

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.
PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.

1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 04/28/2017	2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis	3. DATES COVERED (From - To) SEP 2016 - APR 2017
--	--	--

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Air Force Pilot Retention: A Holistic Solution to Talent Management	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A
	5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A

6. AUTHOR(S) Schwartz, John R., Major, USAF	5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A
	5e. TASK NUMBER N/A
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A
--	--

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
While research on pilot retention varies, most studies only focus on one aspect of this complex problem. A pilot retention crisis is here and if the problem is not fixed, it will severely degrade the world's greatest Air and Space Force. While there is rarely a perfect answer, this paper is an attempt to shine a light on the multiple grievances while offering plausible solutions that would benefit the Air Force's ability to retain manning in the future. Without addressing multiple grievances and taking a holistic approach, the problem will remain unsolved and continue to threaten the readiness of the USAF.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
Air Force pilot retention; military pilot retention; air force talent management; pilot retention

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			USMC Command and Staff College
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	UU	33	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Air Force Pilot Retention:
A Holistic Solution to Talent Management

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR:

Schwartz, John R

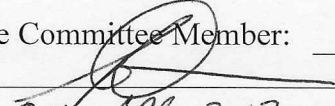
AY 16-17

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Frank Marlo

Approved: 

Date: 27 April 2017

Oral Defense Committee Member: LtCol Micheal Russ

Approved: 

Date: 27 APR 2017

Executive Summary

Title: Air Force Pilot Retention: A Holistic Solution to Talent Management

Author: Major John R. Schwartz, United States Air Force

Thesis: Addressing the root causes of pilot retention must overtake continual attempts at short-term crisis management. Lasting solutions build leadership credibility and prevent cyclical pilot mass exodus threats when the airlines are hiring. Air Force leadership needs to regain pilot's trust, show they value their expertise, and focus priorities on the Air Force mission.

Discussion: Leadership has never fully addressed or solved the problem. The Air Force has cyclically faced pilot retention issues since it was formed, but world and economic events prevented the previous retention scares from turning into a crisis. Retaining pilots is essential to the Air Force because pilots command and lead the Air Force's primary mission. Additionally, the government has invested millions of dollars into a pilot's training and the experience they provide is priceless. When threatened with retention problems, the Air Force falls behind in quantity, but most importantly it loses say on the quality of the personnel it retains. Talking to pilots that actually leave is critical in understanding this problem. They all expressed multiple grievances. These were consolidated to highlight the overarching root-cause problems:

- 1) Pilots do not trust leadership
- 2) Pilots do not feel the AF values them
- 3) The AF has misplaced priorities

Solution: The Air Force must take a holistic approach and address the multiple causes of the problem if it wants to solve retention issues now and in the future. The Air Force must own problems they have ignored for years. Focus must be placed on making the USAF an organization pilots want to continue to work for.

1) *It starts with Air Force leadership regaining trust.*

- a. The leadership at all levels must be more transparent, honest, not afraid of taking risks, and support their airmen.
- b. The Air Force needs to be more proactive when addressing known problems in the future. The current reactive nature at addressing issues causes further lack of trust in leadership.

2) *The Air Force must prove it values its people and their expertise.*

- a. Unnecessary deployments need to be minimized.
- b. Incentive pay needs updated while more options are needed for associated commitments.
- c. A pilot track needs to be created.

3) *Finally, the Air Force needs to prioritize the mission.*

- a. Excessive additional duties need to be reduced.
- b. Support for airmen needs to be increased.
- c. The promotion system needs to focus on the mission and leadership, not collateral duties.

Using John Kotter's model for change, the Air Force can address these problems and implement lasting change for the organization. Solutions to the current problem benefit more than just pilots and would make the Air Force a more effective and more productive organization overall. Solving the pilot retention problem is critically important to the readiness of the United States Air Force.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

QUOTATION FROM, ABSTRACTION FROM, OR REPRODUCTION OF ALL OR ANY PART OF THIS DOCUMENT IS PERMITTED PROVIDED PROPER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT IS MADE.

Table of Contents

	Page
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	ii
DISCLAIMER	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
PREFACE.....	v
INTRODUCTION	1
PILOT RETENTION PAST AND PRESENT	3
CURRENT SITUATION	7
PROBLEM FRAMED	9
GRIEVANCES AND SOLUTIONS	12
FAILURE TO TRUST LEADERSHIP	13
VALUE YOUR PEOPLE.....	16
MISPLACED PRIORITIES	23
IMPLEMENTING LASTING CHAGE	29
CONCLUSION.....	33
ENDNOTES	34
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	37

Preface

Pilot retention has been a research topic for decades. RAND has conducted multiple studies on this subject, and numerous military members have written about it. While research on this topic varies, most studies only focus on one aspect of this complex problem. For a majority of my career I have heard various grievances from the pilot force on how the military operates and deals with its people. The pilot retention crisis is here and if the Air Force, military, and United States government does not fix this problem, it will severely degrade the world's greatest Air and Space Force. The Air Force must listen and attempt to understand the pilots that actually decided to leave active duty if it wants to fix the underlying problems. While there is rarely a perfect answer, this paper is an attempt to shine a light on the multiple grievances while offering plausible solutions that would benefit the Air Force's ability to retain manning in the future. Without addressing multiple grievances, the problem will remain unsolved and continue to threaten the readiness of the United States Air Force. Additionally, leaving this problem unsolved will lead to greater problems in the future. Highly trained technical experts in various career fields will face similar retention threats as the civilian world competes with the military for talent.

This paper would not have been possible without the time and information provided by the fifteen pilots who allowed me to interview them. I spoke with most of them multiple times, some for a few hours in order to gain a better insight into everything that went into their decision to leave the Air Force. So to them, "Thank you for the time you gave me, your insight, and your openness and honest feelings on this topic."

I'd also like to thank those current members in the Air Force that gave me feedback and discussed many of the ideas in this paper with me.

Finally, I'd like to thank Dr. Frank Marlo and LtCol Micheal Russ (USMC) for their guidance, reviews, inputs, and edits to this paper.

Introduction

The high demand for pilots in the commercial airline industry is creating pilot retention issues in the Air Force. Airlines worldwide are hiring at record rates and project to continue this trend for the next ten years. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force publicly acknowledged this issue in 2016, announcing that the Air Force is short approximately 700 pilots.¹ In March 2017 at the Air Force Association Air Warfare Symposium, Acting Secretary of the Air Force Lisa Disbrow stated the Air Force is now short approximately 1500 pilots. This shortage comes while the United States Air Force global operations are increasing in support of humanitarian relief and military conflicts. As operations increase, the inability to retain the Air Force's most valuable resource, its personnel, is a serious concern. This concern is amplified when those lost to the civilian sector are technically advanced professionals possessing millions of dollars of training and many years of flying experience.

Air Force pilot discussion regarding the rising "retention problems" the military would face due to the projected airline hiring has heightened in the last seven years. Each year, rumors grew addressing the extensive airline pilot shortages just over the horizon. As airline pilots and news articles confirmed these rumors, Air Force pilots, now more than ever, accepted them as facts. Pilots' frustrations continued to grow, especially regarding how the Air Force handles its people.

To make matters worse, the military was forced to downsize. As a part of downsizing, many pilots accepted additional payment from the government to voluntarily separate from active duty, but the Air Force seemed to continue to increase workload with fewer personnel. Pilots understood that a projected massive airline hiring was approaching, providing more job opportunities at a greater value.

Pilots are not the only members of the Air Force that have these grievances. While fixing these problems today helps pilot retention, in the future it may prevent similar retention issues for other career fields. Pilots will always leave the military for various reasons, but the current airline hiring spree has created a massive departure of pilots that is putting the Air Force at a serious disadvantage. Pilot's lead and command the Air Force mission to "fly, fight, and win." The readiness of the entire Air Force is threatened if this issue is not resolved.

The recent airline-hiring surge and current retention challenge did not surprise Air Force pilots, but senior leaders and the government appear tardy in response to pilot retention struggles. The Air Force needs to lead change and enact adaptive and lasting programs and policy to protect valuable personnel assets from this seemingly cyclical problem.

