Squadrons, the heart and soul of the Air Force, have been under unremitting strain. USAF seeks to fix that.

Soon after Gen. David L. Goldfein took command as the Air Force Chief of Staff in July 2016, he put three big rocks in his jar of priorities for the service. At AF&’s Air, Space & Cyber (ASC) Conference in September 2016, the 21st CSAF announced that his tenure would be defined by the development of multidomain command and control, the cultivation of joint leaders within the Air Force, and the revitalization of the squadron.

While work is underway in all three areas, Goldfein clearly prioritized squadron revitalization during his first year. Given the problems of readiness, retainment, and operations across the force, the effort was a logical starting point. “It is at the squadron level where we succeed or fail as an Air Force,” Goldfein said at ASC. “It is where airmen are developed. It is where airmen are resourced.”

Goldfein’s revitalization discussion began in February 2016 when he sounded the alarm on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. on the road’s current state. In testimony before the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on defense in June, Secretary of the Air Force Heather A. Wilson said a thousand new positions to add in at the squadron level. “We’re seeing the effects of [cuts] at the squadron level,” Wilson explained that many of these positions were lost in 2013 as a result of sequestration, and the Fiscal Year 2018 budget “puts more support back in at the squadron level.”

Wilson told Congress that readiness across the Air Force was at its worst level since the 1970s—“less than 50 percent ready across our Air Force, and we have pockets that are below that.” He added that USAF was off balance due to “nonstop combat, paired with the budget instability and lower than planned toplines.”

The service’s squadron revitalization has barely begun, but USAF is already acting on some initial findings. In testimony before the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on defense in June, Secretary of the Air Force Heather A. Wilson said a thousand new positions to add in at the squadron level. “We’ve taken cuts in some places that made sense to take cuts at the time, but that the long-term effect of that had been cumulative.”

When those people were no longer in squadrons, their duties fell to those who remained, making it more difficult for them to focus on their primary duties. The increased burden that came from squadron-level cuts is “primarily for them to focus on their primary warfighting mission roles,” Davis contended.

Davis and his team spend a lot of time traveling these days. They are in the midst of some 20 base visits that will make up the core data collection portion. To gain the broadest possible perspective, they are conducting interviews at each of the nine Air Force major command (majcom) headquarters, one operational base connected to each majcom, plus the Air National Guard headquarters and an additional deployed location, Al Udeid AB, Qatar.

They complete one base every week.

During their visits, they mostly talk with airmen. “What we’re attempting to do is get past what the symptoms are and get down to the root causes,” he said. The central methodology is “peer-to-peer interviews.”

Davis goes to every base, and the interview team always includes a colonel, at least one lieutenant colonel, and a chief master sergeant. This mix ensures that interviewees are sitting across from someone who “understands their perspective as they ask the questions,” Davis said.

While the basic model remains the same from one place to another, Davis said the team has been changing and refining the questions as they go along in response to what they have been learning.

In addition to the one-on-one interviews, the team co-
The team did this on the issue of squadron commander and squadron superintendent preparation and training, he said. The team “identified that as a shortfall” early in their process, they presented the issues at Corona, and “it’s been tasked to Air University to look at and provide recommendations back to the Chief.”

Another early recommendation has impacted the Air Force budget request for Fiscal 2018. That request includes an increase of 4,100 Active Duty members and 1,700 Guard and Reserve, and squadron revitalization has helped the service to better target where some of those increases should land.

In this case, the squadron initiative was able to identify a need and recommend speedy, well-resourced change to alleviate the problem.

This kind of responsiveness is crucial. At AFAS' 2017 Air Warfare Symposium, Goldfein tells reporters he recently met with wing commanders and told them that squadron revitalization is not about delivering a solution from the top down. “I don’t want them all waiting around for me to solve it,” he said. “Don’t wait for me to come to you with the big program.”

Davis expected the field interviews to be completed by the end of July. The team will review their data and seek to identify the root causes of the problems they’re studying and propose solutions with the help of subject matter experts. They will “brief those to Air Force leadership in the fall.”

The solution and implementation phase will take some time. “This is not build a team, make recommendations, and then dishand the team,” Davis said. “This is a four-year effort in the Chief’s view.” After the team issue data collection, Davis thinks three years is not too long to spend identifying causes and preparing solutions. “It will take some time to figure out what we need to do and do that in a deliberate way,” he said.

