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MASS EXODUS: EXAMINATION OF USAF PILOT RETENTION

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By

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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in  
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## Abstract

Every organization faces challenges throughout its existence due to an ever changing world. These trials can range from small internal problems all the way to large issues impacting the organization's very foundation. Either way, these challenges must be examined, understood, and appropriately dealt with for the organization to survive. The United States Air Force (USAF) is currently facing such a challenge in the form of severely low retention among its highly trained pilots. This study strove to explore this problem, looking at the underlying reasons why pilots were leaving the USAF before retirement and then generating potential evidence based solutions to this retention issue. In order to accomplish this goal, the researcher utilized a grounded theory methodology, examining the interview responses of twenty-one former USAF pilots regarding their retention decisions and experiences in the USAF. After analysis, the data gathered showed that quality of life factors, such as work/life balance and outside opportunity, had the greatest impact on retention decisions and led to the development of the USAF pilot quality of life retention theory. Additionally, the data provided a foundation for the creation of two solution sets, one focused on improving quality of life factors for USAF pilots and the other centered around improving leadership within the USAF, due to leadership's impact on almost every aspect of a service member's life and career. The end goal is not just a better understanding of why this problem became so dire in the first place, but also what can be done to alleviate the strain and ensure that the chances of such a retention problem happening again are low.

*Keywords:* Retention, Work/life balance, Leadership,

## Dedication

This Dissertation in Practice is dedicated to my wife Brooke. Her continuous support throughout this difficult process made it possible to keep going through all of the trials and headaches associated with such an involved project. I just want to thank her for her understanding and patience, I could not have done this without her.

## Acknowledgements

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction and Background**

As one gains more experience dealing with various organizations, it becomes apparent that these organizations are all complex entities, subject to a multitude of stimuli in the form of internal variables and external influences. Those stimuli vary in form, from internal forces, or factors, such as a new organizational structure or mission, to external forces ranging from new clientele to regulatory alterations and governmental pressure. Throughout all the dynamic changes and complex interactions that organizations face, leaders must utilize their resources and experience to keep the organization on the path towards not only survival, but also oriented and moving toward future success and growth. While there are many resources at an organization's disposal, one asset that is particularly critical to this overarching goal is the retention of skilled employees. In support of this, Cardy and Lengnick-Hall (2011) state that an organization's human capital is one of the few resources that continue to provide a competitive advantage over peer and rival organizations. In addition, retaining critical staff is economically beneficial over time due to the costs associated with hiring and training new employees (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Keeping this in mind, this Dissertation in Practice (DIP) centered on the idea of maintaining the organizational workforce in the United States Air Force (USAF) through an examination of the USAF's current pilot retention rates.

The USAF's ability to support national security objectives and maintain its readiness relies on the ability, and work productivity, of many highly trained employees. Over the course of the USAF's existence, the service has been challenged with high

attrition rates of officers and enlisted personnel, especially high attrition rates of pilots (Ballard, 1998). With pilots leaving the service at an unsustainable rate, the most current iteration of this reoccurring problem is particularly troubling (Parrish, 2017b). This downward trend has only continued to grow, increasing from a 1,500 out of 20,000 pilot deficit in 2016, to almost 2,000 in 2017 with no signs of stopping (Daniels, 2017). By focusing on the population in question, pilots, this study gathered data directly from the source, and then used this information to understand the “why” behind the retention crisis and potential ways ahead.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As mentioned earlier, the USAF is facing a serious problem in keeping pilots from leaving the service prior to retirement. While this issue is not new to the USAF, and it has been faced by the service many times previously, the scale of the current attrition crisis is substantially worse than in previous years (Ballard, 1998; Daniels, 2017). Up to this point the USAF and other researchers, while admitting that multiple factors effect retention, have primarily looked at commercial airline industry hiring increases as the main culprit for increased pilot attrition (Ballard, 1998; Barrows, 2002; Cromer & Julicher, 1983; Mattock, Hosek, Asch, & Karam, 2016). Subsequently, the problem has historically been approached from a primarily monetary perspective. Leaders have routinely utilized incentive pay strategies such as the Aviation Retention Pay program to offer pilots more money to stay in the service until retirement, with the hope that this will offset the compensation disparity between the two options (Losey, 2017; Shipley, 2018). Even though that strategy provided some minor relief, the problem is still growing since these solutions only consider the most obvious factor, showing a



lack of understanding of other possible underlying reasons for the unsustainably low retention rates.

With this knowledge, a fresh perspective is needed that will approach the issue from a new direction. The study strived to accomplish just that, by engaging former USAF pilots in finding, and examining, the main reasons why pilots leave the service early, with the goal of developing practical ideas for retention improvement. This cannot come at a more critical time as the USAF Chief of Staff, in an interview in early 2017, remarked that unless a way to reverse this trend is found, the USAF's ability to fulfill its role in the nation's defense is at risk (Woody, 2017c).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Armed with a better understanding of the problem, including its background and potential impact, attention can turn to the overall purpose of this study. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover the underlying reasons for, and develop solutions to, the current pilot retention crisis in the United States Air Force.

### **Research Questions**

With the purpose firmly in hand, the need to develop an actionable central research question becomes apparent. The intent of this question, and any subsequent sub-questions, is to create a sense of focus for the study, keeping it in line with the researcher's intent and the study's end goal (Creswell, 2017). Concerning the USAF's retention problem, creating this central question is crucial to ensure that the researcher does not diverge from his intended purpose of discovering the underlying reasons for the retention crisis. Maintaining this mindset, the following central research question, and sub-questions, guided this qualitative study:

Research question: What are the underlying reasons behind the increased number of United States Air Force pilots leaving the service early?

Sub-question #1: What impact does the type of leadership experienced by USAF pilots have on their decision to stay in the service past their initial Active Duty Service Commitment (ADSC)?

Sub-question #2: What impact does work/life balance have on USAF pilots' decisions to stay in the service past their initial ADSC?

Sub-question #3: What impact does compensation and outside opportunity have on USAF pilots' decisions to stay in the service past their initial ADSC?

### **Aim of the Study**

The growing pilot retention problem in the United States Air Force is an alarming trend, and effort is required to discover the underlying reasons behind this phenomenon. Once these factors have been identified, the aim of the study was to create a grounded theory concerning the pilot retention crisis, as well as evidence-based solutions for the problem of retention, providing a potential way forward for the service.

### **Methodology Overview**

In this study, the goal was to first discover the reasons why USAF pilots are not staying in the service and, second, to develop an effective plan to address low retention. Due to a paucity of scholarly research on this problem, and the fact that the available extant reports tend to focus more on the financial aspect of the issue instead of exploring the impact of other variables such as leadership, work/life balance, and opportunity, the author chose the qualitative method of grounded theory to approach this topic.

Grounded theory is utilized in cases with lower amounts of previous research, and corresponding theories (Creswell, 2013). The method begins by gathering data from the study's participants, analyzing this information for themes, and then generating a working theory that is "grounded" in the data (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the required data was gathered from a sample of 21 former USAF pilots, all of which left the service at either their initial ADSC point or sometime prior to retirement. The data was then analyzed, looking for the factors that led to their retention decisions. From the analysis of this data, a central theme, or reason, emerged which was then used as the starting point in generating a theory, which then led to the creation of potential solutions to the retention problem.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

Communication and understanding are crucial to any research endeavor. Researchers must strive to stay true to the intent of their study while ensuring minimal confusion as to the definition of important terms, or the meaning behind critical concepts. Acknowledging this concern, the author, in order to ensure comprehension and make the study as easy to follow as possible, provides the following terms that were used operationally in this study:

*Retention:* Staying in the service past initial Active Duty Service Commitment to retirement.

*Leaving early:* Leaving active duty at initial Active Duty Service Commitment or any time prior to retirement, most often prior to the 17-year mark.

*Active Duty Service Commitment (ADSC):* Currently 10 years of active duty service in the USAF for pilots.

*Retirement:* 20 years of active duty service in the USAF.

As with any specialized subject or unique organization, there are terms and concepts that are not well known, or that hold a completely different meaning to outsiders. This is certainly true with the military as a whole, and the USAF specifically. Now that the key terms and concepts utilized within the study have been defined, the hope is that readers will better understand the study itself.

### **Assumptions**

Regarding assumptions, the researcher critically reflected upon and openly provided ideas and concepts that could be applicable to this project. With regard to USAF pilots and the concept of retention, the researcher does have a few assumptions worthy of discussion. The first assumption is that most individuals who become USAF pilots initially intend to remain in the service past their ADSC. From the researcher's personal experience in the service this seems to be the case and is the basis for this assumption. In addition, the author assumes that not all individuals leaving the service early are doing so because of the current airline hiring boom, but that other factors are at play. The final assumption is that each USAF pilot follows the same general career progression and expectations regardless the community they are a part of. In essence, while the particulars of individual careers can be vastly different they all follow a common general path from commissioning to pilot training to active flying assignments to a retention decision. While these assumptions are a valid concern to address, the author understands that they are not written in stone and may vary or evolve over time.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Personal Biases**

This study contains several limitations. The first is that of time, with the researcher only having months to complete the project, necessitating a scaling of the project to fit within this constraint. Next, distance played a limiting role in the process of gathering data. Since former USAF pilots live all over the world, in person data gathering was not feasible. The ideal methodology to account for this limitation was to utilize telephone or e-mail interviews. The final limitation to mention concerns the sample used. While the author attempted to use a sample that was as representative as possible, the chosen methodology only requires 20 to 25 participants and the selection techniques used were limited to a combination of convenience sampling strategies in order to get the required number of participants from each pilot community within the USAF (Creswell, 2013). This limitation certainly impacted the study's overall generalizability, since more traditional methods of sample gathering involving large numbers of potential candidates paired down to a manageable number through random selection criteria was impractical due to the limitations listed above.

Moving to delimitations, since the population of USAF pilots was the target population of the study, the results may not be as applicable to pilots in other services; even those that are facing retention issues of their own. In addition, the sample only included those individuals who had left active duty prior to retirement and not those that decided to stay in. By leaving out this demographic, the counterpoint of why an individual decided to stay on active duty will not be considered. Last, due to the time constraints of the project, a longitudinal study was not feasible. This left out a large amount of potential data concerning the participants' service journey from

commissioning to their retention decision, which could have provided more support to the project's results and provided a more nuanced understanding of the issue of pilot retention in general.

Finally, the topic of personal bias must be addressed. As a former active duty USAF pilot, the author had firsthand knowledge of the issues presented in this study. The author understood the pilot community and worked within it for 15 years before making the decision to leave active duty for the USAF Reserves. On the positive side, this intimate knowledge allowed the author to not only better navigate the community, but also find participants that were of value to the study. From a negative perspective, the author made his decision to leave active duty after 15 years of personal experiences that undoubtedly biased his perception and understanding of the problem. To counteract, or bracket, this bias the author had to first be aware of his own perceptions. With this awareness, the author then strived to remain impartial and allowed the data to lead to the conclusions without bias. In addition, patently revealing researcher bias showed an honest awareness of the issues and helped generate trust with readers (Creswell, 2014).

### **Leader's Role and Responsibility in Relation to the Problem**

As one explores the subject of leadership, it becomes clear that whether formally or informally, leadership plays a part in everything that goes on within an organization. That how leaders conduct themselves, whether in response to a crisis or in everyday dealings with employees, impacts not just specific individuals, but the culture and cohesiveness of the organization they lead (Northouse, 2016). Regarding the study's problem of pilot manning in the USAF, one can see several ways in which the impact of leadership was felt.

