

Managing the Air Force's Most Important Resource

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Since September 11, 2001 the United States Air Force has completed numerous changes in policy and standards to align with the continuous personnel and equipment changes. In order to manage the Air Force's fiscal year 2009 end strength of 328,600 effectively and raise morale, the Air Force management must embrace a comprehensive approach to manpower structure, with personnel funding, and technical training.

Background

The United States Air Force has changed the total end strength of personnel multiple times in the last decade in order to meet financial and expeditionary demands. After 2001, the Air Force grew to over 372,000 personnel in order to meet the upcoming demands of the War on Terror. Shortly thereafter in fiscal year 2004, the Air Force also began to cut positions that were not in the budget, in conjunction with streamlined processes and procedures in order to get down to the approved 349,000 personnel level for fiscal year 2005.¹ However, the Air Force continued to draw down severely due to financial and congressional demands, ending fiscal year 2007 with 334,000 personnel, and planning to finish fiscal year 2009 with 316,000.²

¹ Air Force Strength From 1948 THUR 2007

URL:<<http://www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/demographics/ReportSearch.asp>>. Accessed 4 January 2008

² Bruce Rolfsen, "Force-Shaping update could come Wednesday,"

URL:<http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2007/08/airforce_force_shaping2008_070813>. Accessed 4 January 2008.

The draw down initiative was ceased by Defense Secretary Gates mid way through fiscal year 2008.³ However more recently, on January 5 2009, Air Force Times wrote that the Air Force is ready to grow by 10,000 by the end of 2010.⁴ Upon reading this, Air Force personnel became disheartened from all personnel that were cut unnecessarily.

One problem with the rapid decrease was the target grades, primarily first lieutenants. First lieutenants, when commissioned, made the commitment to serve at least four years and many had the intention to serve longer if their service records met promotion standards. In many cases, these lieutenants were never given a truly responsible role while in the Air Force, because more lieutenants existed than positions to fill. In fact, the Air Force commissioned many more officers than they needed between 2002 and 2004, only to kick them out because of this mistake three years later.

Lieutenants were not the only group targeted: majors, lieutenant colonels, and enlisted ranks were also drastically reduced. Some of the junior enlisted had experiences similar to those of the lieutenants. Though large incentives were offered for their separation, majors, lieutenant colonels, and non

³ Michael Hoffman, "Gates: No More Cuts to U.S. Air Force Personnel," [URL:<http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=3570646>](http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=3570646). Accessed 5 January 2008.

⁴ Staff report, "14 things airmen must know in 2009." *Air Force Times*. 4 January 2009 pg 8

commissioned officers (NCO's between E-4 and E-9) also lost their jobs with little time to plan.

1980's Processes and Considerations

The Air Force has not always had to make drastic cuts after a surge. The importance and difficulty in attaining proper end strength numbers was learned in a discussion with a retired Air Force officer who ran officer accessions in the mid 1980's at the Air Force Personnel Center. During the Cold War in the 1980's the Air Force accessed as many second lieutenants each year as exist now total, approximately 7,000.⁵ Each year, the Air Force must be exactly on their end strength numbers, and have the correct total in each specialty code. There are many estimates that must be made, people drop out during Officer Training School, others are forced out due to poor academic and physical training scores, even un-timely deaths, and college graduates fail or drop contracts. When pilots and navigators fail out of training, or drop on request, they must be placed into another career field, if not dropped from the Air Force. This affects the accessions in each specialty code. A controlling measure is to move graduation dates for Officer Training School, that way a group can be pushed forward or back

⁵ Air Force Strength From 1948 THUR 2007. Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet.
URL:<<http://www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/demographics/ReportSearch.asp>.> Accessed 4 January 2009.

between fiscal years. On a smaller scale, college commissions can be moved around on a person by person basis.⁶ Once the Cold War ended and 7,000 accessions a year were no longer required, the Air Force accessed less each year to draw down slowly.

Current Process

Force shaping has been the method of choice for separating first lieutenants pre-maturely from their active duty service commitment of four years. The force shaping process starts at the wing level with a wing commander stratifying his first lieutenants first to last within the entire wing and again within the career fields. Each career field must meet their own end strength demands of force shaping in order to balance the force. However, force shaping does not always result in expected end state. For example, the author, a communications officer commissioned in 2004, had to compete with zero communications officers in the wing and only one other officer overall in the wing. Yet communications officers commissioned in 2004 were drawn down forty-two percent, the maximum possible for one group in one year, which amounts to approximately 125 of 300 officers.⁷

⁶ Colonel (ret) Scott Wm McLaughlin. Interviewed by author. Written. Springfield VA., 2 January 2009.

⁷ As reflected in the memo, the author was commissioned in 2004 and was selected to remain in the Air Force even though he was not competing against any other communications officers and only one other officer in the wing. This will normally reflect poorly on the officer since he cannot be compared to other officers. The author had an achievement medal and a deployment which is rare and aided in him remaining in the Air Force.

