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TITLE:

A Challenge to PCS Status Quo

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Executive Summary

Title: A Challenge to PCS Status Quo

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Thesis: Through increasing DOD continental US (CONUS) tour lengths to a four-year minimum and reforming take-it-or-leave-it extension incentives for overseas tours, the DOD will reduce its personnel budget, improve personnel retention, foster more stable and efficient units, and become more adaptable to changing service member motives.

Discussion: It is clear that costs associated with PCS will remain a focus for congressional oversight. Mechanisms to significantly reduce the cost of PCS moves should aim to reduce the number of moves required annually by increasing the lengths of tours at each duty station. In addition to cost savings, the DOD stands to benefit in other ways including increased unit stability and performance, family satisfaction, and personnel retention.

Conclusion: The most impactful measures to reduce PCS frequency should focus on increasing tour lengths. 48-month tour minimums for CONUS duty stations coupled with enforcement of those tour lengths achieves that goal directly. While for overseas tours mandating across the board tour increases may be detrimental to the DOD, properly incentivizing voluntary extensions of those tours can achieve a significant reduction in overseas PCS. Incentives should move away from the traditional take-it-or-leave-it model, toward a quality adjusted bid strategy that can account for diverse motivations and preferences while achieving cost savings akin to those in the private sector.

More can be gained than cost savings. Increasing tour lengths provides the military with more stable and efficient units by retaining familiarity among unit members, increasing expertise in both leadership positions and technical jobs. Overall unit efficiency improves proportionately with stability. Additionally, the overall stability of the services improves as family satisfaction improves. There is a direct correlation between service member proclivity to remain in the military and the satisfaction of military families. The DOD's ability to retain an increasingly technical force beyond initial enlistment is vital to the success of a modern force.

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Preface

The idea for this paper occurred as I drove from San Diego California to Quantico Virginia reflecting on a conversation I had with a previous Commanding Officer of mine. The trip marked the sixth move in 13 years for my family. My wife and I have a non-verbal autistic son and change is a challenge for him to say the least. After six months in Virginia, he still awaits necessary healthcare services including behavioral therapy which must be reestablished following each move. I have orders to move back to San Diego in four months and must admit my own bias in addressing this issue. Is moving with this frequency necessary in the military? For decades, the number of personnel moves the military executes annually has been a target for legislative oversight entities, primarily focused on reducing cost associated with Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves. This paper aims to shed light, not only on the monetary costs of PCS, but on the additional negative impacts of moving approximately one third of DOD service members annually and offers recommendation to mitigate those effects.

Thanks to Lieutenant Colonel D.R. Campbell, Dr. Jill Goldenziel, and Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Janczyk.

Congressional Oversight Target:

In 2013, the Senate Authorizations Committee (SAC) made the following statement in a call for the Department of Defense to review its Permanent Change of Station (PCS) policies. “The Committee believes that increasing tour lengths will not only result in cost savings, but it will also lead to less stress on the force and hardship on families that are forced to move frequently. In addition, longer tours will ultimately lead to better performance since service members will have more time in a specific job before departing.”¹ The 2013 statement did not mark the first instance DOD oversight entities have questioned costs associated with moving a third of its personnel annually. Government mandated studies on the issue date back decades and to date, no solution or marked change has diverted attention from the issue. Two separate studies by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 1996 and 1998 focused on the “policy detriments of permanent change of station moves”.² In a study released in September of last year to determine the factors behind rising PCS cost, the GAO stated, “DOD officials did not know when the last evaluation of the PCS program had been conducted.”³ The problem persists with no solution to solve the issues DOD oversight authorities desire.

In 2015, Sen. John McCain, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, stated, “There are several actions that our services can take to rein in the unacceptably high costs of this program, including by actually enforcing its own duty station tour lengths for troops, normalizing weight allowance policies across the services, and reducing the frequency of operational moves.”⁴ To evaluate the costs associated with frequent permanent change of station moves, the following areas are highlighted: DOD budget, personnel and unit readiness, personnel retention, and family burden. While some costs associated with PCS moves are less malleable, others can be significantly impacted through policy changes. Through increasing DOD members’ con-

tinental US (CONUS) tour lengths to a four-year minimum and reforming take-it-or-leave-it extension incentives, the DOD will reduce its personnel budget, improve personnel retention, foster more stable and efficient units, and become more adaptable to changing service member motives.