The current, antiquated personnel management system in the Air Force will not retain the requisite pilots for maintaining the expected level of performance and readiness. Continued reactionary attempts by the Air Force are seemingly "late to need" in stopping or slowing the departure of the pilot force. Addressing the root causes of pilot retention must overtake continual attempts at short-term crisis management. Lasting solutions build leadership credibility and prevent cyclical pilot mass exodus threats when the airlines are hiring. Air Force leadership needs to regain pilot's trust, show they value their expertise, and focus priorities on the Air Force mission.

Pilot Retention Past and Present

In its short history, the Air Force has experienced multiple pilot shortages. Each decade repeats itself when the build-up for large-scale conflicts is followed by force reduction after conflict. The military force manning requirements also fluctuate with budget changes and restrictions. When military might is necessary or popular, money is focused toward the expanding military and defense capability. After the conflict, demand declines, money is reallocated elsewhere, and the military is trimmed down.

Economically it is tough to support a large military during a perceived time of peace, while large-scale conflicts are tough to predict and costly. Balancing manning, training, operations, equipment, and money was and is a continual struggle. Managing Air Force pilots fared no differently, following this military cycle during its early existence.

From World War II through the 1970s, pilot reductions were mainly self-induced, as the military looked to downsize following wars. In turn, new conflicts created a need and deficit.² The primary method of controlling pilot numbers through history was by adjusting pilot production. During the Korean War, for example, “the solution was to rapidly increase pilot production from 2006 pilots in FY51 to 6401 in FY54. Inventory eventually caught up with requirements in FY58 as a deficit eventually became a surplus of 1711.”³ The Vietnam War saw similar adjustments of a surplus quickly turning into a deficit, therefore more production changes were made to meet the demand.⁴

Following the Vietnam War, the airlines emerged as the new recurring threat to military pilot retention. The airlines quadrupled pilot hiring in 1977, which led the Air Force to an all-time low retention rate of around 25 percent.⁵ To add to the problem, pilots were not happy with the state of the Air Force and their jobs.

The infamous 1979 ‘Dear Boss’ letter penned by Captain Ron Keys to the Tactical Air Command commander, General Wilbur Creech, capturing the frustrations and dissatisfactions of many Air Force pilots of that era... This environment of being underappreciated and overworked, coupled with the internally propagated false pretense that the force was functioning normally, gave rise to a group of cynical and exhausted pilots looking for a career outside the Air Force.⁶

The retention crisis was averted when the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 impacted the airlines, forcing them to furlough pilots and making pilot retention no longer an issue for the Air Force. As a RAND study concluded, “those higher-than-expected retention levels for that decade masked the Air Force’s underlying descent into becoming a “hollow force” for the first time in its 30-year history.”⁷

The Air Force experienced another large pilot build-up starting in the early 1980s, but another airline hiring surge threatened retention by the end of the decade.⁸ Attempting to avoid the problems that arose in the late 1970s, the Department of Defense conducted several studies to prevent pilot shortages. It found that the majority of pilots planned on making active duty military their career. Not surprisingly, the studies showed that “officers’ experiences during their careers influence their decision to stay or leave the service.”⁹ In order to combat these pilot retention issues, the government instituted an aviator bonus program in 1989.¹⁰ The retention issues unfortunately never surfaced due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and once again the military faced another drawdown following the Cold War.

During this drawdown, the Air Force intended to reduce its pilot force by nearly 30%, making it difficult to assess how the bonus affected pilot retention.¹¹ However, the bonus helped predict future pilot retention, as 90% of pilots who did not take the bonus separated from active duty within two years.¹² Further preventing pilot retention issues, the Gulf War and rising oil prices forced airlines to furlough pilots again, preventing another predicted hiring frenzy planned for the early 1990s.

The most threatening pilot shortage to date occurred at the turn of the century due to another predicted airline hiring surge. With steady numbers through the early nineties and continued attempts to lean the force, Air Force pilot production dropped to an all-time low in 1995.¹³ Poor planning from a production standpoint and another airline hiring surge in the late nineties threatened the Air Force again. From 1996 to 2002, the Air Force was predicted to go from a surplus of about 400 pilots to a deficit of over 2,000.¹⁴ This retention problem became the Chief of Staff of the Air Force's top priority. As Sweeney's RAND study reported, "In February 1997, the USAF Chief of Staff, Gen Ronald R. Fogleman, addressed the Senate Armed Services Committee over what he called the first stages of a major pilot drain being caused by a high operations tempo, the eroded value of pilot pay, and high-paying jobs outside of the military."¹⁵ The Air Force reduced manning following the Cold War, but it was involved in two major regional conflicts and had its highest global presence in its history. Degraded quality of life, family stresses, and opportunities to get a great job outside the military provided enough reasons for pilots to depart active duty. As the RAND study reported, "it was really pilots' experiences creating the pressure for pilots to leave. The opportunity to fly in the airlines was the escape valve."¹⁶

The late 1990s pilot retention crisis was reaching new heights. Commander of Air Combat Command at the time said the frustration was building from less people and equipment to do more work.¹⁷ In 1998, the new Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Ryan, stated:

The 14 major airlines' demand is more than double the fixed-wing pilots available from all the services who have completed their service obligations. Last year we doubled the bonus we pay our pilots to remain with us for five years beyond their initial pilot training commitment, and while that program paid for itself in increased retention, it did not solve our pilot shortage; our goal is for at least half our pilots to stay with us beyond the nine-year point. Currently, only a quarter are electing to remain.¹⁸

The Air Force focused on addressing the issues with operations tempo and quality of life, but it appeared to be “too little, too late” as the exodus of pilots continued to worsen in 1999 and 2000. The Air Force was on the verge of the largest pilot shortage since the Vietnam War.¹⁹

The pilot shortage crisis soon collided with a world-changing event when terrorists attacked on September 11, 2001. The Air Force immediately implemented a stop-loss, while the airlines took economic hits from the public’s new fear of flying. Airline expansion ceased, and the airlines were forced to furlough pilots.²⁰ With the country under attack, patriotism reigned supreme. Recently-separated Air Force pilots and reservists were anxious to get back on active duty to help the military prepare for the Global War on Terrorism. Most of them also needed a job as the airlines were struggling once again. September 11, 2001 staved off a crippling pilot shortage the Air Force never had a chance to solve.

The operations tempo remained high as the Global War on Terrorism continued throughout the first decade of the 21st century. In 2008, the prospects of another airline hiring surge appeared. However, it never developed as the economy crashed, devastating the airlines still rebuilding from the effects of 2001. With most major airlines claiming bankruptcy, the airlines could not expand their pilot force.²¹ Therefore, the Air Force remained safe from losing pilots to the airlines for a few more years. When budgetary reductions cascaded throughout the government in 2011, the military was required to trim back, leading to force reduction measures forecasted to be complete by FY17. Some pilots were not affected, but on multiple occasions, pilots were offered early voluntary separation packages. The military once again was getting smaller, but the workload and job requirements stayed the same. The Air Force’s global presence and role in conflicts remained as important as ever and was expanding.

The Current Situation

The “pilot retention crisis” has not ceased since the mid-1990’s. Pending any unforeseen circumstances, today commercial airlines are positioned to hire an unprecedented number of pilots. Most predictions show the airlines can easily hire more pilots over the next 10 to 20 years than the current civilian and military training pipelines produce. The major U.S. airlines alone plan to hire nearly 4,000 pilots each year through 2025, and the Air Force only produces 1,200 annually.²² In 2015, airlines actually began this most recent hiring surge, as the worldwide demand for pilots is as strong as it has ever been. This extreme demand and limited supply is raising commercial airline pilot wages and significantly threatens military pilot retention more than ever.

Historically, every airline hiring frenzy has threatened the Air Force more than the previous one. Following this trend, the current threat appears to be the worst ever. In years past, economic downturns hampered the airlines’ ability to grow, while new wars revitalized the military. In the 16th year of fighting the Global War on Terrorism, operations tempo is high, while new conflicts are more of a threat than ever. Additionally, economic issues do not seem likely to have the debilitating effect on the airline industry as they have had in the past. Contributing to the unprecedented worldwide pilot demand is predicted airline growth, rising mandatory airline pilot retirements, and an increase in the required minimum hours.

