

**Lagging pilot retention poses a threat to combat readiness.**

# Keeping Pilots in the Cockpits

By Suzann Chapman, Associate Editor

**T**HE Air Force today is facing mounting losses of pilots. USAF personnel officials predict that, by next year, it will fall short of its required numbers, and the shortage will then begin to increase on a major scale. Already, the service suffers spot shortages of pilots for fighters and MC-130 aircraft.

Navigator losses also are increasing. The Air Force expects to maintain sufficient numbers by continuing to return older officers to flying duties, though officials admit that limits career broadening and adversely affects morale. However, in 2003 the Air Force starts to run out of options there, too.

Even though enlisted retention is high, the Air Force continues to carefully monitor retention levels across all parts of the force. Problems have emerged in certain hard-to-maintain enlisted career fields, such as pararescue and combat controller specialties.

As a result of these and other trends, the Air Force is shifting its personnel focus well into the future to anticipate, and then act to prevent, serious problems, according to Brig. Gen. John

Figure 1: **Cumulative Continuation Rate**

FY	Rate
1989	36%
1990	37%
1991	35%
1992	34%
1993	61%
1994	82%
1995	86%
1996	77%

F. Regni, the Air Force's director of Military Personnel Policy.

"As the force gets smaller, we're going to have less flexibility," said the General. "We want to be able to anticipate retention patterns before they become a crisis."

Even as the service wrestles with modernization and readiness difficulties and with new cuts in force structure, the pilot retention problem has emerged as an urgent concern—the center of USAF's personnel problems.



Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, the USAF Chief of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in February that the Air Force and the other services are suffering the first stages of a major pilot drain. Fogleman said that losses are driven by the pace of Air Force operations today, erosion of compensation, and lucrative private-sector opportunities.

**Bad News**

Lt. Gen. Michael D. McGinty, USAF deputy chief of staff for Personnel, told Congress that the leading indicators “spell bad news” for rated retention. He noted that drops in retention for both pilots and navigators had occurred, but he emphasized that the immediate worry is pilot retention. If low pilot retention persists, he warned, it will “directly affect the readiness of our combat units.”

So worrisome has the situation become that it prompted a pilot retention “summit” last April among senior USAF leaders, who gathered to discuss and assess recent pilot complaints—specifically, high operations tempo and reduced quality of life. Attendees at the summit focused on potential measures they hope will ease the concerns of the

Figure 2: **Pilot Bonus Take Rate**

FY	Eligibles	Takers	Rate
1989	5,512	3,719	67.5%
1990	1,773	665	37.5%
1991	1,665	658	39.5%
1992	1,169	803	68.7%
1993	1,021	806	78.9%
1994	718	584	81.3%
1995	434	332	76.5%
1996	802	469	58.5%

pilots and, at the same time, possibly have a positive effect throughout the force.

Officials said that, to gauge the state of pilot retention, the Air Force consults four key indicators.

■ Cumulative continuation rate, which measures how many pilots in the service at their sixth year are still on board at their eleventh year. Here, the news is bad. In one year—from the end of Fiscal Year 1995 to the end of Fiscal 1996—the indicator dropped by

nine percentage points. [See Figure 1.] Worse, official Air Force projections forecast continued decline.

■ Aviator Continuation Pay acceptance rate, which reflects how many pilots who have completed an initial eight-year active-duty service commitment (ADSC) are willing to accept a new five-year commitment by signing up for the pilot bonus. This figure—called the “take rate”—dropped 18 percentage points over the same one-year period. [See Figure 2.] Of this year’s eligible pilots, the Air Force expects to get positive responses from only 43 percent, down from 59 percent last year. That’s if things pick up over the next few months; at present, the take rate is only 39 percent.

■ Separation requests from pilots who are free of their ADSC. This year, according to Regni, “more eligible pilots who can leave are, in fact, putting in their papers and leaving.” Compared to the same period last year, pilot separations are up 51 percent. [See Figure 3, next page.] This result was predictable; 90 percent of those who decline the pilot bonus request a separation within two years.