The total cost of PCS moves in fiscal year (FY) 2014 was 4.4 billion dollars.⁵ The most influential variable in PCS costs is frequency, or more accurately the total number of moves executed annually. To understand the reason for the frequency of PCS moves, it is important to distinguish the types of moves categorized as such. Four types of PCS moves are considered fixed cost and inflexible by the DOD. Accession moves are those associated with getting initial enlistment personnel from training and indoctrination points to their first duty station. Separation moves are those associated with separating or retiring service members moving from their last duty station to their desired civilian location. Training moves are associated with moving personnel to long term (greater than 20 weeks) training locations. Unit moves occur when an entire unit is relocated, i.e. base realignment. Two types of moves offer more opportunity for manipulation. Operational moves are those occurring in the same theater of operation, most commonly the continental US (CONUS.) Rotational moves refer to moves to and from overseas duty locations distinct from operational deployments. Of the total 4.4-billion-dollar cost of the PCS program, 2.8 billion dollars is associated with the more adjustable moves, including 1.5 billion for rotational moves and 1.3 billion for operational moves.⁶ In 2014, the DOD executed a total of 646,387 PCS moves.⁷

Following the 2013 SAC mandate to review the PCS policy for potential benefits of increased tour lengths, the Office of the Secretary of Defense commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct a comprehensive review. That same year, the SAC used cuts to military person-

nel appropriations as a forcing function on the DOD to reduce PCS costs. Reductions to that portion of the budget in FY 2013 and FY 2014 totaled 341.1 million dollars. “The FY 2014 reduction was categorized as being for ‘PCS efficiency.’”⁸ The tepid DOD response did not aim at the obvious (reducing the number of moves,) but instead at reducing the cost of moves. The Department of Defense Inspector General (DODIG) released a report on 21 May 2014 with recommendations including “minimizing the weight of HHG (household goods) shipments. . .weight limitations to local moves executed at the convenience of the Government. . .remove language allowing Services to pay for expired NTS (non-temporary storage) after the initial entitlement period.”⁹ The recommendations clearly focused on reducing entitlements for service members executing PCS moves vice reducing the number of moves. The RAND analysis of the DODIG recommendations seems skeptical of the effectiveness of such initiatives saying, “it seems difficult to achieve sizeable savings by reducing weight allowances and storage periods.”¹⁰

A RAND study titled, *Tour Lengths, Permanent Changes of Station, and Alternatives for Savings and Improved Stability*, focused on increasing tour lengths to reduce the number of moves executed. Though multiple variables impact the number of annual PCS moves, in general, the fundamental elements are the number of assigned personnel at a given location and the average tour lengths of those assignments. The relationship of personnel assigned at a location is proportional to move numbers, while the relationship between tour lengths and moves is inverse. To illustrate this relationship, assume that 3000 personnel are assigned to a duty station. The average tour length for those personnel is three years, meaning, each year one third of the population departs and is replaced. Therefore, total annual moves can be expressed as population multiplied by two, divided by average tour length ($3 \times 2 / 3 = 2$) resulting in 2000 moves in this exam-

ple.¹¹ Focusing primarily on overseas moves, the Rand study offers four primary methods to reduce moves required.

All four methods offered, aim at the same variable in the equation-tour lengths. The other variable, end strength (total active duty personnel,) is a function of National Security Strategy and outside the control of the DOD. The obvious and most effective method to reduce moves is to increase time on station (TOS) requirements. The last three methods-restricting personnel from cutting tours short, incentivizing tour extensions, and allowing back to back assignments at the same location, have the same goal to increase overall time between PCS moves.¹² The study characterizes the first two as potential morale reducing and career inhibiting measures. “Mandating longer TOS requirements and restricting curtailments could conceivably reduce morale and inhibit career development, therefore negatively affecting readiness and retention.”¹³ The opposite assumption is made regarding tour extensions and back to back tours because they allow for service member choice in the decision to increase tour lengths. The study thus focuses on the option to incentivize overseas tour extensions which this paper will discuss in detail. Before moving on to that analysis, an evaluation of the underlying assumption is required.