First, global passenger demand is on the rise. In 2015, the United States had a 5% increase in passenger travel.²³ Airbus and Boeing estimate a continued growth between 4 and 5 percent respectively for the next 15 – 20 years.²⁴ With increased demand, the airlines are looking to expand their aircraft fleet, which requires more pilots. The United States and Europe each predict to need nearly 95,000 new pilots over the next 20 years, while the booming Asian

airline industry needs nearly 225,000.²⁵ Boeing gave a global estimate of 617,000 pilots needed by 2035.²⁶ Airlines connect the world today like never before, with the most conservative estimates still showing strong demand for the industry to continue to grow.

The second contributing factor for increased pilot demand is that many current airline pilots are reaching their maximum retirement age. As the *New York Times* reported, “roughly 18,000 pilots in the United States will age out by 2022. This is a can Congress kicked down the road in 2007 when it raised the mandatory retirement age to 65 from 60 to delay the exit of all the military pilots who moved to airlines after the Vietnam War.”²⁷ The airlines and Congress saw the worldwide pilot shortage coming a decade ago and hoped this five year period would help the airlines recover financially and aid the aviation industry in exploring solutions to the impending problem. The military was in the midst of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq at the time, but was aware of the looming situation. Military pilot production remained constant, while the civilian sector declined because of the economic challenges America and the world faced. The retirements are beginning and will continue for the next decade.

Finally, these factors combine with new increased hours requirements for airline pilots. After an airline crash in 2009, federal legislation mandated that starting in 2013, entry-level pilots for commercial airlines needed a minimum of 1500 flying hours. This requirement was an increase from a previous requirement of 250 hours.²⁸ Training costs alone to get a commercial pilot’s license are estimated around \$150,000.²⁹ Increased training hours equate to added time for a pilot to be marketable. With the economic struggles America has faced the past ten years along with the hit the airline industry took after September 11, 2001, the cost for civilian flight school did not add up for many aspiring pilots.³⁰ Since 2001, the combined military and civilian pilot numbers in the training pipeline fails to meet the airlines requirements. Lowering the 1500-

hour minimum requirement is one suggestion to alleviate this issue, but experienced airline pilots agree that lowering the 1500-hour requirement is a bad idea and have testified to Congress regarding the issue.³¹

These three factors build a strong case that the airlines will be hiring for the next 10-20 years. Even the previous economic disruptions the airlines have endured would not have the same drastic effects on airline pilots today. The reliance on aviation is at an all-time high. Some would argue that unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are the aviation of the future, and pilots are a dying breed. This assessment may be partially true; however, experts agree, “we remain a long way off from fully automated passenger flight.”³² Additionally, UAVs still need skilled operators, adding to Air Force manning demands. Technology will continue to change, but competition will always exist between commercial and military organizations for qualified operators. Barring another unforeseen event, a global demand for pilots is here to stay.

The Problem Framed

When given two options for employment, people naturally take the offer that best suits their *individual* needs. As previous research revealed, when the airlines are hiring, fewer pilots will stay in the Air Force. Simply stated, it all comes back to the basic rule of supply and demand. The high demand for pilots gives them more control to decide on their future. Commercial airlines offer great pay and unmatched travel benefits for a job that consists of just flying and only working about 15 days per month. The military cannot compete directly with the airlines in these areas. This makes retaining pilots in the Air Force a complex problem when the airlines are hiring.

The nature of the Air Force and military involves voluntary service and sacrifice in “defending the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic.”

Every member of the military takes this oath upon entering the service and understands the sacrifices required. Pilots are no different. Becoming an Air Force pilot is extremely competitive from the beginning. Most either graduated from the United States Air Force Academy or were at the top of their class coming through ROTC and OTS commissioning sources. Pilots work extremely hard just to get a pilot slot, so the majority had plenty of job opportunities after college, generally electing, voluntarily, to serve their country.

Upon graduation from an intensive and demanding 52+ weeks of pilot training, pilots understand that they owe 10 more years of service to the Air Force. No other profession in the Air Force requires a commitment this long. This proves the importance and value of pilots to the Air Force, and also their dedication to service. In comparison, most initial service commitments are only 4-5 years. The 4-year education from the Air Force Academy is only a 5-year commitment, while a standard 4-year medical school scholarship in the Health Professions Scholarship Program for physicians incurs a 4-year commitment after completing residency.

The majority of pilots join the military to serve their country and be a part of something bigger than themselves. As life happens, individual aspirations change, so a natural attrition is expected and even required. All pilots will not and cannot be retained for 20 years, and this is a well-known fact. However, the Air Force relies on a large percentage of pilots extending their commitment past the initial ten-year pilot training commitment. The Air Force has invested heavily in its pilots, who bring years of irreplaceable experience to the core mission of the Air Force. When a majority of pilots are rushing to separate from the military every time the airlines are hiring, it is a sign that a problem exists. If the organization is not able to keep the number of pilots necessary, let alone choose which pilots they want to stay, the Air Force will not only be behind in quantity, but most importantly, in quality.

Three groups of pilots have always existed: one group who will separate immediately after their commitment; a second group who will make the military a 20+ year career; and of utmost concern, the third group, who are undecided when their commitment is expiring, but want to stay in and make the Air Force a career. The battle for the third group is the one the Air Force is currently losing. The fix is not a simple, reactive solution. To achieve lasting results, the Air Force needs to proactively address the root-causes of this problem.

To identify solutions, listening to the pilots separating from the Air Force is a fine starting point to understand the problem. Pilots strive for perfection, but know it will never be attained. They simply desire a more efficient, mission-focused organization. Though slightly different reasons, stories, and criticisms emerge, the themes throughout the pilot community are similar. Addressing underlying grievances is the only way to solve the long-term continual battle of pilot retention. Doing so requires a new approach to overcome the Air Force's "blind spot."

Pilots maintain a technical skill that is in high demand around the world. Millions of dollars are invested in their training, so investment in solving the problem with a lasting solution is a worthy cause. As technology continually changes, these struggles are sure to affect more than just the pilots and the Air Force: it will eventually turn into a military retention problem affecting high demand career fields if a viable solution is not addressed in the near future.

Grievances and Solutions

Many pilots are frustrated with the Air Force and the airlines offer them a desirable alternative. The Air Force has seemed to ignore the frustrations expressed by pilots over the last decade. With great opportunities in the civilian sector, these pilots decided leaving the Air Force was the best option. Air Force leadership must listen and attempt to understand the grievances of pilots who actually separated. The Air Force needs pilots. They lead and command the primary mission. Without addressing grievances, more pilots than the Air Force can afford to lose will continue to depart active duty. The next few sections compiles the viewpoints of 15 pilots (13 male, 2 female) interviewed, all having separated from active duty between 2012 and 2017.

The demographic included F-15, F-16, C-5, C-17, C-130, KC-10 & KC-135 pilots that all separated from the Air Force between the 7 and 13-year point of their career. All were in good standing, with nobody recently passed over for an eligible rank. Two were even school selects off their Major's board. Just over half initially planned to make the Air Force a career, while only one never thought it would be a career. The rest said they took things year by year. Two VSP'd, two palace chased, three stayed 1-2 years after their initial pilots training commitment expired (separated before next PCS), while the others left when their initial commitment expired. All of them got Air Force Reserve or National Guard jobs, although half of them are already questioning if they will stay in to get a retirement, mostly because "it is becoming more like active duty." All but three members left to pursue an airline job (one changed his mind within a year and has already been hired by an airline, while the others keep a part-time reserve job and raise their kids because their husbands went to the airlines).

The military life is not for everyone, but the disheartening fact is hearing many of these highly skilled aviators and officers talk passionately about why they lost faith in the Air Force.

As one pilot put it best, “I absolutely do not regret leaving the Air Force, but I’m sad I left because I love the Air Force. Perhaps the biggest frustration people leaving the Air Force have is they see how great we could be if we were just trusted, allowed to do our jobs and be adults.”³³ Most interviewed felt a majority of the Wing Commanders and higher leadership (referred to in this paper as senior leaders) are too disconnected from the squadrons and do not understand the issues or simply lack the ability to make the significant changes required. Since the civilian government plays a major role in running the military, some senior leaders truly are powerless to institute the required changes. Regardless of this fact, changes are needed to ensure the Air Force is appropriately manned for the future. Leadership at every level has a role.

