Too many Air Force people are deciding life might be better out of the service.

The Retention Problem Spreads

They have been ground down by endless weeks on temporary duty in the Arabian desert and at other remote sites. When they get home, after missing everything from children’s birthdays to holiday family gatherings, they must work longer hours than ever to meet performance standards. They see the Air Force getting smaller and budgets tighter. Then they are tempted by lucrative civilian job offers.

Air Force pilots? Yes—but not them only. More and more, the Air Force’s rank and file members are being battered by the same problems that afflict fliers, and too many are deciding that life might be better outside military service.

Retaining motivated and technically adept enlisted men and women is becoming more and more difficult for Air Force personnel officials. The situation is not as acute as the pilot problem. Still, service leaders find it harder than ever to keep mid-level specialists in key jobs. These range from experienced F-16 crew chiefs to Serbo-Croatian linguists.

In a recent message to the force, Gen. Michael E. Ryan, Chief of Staff, warned, “One of the Air Force’s major challenges today is to retain the high-quality people we need.” Ryan has pushed for a multipronged effort to improve enlisted retention. It includes steps ranging from the reduction of operations tempo, where possible, to increased use of videophone communication between families and airmen overseas, to a thorough overhaul of the very structure and operations concept of the post–Cold War Air Force.

Use of video links may sound like a minor detail, but it represents the kind of attentiveness that can tip a re-enlistment decision in the Air Force’s favor. The service had conducted successful video link tests at more than 40 operating locations. “This initiative met with a positive response,” Lt. Gen. Michael D. McGinty, then–deputy chief of staff for personnel, said in a status report to Congress. Regarding the video experiment, McGinty noted, “A deployed first sergeant said, ‘I’ve never seen a better morale booster.’”

Pilot Exodus

Without question, the pilot shortage remains USAF’s most serious and difficult retention problem. Too many deployments to Southwest Asia, plus a boom in airline hiring that shows no sign of slowing down, has sent many Air Force aviators practically rushing for the exits.

Projections based on data collected through July show the Air Force is on pace to lose many more pilots in the next several years and suffer an actual shortage of some 2,300 in 2002. That projected 2002 shortfall, moreover, is nearly 30 percent higher than the figure projected only a few months ago. In early 1998, service officials said, they calculated USAF would be short 1,800 pilots when 2002 rolls around. Worsening conditions through 1998 have forced them to revise that projection.

Fixes such as an increased pilot bonus and reduced training tempo could cause this trend to turn around, though they have yet to do so, Air Force personnel officers note.
Retention problems being experienced in the enlisted force may be less dire, but they are serious and have become the source of major concerns. As far back as late 1997, Air Force officials were sounding an alarm. CMSAF Eric W. Benken delivered a memo to the top brass in which he warned bluntly that enlisted retention “is going south on us.”

The concern of Air Force leaders is focused narrowly on second-term re-enlistment rates, which is an area of difficulty in an otherwise strong personnel picture. (See box on p. 63.) The decision about whether to opt for civilian life at the end of two tours is a crucial one. Those who re-up are often dedicated to long-term military careers. Most have already demonstrated they are valuable to the Air Force itself just by reaching the two-term point. The US government has invested thousands of dollars—sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars—in their specialized training. Many are hard to replace.

The Air Force goal is to entice 75 percent of its two-termers to continue their time in service. Through the end of the third quarter of Fiscal 1998—that is, through June 30—the actual figure was just 70 percent.

The main reasons for retention woes are well-known. Increased operations tempo is the culprit that many departing airmen cite as the push that shoved them out the door. As Air Force leaders often point out, four times as many personnel typically are deployed away hovers around 52 percent, for instance, well below the 75 percent goal. For communications—computer systems controllers, it is only 31 percent.

Other skills listed on AFPC’s Top 10 Re-enlistment Watch list, with their first-through-third-quarter 1998 second term re-enlistment rates, include: F-16 crew chiefs (66 percent), security forces (66 percent), pararescue jumpers (55 percent), airborne battle management personnel (64 percent), combat controllers (100 percent, but remain on the list based on prior year activity), cryptolinguists (53 percent), and computer operators (61 percent).

“These are not the only skills we’re concerned about,” reports MSgt. Tony Patterson, superintendent of retention policy at AFPC. “These are ones that we’ve picked out as being particularly important to the Air Force.”

In Fiscal 1997, the last full year for which data are available, the Air Force failed to meet second-term re-enlistment goals in 114 of 378 enlisted specialty codes, or nearly a third of the total. And the situation has only gotten worse.

