



# A Look at the PLA's Youth Aviation Programs

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**OE Watch Commentary:** As the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the People's Liberation Army Naval Aviation (PLAN Aviation) prepare for more challenging missions and continue to integrate more advanced aviation platforms into their inventory, their need for talented and experienced pilots and aviators is increasing. To help meet this need, the PLAAF and PLAN Aviation have developed a number of youth aviation schools to provide flight training to select high school students. The aim of this program is to help supply the Air Force Aviation University, the Naval Aviation University and other military colleges and civilian aviation universities with talented students who have been both carefully vetted for suitability and interest in aviation, and provided with basic aviation instruction.

The PLAAF is seeking to become a "strategic air force", but aviator quality and capability continues to be a major limiting factor for the PLA. Faced with these challenges, the PLAAF and PLAN view youth aviation schools as a means to help improve the quality and quantity of their pilots and aviators, starting at a very young age. In 2011 the PLAAF initiated an experimental youth aviation program at two high schools in Wuhan and Changchun. In 2014, this program produced 96 graduates, 40% of whom were accepted into university aviation programs, including the joint programs between the Air Force Aviation University and Beijing University, Tsinghua University and the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics. The PLAAF expanded and institutionalized the youth aviation program in 2015, when the former General Political Department of the PLA, along with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Security, issued the "Implementation Measures for the Construction of Air Force Youth Aviation Schools" and established 16 air force youth aviation schools at provincial-level, demonstration high schools in 11 provinces. In 2015 the PLAN Aviation established its own experimental aviation programs in two high schools, expanding to nine schools in 2017.

Admission to the youth aviation programs is very selective; students are recruited from among the top junior high school graduates. Applicants must be between the ages of 14 to 16, have academic scores in the top 15% of their class, be in excellent health, meet height and weight requirements, and have excellent eyesight. Candidates go through a detailed and comprehensive physical and psychological examination; the medical portion alone includes 240 separate examination items. In addition to physical and academic requirements, applicants must also have proper political qualifications. The PLAAF seeks to recruit about 1,000 students into its program each year, while PLAN Aviation will likely seek a similar number when it expands its program from the current nine schools, to fifteen schools.

Youth aviation schools are paired with high quality provincial-level high schools, which are funded by the provincial government, and recruit students from the entire province. Students in the youth aviation programs take normal high school courses in addition to their aviation classes and training. The actual aviation training program consists of three years of classes in national defense education, military fitness, aviation knowledge, and flight training. In their first year, students receive instruction in basic aviation topics such as aviation theory, navigation, meteorology, and aviation rescue. Students are introduced to flight simulators during their second year. At the end of the second year, students spend half a month during the summer in flight training.

In previous years, flight training was contracted out to local civilian flight schools, but in 2018 the PLAAF took over this responsibility and began to train students according to Air Force Aviation University training methods. Students receive flight instruction in the CJ-6, the PLAAF's basic trainer for all aircraft, and take five orientation flights during the summer training session. In contrast to the PLAAF, the PLAN Aviation continues to utilize civilian flight schools to train students. Students are taught basic theory and undergo simulator training. Students receive about ten total hours of flight training in a Cessna 172, during which they are accompanied by a senior instructor.

At the end of their third year, students in the youth aviation programs participate in an aviator selection process. Qualified students are admitted to the Air Force Aviation University and the Naval Aviation Academy. Students in the air force youth aviation program can also apply for the dual enrollment program, which allows students to attend Beijing University, Tsinghua University, or the Beijing Aeronautics and Astronautics University while also receiving aviation training at the Air Force Aviation University, ultimately earning a degree from both institutions. Those who fail to gain acceptance at an aviation-related university can still gain admission into other military colleges and universities. Students in the navy's program can also receive a sixty point bonus on admission to Tsinghua University or the Beijing Aeronautics and Astronautics University. Students who fail to be admitted to the Naval Aviation Academy can apply to other naval colleges.

This year marks the first graduating class of the PLAAF Youth Aviation Program. A total of 379 students have been accepted to the Air Force Aviation University, a number which is considered to be successful. Additionally, an unknown number of graduates have entered other university aviation programs or other military colleges. With improvements to the quality of education, student training and the management system, the PLAAF now feels that its youth aviation program is complete, and a new track for early aviation training has emerged. Once the PLAN Aviation expands its youth aviation program to 15 schools, it will likely achieve the same success. The youth aviation programs are now beginning to play a foundational role in the development of China's future air force and naval aviation talent. **End OE Watch Commentary (Jensen)**

**Source:** "PLA to train more fighter pilots for aircraft carriers," *China Military*, 19 September 2018. [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-09/19/content\\_9290445.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-09/19/content_9290445.htm)

*A recruitment campaign has been launched for aircraft carrier cadet pilots by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy.*

*Cadets will learn on a new and better type of training aircraft which more closely resembles the J-15, a Chinese military insider said Tuesday.*

*The Naval Aviation University has received a training aircraft more similar to China's only current carrier-based J-15 fighter jet...*

*"With the Liaoning in service, the Type 001A undergoing sea trials, the third carrier under construction and a fourth already in planning, the PLA Navy will naturally need more carrier-based fighter jets, which means huge demand for pilots," Li Daguang, a professor at the National Defense University of the PLA in Beijing, told the Global Times on Tuesday..."Fighter pilots for carriers are extremely scarce at the moment," Li said.*