Beginning with the problem side of the equation, one of the potential reasons proposed for the pilot exodus is that of negative leadership. McCain (2017) said that while not the singular reason for the pilot shortage, negative leadership trends are a significant contributing factor to the problem. In addition, Air Force exit surveys have shown that “cultural issues” were listed as the primary reasons pilots left the service (Hoadley, 2017). While “cultural issues” could refer to a range of different contributing factors, leadership plays a large part in the creation and maintenance of an organization’s culture and so naturally would fall within this umbrella term.

Moving to the other side of the coin, leadership will also play a huge role in the resolution of the current crisis. The reasons discovered to be major contributors to the manning issue, whether compensation, family, or leadership related, require leaders at all levels of the service to fully embrace the proposed solution. Without this personal dedication to the delivered resolution, pilots will continue to leave the service at the same or increasing rate. In addition, leaders themselves must be willing to not just execute a policy change or solution, but also look critically at the current state of leadership in the USAF. This will involve re-thinking traditional leadership paradigms as well as a need to develop leaders who do not just tow the party line, worrying about their own careers, but who are transformational and possess the ability to motivate and inspire their people, generating loyalty and trust (Groves & LaRocca, 2011). Only with this mindset and dedication will the solutions proposed be successful.

### **Significance of the Study**

When developing a research project, particularly one as complex as this, it is important to reflect on why the project is important, as well as any lasting impact it will

have on the field. For this research project the author looked to, not only, better understand the current USAF pilot retention crisis, but develop executable and sustainable solutions. As previously mentioned, the USAF has been aware of the current personnel problem for several years and has attempted to approach the problem monetarily, through bonuses (Losey, 2017). This tactic has helped, but not solved the problem. The intent of this project was to look deeper at the problem providing concrete reasons and effective solutions that would create an impact on the current literature, practice, and policies.

Regarding current scholarly research, it can be said that the majority of what is available focuses primarily on one aspect of the problem, compensation, and is scant about other possibilities (Barrows, 2003; Mattock et al., 2016). This study strove to correct this oversight by utilizing participants that have lived through this difficult retention decision, generating data that provided a holistic look at the problem and the underlying reasons behind the crisis. The research provided from this approach expanded upon what is currently available, ensuring that other possibilities are taken into consideration through the creation of a new theory on USAF pilot retention. This nuanced approach had the additional benefit of opening up several avenues for future researchers to explore, such as why certain factors, like leadership and family life, play a role in retention and the best ways to approach these new ideas. Additionally, the study's results provided a jumping off point for similar studies concentrating on other services or career fields facing their own retention issues.

From the practical standpoint of improving practice and policy, the results will help the USAF solve a problem that is negatively affecting its ability to maintain its force



and its readiness (Woody, 2017c). With the study's results, movement can now be made towards developing practical retention solutions, such as leadership training programs or the promotion of major shifts in priorities towards lowering ancillary requirements and improving pilots' work/life balance. This improvement in pilot retention will curtail the current negative impact on the force, improving the USAF's ability to meet national security objectives. As a consequence of the proposed changes, outdated policies with regard to manning requirements, promotion, and continuing education can change, creating a better working environment for all airmen. Additionally, procedures will inevitably be created, to include new Air Force Instructions (AFIs), to institutionalize the changes, ensuring that the lessons learned are not forgotten. The predicted impact of the study's results will be an improvement of overall retention numbers, organizational commitment, and the recovery of lost capability over time.

### **Summary**

Every organization faces challenges and the USAF is no different. This chapter introduced such a problem currently being confronted by the USAF and that became the focus of the author's research. To begin, the chapter presented the USAF's recent problem with retaining skilled personnel, along with why the issue is so critical. Attention then moved to the study's purpose, which involved approaching the issue through an exploration of the main reasons why pilots leave the service prior to retirement age. In section three, the main research question and sub-questions were presented, providing greater direction for the project. Next, the study's aim of discovering the underlying reasons for the pilot crisis and creating viable potential retention solutions was delivered. This section was followed by a look at the proposed

methodology, providing support for the author's selection of grounded theory. After the methodology, relevant terms were defined in order to ensure better understanding between researcher and reader. Then, a presentation of the study's limitations, delimitations, as well as any bias brought into the project by the researcher was delivered. Finally, a short discussion on the role leadership will play in solving the issue was provided, followed by a look at the potential significance of the study to current practice, and research. With all of this information provided, the hope is that any potential reader will be better poised to understand, not only, why the researcher chose the proposed topic, but also be able to visualize the direction of the study, from data gathering to solution proposal.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

The United States Air Force (USAF), like many organizations, constantly faces obstacles that must be met head on and overcome. Not surprisingly, these complications can appear in a multitude of forms, and each one must be dealt with appropriately by fully knowing the issue and executing a solution based on this understanding. Keeping this thought in mind, the USAF is currently facing an obstacle in the form of a retention crisis that needs urgent attention. For many years now, scores of highly trained pilots have been leaving the service, creating a deficit that is approaching unsustainable levels (Parrish, 2017b). While service leaders have attempted to implement measures aimed at curbing this growing problem, they have mainly focused on compensation-based solutions, such as aviator bonuses, to entice pilots to stay (Losey, 2017). As mentioned in the previous chapter, this approach does not give fair attention to other potential, and just as valid, reasons for the current state of pilot retention. To correct this oversight, this project examined the underlying reasons for the pilot retention crisis with the goal of developing a practical, evidence-based solution.

Now armed with a reminder of the study's intent, an exploration of the current scholarly and supporting literature is necessary to show the importance of the topic, as well as setting the stage for the research project. To accomplish this task, the following literature review strives to inform the study by first looking at the utilized methodology of grounded theory, to include what it is and why it is the best methodology for the project. Next, findings about the topic of retention in general are presented, offering a base of knowledge concerning the theories, predictors, and common issues associated with retaining skilled employees. After this section, a review of the literature surrounding the current retention problem facing the USAF will be presented, including solutions that have been attempted to this point. Finally, an analysis of retention

strategies as well as the role leadership plays in this topic will be delivered, providing ideas and concepts for tackling the retention problem. Only by truly understanding the applicable knowledge and information surrounding a topic can one truly hope to develop a worthwhile study with the potential to create a lasting impact.

### **Grounded Theory**

As one delves deeper into the realm of scholarly research, it becomes clear that many different methodologies are available for use. The key then is finding the methodology that fits the best with the topic and goals of the project. To explain why grounded theory was selected for this project it would be prudent to first look at what the theory is. Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory as a new qualitative methodology focusing on understanding an issue through theory development as opposed to just testing current ones. In essence, grounded theory is used to gather data from participants concerning a social phenomenon, and their experiences with that issue, that can be analyzed and used in the creation of a new theory explaining the process or providing a reason for the problem being studied (Creswell, 2013; Engward, 2013; Suddaby, 2006). The methodology is particularly useful when there is a scarcity of information or consensus concerning an issue, a situation that can only be rectified through a comprehensive examination and interpretation of the gathered data (Creswell, 2013; Suddaby, 2006).

As previously stated, the current pilot retention problem has been well known to USAF leaders for several years but until relatively recently it has not been given more than a passing acknowledgment (Carr, 2017). Due to this late acceptance of a serious problem, implemented solutions were either too narrow in focus or too late to have the

desired effect. These missteps point to a disturbing lack of understanding the underlying reasons why pilots are leaving. The proposed study looks to remedy this by exploring the “process” involved in USAF pilots’ decisions to stay in or leave the service, with the goal of illuminating underlying reasons previously ignored and creating an explanatory theory for the crisis (Creswell, 2013).

### **Retention Literature**

The ability of an organization to retain its highly skilled employees cannot be overstated. As with any resource, leaders must interact with their followers wisely, ensuring they are treated fairly, as valuable assets, and not demeaned or treated disrespectfully. Khalid, Pahi, and Ahmed (2016) stressed this, stating that the loss of key employees can generate risk to organizations by impacting competitiveness and standing in the global marketplace. While individuals can leave an organization for many reasons, the majority of retention decisions are intentional and not the result of a circumstance outside the employee’s control. No matter the reason for an employee’s departure, the resultant organizational impact is most visibly felt through the loss of, not only, corporate knowledge, but also invaluable experience (Kyndt, Dochy, Michielsens, & Moeyaert, 2009). In recognition, leaders must understand that maintaining this resource is critical not just for the organization’s overall success, but also due to the costs incurred from the constant turn-over of highly qualified employees (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Kyndt et al., 2009). Due to the potential negative effects of high employee turnover, no organization, to include governmental entities, is immune and all must strive to protect this critical resource.

## **Theories**

As topics grow in importance and garner scholarly attention, theories begin to emerge, helping to explain the processes, and concepts associated with these areas. Retention is no different, and the theories available fall into two broad categories: retention: how to keep people from leaving, and turnover: why people leave. Using this dichotomy as a starting point, a selection of theories that fit both categories will be discussed, providing a theoretical base for the researcher's study.

### **Retention Theories.**

Beginning with retention theories, Ramlall (2004) provided a meta-analysis that examined multiple theories of retention centered on employee motivation, a required ingredient in job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Using this analysis as a guide, a few of the most applicable theories are worth mentioning. To begin, one of the most well-known theories is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which states that humans strive to meet five basic needs: psychological, safety, esteem, love/belonging, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Meeting these needs is considered the central focus for all individuals and much of one's effort will go towards this goal. This theory is applicable to retention by providing a way for employers to increase motivation and retention through the development of programs and policies directed specifically at fulfilling these needs. According to Robbins and Judge (2016), while Maslow's theory is easy to understand, leaders must be cautious when using this theory as research into its validity has been less than stellar, lessening its potential usefulness.

A second theory that bears consideration is that of Vroom's Expectancy theory. This theory posits that people concentrate on outcomes, shifting their behavior based on

the result they want and expect (Ramlall, 2004). In support, Robbins and Judge (2016) provided that this theory centers primarily on three relationships: effort-performance, performance-reward, and rewards-personal goals. In essence, greater effort will lead to greater performance, which will then lead to rewards that will fulfill one's personal needs. If an individual does not believe that their efforts within an organization will fulfill their needs, then they may start looking for other opportunities that will.

The final retention theory to discuss is the Motivator-Hygiene theory. This theory states that employees face both positive (motivators) and negative (hygiene) aspects of their jobs, which contribute directly to satisfaction and dissatisfaction respectively (Robbins & Judge, 2016). Interestingly, employers can only increase motivation and satisfaction by both pushing the motivators and eliminating the hygiene items, but not by just doing one or the other (Ramlall, 2004). Providing support, Holmberg, Caro, and Sobis (2017) conducted a case study of Swedish nurses showing that the motivator and hygiene factors espoused by the theory, such as compensation and career prospects, were present and applicable to a current professional setting by impacting job satisfaction and desire to stay.

### **Turnover Theories.**

Turnover theories deserve equal attention where the topic of retention is concerned. Hom, Shaw, Lee, and Hausknecht (2017) delivered a comprehensive look at multiple theories related to turnover that have developed over the last 100 years, three of which warrant further discussion. To begin, Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino (1979) offered a conceptual model of employee turnover based on factors that affect an individual's turnover decision, such as job satisfaction, perceptions, expectations, and

attractiveness of other obtainable opportunities. This theory says that an individual may leave or stay in a job based on their interpretation of future potential, with regard to possibilities such as promotions and compensation (Hom et al., 2017).