■ Aggressiveness of civilian airline

hiring. This has seen a resurgence in recent years and is viewed as a major factor contributing to low pilot retention rates. “There’s not only a constant demand, but there’s an increasing demand to hire pilots,” said Regni. In 1996, the number of airline hires was up 40 percent, to about 12,000 pilots. Airline analysts expect hiring to continue at a rate of about 10,000 per year through 2003.

Figure 3: **Pilots Applying for Separation**

FY	Eligibles	Takers	Rate
1989	5,668	1,442	25%
1990	4,536	1,512	33%
1991	4,361	1,759	40%
1992	3,944	1,734	44%
1993	2,738	930	34%
1994	2,285	423	19%
1995	1,609	359	22%
1996	1,805	479	27%

*According to Air Force projections, hiring by the major airlines alone will be sufficient to absorb all military pilots leaving service through 2003.*

It is this last problem that seems to cause the greatest concern in the Air Force. A direct inverse relationship exists between airline hires and pilot retention, and it is expressed in the cumulative continuation rate, said Regni, who explained that there is a 21-month delay between a particular event in airline hiring and the effect felt in the active-duty pilot force.

For example, he said, the number of airline hires in 1977 went up—rising from 1,000 to 4,000—and shortly

thereafter pilot retention dropped to a record low of 25 percent.

“We worked very hard in this era to work pilot retention to turn that around,” he said, “but probably the largest influence . . . was when the airlines deregulated. There were a lot of furloughs, the airlines stopped hiring. . . . Not so curiously, our retention went to pretty high levels.”

### A Darker Outlook

Unfortunately, current indicators forecast a long period of high airline hiring rates. “If these projections are true, then we have a different challenge in front of us, as we had in the late 1970s,” said Regni.

One factor spurring airline hiring is the large number of commercial pilots who are approaching FAA’s mandatory pilot retirement age of 60. Those facing their sixtieth birthday in the next year number about 1,400. That figure only covers the 13 major airlines. The number of mandatory retirements is expected to continue at the rate of 1,500 to 1,600 through

The airline demand is so high that it far exceeds the number of military pilots completing their undergraduate pilot training commitment. “They could hire every military pilot completing their ADSC from UPT and there [would still be] a great demand for pilots,” stated Regni. [See Figure 4.]

Although increased airline hiring is a major problem, it apparently is not the primary reason many Air Force pilots are choosing to leave the service. According to a recent survey of pilots who did not take the pilot bonus in Fiscal 1997, only 15 percent cited the lure of the airlines as the top reason for departing. [See Figure 5, p. 69.]

That distinction belongs to the view that a major deterioration in the quality of military life has occurred. What is most frustrating for pilots and their families is the high operations tempo and the large amount of time spent away from home. The survey revealed that 30 percent ranked high operations tempo as the number one factor in not taking the pilot bonus. And the second leading reason—quality

Figure 4: **Military Pilot Losses vs. Airline Hiring**

FY	Total USAF Losses	Military Losses	Major Airline Hires
1996	610	986	2,123
1997	1,581	2,265	3,000
1998	1,581	2,274	2,628
1999	1,468	1,981	2,997
2000	974	1,547	3,215
2001	749	1,208	4,052
2002	533	879	4,430
2003	480	901	3,895

2005 and then jump to about 2,000 per year through 2008.

The airlines must replace these pilots while hiring others to cover expansion of service.

Regni noted a change in the airlines themselves. In the past, he said, military pilots were attracted almost exclusively to the major airlines. Today, however, the United States has 55 regional airlines with new glass-cockpit jets, so “there will be an affinity,” and many military pilots will go on to fill jobs in the regional carriers.

of life, at 17 percent—derives from family problems created by the high operations tempo.

Thus, 47 percent—nearly half of those preparing to leave the Air Force—cite these factors as the critical determinant, said Regni.

“The [high operations] tempo is something that’s new and something that’s going to be with us for a long time,” he said. “As an average, our folks are deployed four times as much as they were [during the Cold War].”

That's just a fact of life—the Air Force is an expeditionary force.”

### Potential Cures

At the pilot retention summit, Air Force leaders did not seek a single solution but instead launched several initiatives focused on the critical pilot retention problem. In fixing this problem, they reasoned, they will be able to help the entire Air Force population cope with the operations tempo.

