

AFPC is downright bullish about force stability and the rise in promotion rates for officer and enlisted alike.

Report From the

Personnel Center

By Suzann Chapman, Managing Editor

THE drawdown is not really over—not for the Air Force. End strength reductions continue. In fact, the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review slapped USAF with an active personnel cut larger than any imposed on the other three military services. DoD ordered the Air Force to eliminate 26,900 troops but sought only 18,000 from the Navy, 15,000 from the Army, and 1,800 from the Marine Corps.

Even so, Air Force personnel specialists say that the drawdown's effect isn't nearly as harsh as in previous years. The force experienced no involuntary exits in either Fiscal 1996 or 1997. Air Force Personnel Center officials at Randolph AFB, Texas, predict that Fiscal 1998 cuts, though perhaps more extensive than first anticipated, can be met with volunteers and normal attrition. What's more, AFPC is downright bullish about force stability and the rise in promotion rates for officer and enlisted alike.

AFPC officials realize they have a key role in dealing with what is seen as a major danger for the Air Force: the escalating loss of its pilots and navigators. Pilot retention is the No. 1 personnel problem right now, said Maj. Gen. Susan L. Pamerleau, head of the 1,500-member AFPC.

High Promotion Rate

Still, there are many bright spots. For example, this year marked a return to the 90 percent promotion rate for captains looking to enter the field grades. In Fiscal 1997 the Air Force not only promoted more officers to major than it had since 1991 but also promoted more pilots than it had since 1985.

For all new captains, the good news will continue

as the service plans to leave the promotion rate at 90 percent into the foreseeable future.

This marks the beginning of an era of some stability, stated AFPC officials. There are smaller year groups entering the promotion zone to major.

The Air Force decided to leave the rates for promotion to lieutenant colonel and colonel at their drawdown levels. In 1991, it dropped the rate for promotion to lieutenant colonel from 75 percent to 70 percent and to colonel from 55 percent to 50 percent. The rates will remain at the lower levels for some time, according to AFPC officials.

Despite the growing pilot shortage, officials stated that promotion boards continue to look for the best qualified officer regardless of career field. AFPC analyzes how rated and nonrated officers fare in the process but does not levy percentage quotas based on those numbers.

As a concession to the hardships caused by high operations tempo, which seems to affect rated officers disproportionately, the service did mask the academic degree level for the March 1996 majors board. In effect, USAF told the board members to ignore whether a captain had obtained a master's degree or not. Many rated officers of recent years have been too busy to pursue such academic credentials.

AFPC officials stated they found no negative impact as a result of masking the degree information. Their analyses showed that it did not significantly impact overall selection rates. The 1996 selection rate for pilots was 75 percent, compared to 74 percent in 1995 and 77 percent for 1993 and 1994 boards. For nonrated line officers, the rate was 72 percent in both 1996 and

1995, exceeding the 71 percent rate for the 1993 and 1994 boards.

Air Force officials, commenting on the high quality of the force these days, noted the high caliber of officers who do not win promotions these days. The quality, they say, is nothing short of “unbelievable.”

Pamerleau emphasized that the promotion good news extended in particular to noncommissioned officers. “We have never had as high a promotion select rate as we’ve had this year—highest in 10 years,” she stated.

As with the officer corps, the Air Staff sets the enlisted promotion quota. The difference, though, is that the Air Force promotes within its enlisted force based on an equal distribution among enlisted career fields, with rare exceptions. There is a chronic critical skills list which AFPC officials said gets just a tiny fraction more promotions.

AFPC closely watches the enlisted promotion opportunity selection rate to ensure that it doesn’t get too high and impact quality. However, they said the rates will continue to “shoot through the ceiling” in Fiscal 1998 as they did in Fiscal 1997—a sign of increasing stability in the force.

AFPC officials maintain that, under the Weighted Airman Promotion System (used for promotions to staff, technical, and master sergeant), the individual controls 75 percent of the elements that go into promotion consideration. The only two areas outside their control are time in grade and time in service.

To help a member who may be retraining into another career field, USAF in 1996 began to use his or her Promotion Fitness Examination score twice, rather than forcing the Air Force member to take a Speciality Knowledge Test.

In another change, senior NCOs benefitted from the fact that there are now two chief master sergeants and only one colonel on promotion boards for the top two enlisted grades.