Next, the unfolding model from Lee and Mitchel (1994) considered turnover as an individual matter based on an intricate assessment of multiple variables including the current work environment, the individual's feelings, and other situational factors. This theory contends that an assessment is triggered by "shocks" to the status quo, good or bad, beginning a process that leads to an eventual retention decision (Hom et al., 2017).

The final turnover theory to consider is that of collective turnover, an idea of special significance due to the study's topic of USAF pilot retention. This theory was developed in response to the need for a more macro look at the effect of high turnover on organizations since most theories focused on the individual, and therefore could not be utilized to appropriately account for effects on organizations as a whole (Hom et al., 2017). This model says that high collective turnover will have a harmful overall impact on organizations with regard to decreases in collective performance, increases in financial strain, and negative customer outcomes (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011).

Many more theories are available covering both retention and turnover, providing additional background to this expansive topic. While there is not space in this study to cover them all, the sample provided gives a solid foundation in retention theory and bolsters the importance of studying this subject and its continued impact on organizations.



### **Retention Predictors**

In response to the importance of retention, as conveyed in the above theories, a more detailed look at some of the factors effecting why employees stay or leave an organization is necessary. The first, and one of the most prominent factors for retention, is that of individual fit within the organization. Chatman (1989) provided that the greater amount of person-organization fit, or the more an individual's values and norms match those of the organization, the less chance that the individual will leave. In support, Schneider (1987) posited that while employees may gravitate towards different types of organizations for any number of reasons, they will ultimately leave if the fit isn't right. This idea, presents interesting considerations for organizations, such as the concept that finding the right fit begins during the hiring process, continuing throughout the employee-employer relationship (Natoli, 2004). During this relationship, the initial impression of a positive person-organization fit is continually tested and grows or withers over time, also referred to as the theory of employee survival (Natoli, 2004).

The second aspect of retention to consider is the importance of organizational commitment. Organizational commitment refers to the level of identification that an employee has with the organization, with higher commitment leading to improved retention (Kyndt et al., 2009). Pierro, Raven, Amato, and Belanger (2013) also stated that organizational commitment was, "the extent to which organizational members are willing to work toward organizational objectives" (p. 1122), and is an important factor in not only retention, but also organizational success. With this information, the importance of generating organizational commitment cannot be overstated and one important way to ensure commitment, and in conjunction retention, is through job satisfaction (Smith,

Oczkowski, & Smith, 2011). Creating job satisfaction is a complicated issue affected by many factors such as leadership, managerial practices, support, appreciation, and compensation (Kyndt et al., 2009; Rehman, 2012; Smith et al., 2011).

### **Common Retention Issues**

With the importance of retention covered, along with the two most prominent overarching factors in maintaining retention discussed, attention can turn to three of the most common issues that create retention problems; work/life balance, leadership, and opportunities/compensation. Beginning with work/life balance, this concept concerns how well an individual can balance the growing requirements of work and family within the confines of their day-to-day life (Pillay & Abhayawansa, 2014). Liu and Wang (2011) stated that any procedures created, or attempts made, to improve work/life balance for employees increases both satisfaction and the likelihood that the individual will stay in the organization. This is supported in the researcher's study, which showed that the use of practices aimed at supporting work/life balance, such as flexible hours and childcare, led to increased levels of obligation, motivation, and retention (Liu & Wang, 2011). Looking at this issue through a military lens, its applicability becomes more apparent. Sullivan (2015) postulated that the marked increase in deployments, and subsequent separation of families, causes stress that can be difficult to control without proper support systems. Park (2011) showed that the amount of literature covering the stress faced by military families is scant, and more attention must be paid to supporting resilience and helping families cope. Fortunately, the military has listened to the literature and has begun to provide programs, such as child care and counseling services,

aimed at supporting families and returning service members, though more needs to be done (Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011).

The next topic necessitating discussion is the impact of leadership on retention. According to Kark and Van Dijk's (2007) study, the type of leadership used within an organization can have a substantial effect on employee motivation, creativity, eagerness, and positivity, all potential determinants of retention. In addition, according to one meta-analysis, the use of transformational leadership has a positive correlation with organizational commitment and its corresponding outputs of improved performance and loyalty (Keskes, 2014). Looking at the other side of the leadership coin, Gallus, Van Driel, Walsh, Gouge, and Antolic (2013) delivered an examination of toxic leadership in the U.S. Military, showing that the utilization of negative leadership styles can cause major issues not only for individuals, but also within an organization, specifically its "unit civility" (p. 597). This negativity unsurprisingly leads to a decrease in commitment and satisfaction amongst organizational members.

The final concept to cover is that of outside opportunities and compensation. In a study conducted by Bibi, Pangil, Johari, and Ahmad (2017), retention was shown to increase when organizations provided adequate compensation and promotional opportunities to its employees. Ho, Lee, and Wu (2009) continued, espousing the role of compensation with a study whose results showed that employees whose compensation was deemed less than fair had lower performance and were more likely to leave for other opportunities. These effects are also felt by members of the USAF who, according to Cromer and Julicher (1982), are influenced by economic conditions, outside opportunities, and their own liquidity in making a retention decision. Barrows (2002)

agreed with this idea by showing that the current pay scale and bonus structure used to entice pilots to stay in the service is inadequate considering the opportunities waiting in the civilian world. Barrows (2002) also offered potential ways that the service could fix the pay and bonus system, such as attaching aviation continuation incentive pay to rank and not years of service, potentially improving retention.

### **Literature about the USAF Pilot Retention Problem**

With the literature pertaining to retention in a more general sense covered, focus can shift to the central problem of the study. While the USAF has little problem recruiting young men and women to become pilots, its current problem retaining those individuals once they meet their initial ADSC is nothing new (Everstine, 2018). Axe (2018) provided that the USAF has faced similar pilot shortages at least six times in the past. In support, Ballard (1998), in his thesis concerning the pilot shortage of the late nineties, also mentioned that this problem has occurred several times in the USAF's history and that while compensation improvements help, there is no effective single solution. The researcher stated that a mix of tactics, to include increasing pilot training output and operational tempo changes, need to be utilized (Ballard, 1998).

While maintaining that USAF's pilot retention problems are nothing new, the current iteration has generated concern that seems to be eclipsing past instances. For example, Parrish (2017b) reported that the USAF Chief of Staff for Manpower and Personnel Services said the unprecedented shortage, "is the result of multiple factors: high operational tempo over the last 26 years, a demand for our pilots from the commercial industry, and cultural issues affecting the quality of life and service for our airmen," (para. 3). Daniels (2017) stated that the current pilot deficit has reached 2,000

out of a 20,000 requirement, and will begin to affect readiness and the service's ability to meet its responsibilities unless addressed. According to Pawlyk (2017), USAF leaders were not surprised at the current shortage number and blamed the problem on the service being too small to execute all of its missions and the burden this creates on its people. In addition, earlier in 2017, the USAF Chief of Staff, in reference to the pilot shortage, stated that unless a solution was found, the service's ability to support the nation would start to come into question (Woody, 2017c). As a final confirmation for the criticality of the current problem, Carson (2017) presented a doctoral dissertation examining the pilot retention problem through an analysis of responses to the 2015 military career decisions survey. The study's results confirmed that many factors play into one's decision to leave the USAF and that compensatory issues are not as important as previously believed. In addition, many respondents stressed that other factors, such as leadership, additional duties, and work/life concerns, were just as important in their decision (Carson, 2017).

While the current retention problem has been building for several years and the risk to national security is clear, the USAF has not stood idly by. Many attempts have been made to stem the proverbial tide. Losey (2017) stated that the current USAF pilot bonus, also referred to as the Aviator Retention Pay program (ARP), has been changing to meet the current crisis, climbing to \$35,000 per year in 2016. An article from the Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs (2017) reiterated this bonus increase and also spelled out new one, two, and five-year contract options for the aviation bonus program, as well as increases in incentive pay. In May of 2018 the bonus program was further refined, allowing pilots from communities other than fighter pilots to receive the maximum bonus of \$420,000 (Losey, 2018d). Additionally, the service has increased

monthly flight pay for the first time since 1999 to \$1,000 a month (McCullough, 2018). Unfortunately these monetary strategies do not have the level of impact desired as the actual number of pilots accepting the bonus has declined in many pilot communities (Losey, 2018d).

According to Panzino (2018), Parrish (2017a), and Shipley (2018), the USAF is also looking at solutions outside the realm of compensation, to include reducing additional duties, cutting the number of non-flying pilot billets, and the creation of a flying-only career track. Most recently, senior leaders have expressed that improving recruitment strategies, with an emphasis on minorities and women, and increasing pilot production rates provide the most promise for addressing the current crisis (Losey, 2018; Tirpak, 2018). Furthermore, officials have reported plans to decrease deployments, and increase support personnel, including a program allowing qualified retired pilots to return and fill headquarters assignments (Woody, 2017b). Additionally, Air Force Chief of Staff General Dave Goldfein has begun to roll out the most recent tactic to address the issue, a focus on developing leaders and revitalizing the USAF's basic organizational unit, the squadron (Losey, 2018c). The plan is to develop inspirational squadron commanders, and then give these leaders the resources and authority to do their job with less micro-managing by higher headquarters and less additional duties (Losey, 2018c). In all, 69 different strategies are being pursued in order to help fix the retention issue, ranging from larger bonuses and increasing pilot production to bringing back retired pilots and improving pilots' quality of life (Losey, 2019). To manage all of these proposed fixes, the USAF established an aircrew crisis task force back in March of 2017 to address the retention problem and coordinate a response (Woody, 2017a).

### **Retention Strategies**

Due to the importance placed on an organization's ability to retain its highly skilled human capital, it is no wonder that so much attention has been given to strategies for accomplishing this task. With the large amount of data and diverging opinions, it is easy to get bogged down when researching this topic. While multiple strategies exist, this section will concentrate on benefits, work/life balance, and leadership training in order to provide a more focused approach to the subject.

#### **Benefits**

Beginning with the concept of benefits, Yamamoto (2011) stressed the importance of employee benefit management in supporting retention. The researcher provided a study showing that an organization's ability to deliver benefits of value to the employee, such as adequate wages, available childcare, medical benefits, and housing support generated more positive retention outcomes (Yamamoto, 2011). Pregolato, Bussin, and Schlechter's (2017) study in South Africa showed that no matter the age, gender, or race benefits ranked highest among all groups tested for increasing retention. In a study of emergency medical technicians, Patterson, Probst, Leith, Corwin, and Powell (2005) discovered that appropriate compensation and educational benefits were key components to ensuring employees stayed on the job. Brenner (2010) said the ability to retain employees relies on the organization's ability to provide flexible benefits that meet employee needs, keeping in mind demographic differences that do not support a one size fits all approach. From a different perspective, Peterson (2005) said that providing opportunity to employees is also a critical benefit, that ensuring they have a "sense of

connectivity with an organization and what future it holds for the individual,” improves satisfaction and their desire to stay (p. 87).