In addition to the large incentives for the majors and lieutenant colonels, the other incentive is the voluntary separation pay (VSP) to captains and majors with more than six and less than fifteen⁸ years of active duty service on which the program is centered. The VSP allots the member twice the pay they would receive if they are involuntarily separated for that fiscal year. If the member was approved for VSP, the remaining active duty service commitment is served in the three years of inactive reserve.⁹

At the same time, the Selective Early Retirement Board is for lieutenant colonels that have been twice deferred for promotion and for colonels who have four years time-in-grade without a line number to general. The incentive for volunteering to retire early is to get out of a service commitment early and not to be forced out by the board.¹⁰

Force Shaping was announced in 2005. The board met in 2006 and cut officers as they stated. The following year additional cuts were made to reduce the number of junior officers more drastically. In 2008, the Air Force projected it had met its

⁸ Bruce Rolfsen. "Over 100 Voluntary Separation Pay Slots Left."
URL:<http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2008/01/airforce_voluntaryseparation_080121>. Accessed 4 January 2009.

⁹ Rod Powers. "2007 Force-Shaping (Downsizing) Program."
URL:<<http://usmilitary.about.com/od/airforce/a/forceshaping07.htm?p=1>>. Accessed 4 January 2009

¹⁰ Rod Powers. "2007 Force-Shaping (Downsizing) Program."
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goals for the year, and took only volunteers to the end of March of fiscal year 2008.

Problems

Lieutenants who remained in the military or were forced to leave, received two annual progress reports, possibly a medal, and/or a deployment to distinguish themselves from their peers. This two to three year period does not allow for adequate time to evaluate an officer's potential in the Air Force, or to distinguish his or her abilities from the rest of their peers; especially since the first six months are dedicated to on-the-job and formal training. Upon notification of eligibility and until the board releases the results, an entire year's group will be constantly considering their future careers. Most officers' have served honorably and have records that would normally facilitate an outstanding career. By not volunteering to leave, the lieutenant has allowed the force shaping board to determine the lieutenant's future with the military, and the officer can now be forced to begin a second career after only three years of service. Force shaping adversely affected morale for units and was contagious throughout the Air Force. The feeling of unjust decisions and poor management was felt throughout. This meant that many personnel lost faith that upper management could effectively manage their Air Force.

The more senior officers eligible for VSP and considered by the Selective Early Retirement Board, also experienced the same issues, except these individuals were closer to retirement at twenty years of service. They were bitter for a different reason: that they may not be able to make the 20 year milestone. This presented a feeling of resentment which also spread in the organization.

In addition to the described issues, following the 2007 Force Shaping Board, VSP, and Selective Early Retirement Board, the Air Force accepted volunteers in 2008, and canceled the boards and non-voluntary separations,¹¹ resulting in more questions of leadership.

Counter Argument

The opposition contends that the Air Force has to make these drastic changes because of the constant budget cuts made by Congress. Over the last few years the Air Force budget has been squeezed tighter in order to fund the Global War on Terror. This year, money was taken from the Air Force to fund the Army.¹² The Air Force has shown it is willing to sacrifice in personnel

¹¹ Michael Hoffman. "Gates: No More Cuts to U.S. Air Force Personnel," [URL:<http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=3570646>](http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=3570646). Accessed 5 January 2008.

¹² William McMichael. "DoD asks to transfer \$9.7 Billion to Army." [URL:<http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2008/05/military_defensebudget_army_supplemental_052808W/>](http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2008/05/military_defensebudget_army_supplemental_052808W/) Accessed 4 January 2008.

areas in order to modernize, specifically to fund the aging airplane fleet.¹³

Instead of taking the easy route, and cutting positions because the budget has been reduced, incentives can be given and accessions can be reduced. Furthermore, many commanders have said the most valuable resource is their personnel. Though cutting these personnel prior to the end of their service commitment, and without cause of sub-par performance is not reinforcing this point. In addition, another way to do reduce positions is to make processes more efficient using Lean and Six Sigma. If done properly, unnecessary positions are identified and manpower can be reduced.

Proposed Solution

The Air Force should consider looking further into the future when making personnel decisions. The Air Force should use the designated units in place to the utmost of their capabilities in order to manage the personnel end strength more effectively. These units are in place in order to work with the Air Force Personnel Center to determine the total personnel per career field and in the Air Force. These units should concentrate on specific missions and come up with state-of-the-

¹³ Chris Krisinger. "Force-shaping strategy may pay off, but results won't be certain for years." URL:<<http://www.airforcetimes.com/legacy/new/0-AIRPAPER-1837795.php>>. Accessed 4 January 2008.

art training in order to assist planning. The end strength which is determined after an in-depth analysis should be matched with the number of missions and the expectations of the Air Force with the Secretary of Defense and Congressional budget constraints. By cutting so much of the already trained force, and now presenting the plan to grow by ten thousand more, the Air Force has squandered an obscene amount of training funds, and must dedicate more for the present and future.

Conclusion

With the ongoing modernization of the airplane fleet and state-of-the-art equipment, the Air Force must consider doing more studies in order to find the proper personnel end strength it requires to conduct the mission. It must hold units accountable for their mission of controlling the total end-strength and have the units integrate their processes with budget analysis units to ensure the Air Force falls within its limits mandated by Congress and the Secretary of Defense. All of these must be integrated in order to manage its most valued and expensive resource, personnel, effectively.

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