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14. ABSTRACT Improper total force management coupled with a growing dissatisfaction of increased operational commitments, decreased flight time and aircraft availability, and decreased family time influence large numbers of critical ranked pilots to assess quality of life standards and opt to exit active service. Historical analyses indicate that decreasing total force numbers and expanding commercial aviation directly shape military pilot retention. If the Marine Corps neglects to look at all the growing issues and find was to adjust the current system or incentive qualified pilots it will not be able to decrease the number of pilots leaving active service.					
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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Marine Corps Pilot Retention:

Can the Marine Corps Decrease the Number of Pilots Leaving Active Service?

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Executive Summary

Title: Marine Corps Pilot Retention: Can the Marine Corps Decrease the Number of Pilots Leaving Active Service?

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Thesis: The Marine Corps needs to be proactive at force management instead of continually reacting to current metrics and avoid quick, drastic decisions that ignore long-term, secondary and tertiary effects. As the Marine Corps reaches its total force goals set forth by the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, it will become more difficult to retain pilots unless it can recognize the changing dynamics of its aviation community, incentivize its forces, and reduce non-flying billet requirements. Without these changes, Marine Corps pilots will seek to reinvest their lives and skills elsewhere. Ill-equipping the force, reducing flight hours, and overextending operational commitments will leave the Marine Corps in search for qualified pilots as senior pilots may choose the lifestyle of commercial airlines over the Marine Corps.

Discussion: Historically, the ebb and flow of pilot retention can be recognized as a reaction to the increase and decrease of total force requirements coupled with commercial aviation's current retirement rate. The Marine Corps must look at historical facts and make policy to affect pilot retention in the future. The growing concerns for today's pilot retentions stems from the increasing demands placed on Marine Corps pilots and their aircraft, along with the dissatisfaction of low flight hours, poor aircraft availability, and increased operational requirements. By continuing to stretch the Marine Corps beyond a sustainable capacity without just compensation and consideration of return on investment, it will continue to lose its pilots. Policy adjustments need to be made, in order to stop pilot losses.

Conclusion: Pilot retention is a byproduct of the military's total force fluctuations and the expansion of the commercial airline industry. Research showed that it is not purely about the money, but job satisfaction. Marine pilots of all ranks, positions, and lengths of service are also concerned about a deteriorating Marine Corps environment, where there is a lack of flight time and diminishing resources abound. Monetary compensation can effectively slow and improve the management of the number of Marine Corps pilots who leave active service, but it will not stop it. Adjustments to force management and career progression that allow aviators to stay in their fleet aircraft longer and a five year, first aviation tour improves the Marine Corps' return on its investment. Keeping aviators current and proficient improves safety and preserves the fighting acumen, and as the Marine Corps expands its mission world-wide, it must be mindful of a tempo that over-stretches and exhausts its personnel and equipment. If the Marine Corps cannot make adjustments to its current structure, it will not be able to keep Marine pilots from leaving to pursue greater job satisfaction elsewhere.

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Introduction

Historically, it is not uncommon to hear that some Marine Corps pilots see military aviation as a stepping stone to further their future commercial aviation aspirations. In fact, Marine Corps' Manpower officials state that "the Marine Corps anticipates 7%-10% of total pilots to leave the Marine Corps each year."¹ However, the concern with using the Marine Corps to further one's career in aviation is that highly qualified individuals are leaving active service at the end of their obligated commitment. Coupled with the current increased dissatisfaction regarding low flight hours, poor aircraft availability, and increased operational requirements, more Marine Corps pilots are driven to pursue flying options elsewhere, thereby creating a larger gap amongst the company grade ranks.² Though retention challenges may not be purely relegated to pilots or aviation Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) across the Marine Corps, numerous articles published in the *Marine Corps Times*, *Gazette*, and other mediums highlight pilot retention and the potential implications of not solving decreasing Marine Corps pilot population, especially in the "critical ranks."³

Commercial aviation companies understand the military aviation environment well, and as the industry continues to grow and repair itself after September 11, 2001 (9/11), it can offer greater incentives than the Marine Corps currently does: consistent flight time, family stability, and money.⁴ That being said, not all Marine Corps pilots are in a hurry to leave active service. Unfortunately though, Marine pilots in the company grade ranks, considered the most critical population, are accumulating the majority of losses across all Marine Corps Type/Model/Series (T/M/S) aircraft.