Accounting for Individual Motivations:

Each year, the DOD conducts the Status of Forces Survey to glean service member opinion on myriad subjects including health services, financial compensation, morale, and personal, unit, and family readiness. PCS moves and the impact they have on service members is a component of the annual diagnostic and is valuable to answering assumptions about attitudes toward increased time on station requirements. Since 2010, between 65,000 and 72,000¹⁴ respondents each year answer a variety of questions pertaining to PCS and attitudes toward stabilization. The survey includes all branches of service and breaks down respondents by pay grade, gender,

and ethnicity. Question 32 of the 2014 Survey illustrates the frequency service members move. “How many months has it been since your last PCS?”¹⁵ The average response was 14.9 months with the Air Force having the longest duration at 17.5 months. The Marine Corps had the shortest duration at 11.5 months.¹⁶ The Air Force number is not surprising given its 2009 policy change to increase CONUS minimum tour lengths from 36 to 48 months.¹⁷

To garner information about service member attitudes, generally respondents are asked to rank their level of agreement with a given statement or the level of importance a factor plays in their decision making. A scale rating from one to five, measures the level of impact for each factor. It must be noted that specific questions relating to attitudes toward extending overseas tours included in the 2013 survey do not appear in the 2014 survey. Of the respondents located at overseas duty stations, 41% indicated a willingness to voluntarily extend their tour.¹⁸ Though the majority said no to voluntary extension, 41% is a significant number requiring no incentive at all to extend time on station.

In the 2013 survey, the population indicating no desire to extend were asked a series of questions regarding their motives to end their tour. Respondents were asked “To what extent do the following factors contribute to your decision not to voluntarily extend an additional 12 months at your current overseas assignment?”¹⁹ Factors relating to the RAND assumption that compulsory extensions may negatively impact career development and reduce morale can be examined from the responses. Among the 20 factors examined, the two most influential could be related to morale. “Geographic location” received the highest rating at 3.1 out of 5 and “Lack of opportunity for family to visit at no cost” followed closely at 3.0. Both of those categories also had the highest percentage (28%) of personnel responding with the highest rating of 5. Two of the factors applied directly to the perceived impact on career development. “Delay of profession-

al military education (PME) of professional/technical training” received a more middle of the road rating for impact at 2.4 with 43% of respondents rating it a 1. Career advancement had a higher impact at 2.8 with 20% giving it the highest rating. In general, responses in all 20 categories could be characterized as inconclusive with no apparent factor as the dominant influence on decision making regarding tour extensions. In September 2014, the Office of the Secretary of Defense reported to Congress and remarked on the inconclusive nature of the responses “Because these preferences were highly individual, OSD concluded that it was practically impossible to identify the likely preferences of a service member without a direct inquiry.”²⁰ The implication being, a sweeping mechanism to extend tour lengths across the board is likely to negatively impact service member opinions based on multiple individual preferences and “could negatively impact morale and job performance.”²¹

The preceding analysis focused on overseas tour lengths and suggests the potential for negative impacts resulting from across the board tour extensions. However, it also suggests potential for a large segment of the force to extend tours and thereby reduce rotational move numbers. As mentioned earlier, 41% of those surveyed indicated a willingness to extend overseas tours. Further research suggests that percentage increases with financial incentives. Currently offered incentives vary from service to service, but share a common take-it-or-leave-it element. Examples include the Overseas Tour Extension Incentive Program (OTEIP) and the Assignment Incentive Program (AIP) which offer flat rate financial payouts or other incentives including additional leave, to voluntary tour extensions. Among the problems with these types of incentives is the inability to set the payment correctly. Based on the earlier analysis of individual motives, it is impossible for the DOD to correctly gauge the dollar amount required to incentivize the appropriate number of personnel needed to achieve a cost benefit balance. The result is one of two

situations. When the payment exceeds what is necessary, the result is more volunteers than needed and the incentive costs offsetting PCS savings. A low financial incentive fails to motivate a sufficient number of volunteers to achieve the desired PCS savings.²² RAND echoes this point. “Offering incentive pay to any eligible service member results in overpayment—even when the government does set the pay level appropriately. . .takers will likely include service members who would have extended their tours for less.”²³ Perhaps the most fundamental problem with take-it-or-leave-it incentivizing is inadaptability. Recall the OSD comments to Congress regarding the highly-individualized preferences influencing tour extension predisposition. Not only are the preferences myriad, presumably the same population surveyed three years later would answer differently as their individual life circumstances change. Take-it-or-leave-it incentives are a shot in the dark guess at incentivizing. They provide no feedback mechanism other than the number of volunteers taking the incentive and cannot appropriately achieve cost benefit balance.