Ultimately, “People quit their bosses, not their jobs.”³⁴ In a 2014 Forbes article, Eric Jackson discussed, “The Top 8 Reasons Your Best People Are About To Quit—And How You Can Keep Them.”³⁵ Each pilot interviewed shared multiple reasons for leaving the Air Force that lined up with the reasons Jackson discussed in his article. As one departed pilot stated, “There is no silver bullet to fix the problem; too many issues exist. The issues I and many others left for individually may not seem that big, but when they are all combined, it goes from a harmless snowflake into an avalanche.”³⁶ Another pilot called it “death by a thousand paper cuts.”³⁷ The Air Force is confronted with the largest airline hiring frenzy to date, and pilot grievances that went unaddressed in the past still remain. Pilots leaving the Air Force do not trust Air Force leadership; they do not think they are valued; and they believe the Air Force has misplaced priorities.

Failure to Trust Leadership

Grievances: Air Force leadership’s failure to listen to complaints and its inability to make lasting changes have created a pilot force that does not trust senior leadership. Great

experience and leadership exists at all levels, but every pilot interviewed lacked an overall confidence in the decisions being made and optimism for anything to ever change. One pilot stated, “I have no faith in leadership. Congress runs everything, everything is reactionary, and generals aren’t standing up for commanders.”³⁸ Squadron commanders are refusing to question the system or their boss because it may end their career. Many are not willing to take risks and be leaders. Another pilot stated, “The Air Force engrains the status quo so nobody takes risks. If you take a risk and fail you are done and will not progress. People only do what the others do to get promoted. This hampers innovation.”³⁹ A pilot flying for the airlines stated, “I believe the civilian world may be producing better leaders than the AF right now. I work for a company that not only preaches servant leadership but also practices it. Their leadership from the top down wants to take care of the workers so that the workers are happy and will ultimately do a better job.”⁴⁰ Failure to trust leadership was a constant theme from pilots interviewed. From Wing Commanders up through Congress, pilots had less trust the higher the level of leadership.

The Air Force’s failure to proactively address pilot retention led to the severity of the current problem and has created more distrust. While most pilots interviewed felt making organizational changes would support retention during upswings in airline hiring, alarmingly, every pilot interviewed agreed that stopping the current pilot exodus is a futile task. One pilot stated, “It’s too late now, the exodus has begun.”⁴¹ History has proven once people start leaving, attempts to stop the retreat prove nearly useless. Pilots do not trust leadership’s reactionary attempts and they follow peers that rave about the airline lifestyle.

Every pilot interviewed agreed that they would not trust changes now after observing no effort by the Air Force to change anything the last four or five years. One pilot state, “If we had leadership we could trust, a lot of us would stay in. Pilots have expressed frustrations for years,

and were ignored by Air Force leadership. I have a better option, so when you (Air Force) aren't willing to listen to me, I'll depart."⁴² Now the Air Force needs the pilots it ignored the past decade, as pilot retention is turning into a crisis. Pilots have control of their fate for the first-time in their military career, so it is not surprising they are choosing to leave an Air Force they do not trust.

Finally, once pilots begin leaving the Air Force, they tell their friends what life is like outside of the military and more and more follow them to the airlines. A pilot who recently left for the airlines said, "Fifty to sixty great pilots and friends I know went to the airlines and told me its that much better. It was an easy decision to leave. They all told me I needed to get out now."⁴³ Some Air Force leaders argue that an airline pilot is simply a glorified bus driver and the airlines lack the job satisfaction a pilot has in the Air Force. The argument may be true for some, but pilots trust their friends that have done both jobs now, more than leadership that only knows the Air Force life and has failed to earn their trust. One pilot stated, "Nothing is more offensive when leadership talks down to us and tells us how grateful we are to have the job we have. I volunteered for this job. (Leadership) has no clue what its like on the outside, so don't try to talk about it."⁴⁴ Even if airline pilots regret their decision to leave the Air Force in a few years, it is too late. Right now pilots separating from the Air Force are pleased with their decision and share their stories with all their friends still serving.

Solution: Regaining the trust of the pilot force is a crucial step for leadership. Pilots have seen little to no action by Air Force leadership addressing issues that has been looming for years. For over a decade, most pilots have witnessed everyone from Congress down to Wing Commanders only institute changes based on the hot problem of the year. Leadership's unpredictable tendencies lead to mistrust. This mistrust is leading pilots to the airlines.

Commanders at all levels need to support change and be leaders. Commanders must be willing to say “No” to unnecessary taskings, along with speaking honestly up and down the chain of command. Transparency from leaders garners trust from subordinates. Instead of worrying about how each decision will effect their career, Commander’s need to be honest with their superior commanders. The Air Force needs to allow Commanders the ability to speak honestly and not instantly tank a career for taking certain risks. Micromanaging is often done from the highest of levels, which limits Commanders from actually leading. This oversight trickles down to the squadrons and every decision has to be signed off. Failing to trust airmen at lower levels leads to airmen failing to trust their leaders.

Gaining trust also involves Air Force leadership taking the initiative and being proactive with solutions. Leadership has lost trust from pilots by their action since the 2009 “Dear Boss” letters resurfaced and future rumored airline expansions were on the rise. The Air Force’s failure to act then is a critical reason for the current situation. If Air Force leadership is not willing to acknowledge and proactively address measures to prevent problems forecasted five to six years out, pilots will not trust leadership actually cares. A lasting solution now positions the Air Force for success in the future. Air Force leadership needs to start regaining trust now, so when the next crisis arrives, airmen will trust leadership to adequately address the problem.

Value Your People

Grievances: In addition to not trusting Air Force leadership, pilots do not feel the Air Force values their service and expertise. One pilot said, “The Air Force doesn’t value people or their time...we are simply a statistic.”⁴⁵ In general, pilots felt undervalued based on seemingly “pointless” deployments, insignificant pay with increased control measures, and no defined career path.

Deployments are an essential part of military service, but too many pilots feel they are deploying just to deploy. One pilot said, “I have spent 10 years, a third of my life, becoming an experienced pilot in the Air Force, only to deploy to a job where I simply made power point slides for daily briefings. I could have done this from home as a second lieutenant.”⁴⁶ Many pilots feel these jobs are pointless, doing only a couple hours of actual work each day, but gone from family for six months to a year. “It may be out of the Air Force’s control, but there has to be a better way to manage deployments. Its ridiculous that we are still deploying over there all the time and many of the deployments are useless.”⁴⁷ A six-month non-flying deployment also takes pilots out of the aircraft for eight to ten months, and then requires an additional one or two-months of training when they return to become re-qualified in their aircraft. Deployments take their toll on all military members; it is even more of a morale killer when there is difficulty to see the necessity in the job being filled.

Money is another way that pilots feel devalued. Over half the pilots interviewed mentioned pay as a contributing factor for choosing the airlines. The current annual pilot bonus has not kept pace with inflation and is insignificant in comparison to what the airlines offer. Additionally, the monthly aviator pay has not increased since 1987. Factoring in inflation, the real value of the monthly pay today is less than half its original value.⁴⁸ One pilot expressed, “The Air Force will continue to lose people if they do not compensate them comparably to what they would be making on the outside. It is only one factor, but it adds up.”⁴⁹ The Air Force work-to-pay ratio fails drastically in comparison to what the airlines are currently offering.

Control is another part of life many pilots value. One pilot stated, “The Air Force needs to provide some flexibility because each person is different. Money is not the big issue, you won’t be rich or poor in the Air Force; you will be comfortable. Many people leave because they

want a say in their life.”⁵⁰ Some pilots see the bonus more as a sign of control. “After an initial 10-year commitment they only offer a five or nine-year option for the bonus. That’s a long commitment and two or three more moves.”⁵¹ The Air Force also only offers this bonus once, forcing pilots to make another long-term decision. Many pilots decline the bonus, just so they have options. This control and money work together to suggest value. Under the current Air Force pilot construct, the airlines have a large monopoly on both factors, driving pilots debating their future towards the airlines.

