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The New Way of Officer Assignments

By Bruce D. Callander

In the early 1990s, the advent of the computer and the Internet—along with controversial personnel decisions by senior USAF leaders—gave Air Force officers extraordinary control over their assignments and, ultimately, over their careers. In the process, however, these factors reduced the role of the institutional Air Force in the assignment process. That, in turn, has made it difficult for the service to fill undesirable jobs.

Now, USAF intends to change course. It has given an unmistakable signal that it intends to move back to the center of things by making a series of changes to today’s assignment system. The new rules, recently approved by Chief of Staff Gen. Michael E. Ryan, are to take effect in early 1999.

In the new approach, USAF will emphasize two principal goals. One is to give Air Force commanders a significant role in “mentoring” officers about their futures. The other is to get Air Force officers to view career development as a whole and not concentrate so heavily on their next assignments. Without a doubt, however, the result will be that individuals will have less say—and the Air Force more—in where they go and what they do.

This marks a major change from the current situation. In today’s Officer Assignment System, the Air Force advertises job openings on an Internet web site. Officers are allowed to “shop” for jobs and apply for them electronically. All too frequently, an immediate commander has little input to the process. Moreover, precious few USAF members volunteer for remote or difficult assignments.

With his recent policy decisions, Ryan essentially will be returning USAF to a “select and assign” procedure that prevailed until 1991. Under that system, an officer completed an AF Form 90 listing his or her preferences, but there was little autonomy in job selection. The personnel system usually matched up individuals with openings.

That changed early in this decade. From 1991 until early 1995, most Air Force officers enjoyed a different, almost totally voluntary, system of obtaining jobs under the so-called Officer Volunteer Assignment System. They were able to shop for assignments on a computerized network. Moreover, Air Force policy shielded them from involuntary moves until they had completed at least 15 years of service.

In 1995, the system changed again. Unhappy with the lack of volunteers for certain jobs, the service made all its officers—not just more senior ones—vulnerable to involuntary transfers of location and assignment. The volunteer policy was not completely scrapped, though. Most of the machinery of the old system was left intact, and officers still had the same opportunity to apply for a specific assignment.

Ryan has now gone forward to the past. Assignments will be made in the best interests of the Air Force. Officers will be able to express long-range preferences for assignments. They also will be able to log onto the Internet and discover what jobs are open in their specialties. However, when an officer wants to apply for specific openings, he or she now will have to do so with the advice and consent of their commander.

Full-Dress Study

The changes were recommended by an OAS Review Group appointed by Ryan last December to make a full-dress study of the system. The group was headed by Gen. John A. Shaub, USAF (Ret.), a former deputy chief of staff for personnel and commander of Air Training Command. He now serves as executive director of the Air Force Association.

The study group’s recommendations called for:

1. Increasing the involvement of commanders in the process of future assignments for the officers serving under them.

2. Creating a new Personnel Requirements Display to replace the Job Advertisement System “electronic bulletin board” maintained by the Air Force Personnel Center.

3. Developing a Preference Worksheet to be filled out by officers, routed through their commanders, and stored electronically at the center as part of the input for determining their future assignments.

4. Requiring Officer Assignment Teams at the center to work more closely with losing and gaining commanders, major commands, and career field functional leaders in matching officers to assignments.
Another group, made up of assignment experts and officers from the field, is to work out the details of the changes in coming months.

The Problem
Speaking for his review group, Shaud said, “In our view, the current system has tilted more toward an officer’s individual desires, and not enough consideration is given to the needs of the nation, the service, and the officer’s professional development.

“While the personal desires of the officer are a factor, they should only be one of many considerations, not the driving factor. Whatever assignment system is used, the needs of the nation and Air Force must be paramount.”

A major problem with the current system, Shaud said, has been that it has offered officers greater participation in the selection of their assignments but often has not been able to deliver what they ask for.

“The assumption was that most assignments in the Air Force would have volunteers,” he said. “But what has happened is that a significant number of assignments did not have volunteers, so they had to place nonvolunteers. Then, many officers seemed to be applying more to avoid an assignment than to get one. As one officer in the field said, ‘What we have going now is a high-stakes, rules-intensive computer game.’

“What we would like to preserve in the current system is the visibility. However, the officer’s input of preferences would be monitored by his or her commander. What’s going on now is that the one who plays most heavily is the receiving commander who often doesn’t know the individual very well at all.”

The History
Historically, the Air Force has allowed officers to express their desire for specific assignments, but until recently the process was fairly informal. The form on which they listed their preferences (AF Form 90) was known as “the dream sheet” and the perception was that the Air Force gave it little weight.

With increased use of computers, personnel managers were able to gather more data earlier and more quickly project worldwide requirements. And with the advent of the Internet, the personnel center was able to give officers a routinely updated picture of their own assignment opportunities. In effect, it could allow them to look over the shoulders of the assignment officials for their fields and see where the job openings were developing. It was a short step from there to letting them bid for the slots that appealed to them. At a time when the service was downsizing and worried about keeping officers in needed skills, giving them a greater say in their assignments was part of the effort to make the service more attractive and improve retention.

