartment. A friend compartment. Any number of compartments. But no matter how many or few you have the need for, the compartments must have boundaries and you must be able to switch from one to another when the need arises. The aviation compartment is unique in that it has a switch that mutes all other compartments. But that switch is reserved for use only when in the aircraft. That isn't to say the aviation compartment takes priority. In fact, it doesn't.

As we saw in the article, [Compartmentalization and a Focus on Flight](#), you cannot hope to fully concentrate on your flight duties if you have troubles at home. You need to cordon off some of your time and effort to ensure the family's needs are met. I've made a lot of mistakes in this area, and I hope to save you from repeating them.

When approaching a fork in the career road, include the family in the decision-making process and make it clear they have a voice. If, for example, you have a great opportunity that includes a large pay raise but also doubles your time away from home, the family deserves a vote. If the kids are in grade school and your influence as a parent is more important than as the financial provider, your decision may be easy. If, on the other hand, the kids are off to college and the extra income could pay the tuition bills, your decision may be the opposite. In any case, include the family before deciding.

Take paid time off and don't let it expire unused! You may not feel the need for time off but not taking it tells the family you would rather work than spend time with them. Even if that isn't true, it can be subconsciously interpreted that way.

When approached by a family member with a request, try to focus on them. Avoid situations where you listen (or pretend to listen) while doing something else. This applies when you are inside your aviation compartment while studying or even in your relaxation compartment while watching your favorite YouTube channel. Picture this: you are typing notes about a new aircraft system when your spouse comes in asking about (insert your least favorite topic here). In the past I would continue to type while assuring her, "I'm listening." And she would keep talking. After a while I realized I wasn't paying attention to my studies or to her. I made the decision to avoid all future "half conversations." I then vowed to immediately stop all work, turn to face her, make eye contact and listen. I think she appreciated this and after she was satisfied, she would say, "thank you, please get back to what you were doing." That was years ago. Now I notice she is careful to check on what I am doing before interrupting. I need to learn to pay her the same respect when she is absorbed watching her favorite football team.

Learn how to live without checklists and how to be spontaneous for once in your life! As aviators, we appreciate that our minds can skip important steps and that a good checklist works for starting a jet engine, putting together a lasagna or packing a suitcase for a family vacation. If a schedule gets the aircraft airborne on time, why not use a checklist for the next family vacation? You see a well laid out plan; they see a loss of spontaneity and the spice of adventure. For your next family vacation, try giving up all planning and scheduling. Set a budget and see what happens. You might be surprised how much fun you have.

Switch off the ice water in your veins and let the family know you are human. If you make it a habit to always display the "cool, calm and collected" persona that your passengers value, experiment with showing how much you care about things important to the family. Years ago, a pilot in one of my Air Force squadrons was at a loss to explain his family's anger following the death of their cat. He came home, found the dead cat and chucked it into the dumpster. "It's just a cat," he said. Even if you are in the "it's just a cat" camp, understand you might be alone in this.

"Wait a minute," you say. "You've gone to great pains to say your aviation compartment is sacred and should not be violated. Like when you're on an ILS, you cannot allow stray thoughts about the cat or anything else outside the compartment dull your focus. But now you're saying you need to worry about the cat. What gives?"

### **Understanding Your Limits**

You have an aviation compartment that you can switch on and off when not actively aviating but can never be switched off while aviating. But what if you find that you cannot do that? One day you are a poster child of compartmentalization, the next something happens that makes any attempts at singular focus impossible. What then?

There are times when it becomes impossible not to be consumed by a factor outside your aviation compartment. We call these stressors because they place a stress on you that may or may not be debilitating. It could also be that you can easily handle one stressor but after another and another you exceed your limits.

As an Air Force commander in my past or a flight department manager in my present, there are some situations where I will remove a crewmember from flight duties even if they insist they are fit for duty. Let's say you experience the death of a spouse. Off flight status, no doubt about it. But what about trouble with the in-laws? Or the foreclosure of the mortgage on your house? No? What about both? There are two things you need to realize. First, feeling stressed is perfectly normal. Second, there may be times when it is also perfectly normal to say, "I am too stressed to fly."

Sometimes you need to retreat from a situation before it becomes hazardous, what we called the "knock it off" call. If family demands become too great to handle your flight responsibilities, it may be that your family compartment crowds out the aviation compartment. It may be tempting to withdraw from the family, reasoning that the aviation compartment deals with life and death. Besides, the aviation compartment pays for the family compartment! But if your distraction leads to the end of the aviation compartment, what good did that withdrawal do?

We are not alone in this need to "knock it off" when faced with family troubles. In 2011, a tugboat pilot crashed a barge he was pushing into a tourist boat, killing two tourists and plunging 35 others into the Delaware River. While on duty, he made or received 21 calls on his personal cell phone about a life-threatening medical emergency involving his son.

Even if not presented with such a distraction in the moment, having a family issue weighing on you can lead to equally dire results. There are times the family compartment trumps all others and when that happens, an aviator's prime responsibility is to call knock it off. If you are flying, fess up, give the airplane to the other pilot if you have one, or land if you don't. If you aren't flying, stop whatever act of aviation is going on, and deal with the family first.

An aviator who places the demands of an aviation career over the needs of his or her family is destined for a crisis in both. Unless the aviator's family compartment is secure, the flight compartment is at risk. So, it becomes imperative that the needs of the family come first. Can the same be said of work? If you are a professional pilot, after all, doesn't flight end if there is no work? We'll examine the curious relationship between flight and work in the next article in this series about aviator compartmentalization.

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