For years, Congress authorized the use of the Aviation Continuation Pay (ACP) bonus to assist the Department of Defense (DOD) in the retention of its pilots. However, in light of the

2011 fiscal constraints caused by sequestration laws, each branch was forced to determine how the ACP was going to be used: the Marine Corps has elected not to utilize the ACP since 2011. The lack of ACP, though, is not the main reason Marine Corps pilots are leaving active service.

In the last ten years, the Marine Corps addressed growing concern of pilot retention in a variety of ways. Initially, in 2012, the Marine Corps reduced the commitment for an aviation contract from a mix of six-year and eight-year commitments to a six-year commitment for all T/M/S pilots. This adjustment aligned contract obligations with promotion zones in an attempt to “shape the force,” sifting out pilots not eligible for promotion prior to their eight-year contract.⁵ In response to the 2012 sequestration law, this aviation contract adjustment was made and the Marine Corps also began to enact force reduction programs in an attempt to save money and retain a pool of qualified pilots. Ironically, the force reduction was too successful, resulting in an imbalanced reduction: in 2015, the Marine Corps moved all contracts to an eight-year obligation regardless of T/M/S, proving that this first attempt at retaining quality had backfired.⁶ The intended result for moving all contracts to eight-years was to retain critical “rank” pilots longer, in order to even out the distribution of experience. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps will not see the results of this action for another six to eight years.

This paper acknowledges that, in character, the views and recommendations are business minded and may be counter to the Marine Corps’ culture that seeks to develop every officer into a well rounded Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) officer. However, this does not absolve the Marine Corps from being more proactive at force management, devoid of continually reacting to current metrics where quick, drastic decisions ignore historical trends and pay no mind to long-term, secondary and tertiary effects. As the Marine Corps reaches its total force goals set forth by the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, it will become more difficult to retain

pilots unless it can recognize the changing dynamics of its aviation community, incentivize its forces, and reduce non-flying billet requirements. Without these changes, Marine Corps pilots will continue to seek to reinvest their lives and skills elsewhere. Ill-equipping the force, reducing flight hours, and overextending operational commitments will leave the Marine Corps in search for qualified pilots as senior company grade pilots may choose the lifestyle of commercial airlines over the Marine Corps.

Background and Context

According to the current data, the Marine Corps does not have a pilot shortage or overall pilot retention problem. The total number of Marine Corps pilots is actually four more than the force requires.⁷ The Marine Corps requires 5,070 pilots, of which the Marine Corps has 5,074 Marines obtaining the MOS of 75XX, (denoting aviator or trainee).⁸ When presented purely as numbers, pilot retention does not appear to be an issue. There is however, a real imbalance among the pilot ranks; the shortage comes from qualified company grade pilots. January 2017, across all T/M/S aircraft, company grade pilot numbers indicate a drastic decline in overall numbers, with 4,699 pilots required and a total of 4,567 still in service; a shortfall of 132 pilots.⁹ The overall number of 75XX Marine Corps pilots is disproportionate with the number of junior to senior aviators which indicates that an increased quantity of pilot positions are being filled by higher ranking and/or very junior Marine officers, like those pilots in the training pipeline. This disproportionate spread of aviators has caused difficulty in filling junior rank billets without derailing career progression into field grade ranks; asking more of junior officers, who may not be capable, or finding a way to function with a gap in personnel, which in turn is another factor causing the growing dissatisfaction within the Marine Corps. Pilot retention problems are not

new, but the Marine Corps still has not figured out adequate course corrections that anticipate the environmental changes in time.

Established in 1912, Marine Corps aviation was a tiny fraction of the United States' airpower, possessing a very small number of pilots. As U.S. military airpower expanded during World War Two (WWII), approximately 193,000 U.S. military pilots with an average age of 23 filled the ranks.¹⁰ From 1940 to 1945, commercial aviation was forced to decrease production and utilization as the military increased pilot training and aircraft production; a majority of the United States' civilian airports were closed to civilian traffic in order to support the war.¹¹ At the conclusion of WWII, the subsequent reduction of military forces accelerated commercial aviation's momentum, absorbing large quantities of qualified military pilots to fill the pilot requirements of a booming industry.¹² The average age for pilots during WWII caused a cascading chain of events that would start the competition to retain qualified military pilots. With the first commercial aviation retirement windows occurring in the mid to late 1970s, the first wave of military pilots raced to exit service for higher pay and more flying opportunities visé extending their military careers. Willingly, they signed aviation contracts with the military to fulfill their dream of flying, knowing that they would fulfill their obligation and transition.¹³

