



USAF photo by SSgt. Katherine Spessa

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

By Jennifer Hlad



USAF photo by Amn. Connor J. Marth

**T**he effects of personnel shortages are being keenly felt in the Air Force, making it increasingly tough to retain experienced pilots and maintainers.

Manpower shortfalls in these two areas are by now a well-known problem. Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James in August said the service faced a shortage of 700 fighter pilots by the end of 2016, and experts think it could take until 2019 just to start making headway against the deficit of 4,000 maintainers.

Service leaders are scrambling to correct the imbalance, but the effects of the shortages are already taking their toll on individual airmen.

Lt. Col. Thomas M. Bean, assistant director of operations for the 391st Fighter Squadron at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, said he's heartened by the fact that service leaders have acknowledged the problem, but that does little to reduce the pressure on an individual to accomplish the mission.

"When you join the Air Force, ... you usually do it for a myriad of personal reasons," including pride in one's country and work, Bean said. This means "you

said when he joined the Air Force more than 20 years ago, there were three crew chiefs assigned per aircraft. Now, he said, they're doing the same job and maintaining the same operating tempo with about a third fewer people.

Previously, if the unit was going to fly 10 missions, they would have about 16 crew chiefs available, Bean noted.

### HARDER AND HARDER

"It takes X number of airmen to maintain, to fix the aircraft when they break, and to maintain the overall appearance, as well as the mission capability of these aircraft," Wadas told *Air Force Magazine*. "We find it harder and harder, as time goes on and we lose more and more people, to have the ability to have that touch time per aircraft."

The dwindling numbers of airmen who remain now expect to work 10 hours a day, five days a week, and some weekends—maintaining the same number of aircraft with no backup. Leaders like Wadas try to relieve the pressure and avoid 12-hour shifts by "creatively managing" people, but he said, "it's a constant battle every day."

Compounding the problem is the growing age of the F-15E Strike Eagles that Wadas works on. They "find new and better ways to break."

His unit is "seeing stresses on these airframes that we've never seen before."

According to Bean, the maintenance shortage becomes acutely apparent when a jet's mission is aborted.

"Now we're seeing right around 10, 11," he said. If an aircraft aborted, "it used to be that I would shake the crew chief's hand, salute, thank him for his hard work, and move on to the next jet. I would shake another crew chief's hand, get in the aircraft, start her up, take her to fly."

Instead, "I get out of the jet that I have aborted, I shake the crew chief's hand, I say, 'Thank you for your work,' and he says, 'Sir, I'll see you at the next jet.' And he is running next to me, going to the next jet."

Bean said the workload for the maintainers "is immense."

"It is amazing what they have been able to accomplish, given the limited resources that they have," he said.

Fewer pilots and maintainers also causes more frequent deployments for

## USAF may find that personnel shortages lead to even more airmen leaving the force.

want to accomplish the duties to a certain standard."

Even when leadership says they understand that a unit is overtasked, the airmen don't want to let the mission fail. They'll accomplish the tasks assigned, even if it means longer hours, more stress, and work taken home that affects family and personal time, Bean said.

MSgt. Shannon J. Wadas, production superintendent for the 391st Aircraft Maintenance Unit at Mountain Home,

Top left: SrA. Daniel Lasal performs a postflight inspection on an F-16 at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. The maintainer shortage has caused an increase in workload for those who remain. Left: A pilot signals a crew chief to pull chocks at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, during a Gunfighter Flag exercise. USAF expected to see a shortage of 700 fighter pilots at the end of 2016. Right: SSgt. Brian Covert gathers communications cords at Aviano AB, Italy, during a stopover on a mission to Iraq.



USAF photo by SrA. Cary Smith

those who remain, Bean and Wadas pointed out.

In the past, a pilot may have deployed once or twice in his or her first assignment, perhaps another time in the second assignment, and then gone to a staff or to school—a nonflying assignment. Now, because pilots are needed in the cockpit, they aren't doing those other assignments and end up doing more deployments over the course of their career, Bean explained.