Finally, pilots see no value in being a pilot in the military after their initial commitment because there is no defined pilot career path. It is understood the military produces and values leaders. However, the military and the Air Force currently needs pilots, but does not give them a career path for being a pilot. Every squadron commander and above can show young pilots the path to become a general. Not every pilot wants to become a general officer and very few will. Only a few actually become squadron commanders. The majority of pilots understand they will not be commanders, while only a select few are actually on the “command path” when their pilot training commitment expires. This leaves pilots with more uncertainty than anything. One pilot stated, “Currently, staying in the Air Force for 20 years not on the ‘command track’ means more deployments, most likely a 365 (day deployment), and less flying.”⁵² (This feeling was universal among the departed pilots interviewed.) While some people do not mind a staff job at some point, the increased deployments (especially when many are non-flying) strongly deters pilots. Another pilot stated, “Based on individuals I know that were staying in for 20 years not on the command track, if I stayed (on active duty), I would most likely see 3-4 more deployments. Also, at anytime the Air Force could come out with another selective/volunteer manpower reduction and I wouldn’t make it to 20 years anyway.”⁵³

There is a fear to treat pilots differently, but ultimately, experienced pilots bring an irreplaceable skill-set that the military needs. The rest of the military is designed around an “Up or Out” construct, with up being command responsibilities. Experienced pilots are needed to fill cockpits, so the current model is inadequate at addressing the need. “You’ve never given your people a sense of where they can go in their careers” is one reason Jackson explained why people “quit their bosses.”⁵⁴ If the Air Force values the abilities of pilots who will not command and desires keeping more of them on active duty, it needs to give them a career path. Without another option, pilots are choosing the airlines as their alternative path.

Solution: Everybody views value differently, so the Air Force would benefit from making adjustments to these multiple problems. The Air Force needs to reassess its deployments. Airmen should not be deploying, just to deploy. Eliminating unnecessary deployment taskings will reinforce that value placed in one’s profession. The current conflict in the Middle East has been ongoing for over sixteen years. Even the most motivated warriors get exhausted. Leadership needs to prioritize taskings and use their dwindling personnel resource wisely. Additionally, 365-day deployments are a leading cause that leads pilots away from the Air Force. Three to six months deployments are much more manageable for families to endure. Many Air Force deployments seen as unnecessary are thought of by airmen as an attempt to simply have Air Force “boots on the ground” supporting the fight. Reducing non-mission critical deployments is needed to improve retention.

Although the pay gap between the airlines and Air Force is only a portion of the problem, the Air Force must address proper compensation for its pilot force. Looking to minimize this difference helps because monetary incentives weigh on an individual’s decision. If only making \$10,000 per year less in the Air Force, a pilot is willing to accept more grievances than if the

difference were \$50,000. A 2016 RAND study discussed the need and benefit of increasing the current pilot bonus of \$25,000 per year. It recommended the pilot bonus increase to around \$48,500 per year to compete with the airlines and minimize the pay difference.⁵⁵ Increasing monthly flight pay would be an added benefit that proves the Air Force values pilots abilities from the start, not just when it is trying to retain them for extra years.

Control is a value the military could balance better with pay. As more money is offered to pilots, they acquire even longer commitments. Pilots see this as an attempt for control versus valuing their expertise. Understandably, just as the military does not have an unlimited budget, it cannot afford to give up all control. However, if a pilot's talent is valued, the Air Force could give them a few more options. Some pilots would consider staying for at least one more tour, but do not want to commit for five or nine more years. One suggestion is giving pilots a three-year bonus option, and allow it to be renewed, at least through 20 years. Values of each bonus can be different, but this at least gives pilots a few more options and varied incentives through 20 years along with an option to just stay on for a few more years. Another option is enacting the bonus early, not unlike physicians, who get bonuses while still under their training commitments. A recommended solution is offering the bonus to pilots starting two years prior to their pilot training commitment expiring. Give them a four to five-year bonus at that point, so they commit to an extra two to three years. Many pilots that departed active duty said they would have definitely considered this option at that point in their career. Multiple bonus opportunities would help balance money and control with pilots, increasing their perceived worth.

Still one issue these options fail to address is airline seniority. Even retiring at 20 years, most pilots will continue to work to provide for their family. Most pilots in their early 40's at this point have a family and growing children. Just being hired by the airlines puts them at the

bottom of the seniority list, so they will spend a few years flying weekends and holidays and missing more family events. Having options past 20 years is beneficial to consider. Providing pilots with bonuses adjusted for inflation while giving them a few more options would show the Air Force values their unique set of abilities they are attempting to retain.

Finally, the military is structured with an “Up or Out” construct and is designed to create leaders. This is great for most military professions, but in the pilot force, the Air Force needs to retain experienced pilots to fill cockpits who will not become commanders. If a pilot career path is not defined, pilots question what the Air Force will do with them. Risking more deployments, less flying, or possible forced separation is not worth it while lucrative airline jobs loom outside the Air Force. The training the Air Force puts into a fighter pilot cost an estimated ten million dollars.⁵⁶ While it’s slightly cheaper for other pilots, the training is not cheap, especially when they normally accumulate around 3,000 hours in their first 10 years. Pilots are peak prospects for the airlines at this 10-year point. At this same point the Air Force gives pilots a path to command, with no alternative. While the Air Force does not need to define a Command path this early, it should provide a defined alternate path if it hopes to compete with the airlines for talented pilots. An alternative career path would help keep technical expertise.

A separate track has been discussed in the past and it interests many pilots who left for the airlines. RAND conducted a “New Paths to Success: Determining Career Alternatives for Field Grade Officers” study that gave a viable option for pilots specifically, keeping them in the service for up to 30 years.⁵⁷ Almost every pilot interviewed felt the Air Force needed a defined “pilot track” to keep pilots in the Air Force.

One such “pilot track” the Air Force experimented with in the late 1990s was the Phoenix Aviator 20 program. A group of pilots tested out the program and gave it good reviews as they

were hitting their 20-year mark of service. The Air Force partnered with 19 civilian airlines at the time. Pilots in the program were guaranteed job interviews, a flying assignment their final two years of service, the Air Force covered some costs of the airline transport pilot (ATP) rating, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) class 1 physical, written exam, and membership in an aviation-employment information service. A similar program may entice a few pilots to complete 20-years of service. In 1999, referencing Phoenix Aviator 20, “Personnel officials said the program will probably become permanent” due to the great reviews it was garnering.⁵⁸ September 11, 2001 occurred and nothing else was found on this test program. Updates would be needed for the current climate, but a similar agreement with airlines, covering some training costs, and guaranteeing flying assignments would have its benefits. This would at least be a starting point for a future pilot track.

Another pilot track idea is creating a warrant officer style system. A similar idea could work for the Air Force. Without restructuring the current ranks, the Air Force could cap pilots on this track at the rank of major or captain, since military promotion is normally based on leadership. Since capping rank makes for even greater pay differences, pilots on this track would have to receive a special aviator bonus to compensate for the pay difference in rank and still remain competitive with the airlines. This track would keep a pilot’s rank equivalent to their military responsibilities, but pay them appropriately for their expertise.

The Air Force cannot compete directly with the money and control airlines offer. However, if the military made a few adjustments to deployments, increased pilot bonuses while adjusting commitments, and provided an alternative career path, pilots would feel valued, increasing the chances they continue serving on active duty.

Misplaced Priorities

Grievances: The last category of grievances fall under what pilots see as misplaced priorities. As one pilot stated, “Most people join the military for similar reasons, such as giving back to the nation and wanting to feel like what you do is important. A lot of Air Force pilots are finding out that what they hoped to be a career of service is being met with tons of bureaucracy and a confused set of priorities.”⁵⁹ Pilots have consistently seen a rise in additional duties, decrease in support, and feel the promotion system fails to focus on leadership.

Manning is down, but additional duties and non-mission related taskers are continually increasing. “Do more with less” has been a continual theme for most pilots’ careers in the Air Force. One pilot stated, “We are not flying like they (our leaders say) use to, we have to get a master’s degree as soon as possible, and we have been at war for 10 years, so why are we focusing on more additional duties that are worthless.”⁶⁰ Continuing to do more with less breaks people at a certain point, especially when the “more” is unrelated to the core mission. In Jackson’s article he said,

“You’ve overloaded your best people with too many responsibilities....In cut after cut, there’s a constant job staffing question: how do we get the same amount of stuff done with fewer employees to do it? The simple answer has been to get the remaining employees to do the jobs of 2 or 3 old employees, in addition to the regular job responsibilities they used to have...bosses never revisited staffing responsibilities 3 or 4 years later.”⁶¹

This is a problem that affects the entire Air Force. Focusing on pilots specifically, they now spend more time on everything but flying. One pilot questioned, “Why are we not acknowledging “why” we have a bunch of useless additional duties in the first place. It is failed leadership that allowed this problem get to this point and the Air Force fails to admit it.”⁶² This circles back to the loss of trust many pilots have in leadership to effect change.