The earliest aviation incentive came in 1974, as the U.S. military initiated another force reduction following the Vietnam War. Concurrently, commercial airline pilots from the WWII era began to hit mandatory retirement age. Realizing the vacuum that existed in the civilian world, United States Code 301b mandated that each service branch pay an Aviation Career Incentive Pay (ACIP) to retain service pilots and avoid deficits. The ACIP program established a monthly incentive allowance for aviation MOSs increasing in amount once a pilot hit prescribed "gates," based on years of experience. The ACIP incentivized pilots within their "critically flying

years” by giving the largest monthly increase during this period and decreasing once pilots were moved and placed into staff positions, which more often than not did not require proficiency in flight.¹⁴

In the late 1970’s, Congress was forced again to address the growing concern of pilots leaving the service, noting that the ACIP was not sufficient for closing the wage-gap between the military and the commercial airline industry. As a result, the first iteration of the Aviation Officer Continuation Bonus Program was created. Ranging from \$18,000 to \$38,000 per year, this new program allowed each service to stipulate which T/M/S warranted a bonus. However, this bonus did not stipulate additional service, rank or critical MOS shortages, which resulted in the Navy and the Marine Corps offering the bonus to all pilots. Service-wide, millions of dollars were paid to individuals who were no longer in aviation positions, but who qualified by MOS alone. The misuse of funds caused an outcry before the Subcommittee on Defense, Senate Committee on Appropriations Congress in May 1982; citing the very function of this bonus as for retention of pilots during the "critical career points" of a young aviator’s careers, not for all aviators.¹⁵ Consequently, the misuse led Congress to halt the program until such time that it could be revised. Unfortunately, the Aviation Officers Continuation Bonus program was not readdressed until early 1989.

In May 1989, Senators John H. Glenn, Jr. and John S. McCain III introduced the Aviation Career Improvement Act.¹⁶ The purpose of this act was to address the military’s growing service-wide pilot retention issues. Senators Glenn and McCain, both naval aviators, understood why pilot numbers would continue to decline if the government did not intervene, citing that the Marine Corps was already short 139 company grade officers and climbing as commercial airlines offered higher pay and more generous retirements.¹⁷ Enacted in late 1989, the Aviation

Continuation Pay (ACP) was approved as a means to reduce the “airline-opportunity gap” and provide compensation for military pilots. The original cap on the ACP was \$25,000 per year for up to 5 years of additional service, and selection into the program was dependent upon aircraft T/M/S. From 1989 until late 2001, the ACIP and ACP worked and incentivized enough Marine Corps pilots to remain in the service, increasing the allure of naval aviation.

From the early 1970’s until 2001, the DOD, Congress, and the Marine Corps relied upon incentivizing with monetary compensation, but recent history tells that the underlying cause for Marine pilots leaving the service has not holistically been addressed. When the Marine Corps experiences pilot retention issues, the rhetoric elevates regarding incentivizing pay: “[higher] incentive pay, reduction of non-flying billets for aviators, extension of aviation bonus programs, and an increase of post-flight-training service obligation.”¹⁸

Environmental and Perspective Shift

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 thrust the United States into another war. As a result, the Marine Corps experienced an increase in its total force size, eventually reaching 202,000 Marines. This increase in total force numbers was not difficult to achieve, as patriotic Americans flocked to join the service in any capacity. Many stated openly that “when 9/11 occurred... it just drew me in to serve, and it was my brother-in-law who was an Air Force C-130 pilot who inspired me to become an aviator. I choose the best branch; the Marine Corps.”¹⁹

Repeating history, 9/11 had a reverse affect on the commercial airline industry, as the U.S. government limited airport operations across the country, cancelled thousands of flights, and increased time in the terminal for travelers. All in all, these immediate measures cost airlines billions of dollars in a short period of time. Bankruptcy and massive layoffs followed and even when the U.S. government put together the Air Transportation Stabilization Board

(ATSB) to “bail out” troubled airlines, the 30% drop in air travel that followed in 2002 and 2003 made the commercial airline industry an unattractive occupation to pursue.²⁰ In 2005, with the continued aid from the ATSB, the commercial airline industry experienced its first substantial growth in almost five years, as passenger numbers up increased 10% over numbers in the year 2000. While not out of financial difficulty just yet, 2005 marked the beginning of the commercial airline comeback.

