

Robert S. Poole, MD: Aviation's Champion

Editorial, by Jon L. Jordan, MD, JD

You will find elsewhere in this issue of the Bulletin the obituary for Dr. Robert S. Poole, a long-time physician employee of the Office of Aerospace Medicine and a person many of you know as a friend of aviation and a strong advocate for airmen. Considering my long-time reliance on Bob's wise counsel and strong friendship, I would be remiss in not saying a few words about his importance to the Office of Aerospace Medicine.

I first became acquainted with Bob when he was in the general practice of medicine in the Washington, D.C., area serving as an aviation medical examiner and part-time consultant to the Federal Air Surgeon. Bob was described to me as a well respected and competent physician, a highly qualified pilot, and someone you could rely upon for his common sense and wise advice. As I got to know Bob over the course of many years, I learned that all of this was true.

To say that Bob was a friend of airmen is something of an understatement. As a pilot, Bob knew the environment in which pilots function, and he could accurately assess the safety risks of allowing those who had medical problems to operate in that environment. He also could relate to the concerns and emotions that airmen have over the loss or the threatened loss of their privilege to fly. Because of this, he was able to effectively communicate with airmen when the news of their certification was not favorable.

Bob's highest priority was the safety of the aviation system. At the same time, however, in matters related to medical certification decision-making, he had a strong sense of the need to apply not only sound medical principles, but fairness to airmen as well.

In addition to experience and expertise that covered a broad range of subjects, Bob brought to the Office of Aerospace Medicine a keen sense of humor that made working with him a pleasure. He could make unwelcome tasks much easier, and it seemed that he could find humor in almost any situation. On many occasions, his ability to engender humor even extended to airmen to whom he had to deliver "bad" news.

Almost everyone who knew Bob has a story related to his ability to turn a difficult and contentious situation into a positive experience. In this respect, I am reminded of a situation involving an airman who had a history of a significant medical condition that the airman refused to accept. The airman had been hospitalized with a diagnosis of a myocardial infarction, but he wished to be medically certified without providing the information necessary for making a favorable decision.

The airman was abusive and demanding in dealing with our certification folks in Oklahoma City. As a matter of due course, the case was referred to the Washington office for possible resolution. Bob was asked to review the case and his review confirmed the need for the

medical information. This led the airman to become abusive with Bob and the rest of our Washington staff.

After spending countless hours trying to reason with the airman, I received a call from a high-ranking agency official who was known to be skeptical of our fairness in the treatment of airmen. This official had been contacted by the airman and was convinced that there was no cardiac condition and that the airman should be certified without further delay. Along with Bob, I was summoned to the official's office to explain our actions. Knowing Bob and the official's reputed limited sense of humor, I cautioned Bob to stick to the facts and avoid making light of the situation.

After my introduction of the case, Bob proceeded to brief the stern-faced official on the details, but he was interrupted in midstream. The official looked at Bob and questioned gruffly, "Doctor, do you mean to tell me that this man is suffering from heart disease?" Bob paused, looked innocently at the official, and exclaimed, "Oh no sir, this man has heart disease — we're suffering from it!" With a great deal of apprehension, I looked for the reaction from the official. Fortunately, a slight smile appeared on his lips. He thanked us for the information and sent us on our way.

Together with the loss of his wide range of knowledge, experience, and sense of fairness, incidents like this make me miss Bob greatly. It's not likely that we'll find another person who can come close to taking his place.

Safe journey, Bob, you served the Office of Aerospace Medicine and the American people quite well.