Alternative Incentives:

The RAND analysis offers alternatives to existing incentive programs that account for the inadequacies of the current take-it-or-leave-it programs. Auction bidding in both the airline and healthcare fields is used to fill less desirable shifts. Many types of auction mechanisms exist to incentivize personnel. The benefits garnered in the civilian sector offer lessons to the DOD. “Bidding systems have been employed successfully in many settings. . .personnel typically find them easy to use. . .they tend to improve morale by giving employees more flexibility and greater say over their assignments. . .they can generate substantial savings.”²⁴ The best auction bidding mechanisms would provide a reciprocal benefit for the DOD and service members in the form of cost savings, increased tour lengths, tailored personnel for each billet, unit stability, and a degree of input on assignment for individual service members. Among these, the Uniform

Price Quality Adjusted (QUAD) design would benefit the DOD and its service members by incentivizing personnel to extend tours, tailoring the volunteers to meet the needs of the military, provide annual data on the motivations of participants, and appropriately compensate volunteers based on individual motivations.

QUAD is similar to other uniform-price auctions but allows the DOD to tailor the results based on predetermined qualifications in the volunteers. In a standard uniform price auction, the lowest bidders win and are compensated based on the lowest losing bid. In a QUAD auction a discount is applied to the bid of service members who meet a threshold for either demonstrated superior performance, critical qualification, or critical billet. Auction bidding may not provide savings in terms of incentive cost but would better use that money to attract a greater number of volunteers by allowing them to set their own price. Using QUAD auctions allows the DOD to tailor the qualifications of those volunteers. Auction bidding software used widely around the country has successfully provided cost savings for institutions using it. Studies of those institutions allow an examination of implementation and maintenance costs. According to a 2005 study for the California HealthCare Foundation, average costs for a 300-staff hospital using online bidding software ranged from \$60,000 to \$150,000 for implementation and \$3,000 to \$9,000 monthly for tech support.²⁵ Extrapolating from those numbers (cost is predominantly tied to the number of users²⁶) implementation of similar software to cover every DOD service member permanently stationed overseas would cost between 30 to 75 million for implementation and 18 to 54 million annually for tech support. While those numbers may alarm, a mere 10% increase in extensions returns an annual rotational PCS savings of 150 million.

Replacing existing take-it-or-leave-it incentive programs with a QUAD auction model is a viable solution to the limited benefits of take-it-or-leave-it incentives, is flexible to both the

needs of the services and service members, and could be implemented incrementally for overseas assignments. Civilian software in use at hospitals around the country like BidShift can be tailored to meet DOD needs and provide ease of use to service members while offering potentially large savings.

CONUS Moves:

Moves in the continental United States are more amenable to across the board tour length increases with the exception of initial accession personnel. Unlike overseas moves which may include separation from extended family, social connections, and familiar culture, moves within the US are more palatable to the force at large. Across the board tour extensions from the nominal 36-month tour to a 48-month tour would provide immediate operational move cost savings, stabilize units already operating at high tempo, and positively impact retention by stabilizing families. This cannot apply to initial enlistees because the majority of initial enlistments prescribe a four-year commitment from the enlistee. The time spent in indoctrination, initial military occupational specialty training, and travel between duty stations means 48 month tours are only feasible for enlistments greater than four years and for personnel who reenlist. In addition to extending tour lengths, curtailing short tours is key to reducing PCS moves. The Center for Naval Analysis found that only 55% of 60-month tours are ever completed while 79% of 48-month tours are completed.²⁷ These figures lead RAND to conclude that lengthening tours may be undesirable for the force because of the correlation between completed tours and shorter assigned tour lengths.²⁸

One reason for frequency of shortened or curtailed tours is the desirability of certain duty stations over others. One way to address the issue is a program the Air Force uses to a program to fill billets at less desirable duty stations called the Voluntary Stabilized Base Assignment

Program (VSBAP.)²⁹ The program allows Air Force personnel to volunteer for placement at select locations historically difficult to fill in exchange for tour lengths of four to five years. A similar program instituted across all services could significantly reduce tour curtailments. By having more voluntary assignments and enforcing tour lengths, the overall stability of the force can be increased. While some longer tours may be undesirable on a case by case basis, the correlation between more stability for service members and their families with retention and satisfaction cannot be ignored. Lengthening and enforcing extended time on station for CONUS tours will overall decrease cost and increase stability for DOD units and service families. A sweeping change like this will no doubt find detractors espousing the infeasibility of the plan. However, after the 2013 sequestration, the Marine Corps-the smallest service with the smallest average price tag per move- found it feasible and reduced operational moves by 40 percent between 2013 and 2014 at a cost savings of 100 million dollars over two years.³⁰