In 2007, President George W. Bush signed Public Law 110-135 to assist in commercial airline pilot retention by increasing the retirement age of civilian pilots from sixty to sixty-five years of age.²¹ This law, compounded with the desire to go to combat and fly, subsequently caused the Marine Corps’ pilot retention to no longer appear as a looming challenge as it had been in the past. Marine pilots planning to leave and transition to the commercial airline industry saw fewer opportunities due to commercial airline hiring freezes and the retention of “senior” pilots while wages, retirement, and advancement were being renegotiated. During this time period, the Marine Corps did not stop paying the ACP. Instead, the Marine Corps continued to utilize the ACP in its traditional sense, to decrease the perceived commercial airline wage-gap and entice pilots to obligate themselves to additional service: the long-term contract, “big bonus,” and the short-term contract, “small bonus,” obligating pilots up to 15 year of commissioned service (YCS) and 12 YCS, respectively.²²

Many of the Marine Corps pilots affected by the increased retirement age opted to take the ACP instead of transitioning their careers into the commercial airlines. ACP, offered until 2011, resulted in the Marine Corps pilot community becoming “top rank” heavy, as 2016 marked the last year all obligations signed in 2011 would end. These bonuses ensured the retention of highly qualified individuals, but also caused an imbalance in the spread of pilots across the ranks

of the Marine Corps. Many Marine pilots who chose the “big bonus” and opted to stay are now reaching twenty years of service and opting to retire rather than continue a career in the military. In 2011, Congress passed the sequestration laws reducing the Marine Corps’ total forces from 202,000 to 182,000 by Fiscal Year (FY) 2017²³ which caused the Marine Corps to prioritize military funding, effectively stopping the ACP for the proceeding years. The 2011 fluctuation in total force numbers caused the Marine Corps to react and enact programs to achieve manning goals ahead of schedule, in order to save money. This reduction of forces it would appear was not equitable or managed well across MOSs.

In early March 2011, rumors were building over sequestration implications and the decrease of military budgets and total force numbers. In light of these rumors, the Marine Corps acted preemptively, and by June 2011, released its first Marine Corps Bulletin (MCBUL) in search of volunteers to leave active service early. As the CH-46 platform was being retired, the Marine Corps made an easy choice on where to cut its first drove of pilots, promising volunteers in the CH-46 community a plan to opt out of their obligated ACP bonus and subsequently be released from their Marine Corps obligation.²⁴

Subsequently, the Marine Corps introduced a variety of other options for pilots in 2011 and 2012 to assist with total force draw down:

(1) The eight YCS waiver, which gave prior enlisted officers the opportunity to retire after serving eight YCS instead of ten YCS.

(2) The time-in-grade waiver, which allowed officer to leave the service prior to completing their obligated time in grade after being promoted.

(3) The company grade early out program, which allowed company grade officer the opportunity to leave the service a year prior to their obligated service if they agreed to give two years in the reserves.

(4) The Selective Early Retirement Board, which selected a number of personnel in the ranks of Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel to retire, essentially forcing them out.

(5) The Voluntary Early Release Program which allowed select members to separate from the service up to 180 days early than their service obligation.

(6) Temporary Early Retirement Authority which allows members to apply for early retirement at 15 Year Obligated Service (YOS).²⁵

In light of the sequestration laws and the force drawdown, these six “blanket” programs incentivized (in reverse) too many of the Marine Corps’ pilots who saw the looming future of Marine aviation, opting to seek a more stable career in the civilian sector.

The ebb and flow of Marine Corps pilot retention follows the pattern of history where the U.S. has drawn down and built up its forces. Not foreseeing the very evident pattern was a misstep, once again, in managing talent and retaining the numbers needed to be fully operational and capable at all levels of service. The 2017 pilot retention issue dates back to 2007 and was further exacerbated by the fiscal environment of 2011 and 2012. The looming budget cuts forecasted in 2011 forced the Marine Corps, like the other services, to consider force shaping measures that reduced manpower and cut incentive programs. The combination of the austere fiscal environment, the first wave of Vietnam era 65 year old commercial pilots retiring, and the ending of the ACP incentive program has incentivized Marine pilots to leave the service largely created the current critical rank pilot shortage the Marine Corps experiences today. Though the

reinstatement of ACP remains available, it is not certain that the return of the ACP to monetarily incentivize pilots will be enough to fix the growing pilot generation and retention problems.

