

Naval Lt. Cmdr. Facing Disciplinary Action for Displaying Too Much Initiative

Written by Nick Sanders

Thursday, 06 December 2012 00:00



Speaking for the SoCal residents who drive the dreaded 405 freeway nearly every single day, we have some sympathy for Lt. Cmdr. Christopher Tappen, age 35. We think we can speak for many Angelenos when we note that there have been many days when, stuck in traffic, we too wished for an airplane to soar over the crowded mass of autos, pickups, and big rigs in order to get to where we needed to be. So we can empathize with Tappen's desire to take a plane and fly over the country—from Norfolk, where he was stationed with Naval Special Warfare Group 2 at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek—to visit his wife, who was waiting for him on the West Coast.

We also have some small amount of admiration for the man because, not only did he desire to have a plane—he actually took the next step and started to build one for himself. He didn't have the funds to purchase a plane, so he took some do-it-yourself American "can-do" initiative and applied some elbow grease, and *he just did it*. That's the American way, right? That's what we expect of our practitioners of asymmetrical warfare, right? So at least in that respect, Lt. Cmdr. Tappen lived up to our highest expectations, and we acknowledge it.

Except for one teeny, tiny, little thing.

Lt. Cmdr. Tappen didn't pay for his airplane parts. He had the Navy pay for them.

Oops!

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According to [this story](#) at HamptonRoads.com, Tappen—

... admitted in federal court ... that he built a plane, on the government's dime, out of parts he ordered through his job. He pleaded guilty to filing a false claim and faces up to five years in prison when he is sentenced April 1.

The story reports that Tappen graduated from his NROTC program at Georgia Tech with a degree in aeronautical engineering, and then received aviator training, and eventually was assigned to Strike Fighter Squadron 15, where he served as a pilot from roughly 2000 to 2007. At which point, Tappen “switched to a career in oceanography.”

We'll let that last sentence speak for itself.

In any case, Tappen wound up at Little Creek, where he “was responsible for purchasing materials and equipment.” Let's note that his actual job appeared to be a far cry from his apparent vocational desire. He went from Naval Aviator to Naval Oceanographer to ... purchasing clerk. *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot?*

In any case, the key aspect of his job as a purchasing clerk was this: “*Authorities said he had little oversight.*”

Yeah, you know right where this is going, dontcha?

We'll let the HamptonRoads writers finish this little tale. According to the story—

He began ordering parts for a you-build-it Velocity airplane. Tappen also persuaded the Defense Department to send him to Florida to learn how to fly a drone. Rountree said Tappen really went to Florida to learn how to fly his Velocity.

‘Many of the items that Tappen ordered served no apparent military function,’ Rountree said.

In March 2011, Tappen transferred to the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. He

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took his plane with him and rented a hangar to store it.

Back at Little Creek, Tappen's old colleagues began noticing that the parts, supplies and tools they knew Tappen had ordered could not be located. They called in agents with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service.

When agents questioned Tappen in California [he] finally admitted that he used his purchasing authority to buy aircraft parts that he kept himself, Rountree said. But he said he kept the parts only because they did not work in the drone flight simulator that had been legitimately purchased for the special warfare unit. The agents were still dubious.

'Tappen stated that when placing the orders, he knew in the back of his mind that the parts would be useful for his Velocity aircraft and admitted that he did not try very hard to make them work in the simulator,' Rountree said.

Tappen ultimately gave the agents permission to search his house and the hangar, where they found the partially completed Velocity plane and the tools he ordered through the Navy. They also discovered at Tappen's house numerous computers, cameras and other electronics that he had purchased through the Navy while at Little Creek.

The value of the naval parts with which Tappen absconded was about \$74,000. For his part, Tappen's lawyer stated for the record that his client "had no meritorious defense for the charges."

Well.

We know Lt. Cmdr. Tappen had a degree. We know he could fly aircraft. But he doesn't seem like the sharpest tool in the shed, does he?