### **Work/Life Balance**

The next strategy to examine, and one that has been gaining in importance, is that of maintaining an appropriate work/life balance. Roughly defined as the ability to balance career responsibilities with all other facets of one’s life, Cegarra-Leiva, Sanchez-Vidal, and Cegarra-Navarro (2012) offered a study showing that a working environment supportive of work/life balance ideals generates greater job satisfaction and lowers turnover intentions. Hall (1990) in support of the need for work/life balance, delivered a review of literature and practices regarding the application of this concept in the corporate world, culminating in three in-depth steps that businesses can take to implement balance: “set policies and values for the change, organization wide diagnosis, and change implementation” (pp. 12-14). Looking at this idea from the vantage point of the employee, Michel, Bosch, and Rexroth (2014) developed and tested a method to teach employees how to be mindful and develop the skills needed to separate work from the rest of their lives, creating their own work/life balance support system. Finally, Idris (2014) pointed out that work/life balance is a, “ basic requirement by an increasingly enlightened workforce,” presenting a study of Malaysian banking employees that discovered the use of flex time within the industry contributed highly to positive retention and a better work/life balance (p. 71). By supporting a healthy work/life balance, employers are not only helping themselves, with regard to retention, but also ensuring their most valuable resource stays engaged and able to function at a high level.



### **Leadership Training**

The last strategy considered is that of increased leadership training. As mentioned previously, job satisfaction and organizational commitment play a large role in employee retention decision making and are themselves impacted by leadership. Clinebell, Skudiene, Trijonyte, and Reardon (2013) supported this assertion through a study of commitment and leadership styles in employees of two multi-national corporation subsidiaries. The results showed that the type of leadership style utilized had a definite effect on organizational commitment, with transformational and transactional leadership creating positive outcomes and passive/avoidant leadership creating negative results (Clinebell, Skudiene, Trijonyte, & Reardon, 2013). Supporting the importance of leaders with regard to retention, Bake (2019) provided that while employees leave jobs for a variety of reasons, the one most mentioned involves ineffectual leaders and that this loss of talent equates to an almost five trillion dollar annual hit to the United States economy. Adding to this line of thought, Wallis and Kennedy (2013) presented a leadership-training program that approaches the problem of nurse retention through the development of effective leaders by improving four areas: emotional intelligence, collaborative leadership, teamwork, and systems change. Barron (2004) showed that leadership development programs have evolved over the years moving from the one size fits all mentality to more personalized programs directed at the needs of organizations and the abilities of individual leaders. These results lend credence to the need for flexible leadership training programs that promote leadership ability and styles supportive of retaining employees.

### **Summary**

The low and intensifying USAF pilot retention rate is a crisis. This review of the literature began with the proposed methodology of grounded theory, followed by a discussion of retention literature in general, moving from theories to predictors and common issues. Next, literature about the current USAF pilot retention problem and current solutions was provided, lending support to the seriousness of the retention crisis and the need to find a solution. Finally, this section was followed by a short examination of potential retention strategies that could be used to help develop lasting answers to the USAF's retention problem. While the service has worked to contend with the continued exodus of skilled pilots, the currently implemented solutions focus mainly on one facet of the problem, showing a need for continued research towards finding lasting remedies.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

The continuing success and growth of an organization depends on the ability to navigate sometimes unpredictable waters. When an unexpected obstacle is confronted, the organization must work diligently to not just address the current crisis, but to understand the problem and create lasting solutions that will lessen the chances of the same issue happening again. The United States Air Force (USAF) has had much experience with these twists and turns, facing many difficult challenges throughout its history. Currently the service is facing a considerable problem in the realm of human resource management, in particular keeping its highly trained pilots from leaving the service early. While retention problems in the military are nothing new, the USAF's current iteration is troubling as the service is ten percent short of its minimum required number of 20,000 pilots (Mitchell, 2017). Due to the growing risk this retention problem has on readiness and capability, the USAF has enacted measures designed to stop the loss of its pilots, such as closing the wage gap between the service and commercial airlines, but more needs to be done (Losey, 2017).

In response, an in-depth scholarly examination of the problem and possible solution sets needed to be completed. To accomplish this endeavor, the author elected to perform a qualitative study utilizing a grounded theory methodology to collect and analyze the relevant data. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover the underlying reasons for the current pilot retention crisis in the USAF. The following sections will build upon this purpose, going into detail about the methodology, including its components and procedures, to demonstrate the "how" of the author's plan.

### **Research Question**

With the purpose statement reasserted, the overarching intent of the study is established as well as the need to develop greater focus for the research project. As a reminder, this focus came in the form of an actionable central research question and corresponding sub-questions that narrowed the study's aperture while still keeping it in line with the researcher's intent and the study's end goal (Creswell, 2017). With this in mind, the following central research question, and sub-questions, guided this qualitative study:

Research question: What are the underlying reasons behind the increased number of United States Air Force pilots leaving the service early?

Sub-question #1: What impact does the type of leadership experienced by pilots have on their decision to stay in the service past their initial ADSC?

Sub-question #2: What impact does family/work balance have on USAF pilots' decisions to stay in the service past their initial ADSC?

Sub-question #3: What impact does compensation and outside opportunity have on USAF pilots' decisions to stay in the service past their initial ADSC?

### **Research Design**

As one delves into the details of how to approach a research project, many options are available. The first decision is whether to approach the issue from a quantitative or qualitative direction. After carefully considering several factors, such as the seriousness of the current problem, how the service has reacted to the problem so far, the lack of substantive research or literature looking at the contributing reasons for the problem, and the subsequent need to delve deeper into the problem at hand, a decision was made. The

researcher decided that a qualitative approach, specifically grounded theory, was the methodology best suited to answer the question of pilot retention in the USAF (Creswell, 2013).

According to Creswell (2013), the intent of grounded theory is more than just taking a problem or process and describing its parts, or why it is an issue of concern. He stated that the point of the methodology is to use data gathered from participants in the creation of a new theory, which explains the process or provides a reason for the problem (Creswell, 2013). Adding to this description, grounded theory is particularly useful when there is not much information or explanatory agreement concerning the topic, necessitating a detailed exploration and theory development to ensure proper understanding of what is going on (Creswell, 2013).

As previously stated, the service, and its leaders, have known about the increasing pilot retention problem for years and have not, until relatively recently, taken it seriously (Carr, 2017). Unfortunately, their strategies to this point have been single-minded in focus and have not had the desired effect as pilots continue to leave in record numbers. These failed attempts seem to show a lack of understanding, on the part of the larger USAF, of all the potential reasons why pilots are leaving. Keeping this description in mind, the proposed study will explore the pilot retention problem by looking at the “process” that individuals go through in deciding to stay in or leave the service, with the hope of providing underlying reasons along with an explanatory theory for the crisis (Creswell, 2013). By going straight to the source, pilots who have left the service early, the data gathered will be relevant to the problem, impacting the development of a theory that can be used as the basis for future actionable solutions.

### **Participants/Data Sources and Recruitment**

With the research design and methodology presented, the basic structure of the study begins to come together. Now, attention can turn to the sources of data utilized in the project, to include the participants and any other ancillary data sources. For this research project, the population being studied was that of all former USAF pilots. This is a large pool of potential candidates spread all over the world. It was impractical in terms of money or time to even consider interviewing all of them; thus, a sample was utilized. In order to gather the sample, the researcher conducted a purposeful sampling strategy, utilizing a combination of convenience, snowball, and criterion sampling techniques (Babbie, 2017; Creswell, 2013).

Providing more detail to this process, purposeful sampling allowed the researcher, based on his knowledge of the subject, to choose individuals that would contribute to the study and eventual theory generation (Creswell, 2013). Looking closer at the techniques utilized, convenience sampling allowed the researcher to use participants that were logistically available and thus facilitated the study within time, and monetary limitations. Convenience sampling was combined with snowball sampling, as the researcher used known individuals from different USAF organizations to help generate lists of potential participants. Concurrently, criterion sampling was used, relying on participants that meet a set list of requirements for inclusion in the study, in this instance pilots split between the different pilot communities who had left the USAF early within the last 10 years (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the researcher utilized a newer form of convenience sampling by leveraging social media to increase the pool of potential participants. This use of social media in research is supported by a growing amount of literature, to include entries

from Lunnay, Borlagdan, McNaughton, and Ward (2015) as well as from Murthy (2008). The inclusion of social media was accomplished by placing a request for participation on the “Pilot Network” page in Facebook, a closed group page used exclusively by pilots, many of which are current and former USAF. By using multiple methods in conjunction, the researcher strived to contend with the known limitations of time and money while still ensuring that the participants selected met the study’s needs.

Once a pool of potential candidates was generated, those individuals were sent an invitation and asked to indicate their willingness to participate. Interview instruments were then sent out with the intent of using systematic sampling with every third individual from the list of potential participants selected until a full sample was chosen (Babbie, 2017). Since only 21 responses were returned the researcher made the determination to use all of them, as this number fell within the requirement for grounded theory, ensuring enough data from was available for analysis (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Collection Tools**

In order to gather the data required for analysis, the study utilized an interview instrument presented to each participant, as suggested in several qualitative inquiry texts (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2014). Due to the specific nature of the problem being studied, the interview protocol used was created specifically for this project, focusing on answering the study’s primary research question. Though typically administered in person, due to limitations of distance and time as well as encouraging participation, the interviews were presented via email. This strategy made the interview process easier and more manageable for the subjects, and potentially improved response rates as well as the quality and thoroughness of responses. In addition, supplementary data was gathered

directly from open sources such as the Air Force Personnel Center, providing current pilot numbers and other demographic data relating to the pilot community in general and the retention crisis specifically. This data is factual and used specifically to support the seriousness of the issue being examined and the current actions of the USAF towards solving the problem.

Focusing in on the interview protocol itself, the intent of this instrument was to allow the participants an opportunity to answer multiple questions, five demographic and 15 open-ended, concerning their retention decisions. The protocol, provided in appendix A, centered on the central research question and sub-questions. The first part of the protocol contained short demographic questions along with general inquiries about the individual's time in the military. Examples included questions concerning military rank and number of years at the time the individual left the service, as well as the type of aircraft flown and family make-up. The focus then narrowed down to particular sub-topics that broke the research question into parts that could be individually explored, while still advancing the study's purpose (Creswell, 2013). In the case of the study presented in this paper, the following sub-topics materialized:

1. Understanding retention in the USAF pilot community.
2. The decision to leave the service.
3. Leadership and retention.
4. Family life and retention.
5. Outside opportunities and retention.



In their current form, the sub-topics were intended to help provide the information needed to thoroughly examine the central topic and develop a theory. The topics were also specifically placed in this order to allow for a more logical flow of ideas. The first sub-topic starts very general, providing an avenue of understanding perceptions towards retention in the USAF pilot community. This understanding is crucial because the researcher must comprehend how the subjects personally perceive retention before looking for a solution. The second question began an exploration of the subjects' individual experiences and the process that they personally went through towards their retention decision. Following this exploration, the next three sub-topics went into more detail about the role that certain factors played in the creation of retention attitudes. Each subtopic has several questions, as shown in appendix A, that helped guide the participant and garner the data needed for further analysis and theory development.

Since the proposed interview protocol is being generated specifically for this project, questions of reliability and validity do present themselves. The researcher developed the interview protocol over the course of several months during his dissertation studies. The protocol went through many iterations and has been reviewed by multiple sources to get to its current format. In terms of validity, or the ability of the instrument to provide accurate data, several measures were utilized. To start, several individuals familiar with the qualitative methodology and the topic were enlisted to review the interview protocol, asking questions and giving opinions to provide an outside perspective and increase validity (Creswell, 2014). In addition, careful construction of the protocol's questions, ensured that none were leading, that all aspects of the problem

were covered, and that participants were given adequate chance to answer each question fully, improving on the concern of validity.