Marine Corps and Commercial Airlines Comparison

The events of 9/11 inspired a new generation of pilots to serve the Marine Corps. Sadly, after 15 years of increased tempo and a gloomy outlook on the state of Marine aviation, individuals who joined after 9/11 no longer see the same values of staying on active duty as they did when they joined. After Vietnam, the commercial aviation industry grew once again, and coaching by senior Marine Corps pilots within their squadrons became the norm on how to “work” the system to maximize flight time and experience - “being a company grade officer pilot was the place to be if you loved to fly and wanted to transition to the airlines.”²⁶ In 1990 after the Gulf War, pilots were inspired by the thrill of combat and took the “big bonus” in order to continue active service for their country. This act of patriotism is not a new phenomenon. Marine pilots today join for these very reasons: to serve their country, “to fly,” and “to support the troops on the ground.”²⁷

In September 2016, the Marine Corps updated *Expeditionary Force 21 to Marine Corps Operating Concept – How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, illustrating the expanding role the Marine Corps will take as it looks ahead to 2025.²⁸ This document, while inspiring and forecasting the future projection and mission of the Marine Corps, illustrates the constant drive and expansion of the Marine Corps into a tempo proven unsustainable by current aviation forces. Marines understand this increased requirement and see this issue very clearly; to the point that large numbers of Marine Corps pilots are leaving active service in search of a more stable, “normal” life, that supports both them and their family. Deploying at a ratio of 1:2 (or less for some platforms) for six to nine months at a time while being offered twelve months at

home (of which training detachments, advanced schooling, non-resident professional military education obligations and collateral requirements occupy time) and the promise of repeating the process does not appeal to the individual.²⁹ The current Marine Corps aviation community is over-stretched, undertrained, and improperly compensated for the sacrifice, commitment, and service they have provided to the Marine Corps. The family is the ultimate bill payer as fathers, husbands, mothers and wives are struggling to make time for their greatest legacy.

In a 2015 survey conducted by Manpower & Reserve Affairs (M&RA) at the direction of the Deputy Commandant of Aviation (DC/AVN), 3,517 aviation officers between the ranks of O-2 and O-5 were surveyed regarding their view on the state of Marine Aviation; a resounding 61% participated.³⁰ The overwhelming response from the aviation community indicated that it was dissatisfied with the “amount of flight hours/training, availability of equipment, parts and resources, as well as manning levels and personal/family time.”³¹ In addition to this survey, multiple phone and face-to-face interviews were conducted with Marine Corps pilots who have already exited the service. A majority of the pilots interviewed cited patriotic reasons that pulled them to the Marine Corps, and that same majority listed “getting to fly” as close second. Counter to the reasons that made them join, most also stated that the operational tempo and unregulated, collateral duty assignments were almost unbearable: “the operation tempo keeps us working sixteen to eighteen hours a day at the squadrons and every minute up to our crew rest while deployed.”³² In one case, the constant over-stretching of resources made one Marine pilot leave the Marine Corps and join the Air Force’s U2 astronaut program, because the “Marine Corps lacked resources and opportunity to continue flying and progress in rank without consistently deploying.”³³ The Marine Corps espouses the value that every officer becomes a well-rounded MAGTF officer and with this in mind he continued, “The Marine Corps wants you

to be everything which does not help pilots maintain proficiency. Then, they [Marine Corps] tack on more ground job requirements and deploy you... I enjoy flying, and enjoy service, but I enjoy being with my family too, so it was not a hard choice to leave the Marine Corps when they tried to deploy me for the third time in four years.”³⁴

Moreover, another pilot left active service because he sought career progression and credibility in his aircraft. He had already completed two deployments as a pilot and a third as a Forward Air Controller (FAC) with a ground unit. After being given follow-on orders to Marine Corps Base 29 Palms for another two year ground tour that promised two more deployments out of the aircraft, he decided the Marine Corps was not the right fit for him, and subsequently opted to transition to the reserves and was later hired by Southwest Airlines.³⁵ “The lifestyle is so much better at the airlines, I keep in the reserves because I enjoy the tactical stuff, but there are days when I wonder if it is worth it at all, for my family’s sake.”³⁶ At the end of the day, a Marine Corps concerned about the needs of the Marine Corps and not its individuals will eventually wear down its pilots, likely forcing them out and inevitably harming pilot recruiting and retention.