Beyond Financial Cost:

The following section will outline the impacts PCS moves have on the force. While legislative oversight mentions these costs as admonishments to the DOD to reform PCS policy, the target seems plainly budget oriented. However, there are tangible impacts to the readiness and sustainability of the force resulting from frequent PCS.

Unit and Individual Readiness:

The foundational Marine Corps doctrinal publication, *Warfighting*, addresses unit stability in a way agreeable to any organization. “The personnel management system should seek to achieve personnel stability within units and staffs as a means of fostering cohesion, teamwork, and implicit understanding”³¹ One does not need military experience to know that performance

in an organization improves with experience in a familiar job, environment, and team. An organization with a common goal, recognized individual strengths and weakness, time training together, and shared success and failure, tends to adapt and improve over time. In the US military, personnel turnover constantly challenges this, especially in positions of leadership. The Marine Corps Personnel Assignment Policy Order, *MCO 1300.8*, echoes this and points out that the service families play a role in unit performance as well. “Compliance with this policy improves combat readiness by controlling unit personnel turnover and ensuring equitable treatment and career development of individual Marines. Combat readiness is further improved by increasing stability of Marine families and reducing PCS costs.”³²

The time spent during the physical act of executing a PCS does not account fully for the loss of stability in a unit. The service member spends time checking out of an installation, preparing the household, searching for a house at the next installation, checking into the gaining installation, and finally conducting on the job training at the new unit. This process can take weeks or even months. Tim Kane offers his perspective on this loss of productivity in his book, “Bleeding Talent,” arguing the military is losing some of its best officers due to a retention crisis.

Maybe it’s a leap of logic to say a person becomes twice as productive by working each position twice as long, but do not forget the training lag in each position. If it takes six months to ramp up a learning curve, then job tenures of four versus two years cut one-eighth of unproductive time from the workforce, not to mention the cost savings in half as many Permanent Change of Station moves.³³

Unit and individual performance is tied to the amount of time the individuals in a unit stay together. Increasing tour lengths will directly positively impact the performance of DOD units while benefitting the families of the service members in those units.

The Nomadic Military Family:

The number of operational deployments for US service members is well documented and often cited as a concern for retention and readiness in the military. The repeated separation of service members from their families is certainly a factor in stress for both the service member and the family, but perhaps more jarring is the frequent relocation of the family. Intuitively, people recognize the emotional and psychological stress imposed by relocation. In addition to the psychological impacts, there are other negative impacts on the military family associated with frequent moves.

Healthcare for the military family is impacted negatively as a result of frequent PCS moves. The large bureaucracy of the Military Health System (MHS) exacerbates the effect of frequent moves. Often health care service gaps occur during relocation and long after. A statement by The National Military Family Association to the SAC Subcommittee on Personnel in February of last year, highlighted the issues.

A PCS will, by definition, disrupt the continuity of care that is so important in managing complex medical conditions. After every move, special needs families must begin a lengthy cycle of referrals, authorizations and waitlists resulting in repeated gaps in care. Military families fear these repeated treatment delays have a cumulative and permanent negative effect on their special needs family members³⁴

Service delays are not limited to special needs patients. In an anecdote from the same statement, a military spouse in the 28th week of a high-risk pregnancy, who walked her medical records into her new primary healthcare provider following a PCS, was required to take a pregnancy test to verify the pregnancy. “Even after verifying the pregnancy, she could not get an appointment until she was 36 weeks.”³⁵ These issues require reforms in the MHS but are made even more impactful by the frequency of PCS. In a system that struggles with providing continuity of care for families who change duty stations, the number of PCS moves has a direct negative impact on the

health of the force. Simply put, until sweeping reforms in the MHS are implemented, many military healthcare issues can be mitigated by increasing time on station to reduce the number of opportunities the MHS has to fumble care for a moving family.

