The Air Force’s long-predicted pilot shortage is here. And it’s getting worse.

Last fall, at the end of Fiscal 2015, the Air Force was 511 fighter pilots short of its needs. In March, that number had risen to 614, and if trends continue, by this fall the deficit will exceed 700. That would be 20 percent of the 3,500 fighter pilot positions currently authorized, according to Air Staff numbers.

By design, the Air Force has more fighter pilots than fighter aircraft—to fill staff jobs, air operations centers, instructor slots, planning, and as reserves—but officials say they may not have enough fighter pilots to fill the available cockpits by 2018. By 2022, the overall shortage is expected to reach 1,000 if a fix isn’t found.

The situation is nothing less than a “crisis,” Col. Farley Abdeen, chief of the Total Force Aircrew Management Integration Division, said. “The shortage is being felt first and hardest in those nonflying positions because keeping aircraft flying is the top priority.”

“If we say we are cutting into the fighter squadrons,” Abdeen said, “things have gotten really bad because that means we can do barely anything else on the periphery, and those things are very important.”

Paradoxically, Air Force officials say it’s the shrunken force that’s at the root of the pilot shortage—a fact that prevents a quick fix. The service doesn’t have enough aircraft or experienced pilots to season new pilots to fill the ranks. To address the situation, planners are working to ramp up pilot production at the maximum rate they can be absorbed, reduce the number of required rated positions where possible, and keep experienced pilots from voluntarily leaving the service. Those remedies, however, will take years to erase the shortage.

**BOTTOMING OUT**

Exacerbating the situation is an airline hiring surge, already underway and predicted to continue through 2025. The airlines are luring away pilots in all specialties, because these aviators already have the millions of dollars’ worth of training necessary to certify a commercial captain.

“It’s a big problem,” Lt. Col. Jason Cockrum, who manages career fields for the Combat Air Forces, told *Air Force Magazine* in May. “Obviously it’s taken us a decade-plus to get here, and it’s going to take a decade to get out of it.”

Managing the pilot inventory is tricky. A disparity in the number of pilots USAF produces and the number it needs can create an imbalance—either a shortage or excess, both of which endanger readiness—that takes years to flatten out. It’s been a struggle for the Air Force to fine-tune that balance during the force structure reductions since the end of the Cold War. (See “How Many Aircrew,” January 2014, p. 42.)

In the past, Cockrum said, the Air Force was able to cut its way out of shortages. Fewer squadrons meant fewer cockpits to fill. But that won’t work this time.

“The problem now is, we’ve reached the floor,” he said. “There’s no more cut that you can take and execute the mission that we’re tasked to execute.”

In fact, Air Force officials say reductions in the number of operational and training squadrons are largely to blame for the current fighter pilot shortage. The service has cut the number of its combat-coded fighter squadrons by nearly 60
The shortage, in turn, creates extra work for the experienced pilots who remain. In September, Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III stood up a fighter enterprise redesign to address the shortage. As part of the effort, planners have surveyed pilots about the factors they consider when deciding to stay in or leave the service. They’ve found the high operational tempo between deployments—the result of exercises and other support missions—is a primary concern.

“Even when they’re home, they’re not home,” Gen. Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle, commander of Air Combat Command, said while discussing pilot retention at AFA’s Langley Chapter Airpower Symposium at JB Langley-Eustis, Va., in April.

As a result, the service is finding it can’t hold onto its experienced pilots at a time when it’s not creating enough. Planners fear the airlines—which offer a chance to live in one place, a steady schedule, and higher pay—will pull more and more pilots away.

“The Air Force has long offered incentives such as increased flight pay and signing bonuses to compete with the airlines for its own experienced pilots. But the competition is getting more intense.”

For the last several decades, the percentage of USAF pilots who signed up for service beyond their initial 10-year commitment in exchange for a bonus closely followed the pace of airline hiring, according to an Air Force-sponsored RAND study released in 2015. When hiring was slow, the bonus “take rate” was between 60 and 70 percent, but during times of increased hiring, it only ranged between 30 and 40 percent.

**LURING MILITARY AVIATORS**

For much of the last 15 years, the airline industry faced curtailed growth in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and then due to further travel reductions related to the SARS disease outbreak and the US financial crisis, according to a February 2014 Government Accountability Office report. During that period, hiring was slow, the bonus “take rate” was between 60 and 70 percent, but the shortage could get worse.