One initiative calls for the Air Force to work with the Joint Staff to develop smaller force packages for contingency responses. The service hopes to be able to reduce the number of aircraft that must be deployed and thus reduce the number of personnel that need to go overseas in any given situation.

In addition, the major commands are looking for methods to cut their training requirements, which generate a lot of flying hours and add to the operations tempo burden.

Involvement in today's real-world contingencies usually requires lots of patrol flying, which does nothing to sustain combat flying skills. Especially in fighter units, pilots returning from contingency assignments immediately embark on a catch-up flying training program. At the summit, Air Force leaders decided to postpone such intensive training operations for returning units until members first had gone through a stand-down period.

Regni outlined the new routine for a typical squadron that had been deployed for six weeks. “When that squadron goes back to its base, those aircraft won't fly for at least one week—which will allow people to go back to their families, take a breath, catch up,” he said. He added that the stand-downs will apply not just to flying units but also to other units and individuals who have been tapped for contingencies—a USAF-wide solution for operations tempo pressure.

The Air Force expects these stand-downs to decrease readiness ratings. That is a given, according to Regni. He said that, overall, the leadership thinks that the stand-downs “will have a positive effect.”

The Air Force Inspector General also is considering whether and how the service might use contingencies as a way to evaluate operational readiness. They could be used for this purpose in the place of generating additional

flying hours to prepare for, and then conduct, an operational readiness inspection.

The Air Force also plans to adopt the Navy's successful ombudsman program. The Navy created a cadre of spouse ombudsmen—the senior ombudsman has direct access to the unit

Figure 5: Why Pilots Decline the Bonus

Reason	Percentage
Optempo too high	30
Quality-of-life factors	17
To fly for airlines	15
Commitment too long	13
Assignment process	9
Can't continue flying	8
Personnel policies	4
Poor career potential	4

commander—to help family members of deployed personnel. They ensure that, if a family encounters any kind of barrier to receiving necessary assistance, they could turn to the ombudsman.

### Devaluation

The Air Force has asked Congress to increase the special pay for aviators to their former value, which has been eroded by inflation. Since 1990, for example, the Aviation Career Incentive Pay and Aviator Continuation Pay have fallen by about 35 percent.

The Air Force's long-term plan calls for doing more than catching up with inflation, however. The service would like to revamp totally the entire aircrew special pay program.

Regni said, “We think it's time for [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] to do an all-service review—come up with a total aviation compensation program—something that would replace all these different pays we have now and come out with one.” The goal, he said, would be to “link it to career progression.”

Today, when a pilot has enough years and flying hours to move from pilot

rating to senior pilot rating, or from senior pilot rating to command pilot rating, there is no monetary incentive to make the change. Air Force leaders think the compensation ought to be linked to progression for pilots and other aircrew members. However, Regni acknowledged that the initiative will be difficult to attain, since each service must find the money to fund the move.

In the drive to keep pilots in the cockpit, USAF also has reduced its requirements for pilots to fill staff positions by 20 percent. This step works to the benefit of flyers who prefer to stay in aircraft rather than take on career-enhancing assignments. However, the move bears close watching and means that special instructions must be given to promotion boards.

Because the critical shortages are in the company-grade ranks, the Air Force must place field-grade pilots in line flying positions again—instead of the normal progression to a staff job at the Pentagon or a major command. In effect, until the crisis has passed, pilots definitely will spend more time in airplanes. Thus, the Air Force must make sure that its promotion boards understand that filling line flying positions outweighs the normal demands of career progression.

The Air Force already does this for navigators, Regni explained. The Air Force Secretary's instructions to a promotion board point out that board members “will see records for majors and lieutenant colonels who are doing line navigator duties because they are meeting very important needs of the Air Force.”

Additionally, the Air Force has increased its quotas for undergraduate pilot training. This year, UPT expects to graduate 664 pilots, ramping up to 1,100 in 2000, meaning that it would meet its goal one year earlier than planned.

The Air Force still offers its pilots the opportunity to fly the most technologically superior aircraft in the world. It still has the camaraderie in its flying squadrons that pilots do not find with commercial airlines—there, pilots often don't know who they'll crew with until they show up for the flight.

USAF's worry, however, is that those benefits might not be enough when put up against the lure of money and at least some family stability. ■