Competition: “Get Your Cake and Eat It, Too”

“I get to fly” is a common theme stated by pilots who left the Marine Corps to fly for the commercial airlines. Moreover, there appears to be an overabundance of satisfaction with family health/fitness and lifestyle: “the Marine Corps made it [flying] a passion, but fell short everywhere else.”³⁷ The reduction of time for family is a common complaint Marine Corps wide, a large contributor for Marines to exit active service. In January 22, 2017, the *Marine Corps Times* published a story of a Marine Major who turned down the rank of O-5 and command, citing his own limitations to “be a good father and be a good Marine.”³⁸ Over fifteen

years of constant deploying and high operational tempo in training away from home have placed a very large burden on family. Often times, aviation squadrons deploy for a six month period which is preceded by workups that take six to nine months of preparation, a portion of it usually spent away from the home station. Once the deployment is over, the cycle repeats until the Marine is given permanent change of station orders to a non-deploying unit, if they are so fortunate. “In a two year period, I deployed twice, one for seven months, and the other for twelve months, and that did not include work up time, so my family did not really know me for two years except through emails.”³⁹ For many, by the end of their time on active duty, the tempo of the Marine Corps did not offer a “quality of life that was sustainable to support a long-term healthy family relationship, and if you did stay in, the Marine Corps would pull you from the cockpit anyways, and shove you into some staff position, losing the skills the Marine Corps paid for.”⁴⁰

Flying and Quality of Life: A Comparison

When comparing flight hours and quality of life alone, Delta airlines promises a minimum of sixty-five flight hours a month for all aircraft types, translating to approximately ten to twelve days a month if pilots fly six hours per day. Delta pilots are also paid hourly per flight hour, with overtime pay as required.⁴¹ The Marine Corps’ close equivalent is the KC-130J aircraft, with pilot flight time averages between thirty to forty hours per month (dependent upon squadron location and pilot qualifications); employed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and are not paid overtime. Both pilots are able to fly more if they volunteer or have higher qualifications, but airline pilots do not have to focus on collateral duties of management of personnel, maintenance, operations, or any other obligation that comes along, allowing for a more stable and predictable family life and better work-life balance.

In addition to flight time and lifestyle, one cannot overlook the monetary advantages of the commercial airlines compensation. At Delta, the most junior first officer (Marine Corps T3P co-pilot equivalent), on the smallest aircraft during the first year will make roughly \$65,000 per year.⁴² At the completion of the probationary year, the first officer pay jumps to between \$93,000 and \$127,000 per year (aircraft type dependant), with annual pay increased based on years of experience, in addition to contracted pay increases of 18% for 2016, 3% for 2017, 3% for 2018, and 4% for 2019.⁴³ By contrast, a Marine Corps First Lieutenant with three years of service, and 1 year of flight experience makes roughly \$80,000 per year, well above the probationary year by \$15,000. However, Marine Corps pay is salary with no opportunity for overtime pay, and comparatively, there are yearly increases range from 1.1% to 4.6% on average.

Once Delta pilots reaches the rank and responsibility of Captain, (which with no prior experience could take up to twelve years) the starting pay in their first year ranges from \$172,000 to \$234,000 per year with the same annual pay increases as the first officers.⁴⁴ Delta also provides a 401K retirement plan, with up to 16% contribution matching, medical and dental plans, travel perks for the whole family and a choice of duty location based on seniority.⁴⁵ By comparison, a major in the Marine Corps with over 18 years of service and 12 years of flight experience earns around \$160,000 per year. Although the Marine Corps is going to a 5% matching 401K style retirement with 40% of base pay pension after twenty years of service, it does not compare to the potential growth Delta is offering in the long term.

Commercial airlines also prefer to hire military pilots, even selecting some with less than the prerequisite flight hours due to the military training, experience, and leadership which gives these first officers the ability to start in a major airline instead of having to build hours with a regional airline that pays less.⁴⁶ Military pilots also offer great return on investment for

commercial airlines, as the training and flight hours of experience are not paid for by the companies, but the government. Couple that with the leadership and problem solving skills developed in the Marine Corps and the commercial airlines are happy to hire and retain this quality of individual. Delta's lifestyle is pilot-oriented with few collateral duties or risk of being "deployed" from family for extended periods. As commercial aviation continues its recovery from the last decade of bankruptcies, retirement fluctuations, and dismal pay, it favors already-vetted military flight experience and training, which cause many qualified Marine pilots to serve and leave. "The Marine Corps gives me nothing for the commitment and time that I put into it and what it asks of me and my family, if it is about a steady paycheck, I can get that from the airline and have a better quality of life to go with it."⁴⁷

Ultimately, Marine aviators are trained as riflemen then to fly, learn tactics and become skilled in their aircraft; however, many have become dissatisfied by obligations that take them away from being able to maintain proficiency at flying and supporting the ground combat Marines. Patriotism and the dream of being a pilot that brought many Marine pilots into the Corps appears to be more overshadowed by the rigorous deployment schedules and demanding requirements, making it easier for Marines to exit service for better money, lifestyle, and family life.