According to CMSgt. Gregory Haley, chief of the AFPC Enlisted Promotion and Military Testing Branch, USAF’s goal is to ensure that the enlisted promotion system is “visible, understandable, and acceptable.”

Progress in Assignment Systems

Those same words could apply to the Air Force assignment system. AFPC is pushing toward simpler, faster, more accessible assignment processes for both officer and enlisted members.

There are currently eight different ways for officers to volunteer for assignments. The largest number of officers do so by using the Internet. In fact, AFPC estimates that about 70 percent of officers now volunteer for assignments via the World Wide Web.

In its first Officer Assignment System review in 1996, officers expressed the need for more information and more voice in the process. Since then, AFPC has made the Web volunteer process more informative and accessible. Not only can an officer volunteer online, but the officer’s current commander can include comments, which the officer can read, and the gaining commander can, with a few keystrokes, review information on all eligible and qualified volunteers.

AFPC plans another OAS review in the near future.

The establishment of the Enlisted Quarterly Assignments Listing in 1992 went a long way toward opening up the process for the enlisted force. AFPC releases EQUAL four times each year through the base military personnel flights and now also puts it on the Web. Air Force officials said that, in one quarter, the EQUAL Web page will get more than 90,000 hits.

AFPC officials said the system is working well. They maintain that the cornerstone of the business is equity—sharing of good and bad assignments. Someone may not want to volunteer for an overseas assignment. However, since some 70 percent of all Air Force enlisted members eventually go overseas, officials noted it’s wise for individuals to keep their preferences current.

As the drawdown continues, the question looms: Will the Air Force have to institute another round of involuntary separations and retirements? Officials at AFPC do not think that will be the case, given the large number of personnel who came on during the buildup years and now become eligible for retirement.

However, they are concerned at the high cost of some of DoD’s drawdown tools. They are expensive to implement. “In the early part of the drawdown we were not

The Consolidation Move

Faced with the DoD-wide mandate to cut its civilian personnel function by half, the Air Force decided to fall back on its many years of experience with centralized handling of military personnel. It consolidated its military and civilian personnel functions.

AFPC chief Maj. Gen. Susan L. Pamerleau took special note of the consolidation and its ongoing streamlining measures, which fall under a program called Palace Compass. “We had all this infrastructure, and the civilian career management folks were just down the street so it made a lot of sense to consolidate,” she said.

In 1963, USAF created Air Force Military Personnel Center to perform tasks that it is now doing with Palace Compass, explained the general. These, she said, are “the kinds of things that allow us to do centralized counseling or centralized payment information.”

“For instance, if someone wants to retire, they can call up on an 800 number, and they can get a retirement calculation,” she added. “There are a variety of things they can do just by using the automated voice system—24 hours a day.”

The Air Force now has centralized hiring authority. Instead of using the lengthy old Standard Form 171s, AFPC takes a resume just as would a private business. “We scan it in using commercial off-the-shelf software, which matches skills, education, and experience—what used to take about 45 days now takes about nine days,” said Pamerleau.

AFPC is also investigating a consolidated assignments approach for civilians and officers in certain career fields, such as the Office of Special Investigation and Public Affairs—fields where civilians and military officers often perform the same type of work.

One of the major undertakings is to regionalize civilian personnel services under the Directorate of Civilian Personnel Operations at AFPC. The Randolph center will handle centralized staffing and classification (for bases with 500 or fewer employees) programs, benefits and entitlements, such as insurance and retirements, and maintain the Official Personnel Folders. Each base will retain a civilian personnel flight to provide management advisory services and to coordinate skills training and off-duty education, among other actions.

as concerned as we are now with the cost,” stated Lt. Col. Dean Sandmire, chief of AFPC’s Retirements and Separations Division.

For example, he said, the Temporary Early Retirement Authority is a mixed blessing. In the long term, costs will be lower because those individuals will draw less money in terms of military retirement pay. In the short term, the services have to put the money to fund the X-number of years short of 20 into a separate pot to pay separation costs. It comes out of the current year’s spending—not the regular retirement account.

“TERA in the current year is not cheap for the services to execute,” said Sandmire. “It saves money in the long run, but that first year is expensive.”

Early in the drawdown, Congress provided extra funding for TERA and other drawdown tools, like the annual payments and lump sum packages. Now, Congress asks the services to work the programs first.

