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### **Meeting the real aviators**

Aviator in simple words means an operator of an airplane. Education of the operation is fairly available in the United States, and anyone who is interested in aviation is able to attain a license through a flight school. University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign has an Institute of Aviation which contains a noteworthy number of people majoring or interested in aviation. There is an aviation club called, AHP, consisting of about fifty-seven people, and I attended the meeting to observe and study them from a non-aviator's perspective. The meeting was held at 7:00pm, Thursday (February 9<sup>th</sup>) in room 252 of Mechanical Engineering Building. I was notified that there would be a guest speaker who works in Delta Airline and he would share his military experience with us and the real aviation meeting would be held next week.

The mechanical building was totally unfamiliar to me since it was my first time being in the building. The campus building was unique as the only hall way had the light on. When I arrived at the meeting room ten minutes early, there were only three navy pilots, each busy preparing for presentation they were about to start. The airmen all wore naval uniforms, but the uniforms looked rather like work clothes with a long zipper. Only the airman who seemed to be the guest speaker was the only man wearing a formal military uniform. Behind them, there were four students sitting quietly. The head of the club, Dan Mark Skelskey, soon

appeared in the room and immediately recognized me. We talked briefly and waited for the airmen to start the presentation. As we watched the hall fill up gradually, I noted a girl who dressed as if she planned to go to a party after the meeting. It was in a way surprising that such an unlikely combination of a party girl and aviation existed in this major. Since the room was relatively small in comparison to other rooms, the entire room filled up with only ten people.

The meeting was started with Dan's quick announcements and the airmen initiated the presentation by briefly introducing themselves. The guest speaker, Captain Haas, was a marine reserve pilot who flies commercially for Delta airlines. He graduated from University of Missouri and had never experienced a flight before entering college. He served as a pilot for 18 years in air force. Other pilots who accompanied the Captain for the presentation were Major Hill and Captain Schoonover.

The main topic of the presentation was to explain the benefits you receive from entering the military. Taking an oath to enter military after college would provide financial aid to students. Also major airlines such as United, Delta and Northwest would give top priority to people who have an aviation experience in the military on selecting their aviators. They explained that there are three steps to go through to become a pilot in the military: officer candidate school (OCS), the basic school (TBS) and the flight school. The main focus in OCS is physical training, military skills and problem solving, whereas TBS mainly focus on leadership. Getting an admission from flight schools is relatively much harder than it is to get

into OCS and TBS, because jet aircraft requires not only excellent physical and mental conditions but also pilot's ability of making quick and accurate judgments in few seconds. The students in the room paid attention seriously and tried to jot down some useful information. (A couple of them were thinking of joining the navy.)

The presentation lasted for about an hour, and to be honest, I felt a bit bored since I could not understand the technical terms they used constantly. It seemed that I was the only one not understanding the name of the aircrafts and technologies in aviation. However along with boredom, I also felt shame in my lack of effort to gain information about the presentation. I could have asked Dan or even the guest speakers about aviation before the presentation started. The lack of knowledge in the field was the first challenge I faced. If I knew more about the aviation, I of course would not have started this project. Despite my ignorance, I was depressed as I could sense a huge gap between them and me.

After the meeting, I had a quick interview with the head of club, Dan. He was really kindhearted and tried his best to answer my questions. I began the interview by first asking what AHP, the name of the club, stands for.

"It's spelled Alpha Eta Rho using the Greek alphabet. It is written AHP. In English, it's spelled AER, pronounced like air".

He explained that this club was first started in early 1990's but discontinued for few years since all of executive members of the club were deployed to Iraq. AHP was restarted two years ago as it regained its new members. On the subject of his leadership over AHP, he

replied that he volunteered himself to be the leader and that he was elected as the new head of the club. He also said that there are about fifty-seven people in AHP, which was open to all although everyone in the club happened to major in aviation. My last question for Dan was what it means to be an aviator.

“That means you are a pilot and know how to operate complicated machines no matter what kind you operate.”

Expecting Dan to say something abstract and uncommon, I was a little bit disappointed. I thought people willing to dedicate their lives to aviation would think differently. I wanted to ask him for more esoteric answer, but I stopped the interview there ( I knew he was extremely busy at that moment).

Becoming acquainted with new people has always been exciting and thrilling to me, but the meeting was not as interesting as I expected. Probably, that is mainly due to my lack of knowledge in aviation; I did not feel involved at all throughout the meeting. Nevertheless, I feel totally confident that I will get over all the challenges I face, for everyone in the club are all supportive and willing to help me with everything.