Recommendations

Adopting new policies for retention is not as simple as writing down a list of demands. Leading change requires careful analysis of past, present, and future forces to provide the context required for understanding the implications that "not acting" will have on the future force. Senators McCain and Glenn got it right in 1989, and the following recommendations of this paper follow the nature of their initial recommendations. First, Marine Corps pilots retained in

flying billets for as long as possible increase the Marine Corps' return on investment. Second, lengthening the first flying tour to 5 years affords pilots adequate time to train and progress in their T/M/S. Lastly, the Marine Corps needs to utilize an updated aviation continuation pay to close the commercial airline wage-gap. These three recommendations represent the top three incentives of those who have left the Marine Corps cited as options that could have convinced them to remain on active duty.

Keep Pilots in Pilot Billets. The career path of an aviator begins after receiving the designation of Naval Aviator at the completion of advanced flight school and runs through the end of the signed aviation contract, eight years. Regardless of platform, a pilot's winging date marks the start of the aviation contract obligation; however, some platforms take longer to get through initial T/M/S basic training than others and subsequently cost the Marine Corps time to get the best return on its investment by the end of the obligated contract.⁴⁸ In the last 5 years, the Marine Corps has extended time on active duty for some Marines with aviation contracts by pulling them from flight school wait lists and send them to Infantry Officer School (IOC). Subsequently, many of these Marines were then deployed as platoon commanders to Afghanistan, then returned to begin their flight training syllabus. Similarly, once in an aviation billet, Individual Augments (IA) decreased primary billet exposure. The IA process pulls pilots that are typically in the middle of their tour, thus keeping them from obtaining the qualifications required to train and sustain proficiency in a squadron.

Understandably, the Marine Corps needs to fill these billets; however, when an aviator is pulled from the middle of his first aviation tour, he/she loses perishable flying skills and the return on investment is diminished.⁴⁹ The Marine Corps must account for all staff positions prior to adjusting its total force numbers; a reevaluation must occur to determine actual manpower

requirements per the number of Marines in the Marine Corps, not what it was. Relieving the fear of being pulled during the height of the initial squadron training invests personal confidence toward the longevity of Marine Corps officer ranks and increases the overall return on investment.

Adopt a five year first tour policy for aviators. The FY 2016 data for cost to train indicates that when a pilot stays in the aircraft longer, the associated cost per year for flight training goes down.⁵⁰ For example, if it arbitrarily costs the Marine Corps \$80,000 to train a pilot, then that pilot flies for the proceeding eight years, the cost for training equates to \$10,000 per year. However, for every year that pilot is out of the aircraft, the cost per year nominally increases. A return is only seen when the pilot is flying. When Marine Corps pilots move duty stations every three to four years and/or happen to be removed early for to fill a Fleet Assistance Program (FAP) or IA billet (non-flying), the return on investment diminishes. Every fleet squadron T/M/S training syllabus is based on a 36-48 month training cycle. When that cycle is interrupted by an unforeseen absence and a pilot falls behind, they lose perishable flying skills. Moreover, while moving Marines every three to four years is not necessarily a poor system for generating “well rounded MAGTF officers,” for currency and proficiency of a Marine aviator, it can be dangerous.

A five-year first tour provides the Marine Corps the best return on investment, short of flying for all eight years of an obligation, and provides a more robust training cadre as pilots gain instructor qualifications during the 4th year, and train the trainer the 5th. The current PCS cycle mentioned above has a Marine pilot moving after three or four years, potentially being out of the aircraft for three years, leaving zero to two years left on his aviation contract, and the decision space to determine whether to stay on active duty or not. Should the Marine Corps adopt a five-

year, first tour model, it would guarantee each pilot would be in their T/M/S aircraft for at least five years, and provide the squadron with larger numbers of experienced instructor pilots. The five year plan also sets distinguishable career checkpoints for progression and aligns with O-4 and O-5 promotion boards.