Pilot Predicament

For all the good news, the pilot problem is never very far from the minds of AFPC officials. They have crafted a number of steps to help bring the situation under control.

For example, the Air Staff and AFPC have mandated a 100 percent fill-rate for all line fighter pilot combat and training positions. AFPC may also overfill these positions, if needed, to maintain the necessary experience levels.

Overall, the service is reducing the number of rated positions it has traditionally maintained on Air Staff and major command staffs. For fighter pilots, Pamerleau stated, manning for major command and other agency staff jobs had already been reduced to 75 percent and would go down to 69 percent.

Unfortunately, that can act as a career disincentive for many fliers who have been brought up in the Air Force tradition that to get ahead an individual must follow a standard career progression which includes the requisite staff jobs. Other fliers may relish the chance simply to stay in the cockpit.

Taking older pilots and navigators out of staff jobs and putting them back in their aircraft is a short-term solution. It is one that, unfortunately, creates additional problems later on.

The Air Force has for years told its rated crew members that they can’t fly forever. Now it must reverse that education process and assure them that they will not be passed over during promotion reviews.

In the case of fighter pilots, according to Col. Fred Wall, chief operations officer in AFPC’s Assignments Division, the service now confronts a deep dip in pilot numbers—a “bathtub” that it simply can’t fill—even by returning older pilots to the cockpit.

One of the problems with downsizing in general, explained Wall, is that you can’t just cut from the bottom. A typical F-15 fighter wing has 60 percent inexperienced and 40 percent experienced pilots. If a base closes tomorrow, he said, those 60 percent inexperienced pilots could go no place but to another F-15 wing. The 40 percent are easily placed into instructor slots, staff jobs, or even other aircraft.

In the long run, he said, cutting exclusively from the bottom reduces the service’s ability to absorb new fighter pilots into the system. When USAF reduced its primary

aircraft authorized in a squadron from 24 to 18, it cut its absorption rate. “I can take fewer fighter pilots into the force because I don’t have iron on the ramp, I don’t have airplanes to put them into,” stated Wall.

The only way to make things come out right is to take that base-level cut, and cut everything above it, too, he added. That’s the difficult part.

Trimming Headquarters Staffs

Faced with a growing shortage of rated officers, the Air Force is cutting its headquarters staffs and changing the way it views operational staff jobs, many of which traditionally required wings. This is a move that’s carrying its own “good news/bad news” effect, according to Wall.

On the positive side, shifting staff jobs from pilots to other operational fields is in sync with USAF’s avowed plan to shift from being an air force to an air and space force and then a space and air force.

“We don’t necessarily need all fighter pilots working in XO,” he said. “We need people who understand command and control, or space and missiles.”

The change is not something the Air Force can simply carry out overnight, he added. Each career field has operated with a set number of jobs to fill. “It will take a little time to get the force balanced the way we want.”

And, even with elimination of some staff jobs for fighter pilots, the bathtub will still be hard to fill. Other measures are needed.

For instance, the Air Force is taking unprecedented numbers of “late-rated” officers into pilot training.

These are officers who could not get into pilot training during the early drawdown years because of the pilot excess but still meet age and other requirements. This is not a new program, but the numbers have been “a trickle compared to now,” said Wall. “This is the right thing to do for those kids who went through college thinking they were going to fly, then couldn’t.”

However, the service cannot simply open the valve on pilot production. “People don’t realize it’s a six, seven, or eight year process,” explained Wall.

That process entails balancing various estimates based on the number of pilots currently required, predicted end strength, and attrition rates. During the height of the drawdown, when it still had an excess of pilots, the service cut back on recruiting qualified pilot candidates into the Air Force Academy and ROTC programs and went instead for more scientists and engineers.

“You’re dealing with so many unknowns, because you’re dealing so far in the future,” said Wall.

For fighter pilots, the problem is compounded by unevenness in requirements. Even as the force in general shrank, USAF had no reduction in its remote overseas needs. In fact, given the large number of peacekeeping actions around the world, the requirement has actually grown.

The percentage of CONUS pilots going to overseas remote assignments has gotten out of whack, stated Wall. As a result, in the case of an F-16 pilot, the Air Force can’t forward that pilot’s name for a particular career building job the pilot might want to apply for. “We have such a high draw out of that career field that we need to keep rotating them through short tour locations,” he said. “That becomes very frustrating for the pilot.” ■