Moving to reliability, or the consistency of the gathered data, this aspect is a little more challenging. Unlike a quantitative survey, where reliability is high due to the use of specific answering schemes, the use of open-ended questions in qualitative research generates individualized answers that do not lend themselves initially to high levels of reliability (Creswell, 2014). In this situation, reliability really came into play after the instrument had been returned, transcribed and coded. When this step occurred, strategies to ensure reliability in the transcription, coding, and analysis process were used to include the use of Dedoose® quantitative analysis software and a coding book to ensure consistency.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Now that the interview protocol and supplemental data has been examined, a look at data collection procedures is warranted. While some of this information was covered previously, examining the procedure holistically, starting from sample generation, will help to pull the entire process together. As a reminder, the population examined was all USAF pilots that left the service at their initial commitment point or some other time prior to retirement. The sample drawn from this population consisted of 21 former pilots, split as evenly as possible between the tanker/transport and fighter/bomber communities based on response rates. Recruitment of these individuals occurred using different sampling techniques to include forms of convenience and snowball sampling. Essentially, the researcher contacted potential participants that and asked those individuals to participate and to provide additional candidates for inclusion in the study

(Babbie, 2017; Lunnay et al., 2015). In addition, he used social media avenues, such as Facebook, to garner more potential participants (Murthy, 2008). With the sample secured, the researcher then executed the interview protocol by e-mail, as this was the preferred method of the participants, making the interview process easier and more manageable for the subjects, while improving response rates and the quality and honesty of responses.

Once the responses were returned, the data was reviewed and then run through a qualitative analysis program, in this case Dedoose®, that helped pull out common responses and themes (Babbie, 2017). The responses were then coded by the researcher, with the aid of the analysis software, focusing on finding reoccurring comments and ideas that were subsequently grouped into themes and analyzed, with one theme eventually becoming the central theme and the basis for the final theory (Creswell, 2013). This grounded theory was based on the data provided, no matter where that data led, and provides a potential explanation of the USAF pilot retention problem that is fairly generalizable, as well as qualitative methods can be, to the greater population and actionable.

With regard to the quality and validity of the data collected, several topics bear mentioning, the first being the question of potential researcher bias. The researcher, as a former USAF pilot who has left the service prior to a full retirement commitment, came into this project with certain biases. While the researcher's biases color the researcher's perception of the issue, he strove to remain neutral in his analysis and properly execute the grounded theory methodology by allowing the data to lead where it may during the theory creation process. This was accomplished by first voicing potential biases, thereby

letting the reader know of them up front and allowing them to make their own judgements as to any potential impact. Additionally, the researcher utilized the bracketing techniques of reflexive journaling as well as memo creation in order to gain a greater awareness of his biases and a better understanding of their origins and the potential impact that they may have had on the project (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Several strategies were utilized to ensure validity of the study. The first strategy for validation was a peer review of the analysis, allowing an outside source to examine and critique the project (Creswell, 2013). The next validation strategy involved presenting participants copies of the findings and analysis to determine accuracy, otherwise referred to as member checking (Creswell, 2014). Where reliability was concerned, the researcher first ensured that the returned interviews were accurate and there were no glaring mistakes or lack of information (Creswell, 2014). Next, the researcher confirmed that the coding utilized remained consistent through constant comparison with the established code plan, looking to guarantee that there were no unintentional changes in the meaning of codes during the analysis (Creswell, 2014).

### **Ethical Considerations**

As with all research projects, a discussion of potential ethical considerations is in order. For this study, several ethical issues stood out and required addressing. First, and arguably most important, was the issue of anonymity and confidentiality. Many individuals, even those that may no longer work in the organization in question, may not want their identities known for multiple reasons to include fear of potential reprisal. In order to assuage these fears and get the most truthful responses to the interview questions, the researcher assured participants that all identifiable data gathered was not

only kept physically secure via a password protected file, but also kept out of the final write-up (Creswell, 2013). One way this was accomplished was through the codes in reference to each participants' responses instead of actual names. This technique helped to ensure that no actual names are connectable to any interviews. Second, the researcher ensured that the participants were provided all of the pertinent information concerning the study and that their consent was garnered in the appropriate way (Creswell, 2014). This task was accomplished by sending out a letter clearly explaining the rationale and purpose behind the project, the potential outcomes, and asking for the participant's permission to be included. Next, in constructing the interview questions, the researcher had to be very aware of how the questions were crafted in order to avoid leading the participants (Creswell, 2013). The protocol was created with a definite structure, in order to gather the needed information, but also with questions that allowed the participants and the data a certain amount of freedom to present the information as it was. By leading the participants, whether intentional or not, the study's validity would have come into question. The final ethical consideration fell along this same line and involved letting the data speak for itself and honestly reporting that outcome (Creswell, 2013). Even though the author came into the project with previous experience and bias, enough objectivity and distance was present to ensure the researcher could accept the results, no matter what the outcome, and was able to lay out a grounded theory based on the data provided and the results of rigorous analysis (Creswell, 2013).

The final issue to touch on concerning the data and the study in general, was obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This process, while tedious and sometimes long, was the critical first step in getting the research study off the ground.

The purpose of the IRB is to ensure the protection of a project's potential subjects by examining the risks involved and the steps that will be taken to counteract or minimize those risks (Creswell, 2014). Due to the importance of this process, the responsibility fell on the researcher to provide a proposal to the board, via Creighton's IRB site, presenting all of the study's procedures for review (Creswell, 2013). In order to be in the best position for approval, the researcher ensured that the proposal presented to the IRB was as thorough as possible and covered all aspects of the study from its purpose and research question, to the selection of the sample, methodology used, and the potential results (Creswell, 2013). Within this proposal, the plan for subject protection was incorporated, with regard to identifiable information and any additional confidentiality concerns, along with an explanation that the proposed human subjects were not a high-risk population (Creswell, 2013). In addition, a copy of the participant information letter (Appendix B) was included for the IRB's consideration. With these safeguards in-place, the potential for a lengthy review process was decreased and the proposal was approved. A copy of the IRB exempt letter is included for review as appendix D.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

With a better grasp of the data collection procedures that were utilized and any ethical considerations that required attending to, attention can move to a discussion of the actual analysis plan employed. Gathering the needed data for a research project is just one step in a long process eventually leading to actionable results. Without a solid plan for the organization and analysis of said data, the information gathered amounts to essentially nothing.

In order to avoid this potential barrier, this study followed a plan that allowed the researcher flexibility to interpret and analyze the data as it came in, looking at all the different facets of information provided in order to find the critical components and generate results (Creswell, 2014). At this beginning stage, the researcher did not wait for all responses to come in before analysis, but started analyzing the completed interviews as they become available. This analysis began by reviewing those interviews collected via e-mail, ensuring the raw data was complete and in the format required for the qualitative analysis software utilized. Once all of the data was formatted the researcher began the process of coding the data with the help of the qualitative analysis software Dedoose®, which assisted in storing, searching, and comparing the data (Creswell, 2014). This began with open coding where the researcher looked at the responses provided in each interview, identified the key points and then coded those concepts accordingly (Babbie, 2017). Following open coding, axial coding was used to begin identifying similarities and differences between the participants' responses, providing more focus and leading to the grouping of codes into general categories and themes (Babbie, 2017; Creswell, 2013). This step was where the functionality of qualitative analysis software really came into play. Finally, selective coding was used to help identify the central theme that all the other themes related to (Babbie, 2017; Creswell, 2013). This theme was then used in the development of a theory concerning the USAF pilot retention crisis, grounded in the data collected from participants (Creswell, 2013).

### **Timeline for the Study**

Now that the researcher has provided detailed information on the data analysis plan, the timeline utilized for the completion of this project deserves consideration,

allowing for a better idea of how all of the individual parts came together. The timeline required that the study be completed, and defended, by May 2019. This plan provided approximately nine months to complete the entire research project. Due to the inherent nature of such an endeavor, many challenges and unexpected events occurred and necessitated modifications of this proposed timeline, though the end date remained constant. Adjusting for these changes, the researcher strove for, and accomplished, his proposal defense at the beginning of September. This allowed time to make needed adjustments to the current plan and artifacts, as well as gain IRB approval by the beginning of October. Once the approval was garnered, the researcher sent out invitations for participation and started interviews by mid-October and completed data gathering by 31 December 2018. Analysis occurred as responses come in and was completed by 15 February 2019. With this step accomplished, the author was able to write chapters four and five by the end of March with the defense occurring in mid-April.

### **Summary**

When one strives to study and examine a problem within the confines of a formal research paradigm such as the dissertation in practice, it soon becomes clear that there are many aspects that must be addressed. One of the most critical of these is the planned research methodology. In this chapter, the researcher provided the methodology used for the study as well as support for this decision. To begin, the research question and sub-questions were presented in order to remind the reader of the project's purpose. Second, the proposed research design, in this case grounded theory, was offered in detail, to include the reasons for its selection and the methodology's fit. Next, the researcher looked at the study's population, sample, and recruitment practices. Following this



section, a discussion on the data collection tool and data collection procedures occurred, providing a good look at how the data was collected and handled. Ethical considerations occupied the next section, covering some of the most applicable ethical issues faced during the study. Then, the actual data analysis plan was discussed, going into detail about topics such as coding and theory development. Finally, the timeline followed for completion of the study was provided, as well as the researcher's personal reflection on the research process. With the study's methodology presented in detail, the researcher is now ready to move on to the meat of the project, the analysis and results, tackling the USAF pilot retention problem head on.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### **Introduction**

As a research project builds and develops, it moves from the infancy of conceptualization all the way through a final conclusion or, as is the case in this study, a potential solution. A critical component of this eventuality is the presentation of any findings that may have materialized out of the hours of research and analysis undertaken by the researcher. Keeping this in mind, this chapter will focus specifically on this aspect of the project, providing the findings and results that came from data gathering/analysis and how these findings impacted this grounded theory study, the purpose of which was to discover the underlying reasons for, and develop solutions to, the current pilot retention crisis in the United States Air Force.

To accomplish this objective, the chapter was laid out in a logical sequence beginning with an exploration of how the data received from the participants was organized, coded, and analyzed. Following this discussion, data examination begins by first providing a brief look at demographic and statistical information concerning the participants themselves. Next, the actual findings are presented and organized based on themes used in the questionnaire while keeping the project's stated purpose in mind. Finally, an analysis of these results is delivered, bringing the data together by determining what the participants were trying to say and how it all related to the study's research question and sub-questions, which are provided below:

Research question: What are the underlying reasons behind the increased number of United States Air Force pilots leaving the service early?

Sub-question #1: What impact does the type of leadership experienced by USAF pilots have on their decision to stay in the service past their initial Active Duty Service Commitment (ADSC)?

Sub-question #2: What impact does work/life balance have on USAF pilots' decisions to stay in the service past their initial ADSC?

Sub-question #3: What impact does compensation and outside opportunity have on USAF pilots' decisions to stay in the service past their initial ADSC?

The end goal of this analysis was a true understanding of the data gathered and the subsequent creation of a grounded theory concerning the USAF pilot crisis. This theory was then utilized in the development of practical, and sustainable, solutions aimed at not just relieving the current pilot shortage but also reducing the chance of another such crisis materializing in the near future.

## **Presentation of the Findings**

### **Data Organization and Analysis Procedures**

The researcher began the data gathering and analysis process by first sending out invitations to participate in the study. Using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, invitations were sent out directly to 18 individuals and a blanket invitation was put on the "Pilot Network" Facebook group (Babbie, 2017; Creswell, 2013; Lunnay et al., 2017). The goal was to receive between 20 and 25 positive responses and subsequent questionnaires for analysis (Creswell, 2013). After all positive responses were received, 33 questionnaires were sent out and 21 were returned for a 64% response rate. This level of participation provided more than enough completed questionnaires to complete the data gathering and analysis process.