For example, an F/A-18 pilot's initial training pipeline (primary to F/A-18 FRS completion) is the longest among all of the Marine Corps aviation platforms, averaging out around 2.3 years, 1 year longer than his peers.⁵¹ The five year initial tour would have this pilot leaving the first tour as a senior Captain, in zone for promotion prior to the next move. If this individual is selected while in a 1-2 year "B-Billet," he/she could move back to the fleet squadron for a department head tour then progress onto a larger fighting force staff or one at Headquarters, United States Marine Corps. If the individual is ultimately passed over for promotion with no chance to promote, then the Marine Corps is obligated to place them in a position that best suits transition from active duty. A five-year cycle may not reduce pilots leaving the Marine Corps, but it will retain more qualified personnel at the squadron level directly effecting unit proficiency and the current strain on obtaining highly qualified returning pilots.

Adjusted Aviation Continuation Pay. "Though money can't buy happiness, it sure helps" is a surprisingly common response from the pilots interviewed for this paper. As mentioned earlier, ACP was utilized for decades to incentivize pilots to stay in active service, but without consideration for inflation and airline wage comparisons, it is now obsolete. The current amount associated with the ACP bonus is still rated with a \$25,000 per year cap, an amount that has not increased since 1989. However, the Marine Corps has not been alone at researching and understanding pilot retention and the use of the ACP. The U.S. Air Force faces an even greater

challenge based on its sheer size, coupled with the same allure commercial aviation has on its forces. The Air Force decided to reinstate the ACP bonus in 2014 to curb pilot losses, which that point have resulted in a shortage of approximately 700 pilots.⁵² Air Force research determined that money is not the only answer, but it can help slow the losses to a manageable, predictable level. Unfortunately, pilots are no longer enamored with bonuses due to the recent availability of commercial airline positions,⁵³ with some of the largest pay increases in recent history, some up by more than 20 percent.⁵⁴

At the completion of the obligated eight-year aviation contract, a Marine pilot makes approximately \$140,000 per year, as a Marine Corps captain with qualification as an Aircraft Commander, while his counterpart flying with Delta is making between \$172,000 and \$234,000 per year. An adjusted bonus amount must account for this in order to close the wage gap with commercial airlines. Similar to that of the Air Force, and as cited by Marine pilots who have left active duty, “if there was a bonus that reflected the difference it would have made it a harder decision for me to get out, but more has to change than just the money.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

Pilot retention problems in the Marine Corps are not new, but are instead a byproduct of the fluctuations in the military’s total force structure and the expansion of the commercial airline industry. From 1974 to 2011, Congress and the military attempted to incentivize pilots to stay on active duty by monetarily compensating them with annual bonuses to close the wage-gap between the military and the commercial airline industry. However, research showed that it is not purely about the money. Marine pilots of all ranks, positions, and lengths of service are also concerned about a deteriorating Marine Corps environment, where there is a lack of flight time and diminishing resources abound.

Monetary compensation can effectively slow and improve the management of the number of Marine Corps pilots who leave active service, but it will not stop it. As commercial airlines continue to witness large numbers of Vietnam era pilot retirements, it will pull valuable pilots from the military service. Adjustments to force management and career progression that allow aviators to stay in their fleet aircraft longer and a five year, first aviation tour improves the Marine Corps' return on its investment which can entice Marine pilots to stay in active service . Keeping aviators current and proficient improves safety and preserves the fighting acumen, and as the Marine Corps expands its mission world-wide, it must be mindful of a tempo that over-stretches and exhausts its personnel and equipment.

Retaining more qualified personnel requires planning for and modernizing antiquated personnel systems that account for personal and unit proficiency in addition to the tax associated with filling garrison and operational headquarters staffs. It is common knowledge that Marines will ultimately deploy as part of a larger mission and bigger picture, but the Marine Corps should look to better understand how the weight of operational proficiency and mandatory collateral duties are being distributed across its Marines. In seemingly "times of peace," the Marine Corps will continue to push its pilots to train as though crisis is imminent; however, to an extent, this push will not retain its pilots when the allure of commercial airline jobs continues to pull the best and most experienced pilots out into the civilian sector.

The Marine Corps, like the other services, must compete not only with its adversaries, but also with those forces that better fulfill the needs and lifestyle of aspiring pilots and their families. Formulating policy and program to combat lifestyle and family aspirations as well, is the Marine Corps' best bet in cultivating a better fighting force, ready, come-what-may, for tomorrow.

Endnotes

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- ³² Phone Interview - Why did you stay when others got out?, January 20, 2017.
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