“If [the airlines] look for experienced aviators, it definitely puts military aviator at the top of those folks they want to look for,” Lt. Col. Robert Butkovich, chief of rated force policy, told Air Force Magazine.

The numbers are already bad. In Fiscal 2015, only 55 percent of all eligible pilots and 47 percent of fighter pilots took the retention bonus. Carlisle told the Senate committee in March that the “draw from the airline hiring has reignited at a phenomenal level.” Butkovich said the total take rate is expected to drop to about 49 percent by the end of the year.

If not handled correctly, the overall shortage could get worse.

“We have to manage the talent across the whole force. And when you look at what we do—air, space, and cyber—air is a huge component of what we do,” Col. Robert Romer, chief of
Air Staff’s military force policy division, said. “If we don’t have the pilots and the experience, if that continues to erode, it’s definitely going to impact readiness, and that’s a huge concern.”

To stave off an even more massive exodus and reduce the pilot shortage, Air Force planners are considering a myriad of approaches. Increasing the retention bonus, they believe, could have the most immediate impact. Notably, about 800 pilots will be eligible to sign new commitments in exchange for a bonus in Fiscal 2017.

In March, Welsh told lawmakers the service would be seeking legislation to increase the retention bonus, in place since 1999, from $25,000 per year of renewed commitment to $35,000 a year. But even that might not be enough.

Air Force studies indicate a $48,500 bonus is required to maintain the pilot inventory when the airlines hire just 3,200 pilots a year. Between $54,750 and $61,500 would be required if the airlines hire between 3,500 and 3,800 pilots a year.

As it costs the service an average of $10 million to train a fighter pilot, planners see the bonuses—even when they amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars for extended commitments—as worth it.

“We retain experience using the bonus,” Butkovich said. “If we lose that experience, it’s going to continually erode the Air Force’s position.” Offering the right amount, Butkovich said, could return the retention rate to the ideal 65 percent within two to three years.

The Air Force hopes quality of life improvements will convince its pilots to stay. Cockrum said planners believe increasing administrative support within the squadrons would reduce the pilots’ workload and allow them to focus on flying, instead of relying on pilots to perform unrelated nonflying duties.

The Air Force is also working to increase the number of pilots it produces—a balancing act all its own. Production needs to be ramped up in line with absorption capacity, to avoid creating a surplus of inexperienced pilots.

**LARGER, EXPEDITED CLASSES**

This fiscal year, 1,230 pilots—including Active Duty, Air National Guard, Reserve, and foreign military members—will complete undergraduate pilot training. The service is increasing class sizes to reach 1,400 pilots a year. Planners are looking for ways, including the use of civilian contractors, to increase its capacity to train even more. Contractors could be used as instructors, for example.

The service will also increase the number of fighter pilots passing through advanced training from the current 250 (Total Force) to 350 in Fiscal 2017. The ultimate goal is to produce 400 fighter pilots a year—an amount planners think the Total Force needs to overcome the shortage. Expedited graduate or platform-specific pilot training is being considered, as well.

In the meantime, planners are looking to get the most out of the available iron. If every aircraft in a squadron flies one more sortie a month, Cockrum said, that squadron would be able to support three more pilots. But increased flying requires increased funding, which can’t be counted on.

The lack of stability in the budget and the threat of a return to sequestration is “damaging to the Air Force,” Abdeen said.

More aircraft require more maintainers. The service was short more than 4,000 maintainers in 2015, but planners hope efforts to reduce that shortage will increase the number of hours the service’s aircraft can be flown. Officials are also considering seasoning new pilots in Reserve or Guard units that have available aircraft.

In April, Carlisle said “something different” needs to be done. The Air Force, he suggested, could increase the initial service commitment from 10 to 15 years, but allow its pilots to spend periods of that with the Reserve and Guard or even the airlines.

Planners admit, however, these fixes won’t solve the underlying problem—a small force being called on to do more and more.

“All those cuts that we had to take made us too small, and we have to grow back up if they want us to do all the things we need to do,” Abdeen said. “We don’t have all the fighter squadrons that we used to have. If we had those right now, we could push up a lot more production and absorption to make that happen, but we’re very limited because of the number of aircraft that we have.”