As was discussed previously, the way data is handled is important to the success of a project. While traditionally accomplished by hand, utilizing paper files and notebooks of information, the data gathered for this study was organized, coded, and analyzed with the help of the qualitative analysis software Dedoose®. This software was critical in providing an online, secure location for the author to manage all of the project's information and data, as well as delivering support for coding and analysis.

To go through the process in more detail, as participants returned their questionnaires a profile was created within the software utilizing demographic information provided by the participants. No identifying information was put in the system and the profiles were identified with a participant code in order to maintain anonymity. The returned questionnaires themselves were then uploaded into the program and subsequently linked to the appropriate participant. Once this was accomplished, the process of coding the responses began.

In order to code the responses, the researcher developed a code tree to use during the process that was added to the software's coding section, improving the ability to code the data and track what codes were used and how frequently. This tree began simply, as the researcher developed three original parent codes: "Reasons for Leaving Active Duty, Retention Plan, and Ways to Improve Retention." These original parent codes allowed for the data to be sorted based on a logical progression through the problem at hand, which was mirrored by the sections of the interview protocol. This progression began by creating a coding theme allowing for a basic understanding of each participant's original plan towards retention. This beginning point then flowed into the next theme, expanding organically by covering changes in this plan and the factors that might have played a role

in this change. Finally, the coding plan turned to potential solutions or actions brought forth by the participants to aid in creating a realistic way forward for the service.

To provide more information, these three beginning codes produced their own subordinate codes based off of the most likely potential responses and the study's research question and sub-questions. For the section on each subject's retention decision, the subordinate codes were very simple, focusing on if the individual originally planned to stay in or planned to leave after completing their ADSC. Moving on to the subordinate codes concerning each participant's "reason for leaving active duty," this section was more complicated. Since this particular coding stream covered the main focus of the project, discovering the underlying reasons behind the USAF pilot retention crisis, the codes broke down into the three most probable contributing factors, "leadership", "family life", and "outside opportunity." These codes were further broken down based on responses provided by each subject that related to and could be grouped underneath each starting subordinate code. Moving to the final section, which covered potential ways to improve retention, the codes came directly from the participants' responses since most provided the same handful of suggestions to include increased compensation, more opportunities, and less additional duties. As each response was read and coded, these codes, both parent and subordinate, continually evolved, sometimes shrinking and other times expanding, in order to cover all aspects and potential responses.

Upon coding completion, there were a total of six parent codes and 28 subordinate codes in two distinct sub-levels. Though the code tree obviously expanded from its original form, several of the codes covered supplemental data or outliers while the three original parent codes maintained their place as the primary focus and themes for the rest

of the coding process. All in all, the researcher used the coding plan espoused earlier in the study moving from open coding, as demonstrated by the many subordinate codes used to begin categorizing the data, through axial coding in the form of grouping these codes under parent codes/themes, and finally to selective coding in order to determine the most central reason delivered for why pilots are leaving active duty and the most promising ways to improve retention (Babbie, 2017). A visual representation of the coding results is provided in Chart 1, allowing for further clarification and support of the findings.

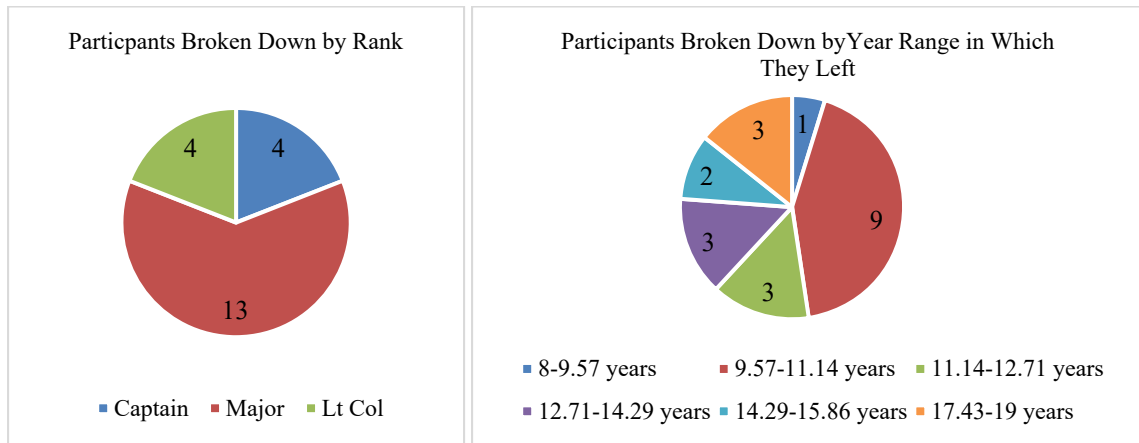
### **Demographic Results**

Armed with a broader understanding of how data was organized and analyzed for this study, attention can move to the actual data and findings gathered, starting with a brief look at the participant demographics. As is the case with many qualitative projects, while not the focus, demographic data is essential in ensuring the participant sample used is both appropriate to the population being studied and as generalizable as possible. Keeping this in mind, the interview artifact used in this study included several demographic questions that helped to provide context to the data and descriptors that were critical in further analysis.

For this section, the researcher strove to set parameters aimed at ensuring that participants met required criteria for the study, and that information needed to address the study's research question and sub-questions was present. From the answers provided by the 21 participants, the researcher was able to determine a great deal about the make-up of the participant sample. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of participants (62%) held the rank of Major when they decided to leave the service. The rest of the participants were split equally (19% each) between the ranks of Captain and Lieutenant Colonel, the

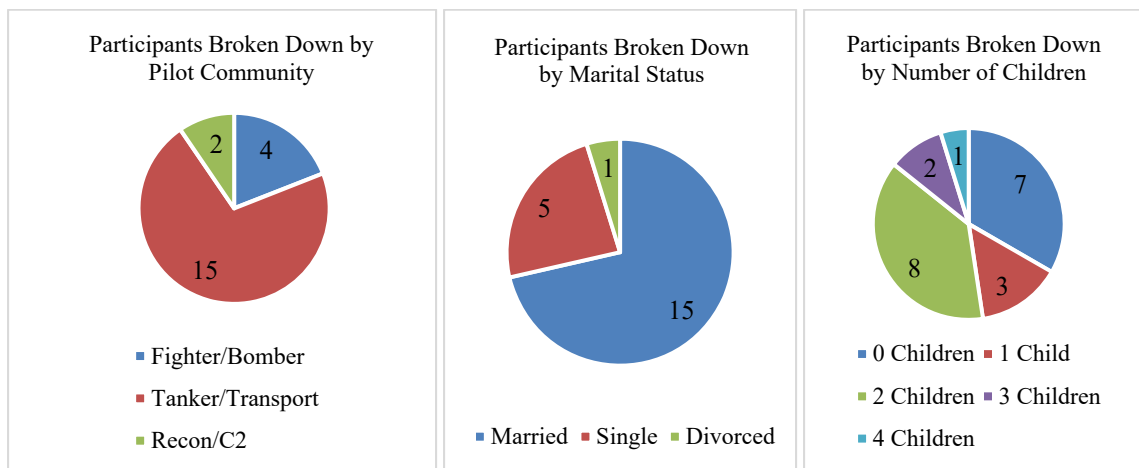
next lowest and highest ranks respectively. Additionally, 71.5% of participants left active duty between 10 and 14 years of service, leaving only 28.5% outside this range on either side.

Figure 1: Participant Rank and Years of Service When Pilots Left Active Duty



Moreover, this section provided additional questions on the type of aircraft flown and on each participant’s family situation. The data returned from these questions, provided in Figure 2, showed that the majority of respondents were tanker/transport pilots at 71%, 19% were fighter/bomber pilots, and 10% were reconnaissance/command and control (C2) pilots. Also, it provided that 71% were married and 67% had children.

Figure 2: Pilot Community, Marital Status, Number of Children



### **Retention Decision**

Moving on from the demographic information, the real crux of the USAF pilot retention debate was examined. Before delving too deeply into this area, the researcher first set the stage by asking participant's about their initial plans towards staying in the service until retirement and if this plan changed, when was that decision made. Of the 21 participants sampled, 17 (80%) said that that when they came into the Air Force they were either open to, or intent on, staying on active duty in the USAF until retirement. Two individuals were always planning on leaving and two had no plan, or idea, at all. This piece of data, though small, shows that individuals are not coming into the service with the intent to do their time and then move on to outside opportunities. These people wanted to stay in, eluding to the fact that other, more underlying reasons must be at play. As will be revealed in the next several sections, these reasons are varied and not necessarily what was expected or presented by the USAF itself.

### **Leadership and Retention**

The first theme provided in the interview instrument (Appendix A), and which covers its respective research sub-question, involves leadership and its potential role in the participant's decision to leave the service early. Participants were asked questions concerning both their experiences with leaders through their career and how this leadership may have impacted their decision to leave active duty. Almost unanimously leaders were described as not retention focused, that they employed negative, or in some cases no, strategies designed to support retaining their skilled pilots. According to one subject, "More than not, my leaders encouraged me to stay on AD through guilt more than anything." In fact, on only three occasions was it mentioned that leaders actually



tried to promote retention in a positive manner. Keep in mind, that this is only three instances by participants who have had multiple leaders during their time in the service. Along with this discussion of leaders and retention, it is worth mentioning that over half of the participants, 13 to be exact, described their leadership experiences as very inconsistent. That leadership within the USAF was extremely varied ranging from transformational all the way to damaging and toxic. While, it is well known that individuals have different leadership styles, it does raise the question as to why a hierarchical organization such as the USAF, which relies so heavily on conformity and on leaders to enforce the rules, does not have more consistent leadership within its' ranks.

The final finding within this major theme concerns the actual impact of leadership on the participants' retention decisions. After coding the data, it was interesting to find that while leadership was mentioned 45 times in regards to it being a reason for leaving active duty, with 33 of those instances pertaining to bad leadership specifically, it was only mentioned as a deciding factor by six subjects (28% of participants). Additionally, the topic of leadership was mentioned seven times specifically as not being a deciding factor with regard to retention.

### **Family Life and Retention**

The next section touched on in the questionnaire involved family life and its effect on retention, or as it is also described work/life balance. This section was fairly short and direct, concentrating on the effect that the participants' military career had on their families, as well as the role family considerations played in one's retention decision. The results of the interview process showed that family life was mentioned 55 times as a reason for leaving active duty and 14 times (approximately 66%) as a deciding factor.

Delving a little deeper, the most applied subordinate code under the family life umbrella involves being gone from family too much with 21 instances, followed by the general uncertainty of an active duty military career with 13 mentions. These numbers begin to show the importance of family life to the study's participants. As one participant stated, "Family was the #1 reason I got out...no reward the USAF could ever provide was worth living away from my family anymore." Family life was described as not being a deciding factor by nine subjects though several of these individuals were single with no families.

### **Outside Opportunities and Retention**

The final theme covering individual reasons for leaving active duty, revolved around outside opportunities. This particular theme has been the most explored by other researchers, as shown previously in this study, particularly within the realm of compensation and the impact of airline hiring on the loss of pilots within the USAF (Ballard, 1998; Barrows, 2002; Cromer & Julicher, 1983; Mattock, Hosek, Asch, & Karam, 2016). While a popular and very visible reason for the exodus of active duty USAF pilots, surprisingly 10 participants specifically stated that they believed the reason pilots were leaving was not solely about money and compensation. This assertion is obviously contrary to the prevailing theory within the USAF and other studies, who have focused most of their response to the problem on the issue of money, but is one that must be thoroughly considered (Losey, 2017; Shipley, 2018).