Another aspect of family upheaval is the economic impact on the military spouse. The antiquated PCS system has failed to adapt to the dual income household. The American family no longer relies on a single breadwinner. The draw of two incomes, more easily achievable in the civilian sector, cannot be discounted by the DOD. A 2013 study on military spouse employment, conducted by The Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) and Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF,) paints a bleak picture. The study focused on female spouses because they make up 95% of military spouses according to the report.³⁶ Most glaringly, the study found that the unemployment rate for military spouses was around 20% which is three times higher than civilian female unemployment.³⁷ It should also be noted that the unemployment numbers only include those actively seeking work and does not account for those spouses who have given up on finding a job. That number is significant given the second conspicuous finding from the report. "A large percentage of respondents are "underemployed" based on two key definitions – education and experience. . .In total, 90 percent of our employed female respondents are underemployed with respect to education, experience and/or both."³⁸ The chief factor negatively impacting employment status is frequent location changes. Of respondents to the survey, 35% required licensing or certification in their fields and were ten times more likely to have moved out of state within the last year compared to their civilian peers.³⁹ In an article titled "Silent Sacrifice" Dr. Michelle Still Mehta (a military spouse and researcher) lays the blame at the feet of DOD policy on PCS.

At the heart of this problem lies a juxtaposition of a 1950's military culture and the reality of today's modern families. The culture of our military continues to function as if all

families were built on a single breadwinner model, with a spouse fully available to take care of the home front and maintain a tradition of volunteerism in support of the military community. Spouses are told they are the glue that holds families together during moves, deployments, overseas assignments, as well as day-to-day life. But, as in most American families, having two incomes is a necessity, not a luxury, for many military families. Unlike most civilians, however, military spouses find it challenging to maintain their employment while moving every two to three years.⁴⁰

The dual income household presents a challenge to retention for the DOD. The annual Blue Star Family “Military Family Lifestyle Survey” echoes this concern. In a comprehensive report of the survey results, 51% of spouses reported being either unemployed or not in the labor force. The survey also found that of those not working, 60% had a strong desire to find work. The report went on to note that “Department of Defense personnel policies have not kept pace with this reality and do not support the sustainability of two careers. . . Removing the barriers to military spouse employment is therefore essential to the military’s talent strategy, retention of its members, and the future force.”⁴¹ Future PCS policy reform must account for military families need to have two incomes.

In June of 2016, The Task Force on Defense Personnel, chaired by former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, addressed the issue of an out of touch DOD as it relates to personnel management. Their report, released by the Bipartisan Policy Center and titled “Losing Our Edge,” argued that the talent pool in the DOD is being drained in large part due to its personnel management including its PCS policy.

One reason for such poor retention might have to do with the incompatibility of the military lifestyle with the demands of modern professional and family life. Through frequent moves. . .the Pentagon forces military members to live a very different life than their civilian counterparts. This cannot continue if the goal is to draw top talent to military service. Military workforce policies were designed for a bygone era of single-income households and standard, twenty-year careers. . . This dichotomy places a strain on service members who, because of personnel system requirements must often choose between remaining in the military and supporting a spouse’s career.⁴²

As the modern force becomes more technologically advanced, the DOD will require longer service times to train and retain a more technically skilled force. If the DOD cannot adapt to changes in modern family dynamics, it will find itself with a serious retention problem.

In addition to considerations of military spouses, military children bear the burden of frequent moves. Changing schools, breaking and making social ties, and being in a new house every two to three years is a stress uniquely familiar to the “military brat.” A 2010 study published by the American Psychological Association found links to negative impacts on well-being related to residential mobility in childhood. The study included 7,108 subjects over a 10-year period between 1995 and 2005. Among the findings, the study suggests that frequent moves correlated with reduced well-being and perhaps even mortality, especially in those subjects with introverted personalities. “Most important, we found that introverts who had moved frequently not only reported lower levels of life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and affect balance, but also were more likely to have died before Time 2 than introverts who had not moved often.”⁴³ The need to form social bonds and long term friendships is key to the development of resiliency and security for a child. For the military child, PCS orders constantly challenge this need.

In a survey of West Point graduates for “Bleeding Talent,” Tim Kane asked the following. “What were the reasons you left the military? Agree or disagree if they were important reasons for your decision.” Of the respondents, 81% at least agreed that family was an important decision and 57% agreed strongly.⁴⁴ The military family has multiple sources of potential stress and hardship. Deployments, hazardous operating areas, and long training periods are necessary realities that service families attempt to deal with. Relocating the service family so often is an unnecessary but significant addition to the burdens of military life and should be a target for DOD planners interested in retaining talent.

