

Airman should become 'wingmen'

The Air Force experienced a staggering number of suicides during the past year. **According to Air Force officials, the service experienced 57 self-inflicted deaths.** According to a recent USA Today article, the number is 43, 10 of those in September alone.

USA Today reported that the deaths "have pushed the Air Force suicide rate to 15.4 per 100,000, the highest figure in nine years." The article did go on to say that the Air Force average is still "well

below the civilian average of about 21 per 100,000 for comparable age groups."

Also according to the USA Today figures, the Army's suicide rate is 8.7 per 100,000, while the Navy's suicide rate is only slightly higher at 11.4 per 100,000. Although both services have far more troops involved in highly stressful contingencies operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, their suicide rates are still lower than that of the Air Force.

No matter which figures are accurate,

the number of Air Force suicides is significant enough that the Air Force is reevaluating its suicide awareness programs.

In fact, the Air Force appears to be borrowing an 1980's term made popular by the Navy recruiting flick, Top Gun.

In his latest Sight Picture, Air Force chief of staff Gen. John Jumper is asking Airmen to be better "wingmen."

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1 Lt. Pete 'Maverick' Mitchell (aka Tom Cruise, Top Gun)

-- Let's get one thing clear; "Tom Cruise" did not make No. 1 on our list; "Maverick" scored the top spot. While we admit Cruise has turned into a respected actor, that wasn't the case when Top Gun was filmed in '85. Back then, his girlish good looks scored him the leading role. Maverick, however, is undeniably the most popular wingman ever.



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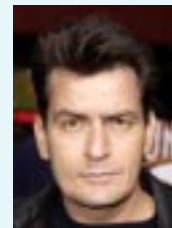
Chewwy stole the show.

5 Col. Charles 'Chappy' Sinclair (aka Louis Gossett Jr., Iron Eagle)

-- Chappy is No. 6 for two reasons. First, he played a very cool character in an extremely bad movie. And second, he played a very cool character in an extremely bad movie. Louis Gossett Jr. was the only (with emphasis on "only") believable character in the unbelievable movie, Iron Eagle.



plants. Topper must overcome self-doubt, sabotage and a love triangle between his top gun nemesis Lt. Kent Gregory (played by Cary Elwes) and the very hot Valeria Golino (played by actress Ramada Thompson).



9 Doug Masters (aka Jason Gedrick, Iron Eagle)

-- Dougie made the list for one reason and one reason only; his rise to fighter pilot fame is funnier than hell. Who could forget this wet-behind-the-ears dependent of an Air Force colonel who transformed overnight ... literally ... into America's top fight pilot. When his fighter-pilot-father is shot down over a radical Middle Eastern state, only Doug -- with the help of the crusty Chappy Sinclair (No. 6) -- can rescue him.



10 Air Force commanders, supervisors, co-workers and friends (aka the Airmen who surround us)

-- Yeah, they made our list, too; not because the Air Force's top general said so, but because these folks are the people we count on each and every day for four or more years. They help us move into and out of our homes; they help us fit in when we're new to the base; they go to the bar with us even when they don't really feel up to it; they invite us to their dorm parties; they introduce us to their attractive co-workers; they fulfill the duties of Wingman No. 6 (above); and they give us shit when we do something stupid (just to make sure we don't do it again).

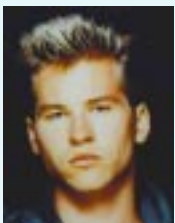
2 Lt. Nick 'Goose' Bradshaw (aka Anthony Edwards)

-- Goose was everybody's best friend. "Why couldn't Goose be the star of the movie," we cried. "Why couldn't Maverick have hit HIS head on the canopy?" His nickname was so uncool that it was cool; his wife (played by Meg Ryan) was a hottie; and his snappy one-liners almost stole the show. Whether he's Gilbert Lowell in "Revenge of the Nerds" or Doctor Greene on E.R., Anthony Edwards will forever be one of world's most likeable wingmen.



3 Lt. Tom 'Iceman' Kazanski (aka Val Kilmer)

-- Here's the wingman we love to hate. In the 1980's hit flick, Top Gun -- with the exception of the malfunctioning cockpit ejection system that stole Goose's life -- Iceman was the closest thing to a villain. What coolness the Tom Cruise character lacked, the Iceman made up for.



6 Wingman (aka the guy you bring with you to the bar)

-- You honestly didn't think we'd forget this guy from our list? We honor this wingman for distracting the ugly chick so we can hit on her hot, unsuspecting friend; and for helping us approach two girls when we're really only interested in one of them.

7 Luke Skywalker (aka Mark Hamill, Star Wars)

-- Let's face it, without "the force," Luke would be stuck on the Tatooine scooping up Bantha shit. But, because he was fortunate enough to spawn from rogue Jedi Darth Vader, he gets to cruise the galaxy with Star Wars studs Hans Solo and Chewbacca.



4 Han Solo and Chewbacca (aka Harrison Ford and his hairy sidekick, Star Wars)

-- Skywalker may have been the star player, but Hans and

8 Lt. Topper Harley (aka Charlie Sheen, Hot Shots)

-- In this Top Gun spoof, Lieutenant Harley is recalled to service to destroy Saddam Hussein's nuclear

Air Force suicides increase ...

The term "wingman" is apparently an effort to get Airmen to look out for one another.

"We lost 57 people to suicide in the past year – a dramatic, and tragic, increase from last year," said the general. "We lost another 99 Airmen to accidents. Combined, that's an order of magnitude greater than our combat losses in both Iraq and Afghanistan since Sept. 11, 2001. We're causing ourselves more harm than the enemy. We must do a better job of looking after one another – be better wingmen."

With the 2004 holiday season fast approaching, Air Force officials are urging a time of renewed emphasis on stress-related issues. General Jumper said the service will reemphasize available support services; review the signs of stress; and remind all Airmen what it means to look out for each other

... to be good wingmen.

"... this problem cannot be solved through programs and training sessions alone," added the general. "It's going to take an effort from the whole force, from our commanders and supervisors to every Airman in the force. It will take your total commitment."

In fact, General Jumper said commanders will bear the responsibility for the total welfare of the Air Force's greatest asset, its Airmen. "You are responsible for their physical, emotional, social and spiritual well-being," said the general. "You should know when your Airmen need help, and where to send them to get it."

The general also called on supervisors to "look every Airman in the eye every day.

"You are our first line of defense," added General Jumper. "Like commanders, you are responsible for the well-

being of the people you supervise. It is you who can spot the first signs of trouble, and you who are in the best position to listen and engage."

The general's instructions to Airmen were simple ... "take care of yourself and those around you. Step in when your wingman needs help."

The general added that Airmen should not dismiss any signs of suicide or stress. He also asked Airmen to avoid improper safety practices and irresponsible behavior.

"Take care of your wingmen on the ground so we can continue to confront America's enemies from air and space," said the general. "Stress is not going away; it is a reality we must accept and manage."

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