

By Peter Grier

The New

The Air Force must cut another 16,000 airmen at a time when the service is still stretched thin.

THE Air Force has changed dramatically over the last 15 years: It's 40 percent smaller than it was at the end of the Cold War, yet operational deployments are up—way up.

Many airmen now on active duty went through the turbulent time of the drawdown in the early 1990s. Now Air Force members face another upheaval as service leaders trim the force by some 16,000 personnel and reshape it to correct current manning and skill imbalances.

The new cuts will be the largest the Air Force has made in years and come at a time when the service remains stressed. Even before the surge in operations generated by the Global War on Terror (GWOT), the pace of long-standing deployments and pop-up crises had caused serious problems. Some officials estimated at the time that the Air Force should boost its end strength by at least 10,000 active duty personnel.

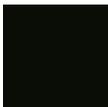
Officials have known since USAF became engaged in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the increased homeland defense mission, that the service has a bigger

Drawdown



USAF photo by TSgt. Scott Reed

As USAF undergoes another large personnel drawdown, some active duty airmen may opt to join Guard and Reserve counterparts such as SSgt. Jonas Concepcion, a Connecticut Air National Guard crew chief.



problem. The Air Force's Human Capital Task Force, in a 2003 report, called it a "content/skills mix problem."

According to the task force, the Air Force's "documented workload is at least 10 percent greater than assigned people." However, it added, "The problem is exacerbated by the fact that workload is not consistent across career fields nor installations."

Air Force Chief of Staff John P. Jumper emphasized that point in a formal statement released Jan. 29. He said, "We are out of balance for the contingency world in which we live."

Air Force leaders have been attempting since at least mid-2002 to identify the manning imbalance and redirect manpower into the most stressed areas. What they are not willing to do at this point is call for a permanent increase in end strength.

The problem, they say, is too complex to be solved by a single expedient.

"Increasing end strength isn't the answer," stated Air Force Secretary James G. Roche last fall. "We need to look at what we're doing, why we're doing it, and ask ourselves if there's another way to get the job done or if it's a job we should be doing."

The Understrength Years

Before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Air Force had been below its authorized end strength for several years. Jumper said that the robust economy in the late 1990s brought a drop in recruiting that the Air Force had not seen since 1979. To fill its rolls, the service pumped up recruiting and began taking in new active duty members in a variety of skill mixes. Some of those skills, said Jumper, "are no longer applicable to the demands of the GWOT."

After 9/11, however, the Air Force continued its recruiting push and implemented Stop-Loss to keep its end strength up as it headed into Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and pursued Operation Noble Eagle at home. By the end of Fiscal 2002, the service's active duty rolls exceeded authorized end strength by almost 9,500 personnel.

When USAF ended its Stop-Loss in 2002, said Jumper, many airmen



The Air Force must sustain critical career fields even as it cuts some 16,000 airmen to reach its authorized end strength for 2005. Above is SrA. Sara Trent, a weapons loader.

who had intended to separate elected to stay. USAF, in 2003, implemented Stop-Loss for Operation Iraqi Freedom. When it was lifted, the same thing happened.

Meanwhile, programs designed to fill critical skill shortages by enticing prior-service members to come back on active duty and reservists to shift to active duty were swelling the force even further. Retention was surprisingly strong. The Air Force goal for first-term enlisted retention was 55 percent, but, at the end of Fiscal 2003, actual first-term retention hit 61 percent.

Both patriotism and increased pay figured in this higher-than-normal rate of retention, according to Jumper. Such incentives as Imminent Danger Pay, Hardship Duty Pay, the Combat Zone Tax Exclusion, and the Family Separation Allowance, plus critical skills bonuses, really work, he said.

At the end of Fiscal 2003 (last Sept. 30), the service was exceeding its Congressionally authorized end strength by more than 16,000 airmen.

Jumper said that this was a temporary situation fueled by the war on terrorism. Everyone—top Air Force leaders, the Secretary of Defense, and lawmakers—agreed it was appropriate to be temporarily overweight, considering the President's declaration of a national emergency.