Counter Arguments:

Frequent PCS is Necessary to Broaden Experience Base:

One argument for frequently moving personnel is that it facilitates individuals gaining experience in different billets. This is necessary for individual competitiveness for promotion and a more well-rounded total force. For example, a Marine pilot is often advised to seek a ground-centric billet following the end his or her first tour. The Marine Corps requires (especially among its officers) that the force be well versed in all the elements of Marine task organization. Since all elements of the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) exist primarily to support the infantry, the requirement is especially true for aviation personnel. B billets are designed to take a person outside of their primary specialty and expose them to another job in another element. Little argument exists about the validity of the B billet construct given the unique success of the Marine Corps in integrating of all elements within its force structure. However, in many cases the officer is sent from an aviation squadron on the east coast to an infantry or other ground unit on the west coast followed by potentially another move back to a fleet squadron at yet a different geographic location. In that example, the officer moves three times in a five-year period from the end of flight training to the beginning of the second flying tour. The officer is more well-rounded, but were all those moves necessary?

In the example of the Marine Corps, force structure on the east and west coast is essentially the same. The largest element of force structure, the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) and the subordinate units that comprise it, have essentially the same billets and personnel requirements on the east and west coast. The close geographic proximity of the multiple units from all elements of the MAGTF within the east and west coast MEF's, allows for transfers of assignment that do not require a move for the service member. This allows for opportunity to

provide the experience and exposure that the B billet is designed to provide by using orders known as no cost Permanent Change of Assignment (PCA) or low cost PCS. The Permanent Change of Assignment and low cost PCS offer the services a cost-effective option to change personnel assignments without incurring the cost of moving the service member. The Marine Corps recognizes this fact and even proclaims it as policy in *MCO 1300.8* stating, “Marines will be reassigned within the same geographic area whenever possible through judicious use of a combination of Low Cost Permanent Change of Station (PCS) and No Cost Permanent Change of Assignment (PCA) Orders.”⁴⁵ *MCO 1300.8*, is dated 18 September 2014, recall that according to the 2014 Status of Forces Survey released that same month, Marine personnel had the shortest duration between the survey and their previous PCS (11.5 months) when compared to the DOD average of 14.9 months.⁴⁶ In the case of PCS, it appears policy and execution are not in line. In an interview for this paper, a personnel assignments branch officer explained the disconnect.

Assignment Branch Interview:

Every year assignments across the Marine Corps are handed out to the force by the Manpower Assignments Branch. “Orders cutting” represents the end of a year-long cycle of making ends meet. The orders directing assignments typically get written in the first three months of each calendar year and this interview took place in the middle of that busy time for the “monitors.” The officer interviewed preferred to remain anonymous and was candid in his assessment of the disconnect between an emphasis on personnel stability and costs savings in policy, versus how billet assignments are actually handed out. “The Marine Corps doesn’t care about money when it comes to moving people.” He explained that the reason is not because the Marine Corps does not care about saving money, it just cannot afford to care. For this monitor, the number of assignments he needed to fill exceeded the number of officers he had to fill them.

Specifically, the number of Captains available was well below what was necessary to fill each job. Each year he tries to assemble a jigsaw puzzle without the requisite pieces. Retention issues in the company grade officer ranks, do not allow him the luxury of making geographic stability a priority. He also addressed one of the arguments made in this paper regarding the dual income household and believed it has an increasingly important role to play in retention, but went on to say that it is never talked about at higher levels where policy decisions are made. “If you bring this up, Colonels and Generals will laugh you out of the room.” For this monitor, a retention issue causes a departure from a policy designed to improve stability and retention. Resignation to the status quo on the part of military leadership kindles this paradox.