The improvements were not without their downside, however. One was that it gave commanders less say in the selection process. Shaud said, “We found cases where officers were volunteering for positions and being selected for them, [yet] their commanders didn’t know about it until they were notified of the officer’s assignment.”

By early 1995, the Air Force introduced a new officer assignment system to exploit all the electronic tools and set up worldwide computer links. The new system, minus the word “volunteer,” also enabled USAF to once again take qualified nonvolunteers to fill the less desirable jobs that were going unfilled.

In June 1996, it refined the system further with a program titled “More Voice/More Choice,” intended to provide more commander involvement—for both gaining and losing commanders—in the assignment process. However, officers still could shop and volunteer for assignments without notifying their commanders.

Admittedly, this kind of “home shopping” was popular with officers. As Shaud said, “They were spending a great deal of time surfing the Web waiting for specific jobs to
be posted so they could volunteer for them.”

But recent feedback from officers in the field had suggested that many found the merchandise not as good as advertised. A recurring comment was that many of the jobs on the electronic bulletin board were, in fact, already filled. “If someone keeps volunteering for things and nothing happens,” said Shaud, “if the system keeps saying ‘no,’ the person says, ‘I suppose there is a system here but I’m not participating in it.’”

The Fixers

It was against this background that Ryan called for the most recent review of the system. It was an open-ended assignment, Shaud said. “When I got involved, I had zero baggage,” he said. “It was something that I knew the Chief wanted looked at, but as far as anyone’s saying change or don’t change it, that was not part of the guidance.”

An important part of the review group’s activity was polling officers for their views about the current system. Almost 10,000 officers in a wide range of grades, skills, and locations responded to a survey posted on the Internet.

The survey provided 14 statements and asked the respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with each or were neutral on the subject.

Almost two-thirds of the officers polled agreed, for example, that Air Force needs should take precedent over individual desires. Fewer than nine percent disagreed.

Reactions were less one-sided to the statement that the current system puts the right people in the right assignment. Forty percent agreed and 39 percent disagreed.

Sentiments were divided, too, on whether the current system is clear and understandable. About 46 percent agreed that it is and 36 percent disagreed.

Asked whether they agreed that the current system is fair to all career areas, however, more than half (53 percent) said no and only 16 percent agreed.

There was a similar division of reactions to statements dealing with the Officer Professional Development objectives for members’ career Air Force Specialty Code. About 35 percent agreed that the OPD objectives for their fields are clear and understandable but 44 percent disagreed. About 31 percent agreed that the present assignment system encourages career development but 45 percent disagreed.

Some elements of present assignment policy drew only mild reactions while others were applauded. Some 43 percent of the officers agreed, for example, that all jobs should be filled by the best qualified, regardless of move status, and 46 percent disagreed. However an overwhelming 82 percent agreed that the ability to separate or retire in lieu of accepting an assignment (“the seven-day option”) should be kept as part of the system. Only 9 percent disagreed.

A whopping 85 percent also agreed that the present Internet assignment home page and electronic bulletin board are important and useful sources of information. Barely 7 percent disagreed. An even larger 93 percent agreed that the ability to provide input (desires and preferences) concerning assignment choices is essential to the system. Only 3 percent disagreed.

A large majority of the officers (92 percent) also agreed that they should have the ability to view all job openings/Advertisements regardless of their own eligibility. Again only three percent disagreed.

Statements on commander involvement drew less one-sided reactions. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) agreed that their commander/supervisor discussed career progression and future assignment options with them. About 24 percent disagreed. However 42 percent of the officers agreed that commanders/supervisors have too little influence in determining officer assignments. About 32 percent disagreed. More than half (52 percent) said that AFPC assignment teams have too much influence over assignments. Only 16 percent disagreed.

Details to Follow

The changes so far announced address some of the major assignment areas, but a number of policy questions will not be answered until the implementing instructions are worked out.

One major one, for example, is whether the seven-day option favored by more than 80 percent of those surveyed should be kept.

“We talked about that,” said Shaud, “and our conclusion was that this has to be looked at further. The tension is between what is fair to the individual and what is fair to others. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that when they have someone refuse an assignment and then retire, it creates short-notice assignment notifications and a domino effect of unplanned retirements.

“I think the troops see it as a condition of service. On the other hand, if it is just wreaking havoc by forcing people to retire, that’s not right either. But we need to know what we’re talking about, and it’s measurable. The Air Force can tell when this action was taken and, in fact, what were the consequences. Did a lot of people retire in lieu of taking an assignment? So our recommendation was that this needs to be studied to see if it needs to be changed.”

The future of some other current policies also must be worked out. Shaud said he thinks the new system will retain the rule that officers in a “must-move” situation have a priority of action. “I think that is driven by common sense as much as anything,” he said.