The main reasons for retention woes are well-known. Increased operations tempo is the culprit that many departing airmen cite as the push that shoved them out the door. As Air Force leaders often point out, four times as many personnel typically are deployed away.

On the Air Force Personnel Center’s Top 10 Re-enlistment Watch List are security forces personnel like A1C Charles Wunsch from the 4406th Support Squadron, here on duty on the perimeter of tent city at Al Jaber AB, Kuwait.

Though USAF has had the highest retention rate among the services, retaining key mid-level specialists is now harder. On the list of skilled enlisted members with a worrisome re-enlistment rate are pararescue jumpers like these.
Air Force Magazine / October 1998

Top 10 Watch List, Enlisted Retention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1st Term</th>
<th>2d Term</th>
<th>3d Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combat controllers</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-16 crew chiefs</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airborne BM personnel</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Com–computer operators</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pararescue jumpers</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air traffic controllers</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space systems operators</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security forces</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cryptolinguists</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Com–computer systems controllers</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: USAF. Fiscal 1998 figures are for first three quarters only.

Air Force Enlisted Retention Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal Year</th>
<th>1st Term</th>
<th>2d Term</th>
<th>3d Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: USAF. Fiscal 1998 figures are for first three quarters only.

Several changes, ranging from decreasing the optempo to overhauling USAF’s structure and operations may help to meet the challenge of retaining personnel like these crew chiefs on the flight line on a Southwest Asia deployment.

The cryptolinguist field, for example, has become a major retention problem because members of that specialty operate in a very high-tempo environment. Enlisted personnel who can speak Farsi (the native tongue of Iranians) or Serbo-Croatian (spoken in many areas of the Balkans) are in tremendous demand overseas.

Similarly, air traffic controllers are shuttling all over the world, running temporary Air Force traffic operations in places as diverse and widely separated as Tuzla in Bosnia and Mogadishu in Somalia.

The high optempo of today affects more than just the folks on deployment. Those left behind often must pick up more of their base’s daily workload. A Chief of Staff quality-of-life survey showed the average number of hours worked by Air Force personnel increased from 47 to 50 per person over the course of 1997.

Such workload issues were not that much of a problem back when the majority of the force was not married. In the 1970s, about 70 percent of airmen were single, and deployments were a chance to see the world. Today the situation is reversed. Only 35 percent of the force is single, whereas 65 percent are married, and the state of an enlisted member’s family is very important to his or her re-enlistment decision. Base housing conditions are now crucial to keeping good people. So are the number of base clinics and ease of access to child care.

Moreover, the long, slow decline in resources demoralizes many in the force and has contributed somewhat to retention problems. “The kids see a shortage of parts, a shortage of trained people, and an abundance of work to do,” observed Gen. Richard E. Hawley, the head of Air Combat Command and an outspoken advocate for easing the strain on the troops.

Squeeze on Benefits

Airmen no less than officers perceive that the resource squeeze has caused a serious erosion of their own benefits. Those who entered the force after 1986 are now well aware that Congress in that year altered the military retired pay formulation to their disadvantage. The congressional move reduced retired pay from 50 percent of average basic pay over the last three years of service to 40 percent of that final three-year run.

These irritants might not cause too much difficulty were it not for another factor: the strong US job market. Civil airlines are not the only US industrial entities eager for USAF–trained personnel. Contractors such as Boeing are snapping up technicians from nearby bases. Computer systems operators are in tremendous demand all across the country. Space systems operators are leaving the service in droves for private work.

“Even in the civilian economy things are moving towards space and satellites,” AFPC’s Patterson points out.

According to Ryan, the Chief of Staff,
the Air Force game plan to retain high-quality people has four major areas of focus. They are: reducing operations tempo, improving care for families of deployed people, improving quality of life, and improving personnel programs.

A number of the optempo initiatives are already in place. Ryan has ordered a 5 percent reduction in Air Force and joint training exercises through 2000, for instance. Quality Air Force Assessments ended Jan. 1. There has been a 10 percent reduction in the length of inspections and number of inspectors used for Operational Readiness Inspections this year, with further such cuts to follow.

To improve care for families, the Air Force is pursuing an ombudsman program. Wing commanders will charge these Readiness NCOs with serving as personal advisors to spouses and dependents of absent Air Force men and women.