PCS is a Cost of Service:

It is valid to say that the PCS system existed in the DOD before the current personnel joined the ranks and therefore service members should cope with the reality of their chosen profession. Those who serve take their orders and execute while the legislative oversight funding the PCS program continue to seek reform. Service members rarely speak out for policy change of any kind. Their policy opinions, especially on quality of life issues, tend to reveal themselves in retention trends. This issue should interest anyone who believes in an all-volunteer and superior US military capability. The US does not rely solely on personnel numbers to project its military might, but also on the professionalism and technical expertise of its volunteer force. Max Boot points out the distinction of the US military compared to other militaries and the need for longevity of service. “It is not only U.S. hardware that’s hard to replicate; so is the all-volunteer force that makes it work. Operating high-tech military equipment requires long-service professionals, not short-term conscripts.”⁴⁷ As the military continues to advance technologically, so will the need for those serving in it to stay in long-term. To facilitate long service requirements,

DOD manpower policies must address issues that pose a threat to retention. In a response to a 2001 GAO report titled “Military Personnel: Longer Time Between Moves Related to Higher Satisfaction and Retention,” which offered obvious conclusions given the title, the DOD stated that it “concurred with the report.”⁴⁸ Still, 16 years later, the PCS system remains a challenge to retention unaddressed. It is not simply an issue that DOD personnel must deal with, but a potential threat to the unique success of the US military

The Next Step:

In order to implement PCS reform there must be a desire from DOD policy makers to change the status quo. Despite the data already cited in this paper tying PCS frequency with negative trends in stability and retention, most surveys or other data mining fail to ask PCS frequency related questions directly. Questions in the 2016 Status of Forces Survey regarding PCS tend to ask about service member satisfaction with details of the last move he or she executed. In this way, the questions are similar to those asked about the Commissary or other DOD services. These questions may be useful to glean information about improving the execution of a move, but fall short of identifying the effects frequent moves have over the course of a career. Blame for retention issues often gets laid at the feet of operational tempo as it relates to deployments. Surveys tend to ask pointed questions regarding number of deployments and family separation time and the relation those have to negative trends while only addressing the relationship of those trends with PCS tangentially. Whether by design or not, a lack of hard data allows a level of deniability on the part of policy makers when it comes to the need for policy reform. Certainly, deployments and family separation impact service member proclivity for continued service, but operational tempo for the military includes how often a family is uprooted. Status of

Forces Surveys need more comprehensive and direct questions regarding the impacts of relocation frequency on all aspects of service including unit stability, unit performance, leadership, career development, job satisfaction, family satisfaction, and retention. On most issues, service members are unlikely to speak out for reform in a setting other than anonymous surveys and PCS is no different. In addition to outside legislative pressure for reform, DOD personnel need the opportunity to specifically address the detriments of current PCS policy in order to affect policy change.

Conclusion:

Changes to status quo are often difficult for an organization, especially one as large, old, and bureaucratically entrenched as the DOD. Yet adaptation, evolution, and innovation is now, and has been, a necessity for the continued success of the military. The US military often develops new doctrine, training methods, and equipment. It also continues to adapt to changes in civil society norms by changing its culture, including desegregating, repealing don't-ask-don't-tell, and opening combat arms to women. While often pushing for and embracing innovation to improve combat capability, cultural changes meet more significant resistance inside the department. At times, civilian oversight drags the DOD through cultural change via mandate. In the case of PCS reform, though congressional pressure to do something about the PCS status quo exists, no significant reform is evident. The DOD should not wait for such a mandate or for conditions like a retention crisis, to force its hand. Efforts designed to reduce PCS costs alone lend themselves to insufficient strategies. Solutions like cutting entitlements for service members fail to make significant impact on the budget and do nothing to address other issues associated with such high personnel turnover. The most impactful measures to reduce PCS frequency

should focus on increasing tour lengths. 48-month tour minimums for CONUS duty stations coupled with enforcement of those tour lengths achieves that goal directly. While for overseas tours mandating across the board tour increases may be detrimental to the DOD, properly incentivizing voluntary extensions of those tours can achieve a significant reduction in overseas PCS. Incentives should move away from the traditional take-it-or-leave-it model toward a quality adjusted bid strategy that can account for diverse motivations and preferences while achieving costs savings akin to those in the private sector.

More can be gained than cost savings. Increasing tour lengths provides the military with more stable and efficient units. Retaining familiarity among unit members increases expertise in both leadership positions and technical jobs. Overall unit efficiency improves proportionately with stability. Additionally, the overall stability of the military improves as military family satisfaction improves. A direct correlation exists between service member proclivity to remain in the military and the satisfaction of military families. The DOD's ability to retain an increasingly technical force beyond initial enlistment is vital to the success of a modern force. Military personnel assignments have thus far failed to adapt to changing norms in American family life and that failure poses a risk to strength of the US military.

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