Another policy the general thought was likely to survive was the one which allows couples, where both spouses are in service, to ask for the same locations. “We did not address that directly,” he said, “but I did bring it up, and it turned out that the numbers were not sufficiently large to be viewed as a big problem. My take is that the Air Force would not do major surgery to that.”

Similarly, he said, the Air Force will continue to allow for personal considerations. “The way I left it with them was that there is a space on the Preference Worksheet for special needs. In other words, it may be that you are saying, ‘I need to go to Fairchild because I have parents who are not well in Spokane, Wash. You ask me what my preference is and that’s it and that’s why. I am willing to forgo what a rising young lad ought to do, and I really need to go to a place for this reason.’”

Some Carryover

The new approach may not satisfy all officers, particularly those who favor electronic job-shopping. But officials stress that the Internet connection is not being broken entirely.
In approving the recommended changes, Ryan said, “Now officers will be able to see all their career field requirements along with special duty requirements. At the same time, they can use a second part of the display which indicates projected assignments being worked over the next six to nine months. Using some or all of this information, officers can talk to their commanders, and they can jointly communicate to assignment teams at AFPC what type of assignment they believe would be best for them.”

At the same time, the Chief said, assignment officers will remain ready to inform, recommend, and educate officers about their assignment options.

Are people still going to have to go to remote locations and “hard-to-fill” assignments? “Yes,” said Ryan. “However, all the key players in the assignment process will be educated on the current requirements at the time when an officer’s assignment is being made. When officers have to fill these assignments, they will understand why they are the ones being selected to go.”

It still will be possible, too, for officers to deal with assignment experts at the personnel center, said Shaud. “With the personnel center paying more attention to career development,” he said, “I would hope that they would be able to do that even better. And, of course, the longer-term result, we think, would be that the commander’s able to handle most of that. It becomes routine that you work with your commander as to the when and where and what of the next assignment.

“What I am hoping is that commanders are able to explain better what an individual’s chances are. Suppose you have somebody who wants to be the CINC’s [executive officer] or aide or something. If that is what the individual really wants, I am hoping that there is a lieutenant colonel somewhere who can say, ‘Let me tell you how you can become competitive’ or say, ‘This just isn’t going to work for you.’ Rather than have officers applying for something that never comes up on the net, informed people will really understand how this works.”

The new approach also should help end some practices that have sparked criticism, Shaud said. “The way the system is set up now,” he said, “the gaining commander can craft the assignment in the advertisement so it can only fit one person. The individual then clicks and drags that assignment and gets picked up, much to the astonishment of a losing commander somewhere. That’s not right either. I think the gaining commander can have something specific in mind but should work it out through the personnel center and in phone calls to the losing commander.

“I think one of the things we will have to work on very hard is teaching the system well to the troops so they trust it. There has to be an element of trust here because it is a shift away from what they have today. I think that when the individual is dealing with the electronic bulletin board with nobody in between, frequently the idea has been that somehow the system betrayed them.”

Something Borrowed ...

Describing how his group developed its recommendations, Shaud said, “I told someone that we used something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue.

“What was old was the idea of this Preference Worksheet, which is like the old Form 90. The junior officers on our team came up with that, and I took a look at it and thought, ‘Well, they have managed to reinvent the Form 90.’ But this is exactly what they wanted, to array preferences and have that array mentored with someone talking to them about it. And this is what is on that Preference Worksheet that the commander signs off on, and that is what gives it its impact at the personnel center.

“The important thing is sticking with the visibility built into the system with the requirements display. What they won’t do is click and drag the way they do today. It will just display the assignments, saying, here is what is available overall and here is what is available specifically for you and your AFSC. Then you translate that into your Preference Worksheet. That is forwarded, all electronically, to the Officer Assignment Teams. But you are guided by someone who understands the process and understands you.

“The thing borrowed is that greater commander involvement. We were briefed by the other services, and we were very much taken with the notion the Army has that this Officer Assignment System is the commander’s system. It works because there is commander involvement. And it isn’t that the commander spends a lot of time figuring out how to help people bypass the system. But the thrust of it is that it is a commander’s system and with a mentored relationship, maybe we can help that.

“The something blue in it is the idea of Air Force values, service—meaning a profession, a calling. It’s the idea that the excellence of the individual in USAF is defined by the job that he or she is doing today and that the assignment system is to enhance that excellence both in the individual and in the system. The final thing is that the Officer Assignment System references the Air Force value of integrity, meaning that it does not give false expectations but that it is based on merit.

“I also use the term ‘integrity’ in the engineering sense,” Shaud said, “meaning that the system all fits together, that the officer, the commander, and the personnel center work together with integrity so that all the parts fit, and people don’t spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to get around it.

“I found those junior officers on our panel very impressive in the way they like to talk about values, this idea of service, the idea of excellence, the idea of integrity. We talked about Duty, Honor, Country and what all this had to do with the assignment system. When I briefed the Chief, I told him what impressed me most was the way that mission orientation and the idea of military values were very much picked up by the junior officers, and that was heartening.”