

## PLA Army Cross-Trains Pilots for Combat

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Recently the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) reported that an army aviation unit has been cross-training its pilots to fly multiple types of helicopters. It is likely that the PLA Army is cross-training utility helicopter pilots to operate attack helicopters, and it is at least possible that the PLA Army has been conducting such cross-training throughout its aviation branch. However, even if this effort is service-wide, it is unlikely that more than a small number of pilots in each unit has been undergoing cross-training.



*Z-10s of the 77th Army Aviation Brigade during a training exercise in April 2024*

### Reports of Cross-Training

In April 2024 the PLA reported that in recent years the 77<sup>th</sup> Army Aviation Brigade of the Western Theater Army has been training its new pilots to operate multiple types of helicopter so that they can serve as “backup pilots.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the rate at which the brigade can fill “main battle positions” has reportedly surpassed the brigade’s sortie rate.<sup>2</sup> The PLA uses the term “main battle equipment” to refer to weapon systems that “produce a primary effect in killing and destroying in operations,” so those who can fill “main battle positions” likely refers to those who can operate attack helicopters such as the Z-10 and the Z-19.<sup>3</sup> (The Z-19 is frequently employed as a reconnaissance helicopter, but the PLA does not categorize it as such, instead categorizing it as an “armed” helicopter like the Z-10.) Therefore, the article implied that the brigade’s cross-training has produced more pilots who are qualified to operate attack helicopters than is required by the brigade’s current level of activity.<sup>4</sup>

This report was not the first about the PLA Army’s cross-training of pilots. In June 2023 the PLA similarly reported that in recent years the 79<sup>th</sup> Army Aviation Brigade of the Northern Theater Army had also been training its pilots to operate multiple types of helicopter.<sup>5</sup> The article

contained little else, but it did mention one utility helicopter pilot who flew an attack mission in a training exercise.<sup>6</sup>

Neither report specified that only utility helicopter pilots are cross-training to serve as attack helicopter pilots, but it is unlikely that attack helicopter pilots are cross-training to serve as utility helicopter pilots. Both reports only mentioned examples of the former. Moreover, the article from April 2024 was accompanied by an explainer that directly stated the lesson to be learned from the article, which was that all personnel must be ready to fight even if they occupy a noncombat billet.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is likely that the cross-training is primarily for utility helicopter pilots to learn to operate attack helicopters.

## **Conclusion**

There are two benefits to this effort. First, cross-trained pilots can continue combat operations when other pilots are too fatigued to do so. The report acknowledged this benefit, mentioning that during one training event, a backup pilot was able to continue flight operations that another pilot could no longer undertake because that pilot had reached the “theoretical extreme of flight length.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, a second benefit is that cross-trained pilots can replace casualties in wartime.

It is possible that the two brigades’ efforts are part of a service-wide effort to cross-train utility helicopter pilots. The newspaper that published the two reports, *Liberation Army News*, is the mouthpiece of the Central Military Commission, which is equivalent to the U.S. Defense Department. The newspaper is published to indoctrinate the troops and examples such as these two brigades are usually publicized to provide other units examples to emulate. Hence, one can usually reason that the examples are exceptional and do not represent the force as a whole.

However, the same reasoning may not apply to this case. The two reports were not published as part of a series or campaign, and they concern units in different theater armies conducting the same cross-training for roughly the same period of time. In addition, the PLA has long promoted what the U.S. Air Force calls “multi-capability,” skill at multiple tasks and skills in multiple occupational specialties, in order to increase those skills’ redundancy and, hence, units’ survivability.<sup>9</sup> It is at least possible, then, that these two brigades’ efforts are part of a service-wide effort to cross-train pilots, but more evidence is necessary to conclude so more definitively.

Even if the effort is widespread, though, it is unlikely that more than a handful of pilots in each unit have cross-trained. Although the fundamentals of operating a helicopter are universal, pilots of utility and attack helicopters have different skill sets due to their different roles. The pilot of an attack helicopter must learn more than just how to operate a different aircraft; he must also learn how to operate in conjunction with infantry and armor and how to properly approach various types of target, among other skills. Effectively cross-training a utility helicopter pilot to serve as an attack helicopter pilot requires as many resources (time, fuel, and ordnance) as it does to train a new attack helicopter pilot. As a result, each brigade must balance its investment of those resources to develop an auxiliary capability with the need to maintain the proficiency of the attack helicopter pilots that it already has.

Therefore, assuming that the PLA Army is cross-training its utility helicopter pilots effectively and the cross-training effort is widespread, it is unlikely that the effort is producing large numbers of backup attack helicopter pilots. It may be true that the 77<sup>th</sup> Army Aviation Brigade has more pilots who are qualified to operate attack helicopters than it currently requires, but it is probably also true that it does not have many more than it requires. Ultimately, the cross-training is unlikely to significantly enhance the survivability of army aviation units.

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<sup>1</sup> 李佳豪 [Li Jiahao], 赵云桥 [Zhao Yunqiao], and 蔡童 [Cai Tong], “让飞行员都成为优秀战斗员” [Make all pilots excellent combatants], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], April 29, 2024, accessed June 14, 2024, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-04-29&paperNumber=02&articleid=930212](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-04-29&paperNumber=02&articleid=930212).

<sup>2</sup> Li, Zhao, and Cai, “Make all pilots excellent combatants.”

<sup>3</sup> 中国人民解放军军语 [Military Terminology of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army], s.v. “主战装备” [main battle equipment] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2011), 525; 李佳豪 [Li Jiahao], 赵云桥 [Zhao Yunqiao], and 蔡童 [Cai Tong], “让飞行员都成为优秀战斗员” [Make all pilots excellent combatants], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], April 29, 2024, accessed June 14, 2024, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-04-29&paperNumber=02&articleid=930212](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-04-29&paperNumber=02&articleid=930212).

<sup>4</sup> Li, Zhao, and Cai, “Make all pilots excellent combatants.”

<sup>5</sup> 杨心柳 [Yang Xinliu], 李旭阳 [Li Xuyang], and 海洋 [Hai Yang], “一员多机’锤炼战斗本领” [‘One man in multiple types’ tempers combat skills], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], June 30, 2023, accessed August 9, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-30&paperNumber=04&articleid=909147](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-30&paperNumber=04&articleid=909147).

<sup>6</sup> Yang, Li, and Hai Yang, “‘One man in multiple types’ tempers combat skills.”

<sup>7</sup> Yang, Li, and Hai Yang, “‘One man in multiple types’ tempers combat skills.”

<sup>8</sup> Yang, Li, and Hai Yang, “‘One man in multiple types’ tempers combat skills.”

<sup>9</sup> Derek Solen, “PLA Air Force Increases Flexibility of Combat Support Units,” *China Brief* 23, no. 23 (December 15, 2023), <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-air-force-increases-flexibility-of-combat-support-units/>.