While additional duties have increased, support has declined. Every pilot interviewed complained about how generally terrible customer service and mission support is in the military. One stated, “You can’t get good customer service anywhere in the military. The Reserves are starting to not be worth my time because the support squadrons are terrible at helping you get anything done.”⁶³ Another pilot echoed the support frustrations by saying, “Enable operators to be technical experts and give us the tools to easily do our jobs or fix something when it’s broken. ESD, DTS, TRICARE, and joint basing are all a joke.”⁶⁴ In contrast to these complaints, every airline pilot raved about the support received in the airlines. “The services in the airlines take responsibility and ownership for the job they do and it shows in the quality of customer service they provide. It is a night and day difference between the airlines and the military.”⁶⁵ If pilots are continually provided poor support and given multiple additional duties that distract focus away from their primary mission, they will depart for the airlines where these misplaced priorities are not a problem.

Adding to the misplaced priorities argument, many pilots feel the Air Force promotion system fails to focus on leadership. As Jackson stated, “If you’re out of touch with who’s really talented on your team and who you’re promoting or hiring, it’s a matter of time before your best people tender their resignation.”⁶⁶ Promotion in the Air Force is often viewed as simply a paper-based checklist. When commenting on the Air Force promotion system, one pilot stated,

To get promoted people are simply getting their Masters first, finishing ACSC online early, etc. They aren’t leaders. They aren’t flying the mission. Instead, it’s all off of paper and all the extra non-flying stuff. Let me lead in my primary duty. To get an award and get promoted I have to run the picnic or be in charge of CFC (Combined Federal Campaign), so I don’t fly a mission for a month and another guy gets extra TDYs. I get promoted and he doesn’t. I understand it’s not always about ones and zeros, there is a balance, but don’t screw certain folks.⁶⁷

Another airman commented, “The promotion system is based upon additional duties and job

titles instead of job performance...Executive officers get the top pushes on every promotion board. They do a lot of work, but just because someone is good at being a glorified secretary doesn't mean they are necessarily the best and brightest that will be able to lead a squadron and the Air Force.”⁶⁸ The Air Force's goal is to promote leaders, but many of the metrics deemed most important fail to capture leadership.

Another large complaint from pilots is the implied pressure for obtaining an advanced academic degree prior to obtaining the rank of Major. Advanced education is important to personal development, but most degrees acquired are just to check the box. One pilot stated, “It is ridiculous the Air Force requires pilot's to get a master's degree they will never use to stay competitive. Pilot training in itself is like a master's degree, not to mention we take annual tests to maintain our pilot qualifications. This is simply a waste of time for young pilots.”⁶⁹ Just having a master's degree does not make someone a better pilot, airman, or leader, so it should not be used as a discriminator. Although regulations recently masked this on promotion boards now, many Squadron, Group and Wing Commanders use it as a discriminator for hiring new executive officers or filling other positions. A young Captain about to PCS from his first assignment said everyone still emphasizes getting a Master's degree as soon as you can. He said everyone told him “you can work on it when you're TDY flying missions.” This statement exemplifies the Air Force's misplaced priorities. Until commanders at all levels ignore this requirement completely and stress it will not be used as a discriminator, pilots will continue to focus on the wrong things and question what the Air Force actually values in them.

Adding to priority frustrations, officer performance reports are more of an art form than a true performance report. One pilot commented, “The Air Force does not give clear indications as to how you are actually doing or give real feedback. Not everyone is going to be a general.

Just tell them that. I feel like they mislead people and don't provide actual feedback.”⁷⁰

Currently every officer performance report says the officer is “excellent” or “outstanding.” The reports fail to accurately project to the officer where they stand. Many officers do not realize until their Major's board they are simply average or even below average because every year they received a report saying they were “excellent.” The Air Force needs to update its performance reports and promotion system to better identify leadership.

Solution: The mission of the United States Air Force is to fly, fight and win in air, space, and cyberspace. Pilots signed up to “fly, fight, and win.” When the Air Force focuses efforts away from its mission, pilots question the service's priorities. It is noted that the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Goldfein, has started to work on solutions in regards to additional duties. Along with the Secretary of the Air Force, he released a memorandum stating a commitment to reduce additional duties and reinstitute Commander Support Staffs (CSS) back into the Squadron so Airmen are not “pulled away from their core mission.”⁷¹ This is a good first step that will help address the complaints about excessive additional duties. Leadership at all levels needs to continue to reduce unnecessary duties as promised so all airmen and the Air Force return focus to the “core mission.”

Furthermore, these changes will help address the lack of quality support, allowing support squadrons to focus on their primary roles of support instead of useless additional duties. As Jackson stated in his Forbes article, “It's time to take a fresh look at who's doing what in your group and probably redistribute how work is getting done on the team...Your best people need to be doing higher level stuff.”⁷² The CSS will help realign duties to those trained to accomplish them, while increasing the quality and timeliness of support Air Force wide. However, some of the support problems are simply due to government bureaucracy and the “socialized support”

inherent to the system. This should not be the case in the military and comes down to manning and leadership. The Air Force needs to properly fill these jobs, and workers need to be held accountable and take pride in their supporting roles. Support is a critical part of the team, and their leadership needs to emphasize this importance and inspire them to take their job seriously and provide world-class support. Additionally, the Air Force needs to stop worrying about “metrics” and simply complete tasks at hand. Too often focus is on a metric and the big picture of support is lost. Poor support is not just a pilot problem. Everyone in the Air Force suffers when support is lacking.

When looking at a master’s degree, it should not be necessary or expected until someone is eligible for Squadron Command or Colonel. By that time, they will most likely have had the opportunity to go to school and focus on a legitimate degree for a year. Young pilots should not be focused on these degrees, but rather spending their time learning to be a better pilot and officer. Additionally, many acquire degrees from an online “for-profit” university, just to “check the box” which is a waste of time and tuition assistance. If the Air Force feels strongly about the importance of a master’s degree, one pilot suggest a better approach, “If the Chief of Staff of the Air Force said, ‘get a master’s from one of these six schools in one of these three fields because it is what the Air Force needs,’ then you’ll get my attention. He gives everyone a suggested list of books to read each year, but offers no guidance on what institutions or degrees will best further our abilities to lead and accomplish the mission.”⁷³ This would add value to the degree, directly benefiting the Air Force. Without program guidance, commanders should not use a master’s degree as a discriminator at any level. Until this focus is adjusted, officers will continue to focus on master’s degrees they will never use, instead of their primary mission. Commanders need to focus on leadership and job performance officers’ display for the Air Force.

Finally, the Air Force needs to make a few adjustments to the promotion system. Realistically there is no perfect system, but a few adjustments and increased focus would retain some great leaders that are currently choosing the airlines instead of a career in the Air Force. One simple approach squadron commanders could consider when evaluating airmen is a peer review system. One pilot suggested, “The Air Force needs to have peer reviews like they did in SOS (Squadron Officer School). That will let you know who the true leaders are and who is respected.”⁷⁴ Identifying the best officers and leaders is the role of a commander when it comes to performance reports. The current wordy, everyone is “outstanding” report should more directly assess performance. (e.g. Include a few areas that the official feedback forms include.) The Marine’s coordination of scores and wording appears to be an improved approach at performance reports. They also weight Commanders scores based on how high or low they normally rate individuals. While there is no perfect system, the Air Force system needs improvements.

Addressing the root-causes of the problem is critical to finding a lasting solution. As a 2015 RAND study stated, “The Air Force has a habit of just tossing money at retention problems. That may help retention to some degree, but that just masks some of the issues.”⁷⁵ Competing to retain technically skilled professionals will be a continual challenge for the Air Force and the military in general. The federal budget is limited and can only compete with the commercial industry to an extent. The Air Force needs to address the multiple criticisms that pilots express if it hopes to solve the pilot retention problem. Ignoring pilot grievances now will result in continually dealing with the same issue in the future. Failing to address manning problems today threatens the future success of the world’s greatest Air Force.