Turning back to the concept of outside opportunity in general, of the three major retention themes examined in this study outside opportunity was mentioned 89 times by participants as a reason for leaving active duty, by far the most of any theme. In addition it was listed 17 times as a deciding factor, many times in conjunction with family life.

Looking further, subordinate codes appeared with happiness with one's job (job satisfaction) at 44 instances, monetary compensation coming up next with 23 occurrences, and lastly promotion potential with just 15. The significance of this large gap between outside opportunities and the other potential reasons for pilots leaving active duty cannot be denied and while it may not center on the idea of compensation, outside opportunity seems to be a major factor in any conversation on pilot retention.

### **Ways to Improve Retention**

While this topic did not have its own section within the survey instrument, the need to develop solutions to the retention problem is obvious and the individuals who experienced this decision first hand are a vital source of data on how to accomplish this task. At the end of the questionnaire (Appendix A) the participants were provided a question asking if there was anything that might have changed their retention decision. The answers provided to this question were analyzed, as well as any other suggestions provided in other sections of the instrument. The results showed a fairly even spread between potential solutions. The most provided suggestion was improving work/life balance followed closely by increased opportunities within the USAF, less additional duties, and improved leadership. Increased compensation was only specifically mentioned three times as a way to improve retention.

Another factor mentioned often as a reason for leaving active duty, as well as a way to improve retention, was quality of life. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica online, quality of life is defined as, "the degree to which an individual is healthy, comfortable, and able to participate in or enjoy life events" (Jenkinson, 2019). This definition covers a wide spectrum and in the context of this study, falls under both the

family life and outside opportunity themes. Overall, quality of life was mentioned 36 times as a reason for leaving active duty and nine times as a deciding factor.

Table 1: CODE CO-OCCURRENCE

	Reason for leaving Active Duty	Deciding factor	Ways to improve retention
* Numbers represent the number of times mentioned by participants			
<b>Reason for leaving Active Duty</b>		36	
<b>Family Life</b>	55	14	
Constant moves	5	0	
Gone too much	21	4	
Uncertainty	13	2	
<b>Leadership</b>	45	6	
Appreciation	5	2	
Bad leadership	33	5	
Did not desire the lifestyle	3	0	
Good leadership but no ability to impact	3	0	
<b>Outside Opportunity</b>	89	17	
Happy with job	44	4	
Monetary opportunity	23	4	
Promotion potential	15	1	
Quality of life	36	9	
<b>Ways to improve retention</b>			
Good leadership			10
Increase compensation			3
Less additional duties			12
More opportunities			11
Not solely about money			11
Reduce deployments			8
Work/life balance			13

### **Analysis and Synthesis of Findings**

With the data and findings presented, attention can now turn to a more detailed analysis, looking at what this information is telling us with regard to the study's research question and any potential solutions. This section will step through this analysis based on the demographic information provided and how that data and the subsequent findings informed on each research sub-question. Beginning with the demographic questions, some general conclusions can be made. The first conclusion is that based on the rank and time at which individuals decided to leave active duty, most of the pilots leaving are mid-career officers. What is important to note is that this group makes up the majority of the experienced pilot force within the USAF. So in essence, the service is losing its most seasoned and knowledgeable pilots. Additionally, the participants utilized for the project came from all three of the major pilot communities within the USAF (fighter/bomber, tanker/transport, and reconnaissance/command and control) and in numbers that closely mirror to the actual layout within the service. As an example 19% of respondents were fighter/bomber pilots and within the USAF's approximately 20,000 authorizations for pilots, a little less than 4,000 are for fighter pilots, or roughly 20% (Losey, 2018b). This shows a good spread of input from the major pilot communities lending more generalizability to the findings. Finally, the demographic questions provided that a majority of subjects, 71%, were married and that 67% had children. This information shows that most of the participants had family commitments of some kind and provide support to the possibility that family considerations could play a role in any discussion concerning retention.

Moving on to the topic of leadership and retention, the findings provided earlier show that while, surprisingly for the researcher, leadership was not the main reason individuals are leaving active duty, it was still on the forefront of many interviewees' minds. Forty-five times leadership was brought up as contributing reason to leave active duty, and six times as a deciding factor. Since squadron commanders and other leaders are the direct interface for most active duty members with the larger USAF establishment, it makes sense that improvement in leaders and leadership ability could lead to improved retention. By ensuring the right people are put in leadership positions, and that those people are provided the training and the resources needed for success, these leaders can then work for their people, making them feel more cared for and understood, leading to greater satisfaction and loyalty (Khalid, Pahi, & Ahmed, 2016). Though this was not as frequently mentioned as the other two areas, it is still significant and warrants attention, especially when one considers that it was also mentioned 10 times as a way to improve retention. As one interviewee said, "I can only think of very few Sr leaders in AD that really embodied the characteristics that I aspire to...and I can think of a lot of career-ists that trample over friends and enemies to get to the top."

Shifting focus to the research sub-question concerning the impact of family life on retention decisions, the findings were not surprising. Family life considerations were mentioned 55 times as a factor for leaving active duty and 14 times as a deciding factor. Since this number was so close to that of the most mentioned reason, outside opportunities, its impact cannot be denied. The main emphasis within this topic revolved around being gone too much and the uncertainty this caused the members and their families. For many participants this uncertainty is what forced them into a retention

decision in the first place. Couple this need for more certainty and stability with available outside opportunities and one is presented with an option that likely meets more of an individual's needs than staying in active duty, making it an extremely attractive selection (Maslow, 1943).

The last topic to cover on why pilots are leaving the service, is that of outside opportunity. This topic is particularly interesting as it is the focus of the majority of prior research into this subject, as described in chapter two. The findings from the interviews confirmed this concept's importance since it was provided as a deciding factor 17 times. Interestingly though, the concept does break from tradition where compensation is concerned, since this aspect is not considered the most important by the study's subjects. More esoteric ideas such as happiness with one's occupation and general quality of life, both of which mean different things to different people, are more prevalent and lead the pack when addressing outside opportunity and retention. As one subject put it, "I can live where I want to without leaving my family...I can control my life and get compensated for my time away from my family." This leads one to the conclusion that while money and compensation are important, and mentioned by the participants, other more intangible factors connected with outside opportunities play a larger role in pilots leaving. This begs the question if the USAF's most utilized tactic of throwing money at the problem will ever really make a difference?

Provided with a better understanding of the underlying reasons for pilots leaving the service early, this next section focuses around how to improve retention. As provided earlier, the participants were asked what could have made them stay in the service past their initial commitment. The answers provided give a decent idea of what could be done

to not just stem the current tide of pilots leaving, but also improve retention in the future. When looking at the findings, an interesting phenomenon starts taking shape. Out of the seven general ideas to improve retention that came from the subjects' responses, no one suggestion stands out from the rest as the leading solution. In fact, only one stands out at all, compensation, and that solution was suggested the least number of times (three). In further support of this suggestions lack of importance, 11 people said that retention was actually not solely about money. The remaining six solutions all came within a few mentions of each other and consisted of everything from improving leadership to reducing deployments and additional duties. What this data suggests is that there is not just one solution to the retention issue. That due to each individual's unique experiences and beliefs, what would potentially increase retention in one group might not for another group and vice versa. This means that a multi-faceted approach, utilizing varied retention strategies, is needed to ensure improved retention outcomes for the majority of people.

### **Summary**

The crux of any major research undertaking is the data gathered and the findings that come from this information. In this study, the 21 former active duty USAF pilots interviewed provided responses to interview questions about their careers and the journey that led to their decision to leave the USAF. The data gathered from this process was then analyzed and compared against the study's research question concerning the underlying reasons behind the increased loss of USAF pilots, and its' sub-questions, looking specifically at the potential impact of leadership, family life, and outside opportunities on this exodus. Detailed findings were provided earlier in this chapter delivering the following revelations. Starting with demographics, it was revealed that the



majority of those who decided to leave the service early were mid-career officers who make up the bulk of experienced pilots within flying squadrons. The other sections focused on answering the three research sub-questions and revealed that while playing a role, leadership had the least amount of impact on participants' retention decisions. Quality of life factors, such as family life and outside opportunities, however had much greater impact with outside opportunities scoring the highest as a deciding factor. Finally, multiple potential solutions to the retention problem were provided by participants, none of which stood out above the rest in number of times suggested by participants, or in importance placed on it by the subjects. All of these findings helped to create a more coherent understanding of the reasons individuals are leaving the service early, and were used to formulate a grounded theory of the pilot retention problem, as well as potential solution sets for the USAF to execute. Both of these results will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

## FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Introduction**

As previously discussed, the ability to care properly for those one supervises, ensuring that their needs are met, and that their loyalty is maintained, is critical to maintaining an organization's ability to function and thrive in today's constantly changing world (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). With this in mind, this grounded theory research project was developed to examine an increasing pilot retention problem within the USAF and to find reasons pilots are leaving, and also, to generate potential solutions.

The USAF's ability to perform its core national defense functions and support national security objectives are threatened by the continued loss of experienced pilots (Woody, 2017c). The current trend is unsustainable, and new approaches to retention are needed to maintain the service and repair the damage that has been done. The hope is that the discoveries from this study and its resulting grounded theory of USAF pilot retention can start the healing process and provide a springboard for future research that might help not just the USAF but other organizations facing a similar dilemma.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Armed with a reassertion of the problem being addressed, including its potential impact on the capabilities of the USAF to defend the Nation, a re-familiarization of the overall purpose of the study is warranted. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover the underlying reasons for, and develop solutions to, the current pilot retention crisis in the United States Air Force.

### **Aim of the Study**

The growing pilot retention problem in the United States Air Force is an alarming trend, and effort is required to discover the underlying reasons behind this phenomenon. Once these factors have been identified, the aim of the study was to create a grounded theory concerning the pilot retention crisis, as well as evidence-based solutions for the problem of retention, providing a potential way forward for the service.

### **The Grounded Theory**

Before the focus of the project shifts into the final phase of solution presentation, the first part of the study's aim, the generation of a grounded theory, must be accomplished. As a reminder, the methodology of grounded theory is used to gather data, primarily from some form of participant interaction, though supplemental data is also used, concerning their experiences with an issue or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This data is then analyzed and used in the creation of a new theory explaining the process or providing a reason for the problem being studied (Creswell, 2013; Engward, 2013; Suddaby, 2006). This theory will then shape the form and direction that potential solution sets take and how they will be implemented within the organization.

As previous research has revealed, the USAF has been aware of the problem with pilot retention for some time and have tried to combat the issue as best they know how, primarily through bonuses and other monetary means (Losey, 2017). As the data provided in this study has shown, compensation is not the main consideration for the majority of pilots, and quality of life factors such as family/work balance and job satisfaction play a much greater role. These findings, provided in the previous chapter, are what form the basis for a new grounded theory on the factors behind the current

USAF pilot retention crisis and a starting point for creating real change and forward progress. From the data generated through interviews and analyzed by the researcher, the USAF pilot quality of life retention theory was created and is provided below:

The pilot retention crisis in the USAF is not the result of just one factor but multiple underlying factors negatively impacting quality of life indicators. In order to increase rates of retention the USAF must focus on improving these factors, the most prevalent of which are maintaining a healthy work/life balance and job satisfaction.