The service is also looking to bolster family ties through better means of communication. That is where the deployable videophones—which operate over standard phone lines—come in. Some commands are taking further action on their own. Example: Air Mobility Command is moving to equip base operations aircrew lounges with Internet-connected personal computers.

**Real Quality of Life**

Officials know that better pay is the best way to bolster enlisted quality of life. In that regard they are happy that this year, in the defense authorization bill, Congress has given the nod to a 3.6 percent compensation boost—a bigger increase than the Pentagon requested.

To help increase quality of life in the area of enlisted housing, the Air Force this year is updating 3,800 family housing units and 21 dormitories. It is building three child development centers, two education centers, one family support center, and one fitness center.

Personnel program improvements include greater opportunity for promotion. With end strength and requirements more stable now than they have been in past years, the service is now better able to predict how many senior NCOs it will need in the years ahead.

“We’ve increased the promotion percentage for master sergeants, staff sergeants, and tech sergeants,” Patterson said. “In fact, the most recent staff sergeant promotion list had the highest promotion rate in 27 years.” That rate was 22.65 percent.

Many of these improvements are aimed at increasing the Air Force’s overall retention. “Rifle shot” efforts—those aimed at keeping individual specialists dependent on something else: bonuses. Air Force officials said that the No. 1 tool for retaining targeted enlisted skills is the Selective Re-enlistment Bonus program.

The growth in such SRBs mirrors the growth of the second-term re-enlistment problem. In 1995, 41 skills were eligible for SRB status, in a program that overall doled out $24 million in re-up cash. Since then, the number of eligible skills has more than doubled. The latest review of the program, effective in late July, added to the list another 18 skills, bringing the total to 107.

The SRB program will cost the Air Force about $48 million in bonuses this year, figure AFPC officials. They believe that even though the cost of the program has doubled in recent years, it is cheap at the price. “We are starting to see some impacts where the bonus money is starting to work,” says Patterson.

Historically, the Air Force has had the highest retention rates of all the US military services. That is one record that Air Force officials intend to keep. High-level attention to the problem can be seen in the very existence of the AFPC retention policy office, which was created in December 1996. Prior to that, personnel officials were struggling to deal with a drawdown in personnel numbers.

“We’re out of the drawdown, and we’re into force shaping,” according to Firmin. “We’re concerned with shaping and building the force.”

Some of the most affected major commands, such as Air Combat Command, have established mirror-image retention offices and set up extensive Internet web sites that provide information on bonuses and optempo reduction efforts. Eleven NCOs met with Brig. Gen. John F. Regni, Air Force director of personnel resources, at the Pentagon earlier this year to discuss ways of keeping more enlisted personnel from walking. Enlisted retention was a focus at a top brass Corona meeting earlier this year.

“The message is we care about our enlisted folks. We care about all our personnel,” says Firmin.

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**The Pain Is Concentrated**

The developing problem in second-term re-enlistment is a somewhat isolated phenomenon.

For example, Air Force recruiting is strong. The task of attracting high-quality personnel into the force has not proved to be a problem—not yet. Officials point out that the Air Force easily met its 1997 recruiting goals. USAF’s former personnel chief, Lt. Gen. Michael D. McGinty, noted to lawmakers that the Air Force brought in 30,200 first-time enlistees, 99 percent of whom are high school graduates. Fully 79 percent of the new airmen scored above average on the Armed Forces Qualification Test.

Similarly, Air Force officials do not see first term re-enlistment rates as a big problem at the moment. At the end of their initial tour of duty, many enlisted personnel from all the armed forces decide that military life is not for them. Service personnel plans have long been adjusted accordingly. Through the end of the third quarter of Fiscal 1998, the Air Force first-term re-enlistment rate was 55 percent. That figure is right at the service’s goal for the year, although it represents a slight dip from 1997’s 56 percent rate.

Meanwhile, the career rate remains strong. It stands at 93 percent for the year so far, slightly below the 95 percent goal.

Thus, second-term retention has become the focus of Air Force concern. About the only other potential difficulty on the horizon concerns recruiting. Officials point with concern to the steadily declining interest among young Americans in entering the nation’s military service. Poll numbers show that the slice of 16-to-21-year-old Americans who say they have a “propensity to enlist” in the military has dropped from 17 percent in 1989 to around 12 percent today.

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Peter Grier, the Washington bureau chief of the Christian Science Monitor, is a longtime defense correspondent and regular contributor to Air Force Magazine. His most recent article, “From the Battlelabs,” appeared in the September 1998 issue.