Implementing Lasting Change

Change is difficult for any corporation, let alone one the size of the United States Air Force, which operates within the bureaucracy of the government. However, with a focused and coordinated plan, implementing the lasting change required to solve the complex problem of pilot retention is possible. The Air Force civilian and military leadership could utilize a model, like John Kotter's, to implement lasting change.

First, Air Force leadership must “establish a sense of urgency.”⁷⁶ It is clear the Air Force is short pilots and the threat is growing. While the Chief of Staff and Secretary of the Air Force have publically acknowledged the problem, they must continue to share the message and ensure everyone is fully informed. As Kotter states, “Transformations usually go nowhere because few people are even interested in working on the change problem.”⁷⁷ Outside of the pilot community, few people understand the severity of the pending pilot shortage, which gets worse each day it goes unaddressed. If everyone understands the urgency, the Air Force will be united and aligned to fix the problem.

Second, the Air Force needs to “form a strong guiding coalition.”⁷⁸ It needs to include leadership in all career fields. Non-pilots on the coalition team are essential in leading their airmen through the process. As Kotter stated, “A strong guiding coalition is always needed—one with the right composition, level of trust, and shared objective. Building such a team is always an essential part of the early stages of any effort to restructure, reengineer, or retool a set of strategies.”⁷⁹

The third step is “developing a vision and strategy.”⁸⁰ The Air Force needs to identify its ideal end state and the solutions to fix current problems. The vision is the crucial selling point that identifies the objective everyone is working to achieve. As Kotter writes, “vision serves to

facilitate major changes by motivating action that is not necessarily in people's short-term self-interests.”⁸¹

Fourth, and severely lacking in the Air Force, is “communicating the change vision.”⁸² Once senior leaders of the Air Force devise a solid plan, they must communicate that plan to everyone. Kotter said, “The real power of a vision is unleashed only when those involved in an enterprise or activity have a common understanding of its goals and direction. The shared sense of a desirable future can help motivate and coordinate the kinds of actions that create transformations.”⁸³

The fifth step is “empowering employees to act.”⁸⁴ The Chief of Staff cannot solve all the lower-level problems. Leadership at the Wing, Group, and Squadron must have the ability and tools to make necessary changes at their level in line with the Chief's vision. This step also empowers commanders at all levels to be leaders, and work openly and honestly to fix lower level problems. Young pilots that witness Squadron commanders ability to effect change will begin to trust the system again. It is important for these lower level commanders to accept the responsibility and lead their airmen, which will involve taking some risks, to effect positive change for the Air Force.

“Generating short-term wins” is the sixth step.⁸⁵ This goes along with communicating the vision. Goals and timelines need to be set and shared. The pilot shortage will not be fixed overnight. History shows that immediate results rarely occur, especially since it will take time to regain trust that leadership has lost the last few years. Pilot retention will continue to suffer for a year or two because many pilots have already made up their mind. Many airmen and leadership up through Congress may lose faith changes are not working because immediate results are not witnessed. For this reason, many corporations often reject changes and return to the status quo.

As Kotter suggested, “target and then produce some unambiguous performance improvements in six to eighteen months.”⁸⁶ Polls may be an initial way to check morale, acceptance of change, and trust of senior leadership. As changes are made, improvements will slowly be seen. Acknowledging small accomplishments along the way keeps the team interested and motivated to continue forging ahead toward the long-term goal. It also produces results to compare with retention statistics that will lag a few years behind changes made. Leadership needs to set reasonable goals. Measuring and sharing progress along the way reaffirms the plan for change is progressing.

The seventh step is “consolidating gains and producing more change.”⁸⁷ This step is crucial for the future of the military. Complacency is partly why the Air Force continues to fight the same retention battles. When milestones are reached, the Air Force needs to continually look at preventing future problems before it is too late and they become a crisis. As history has proven, world events may solve the current pilot retention problem, but forgetting about the problem and failing to fully address it will only cause it to reoccur again in the future. Additionally, pilot retention is the problem of today, while cyberspace and other technical expertise jobs may cause retention problems in the future. Complex problems require continual attention, but not tunnel vision. It is impossible to predict every future problem, but some problems are foreseeable. Leadership needs to identify these problems and develop plans before these problems turn into a crisis. Reactionary attempts to solve problems are never ideal.

Finally, the Air Force needs to “anchor new approaches in the culture.” The Chief of Staff of the Air Force changes every four years while most other Commanders only hold a position for two. If changes are not maintained and engrained in Air Force culture, the same cyclical retention problems will threaten the Air Force again in the future. The failure of

leadership to “anchor” changes leads to airmen to lose trust in lasting change. Learning from past failures is key in preventing repetitive mistakes and weakening the Air Force.

The steps do not necessarily have to be run in order. Many can and will occur concurrently and continuously throughout the process.⁸⁸ Following Kotter’s model, leadership can systematically implement the multiple solutions needed and create lasting organizational change. This change will regain pilots’ trust in leadership, prove the Air Force values its people, and confirm the Air Force’s priorities are mission-focused. Successfully addressing the entirety of this problem will solve a pilot retention issue the Air Force has failed to figure out for decades.

Conclusion

The Air Force has struggled to address pilot retention issues for decades. Previously, unexpected world events solved the problems before they ever became a long-term crisis. The Air Force must look for lasting solutions that address the root-causes pilots leave active duty when airlines are hiring. The problem has grown overtime, and will continue to grow if it is left unaddressed. Furthermore, the technological expertise needed in the military of the future will continue to have enticing civilian competition, similar to the demand we see for pilots today. Solving the Air Force pilot retention problem now places the Air Force and military in a better position to address future retention problems that will arise in other career fields.

Leadership at all levels need to acknowledge the flaws in the system and make the adjustments necessary to make the Air Force an organization that can retain its personnel. In explaining why people quit their jobs, Jackson emphasized, “If you want to keep the most talented members of your team, it’s time you started looking in the mirror and realize the biggest reasons why people quit have to do with you.”⁸⁹ Airmen agree the Air Force hires great people, and pilots acknowledge the world-class training they are provided. Now the Air Force needs to focus on the organizational construct to retain the great people it has recruited and trained to execute the mission.

While helping solve the pilot retention crisis, the changes suggested would also make the Air Force a better and a more efficient organization as a whole, benefitting more than just pilots. The Air Force needs to inspire airmen and give them a reason to stay, not reasons “not to leave.” The changes required evolve around leadership and taking care of people. This is crucial for the 21st century Air Force. Staying ahead of these issues, instead of waiting to react, will ensure the Air Force, military, and United States of America remain at a distinct advantage.

¹ “Air Force: Service Will Be Short 1,000 Fighter Pilots,” *Stars and Stripes*, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.stripes.com/news/us/air-force-service-will-be-short-1-000-fighter-pilots-1.423366>.

² Lloyd A. Ballard, “A Critical Look At The Pilot Retention Problem In the Air Force” (Air University, 1998).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nolan Sweeney, “Predicting Active Duty Air Force Pilot Attrition Given an Anticipated Increase in Major Airline Pilot Hiring,” Product Page, (2015), http://www.rand.org/pubs/rgs_dissertations/RGSD338.html.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ballard, “A Critical Look At The Pilot Retention Problem In the Air Force.”

⁹ Sweeney, “Predicting Active Duty Air Force Pilot Attrition Given an Anticipated Increase in Major Airline Pilot Hiring.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ballard, “A Critical Look At The Pilot Retention Problem In the Air Force.”

¹² Sweeney, “Predicting Active Duty Air Force Pilot Attrition Given an Anticipated Increase in Major Airline Pilot Hiring.”

¹³ Ballard, “A Critical Look At The Pilot Retention Problem In the Air Force.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sweeney, “Predicting Active Duty Air Force Pilot Attrition Given an Anticipated Increase in Major Airline Pilot Hiring.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Will Skowronski, “Pilot Shortage Back With A Vengeance,” August 2016, <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2016/August%202016/Pilot-Shortage-Back-With-a-Vengeance.aspx>.

²³ Kate Murphy, “Plenty of Passengers, but Where Are the Pilots?,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/opinion/sunday/plenty-of-passengers-but-where-are-the-pilots.html>.