The catch was that Congress did not give the Air Force a temporary

increase in funds to pay for the extra people. Officials had to raid other accounts and programs for the money.

"Our task now is to reduce the force while also fixing this skill mix imbalance," Jumper wrote.

Service officials said they must cut 16,600 airmen—12,700 enlisted members and 3,900 officers—to meet USAF's authorized end strength of 359,700 by the end of Fiscal 2005. They plan to identify those cuts this year.

Shaping the Force

The Air Force first will change its recruiting targets. Goals will be slowly reduced from 37,000 recruits this year to 35,600 in Fiscal 2005 and 34,500 in 2006.

More recruits will be directed into stressed career fields. That will only partially fix shortages, as people right out of technical school cannot immediately step into more senior enlisted roles.

"Part of our force shaping will have to be done by retraining and shifting experienced people from over-staffed career fields," said Jumper.

Many airmen are willing to shift, and the service will support waivers to qualify for retraining into critical fields. Jumper pledged that the Air Force will work to unclog any training backlogs caused by limited training capacity in some fields.

"I am dedicated to reducing our



Firefighter SrA. Frank Abreu and other airmen in critical fields, are in high demand. The service has excluded them from drawdown programs such as the one that will waive some active duty service commitments.

stressed career fields and putting in place the right incentives to retain the people we task the most," wrote Jumper in his Jan. 29 statement.

Service reshaping also will change where and in what jobs uniformed Air Force personnel serve. The aim here is to reclaim people who work outside the "blue" Air Force. In 2002, 14,000 Air Force personnel worked in non-Air Force jobs, primarily in unified commands and defense agencies. Though the Air Force accounts for about 26 percent of the Defense Department's active duty military strength, Air Force members filled about 37 percent of non-service-specific military billets.

Some of these jobs do benefit the Air Force. It may be important to have an airman's perspective in certain joint or agency positions, for instance. Others may not have to be filled by a blue-suiter or any uniformed person from any of the other services. Greater use of private contractors might help Air Force leaders "reclaim" some positions into their ranks.

Jumper said that more than 13,000 of these Air Force positions have already been eliminated, in the sense that, when the people currently in those positions leave, they will not be replaced. However, not all of the airmen in those jobs have been moved, he said.

"It's hard for me to argue to the Congress that we don't have enough

people when we should be using some of our airmen in other required positions," said Jumper.

Other planned initiatives include:

- Restricting re-enlistment in overmanned career fields.
- Allowing more volunteers to transfer from the regular ranks to the Air National Guard or Air Force Reserve.
- Shortening some active duty service commitments.
- Commissioning some Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets directly into the reserves rather than bringing them on active duty.

■ Rolling back some separation dates.

■ Limiting reclassification of those eliminated from technical school.

The Air Force must exempt certain categories of personnel from this new drawdown. "Because of manning shortages, 29 officer and 38 enlisted specialties will not qualify for many of the waivers," said Maj. Gen. John M. Spiegel, the Air Force's director of personnel policy. Spiegel said the areas of shortage include pilots, navigators, air battle managers, aerial gunners, fuels specialists, nurses, and first sergeants.

"We don't want to break any career fields during our force-shaping efforts or create problems in future years similar to the ones caused by the downsizing in the early 1990s," said Spiegel.

Officials did not directly rule out involuntary separations. They predict that the first round of inducements should attract about 4,000 volunteers out of the 16,600 they need to cut.

"If at all possible, our goal is to give every qualified airman who wants to stay in the Air Force the opportunity to do so," wrote Jumper. "In addition, we will use every tool to shape the force we have available to avoid the extreme measures that were used in the early 1990s."

It might seem counterintuitive that the Air Force is planning to get smaller at a time when it is overburdened by major worldwide deploy-



Air Force plans call for limiting the number of new recruits the service will take on active duty during 2005 and 2006. It also will direct many of those recruits into certain career fields, to shape the force for the future.

ments. However, bigger is not always better for a service so heavily dependent on advanced technology. Just adding people without changing how you do things can drain millions of dollars in away from important weapons programs.