Strike Eagles are routinely demanded by regional commanders “because of the capabilities we provide, so the frequency of the jets deploying I would not say has increased,” Bean said. However, “it’s a reduced pool of people having to meet the same deployment schedule, so ... the overall effect to the individual is more deployments.”

The deployment schedule is made more stressful by the permanent change of station timeline. It is often two years and eight months. If an operator does two six-month deployments during that time, he or she is only on-station for a year and eight months total, and even then will likely participate in several predeployment exercises that will take him or her away from home.

Bean asked rhetorically, “What is the effect on the quality of life for that individual” and his or her family?

Wadas—who has deployed 12 times and spent a year in Korea—said the deployment schedule hasn't changed, but because the pool of eligible specialists is so small, they simply can't choose not to deploy. People also are being turned around more quickly.

“Five or six people” he served in Korea with in 2013 and 2014 “have already

**A student pilot performs a touch-and-go in a T-6 Texan at Laughlin AFB, Texas. AETC expects to train 29 pilots per class by Fiscal 2019. Flight instructors are stressed by the heavy workload, but USAF needs new pilots since many are leaving.**

been turned back around and are back in Korea,” Wadas said.

“It’s time away from family. You spend more time deployed or on an assignment, as opposed to home.”

The Air Force is working hard to fix the problem: Col. Michelle Pryor, vice commander of the 47th Flying Training Wing, Laughlin AFB, Texas, said her unit is training about 300 pilots per year now but expects an increase to about 500 a year.

## PRODUCING PILOTS

In Fiscal 2016, she said, the wing averaged 21 students per class, but expects that to increase to 29 per class by Fiscal 2019.

Training new pilots “takes a tremendous team effort,” Pryor said. Instructors are flying extra sorties to graduate pilots, and leaders are working to come up with “innovative solutions to meet the increasing demand.”

“We’re working our hardest to produce more pilots” and to deliver airpower, Pryor said.

USAF is moving to boost the number of maintainers, but Wadas said that it takes seven to 10 years for a crew chief to become seasoned enough to “be a leader out there on the line.”

An “influx of new people isn't going to solve the problem—they have to be trained. It's going to take time,” he said.

A lack of money for parts forces maintainers to be more innovative in how they do maintenance, Wadas said. The “cannibalization process on other aircraft is higher.”

In the pilot community, Bean said there is a perception that while fourth generation jets have been carrying most of the burden, they're not getting a commensurate level of funding or attention.

“It's the condition of the jets, how many I traditionally abort [versus] how many I'm aborting now. All that plays into a perception from an operator standpoint,” Bean said.

As more civilian companies seek out military pilots and maintainers, exiting the Air Force is becoming more attractive for experienced operators.

In August, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein said he's “extremely proud” of airmen “because regardless of how much strain there is, regardless of what they're asked to do, they step up time and time again.”

Still, to retain them, quality of life and quality of service must improve, he acknowledged.

Bean said he volunteered for a year-long deployment so his family would be able to stay at Mountain Home, but if that option hadn't been offered to him, he would have thought seriously about separating from the service.

“I have a lot of good friends, compatriots, ... close buddies, who have decided to get out. And I've seen a lot of very good aviators ... struggle with this decision,” Bean said. He knows nine people who have left the force in the last year, including five instructors, so his own workload has increased.

“I don't see this getting better for a long time,” he predicted. “I think we're near an all-time low of barrier to exit, and it's having an effect on everything.” Bean said brand-new fliers are “already talking about what they're going to do when they get out of the Air Force. We can't have that. I think that mentality is what is hurting us systematically with the pilot shortage.”

Fixing the problem will require innovative thinking, Bean said.

However, Wadas said he doesn't see any way forward “other than, we just plug along and do our job.”

That's why, he said, “looking to get out is a possibility.” ★

---

Jennifer Hlad is a freelance journalist based in the Middle East and a former *Air Force Magazine* senior editor.