²⁴ “Reviewing and Evaluating the Pilot Shortage - Part 1 - Demand »,” *AirInsight*, July 7, 2016, <http://airinsight.com/2016/07/07/reviewing-evaluating-pilot-shortage-part-1-demand/>.

²⁵ Birgit Andersen, “Pilot Shortage Threatens To Slow U.S. Airline Growth,” *Forbes*, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/oliverwyman/2016/01/28/pilot-shortage-threatens-to-slow-u-s-airline-growth/>.

²⁶ “The Truth about the Global Pilot Shortage,” *Pilot Career News*, August 11, 2016, <http://www.pilotcareernews.com/truth-global-pilot-shortage/>.

²⁷ Murphy, “Plenty of Passengers, but Where Are the Pilots?”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

-
- ³⁰ “The Truth about the Global Pilot Shortage.”
- ³¹ Murphy, “Plenty of Passengers, but Where Are the Pilots?”
- ³² “Reviewing and Evaluating the Pilot Shortage - Part 1 - Demand ».”
- ³³ Pilot 2, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 11, 2017.
- ³⁴ Eric Jackson, “The Top 8 Reasons Your Best People Are About To Quit -- And How You Can Keep Them,” *Forbes*, May 11, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericjackson/2014/05/11/the-top-8-reasons-your-best-people-are-about-to-quit-and-how-you-can-keep-them/>.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Pilot 2, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ³⁷ Pilot 6, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 12, 2017.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Pilot 8, Why did you separate from active duty?, December 29, 2016.
- ⁴⁰ Pilot 13, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 6, 2017.
- ⁴¹ Pilot 7, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 12, 2017.
- ⁴² Pilot 2, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁴³ Pilot 5, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 3, 2017.
- ⁴⁴ Pilot 2, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁴⁵ Pilot 8, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁴⁶ Pilot 11, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 14, 2017.
- ⁴⁷ Pilot 4, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 16, 2017.
- ⁴⁸ Sweeney, “Predicting Active Duty Air Force Pilot Attrition Given an Anticipated Increase in Major Airline Pilot Hiring,” 66.
- ⁴⁹ Pilot 12, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 6, 2017.
- ⁵⁰ Pilot 8, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁵¹ Pilot 11, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁵² Pilot 4, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Jackson, “The Top 8 Reasons Your Best People Are About To Quit -- And How You Can Keep Them.”
- ⁵⁵ Michael G. Mattock et al., “Retaining U.S. Air Force Pilots When the Civilian Demand for Pilots Is Growing,” Product Page, (2016), http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1455.html.
- ⁵⁶ Skowronski, “Pilot Shortage Back With A Vengeance.”
- ⁵⁷ Pete Schirmer et al., “New Paths to Success,” Product Page, (2004), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG117.html>.
- ⁵⁸ Mike Glenn, “Air Force Reports Good Results from Phoenix Aviator 20 Test,” *Air Force Times*, April 19, 1999.
- ⁵⁹ Pilot 1, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 1, 2017.
- ⁶⁰ Pilot 2, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁶¹ Jackson, “The Top 8 Reasons Your Best People Are About To Quit -- And How You Can Keep Them.”
- ⁶² Pilot 2, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁶³ Pilot 3, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 19, 2017.
- ⁶⁴ Pilot 9, Why did you separate from active duty?, January 9, 2017.
- ⁶⁵ Pilot 6, Why did you separate from active duty?

-
- ⁶⁶ Jackson, “The Top 8 Reasons Your Best People Are About To Quit -- And How You Can Keep Them.”
- ⁶⁷ Pilot 6, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁶⁸ Pilot 4, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁶⁹ Pilot 2, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁷⁰ Pilot 7, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁷¹ Dave Goldfein and Deborah Lee James, “Memorandum For All Airmen: Reducing Additional Duties,” Memorandum, (August 18, 2016), http://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/SECAF/160816_Airmen%27s_Time_Memo.pdf?ver=2016-08-19-123457-897.
- ⁷² Jackson, “The Top 8 Reasons Your Best People Are About To Quit -- And How You Can Keep Them.”
- ⁷³ Pilot 6, Why did you separate from active duty?
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ Sweeney, “Predicting Active Duty Air Force Pilot Attrition Given an Anticipated Increase in Major Airline Pilot Hiring.”
- ⁷⁶ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 37.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 53.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 54.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 69.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 72.
- ⁸² Ibid., 87.
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., 105.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., 121.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., 123–24.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., 137.
- ⁸⁸ John P. Kotter, *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster Moving World* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014).
- ⁸⁹ Jackson, “The Top 8 Reasons Your Best People Are About To Quit -- And How You Can Keep Them.”

Bibliography

“Air Force: Service Will Be Short 1,000 Fighter Pilots.” *Stars and Stripes*. Accessed November 14, 2016. <http://www.stripes.com/news/us/air-force-service-will-be-short-1-000-fighter-pilots-1.423366>.

Andersen, Birgit. “Pilot Shortage Threatens To Slow U.S. Airline Growth.” *Forbes*. Accessed November 14, 2016. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/oliverwyman/2016/01/28/pilot-shortage-threatens-to-slow-u-s-airline-growth/>.

Ballard, Lloyd A. “A Critical Look At The Pilot Retention Problem In the Air Force.” Air University, 1998.

Glenn, Mike. “Air Force Reports Good Results from Phoenix Aviator 20 Test.” *Air Force Times*, April 19, 1999.

Goldfein, Dave, and Deborah Lee James. Memorandum. “Memorandum For All Airmen: Reducing Additional Duties.” Memorandum, August 18, 2016. http://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/SECAF/160816_Airmen%27s_Time_Memo.pdf?ver=2016-08-19-123457-897.

Jackson, Eric. “The Top 8 Reasons Your Best People Are About To Quit -- And How You Can Keep Them.” *Forbes*, May 11, 2014. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericjackson/2014/05/11/the-top-8-reasons-your-best-people-are-about-to-quit-and-how-you-can-keep-them/>.

Kotter, John P. *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster Moving World*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014.

———. *Leading Change*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012.

Mattock, Michael G., James Hosek, Beth J. Asch, and Rita Karam. “Retaining U.S. Air Force Pilots When the Civilian Demand for Pilots Is Growing.” Product Page, 2016. http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1455.html.

Murphy, Kate. “Plenty of Passengers, but Where Are the Pilots?” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/opinion/sunday/plenty-of-passengers-but-where-are-the-pilots.html>.

Pilot 1. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 1, 2017.

Pilot 2. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 11, 2017.

Pilot 3. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 19, 2017.

Pilot 4. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 16, 2017.

Pilot 5. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 3, 2017.

Pilot 6. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 12, 2017.

Pilot 7. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 12, 2017.

Pilot 8. Why did you separate from active duty?, December 29, 2016.

Pilot 9. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 9, 2017.

Pilot 11. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 14, 2017.

Pilot 12. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 6, 2017.

Pilot 13. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 6, 2017.

Pilot 14. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 30, 2017.

Pilot 15. Why did you separate from active duty?, January 30, 2017.

“Reviewing and Evaluating the Pilot Shortage - Part 1 - Demand ».” *AirInsight*, July 7, 2016.
<http://airinsight.com/2016/07/07/reviewing-evaluating-pilot-shortage-part-1-demand/>.

Schirmer, Pete, Dina G. Levy, Harry J. Thie, Joy S. Moini, Margaret C. Harrell, Kimberly Hall, Kevin Brancato, and Megan Abbott. “New Paths to Success.” Product Page, 2004.
<http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG117.html>.

Skowronski, Will. “Pilot Shortage Back With A Vengeance,” August 2016.
<http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2016/August%202016/Pilot-Shortage-Back-With-a-Vengeance.aspx>.

Sweeney, Nolan. “Predicting Active Duty Air Force Pilot Attrition Given an Anticipated Increase in Major Airline Pilot Hiring.” Product Page, 2015.
http://www.rand.org/pubs/rgs_dissertations/RGSD338.html.

“The Truth about the Global Pilot Shortage.” *Pilot Career News*, August 11, 2016.
<http://www.pilotcareernews.com/truth-global-pilot-shortage/>.

Thornton, Ryan K. “AMC Pilot Retention: A Delphi Study.” Air University, 2016.