Adding 7,000 new airmen would equal the cost of seven upgrades to E-3 early warning aircraft, pointed out Roche in a 2002 interview with Air Force Television News.

“That’s a lot of money,” said Roche. “We as leaders have the responsibility to look to see [if] there are smarter ways of doing things. Are we asking people to do things we shouldn’t? Do we have airmen serving in places that are not central to the mission of the Air Force?”

Sweeping personnel change is difficult but not impossible. When the idea of the Air Expeditionary Force was introduced several years ago, about 80,000 Air Force personnel, out of 360,000, were capable of deploying. That number is now up to 272,000.

“The same sort of process is what we’re trying to do, as we find ways to make sure that [airmen] are actually engaged in the core competencies of our Air Force,” said Jumper.

The Rumsfeld Mandate

Each service has been directed by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld to scour its ranks for personnel and technology efficiencies and internal force shifts before asking for more troops. Specifically, Rumsfeld wanted a hard scrub of support jobs being performed by uniformed personnel that could be eliminated or done by civilians.

One DOD estimate found there may be 320,000 military jobs in this category. This year, the department plans to “move 10,000 military personnel out of civilian tasks and return them to the operational force,” Rumsfeld told lawmakers in early February. He added that another 10,000 conversions were slated for 2005.

Rumsfeld believes the increased demand on US forces today is “likely



USAF photo by Lisa Carroll

Pilots such as Lt. Col. Jeffrey Harrigian (above) are in short supply, as are air battle managers, navigators, and medical officers. Because of shortages, 29 officer and 38 enlisted specialties will be held exempt from waivers of duty.

a spike”—meaning a temporary problem.

Many in Congress have been arguing that the US military needs more people overall, not fewer. For example, Rep. Heather A. Wilson (R-N.M.), a former Air Force officer and member of the House Armed Services Committee, has called for an additional 150,000 troops across the board.

Rumsfeld reminded lawmakers that the Pentagon has already added troops. He was referring to recent temporary increases that have pushed each service above its authorized end strength. In addition to USAF’s extra 16,600, the Army is up 7,800, the Navy roughly 6,000, and the Marine Corps about 2,000.

Rumsfeld maintains, “The real problem is not the size of the force, per se, by rather the way the force has been managed and the mix of capabilities at our disposal.”

He attributes a large part of the “spike” problem to the need to garrison more than 100,000 US soldiers in Iraq. To help alleviate this problem, the Administration on Jan. 28 agreed to boost the Army temporarily by 30,000 troops over its authorized strength of 482,000.

Money for the 30,000 increase

would come from the \$87 billion emergency fund for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that passed Congress last year. Army officers estimated the extra manpower would be needed for the next four or five years. They also estimated that every new 10,000-troop increment would cost \$1.2 billion.

In keeping with Rumsfeld’s directive, the Air Force has already identified some 22,000 blue-suiters whose jobs could go to civilians. However, the Human Capital Task Force estimated that the service would have to hire 14,000 new civilian employees—a mix of civil service and contract—at a cost of \$5 billion through 2009, while it still pays for the 22,000 military personnel.

It is too big a sum to take in one bite, so the Air Force plans to take a phased approach. During Fiscal 2005, the service expects to make 1,000 military to civilian realignments. The goal for 2006 is to realign 7,000 positions.

Planning for future Air Force manpower needs is difficult. End strength needs, recruitment targets, career field requirements, and other important aspects of the problem are interlinked. All must be addressed at the same time. The effort is similar to playing chess in three dimensions.

Air Force officials must play this game, and win, even amidst the stresses and strains of a continuing high operations tempo. ■

Peter Grier, a Washington editor for the Christian Science Monitor, is a longtime defense correspondent and a contributing editor to Air Force Magazine. His most recent article, “A Line in the Sand,” appeared in the February issue.