Davis emphasized that his team is not waiting until the end of their process to fix problems they already understand. “If there’s something we find that we think is more immediately actionable, … we’re going to start working that right away.”

Moreover, the team is collecting data through a “web-based” crowd-sourcing platform launched in March. “We realize we’re not going to be able to touch every single airman” with the base visits, Davis said. The website will “give every airman a chance to provide input into what we’re doing.” The first forum on the website averaged 3,000 views per day. Engagement levels were good, with more than 16,000 user votes registered and more than 600 ideas generated.

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Davis said his team has spent a lot of time trying to build this bottom-up strategy into their methodology. They want to listen well to what exactly squadronrons really need. “When we interview, we don’t want to get our own ideas echoed back to us. We want to get the interviewee’s ideas,” he said. So the team spends a lot of time “training our folks to fight against injecting themselves and their own views” into the conversation. The gold standard is the grassroots idea that no one in the Pentagon has yet considered.

Not all the problems Davis and his team have uncovered have quick fixes. Some are more deeply ingrained in the organizational structure of a sprawling global bureaucracy.

Indeed, some are almost sociological in nature. That’s why the Air Force sometimes uses the word “cultural” to describe particularly hairy issues.

One concern that quickly and consistently emerged in the team’s interviews was the need to push authorities down to the squadron level.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein speaks about Air Force operations during an all-call at Shaw AFB, S.C., in May. Squadron revitalization is one of Goldfein’s top three priorities.
Airmen are required to read these periodically and officially acknowledge that they are aware of their contents. In the same way that authorities naturally tend to migrate up and centralize over time, Davis said AFIs “have a natural tendency to proliferate.” Have a problem in a squadron? Write a new AFI to solve it. “Things are put in the AFI for good reasons at the time,” Davis said. But more AFIs eventually create “a cumulative effect” that can hamper squadron effectiveness by “putting an additional burden on the squadron that’s not warranted.”

The team wants to take its time developing a solution to this problem. A new AFI aimed at reducing the number of AFIs would certainly seem less than satisfactory. And it would fail to get at the root cause.

A new AFI is, in many cases, the path of least resistance to solving a problem. Instead, Davis wants to tackle the tougher challenge of creating “the right leadership culture so that you put a check against” things like AFI proliferation.

RETENTION AND READINESS

So what is all this adding up to? The larger goals of the program are getting more airmen to stay in the Air Force and making them better prepared for the mission at hand. These are certainly the two faces of the manpower struggles the service has been confronting in recent years. It’s too early in this initiative to gauge results, but Davis knows what he’s looking for.

One of the keys to keeping people in the force is more choice and more flexibility. “I think we’re addressing the retention problem writ large,” Davis said.

An issue that cropped up in interviews was the desire for multiple professional development tracks in the Air Force. A number of airmen said they wanted to see the service implement “a technical track and a leadership track.” Right now, the Air Force sees every airman “as being on the potential leadership path,” Davis said. Changing that would make it possible for “folks that just want to be good, solid, strong technicians to be able to stay in the Air Force and just focus on that.”

There’s no clarity yet on how the service will address that concern, but Davis said his team will be successful if they have an impact on retention. “I’m convinced, based on what we’re seeing so far, and where we’re headed,” he said, “that we’re going to do things that help retention across the Air Force.”

The other measure will be how prepared airmen feel. “We would expect that if we do this right, we’re going to see increases in readiness,” Davis said. He wants to see real movement on the numbers the Air Force uses to gauge readiness: “personnel, training, equipment, and resources.” He plans to watch the regular climate surveys. “That will be our metric going forward for how we’re doing on this.”

In the end, Davis wants squadron revitalization to be a truly grassroots effort that culls the best ideas from airmen on the ground, doing the mission. But that doesn’t mean the program lacks ambition. On the contrary, Davis has instructed his team to “look for the big opportunities that address all or most squadrons.” If the result is an Air Force that fewer high-performing airmen want to leave, and an Air Force that is better prepared to face the challenges of the complex missions of the 21st century, then the four years of trying to figure out how to revitalize squadrons will seem like time well spent.