### **Proposed Solutions**

With the USAF pilot quality of life retention theory in place, focus can shift to the final step of this study, providing solutions for the USAF pilot retention crisis. As the chapter on findings illustrated, there is not just one main underlying reason for the loss of experienced pilots in the USAF, but multiple reasons based on each individual's unique journey. These reasons, while varied, seemed to center around what would be considered quality of life issues, specifically job happiness and predictability. Not surprisingly, when asked for suggestions on what would have caused them to stay in the service, the study's participants provided several different suggestions, with no one idea standing out above the rest. Keeping this fact in the forefront, the researcher provides a multi-faceted strategy, utilizing two different solution sets based on participant suggestions and the data gathered. This diverse approach is intended to help the USAF find the most effective ways to stem the proverbial tide of pilots leaving the service early and ensure that an exodus of this magnitude does not happen again.

### **Solution #1**

While the project's participants provided seven potential strategies for improving pilot retention in the USAF, several of these solutions were relatable and could be grouped together and tackled as one solution set. Taking this approach, the first solution presented covers the basic principle of ensuring a better work/life balance for USAF pilots. Due to the large amount of proverbial "area" this term covers, multiple methods can be employed to improve this balance. For the purposes of this study, however, concentration centered on those ideas provided by the study's participants that would create the most impact on retention. These strategies included reducing the number of times any one individual is deployed and, while the individual is home, providing more opportunity for managing their careers and flexibility in their work schedules so that they can spend the maximum amount of time with their family.

As the study moves through the different strategies within this solution set, it would be beneficial to think of these different proposals as phases or steps towards improving pilot work/life balance in the USAF. With that being said, not every strategy will be easy or quickly implemented. To illustrate this point, reducing deployments will require a great deal of participation by multiple organizations from both within and without the USAF potentially taking years to implement, but other strategies such as reducing additional duties and flexible work schedules are much easier to accomplish and can be implemented very quickly and at a much lower level. Since work/life balance can have a different meaning to different people, using multiple tactics to approach the issue will create the most opportunity for success and increase positive retention outcomes for the most individuals.

**Support for Solution #1**

The need to improve USAF pilots' work/life balance is specifically mentioned by respondents 13 times and due to its inherent meaning in the context of this study, encompasses three of the other proposed solutions: reduce deployments/time away, more opportunities, and less additional duties. These suggested solutions were mentioned by respondents eight times with regard to reducing deployments and eleven times for both increasing opportunities and reducing additional duties. According to a respondent,

“I spent 10 out of 14 months deployed or TDY...They also ask too much of their members. Cutting down on squadron CSS and forcing pilots to become experts in personnel, financial management, and other support functions takes time away from learning the airplane and developing the skills required.”

This same basic sentiment was echoed by many of the other interviewees providing additional support to the issue, with one stating, “why sacrifice my quality of life when it is not appreciated...the big Air Force needs to really do a study on how many hours pilots and aircrew really give the Air Force throughout the year.” Another said to, “Let folks fly if that's all they want to do,” alluding to the fact that not everyone wants to be a general or senior leader. Luckily, it seems that support for a solution set like this is starting to gain traction at the highest levels of the USAF. As mentioned earlier in this paper, discussion has begun concerning similar proposals, such as removing some additional duties, reducing deployments, and creating a flying-only career track all aimed towards improving pilot satisfaction, though most ideas are still in a conceptual phase (Panzino 2018; Parrish 2017a; Shipley 2018; Woody, 2017b). Looking for support from

a more academic perspective, McNamara, Pitt-Catsoupes, Matz-Costa, Brown, and Valcour (2013) provided that, “many workers report substantial levels of work-family conflict,” (p. 283). Their subsequent study showed that workplaces providing a supportive work-family culture and worker flexibility had better worker satisfaction outcomes (McNamara, Pit-Catsoupes, Matz-Costa, Brown, & Valcour, 2013).

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to Solution #1**

As with any solution there are factors that can affect its success or failure as well as stakeholders that are impacted by whatever course of action is taken. These factors and stakeholders must be carefully considered when creating sustainable solutions so that every aspect of the issue is covered and every potential roadblock identified. By performing this analysis, implementation procedures can be developed that are more likely to not just be executed because leadership said to, but actually accepted and internalized within the organization. With this in mind, a discussion of the factors and stakeholders most prominent in this solution is provided.

#### **Stakeholders Impacted by Solution #1**

Every change within an organization involves stakeholders. These groups fall on both sides of any issue and warrant identification. In this particular solution set, the first stakeholder to discuss is USAF leadership, both at the local and higher headquarters level. The changes provided in this solution will require leaders to potentially modify deployment schedules and requirements, as well as change USAF perspectives on pilot career progression and local policies concerning work schedules. The second set of stakeholders are the USAF pilots themselves. These individuals are the ones most impacted as these potential changes could produce positive work/life improvements and

increase retention. The final stakeholders impacted are the American people, who rely on the USAF as part of their national defense. Improving retention of USAF pilots can only improve this mission and make America safer.

### **Policies Influenced/Influencing Solution #1**

Due to the fact that this solution set touches on deployments and personnel issues, several policies will come into play. With regard to the deployment aspect of this solution, the main overarching USAF policy that must be considered is Air Force Instruction (AFI)10-403, which governs the basics of how USAF deployments are structured, planned, and executed (United States Air Force [USAF], 2012). In order to possibly reduce the number or frequency of deployments, particular aspects of this policy, such as the structure of the Air Expeditionary Force model must change from a rigid deployment schedule to something a little more flexible allowing local commanders more say in how and when their forces are deployed.

Concerning additional duties AFI38-206 covers the reason for additional duties as well as the units and commander's responsibilities (USAF, 2018b). This regulation actually provides the authority to accomplish what is suggested in the solution set as it allows local commanders to review and perform additional duties based on, "mission needs, local conditions, and resource availability" (USAF, 2018b, p. 5).

Finally, with regard to providing pilots more control of their careers through programs such as flexible work schedules and a flying only track, both would require potential modifications to existing personnel policies regarding work rules and career progression. Additionally, new policies aimed at how this flying-only career path would be administered and monitored would need to be developed.



### **Potential Barriers and Obstacles to Solution #1**

Exploring this solution set does reveal some potential obstacles that will need to be overcome. First, changing the way that the USAF deploys is not an easy task. A great deal of effort is put into ensuring the right people and equipment are at the right location at the right time (USAF, 2012). Changing the entire process is time consuming and will likely generate pushback from higher headquarters staffs, including those at the Department of Defense (DoD) level, who originally created the plan. In order to gain momentum for this part of the solution, buy-in from both senior USAF and DoD leaders would be mandatory in order to provide the authority needed to change service-wide policies that have the potential to impact national security.

Second, reducing additional duties, while allowed under current policy, could prove problematic in the aspect that additional personnel will most likely need to be hired to perform these duties since the duty requirements are still present even if the pilots are no longer mandated to perform them. Hiring the individuals needed to accomplish the tasks involves budgetary issues as well as manning authorizations and availability within individual units. Due to these problems, commanders may not be as willing to move the majority of additional duties from the pilot force.

Third, with regard to creating more flexible work schedules for the pilot force, the potential resistance would come from local commanders who are used to having their people at work when not deployed or on leave. Not having their people physically present, could cause anxiety that required work is not being accomplished and things are falling through the cracks. This feeling of not being in control might give some commanders pause at implementing flexible work options and these leaders would need

some way to be assured that work is still getting done even if everyone is not physically present in the office.

Finally, providing pilots the opportunity for a flying-only track could also create push-back from current leadership. These individuals may fear that if a flying-only track is available, many officers may decide to participate with the side-effect of drastically reducing the number of pilots who want to push for future leadership positions, lowering the pool of potential candidates.

### **Financial/Budget Issues Related to Solution #1**

From a financial point of view, there are only two issues that warrant major discussion. The first involves any cost that might be incurred from the studies and focus groups that would be required to research the possibility of changing deployment schedules and for creating a flying only career track. The cost in travel and lodging to get the right people together, potentially on several different occasions, to work through all the issues, coupled with the cost incurred by their home organizations due to their absence could very well be more than the USAF is willing to spend.

The last financial issue would fall to the local commanders and their ability to hire additional help to take on the responsibility of any additional duties removed from the pilot force. Typically, commanders are only allowed to have a fixed number of individuals in their organizations as dictated by the Unit Manning Document (USAF, 2018a). In order to accomplish this, not only will they need to receive the authority to increase the number of employees, but also receive an increase in their budget from higher headquarters to fund the new positions.

### **Legal Issues Related to Solution #1**

Along with financial concerns, legal issues can also arise when implementing new strategies aimed at addressing serious organizational problems. In the case of this proposed solution, the most prominent legal issue would come in the arena of manning. The need to increase the number of employees in order to alleviate strain on the pilot force involves complicated issues with allowable personnel positions. Commanders would need to work with the Judge Advocate General (JAG) offices as well as their Force Support Squadrons (FSS) in order to make sure that all applicable laws regarding the allowable number of positions are followed and any changes are done using the proper procedures.

### **Other Issues or Stakeholders Related to Solution #1**

The only other issue to consider for Solution #1 involves the proposed flying only track and any impact this might have on a participant's potential to move to a new location, or permanent change of station (PCS). The option to stay at one's current location and not be required to move could potentially be very positive for USAF pilots and increase satisfaction and retention amongst those individuals participating in this new career path. There is the potential of resistance from those who feel that moving pilots to different locations provides needed experience while staying in one spot leads to stagnation and complacency. In reality, implementing this strategy would lessen the money spent by the USAF moving personnel across the globe and increase the level of familiarity and piloting experience at any one location.

### **Implementation of Solution #1**

Moving from the discussion on stakeholders and the issues related to the proposed solution set, the prospect of implementation comes into focus. Due to this solution's emphasis on creating a better work/life balance, as well as its multiple parts, implementation must be taken step by step. Beginning with reducing deployments, this part of the solution is more of a long-term goal and by far the most difficult to accomplish. Because of its prominence in participant responses, though, it deserves some attention. In order to properly implement this strategy, the USAF will first need to conduct feasibility studies to see if the current layout and frequency of deployments is necessary or exceeds what is required. Once these studies are complete the results will need to be presented to not just USAF senior leadership, but also the Combatant Commanders responsible for deployed forces and locations, as well as senior officials at the Department of Defense. Once a consensus has been achieved, indicating that the USAF's deployment plan can change, then the service will take responsibility for making the needed changes and then disseminating this information the respective units for application by local commanders. The entirety of this process will take years and hinges on the ability of those conducting the studies to convince leadership that reducing the number of deployed airmen is feasible and will not significantly impact national security.

Moving on to reducing additional duties, this part of the solution set is much easier. Since AFI38-206 provides the foundation for reducing additional duties, and it has been verbally supported by the service, it would be up to local commanders to execute (Losey, 2018c; USAF, 2018). The first step would be an evaluation of the additional duties removed from the pilot corps to see if they can be taken over by other

personnel without creating too much of a burden. If this is unfeasible then commanders will need to work with their local personnel offices to add an additional employee, either civilian or military, to their rosters who would be responsible for these duties. This individual should be added to the commander's support staff (CSS) as this office typically handles administrative issues and is one of the offices mentioned by the Chief of Staff of the USAF for re-inclusion in the squadron structure (Losey, 2018c).

Next, creating a flexible work schedule that allows pilots the most time at home with their families is another fairly easy task. USAF commanders are allowed a good deal of latitude within their units to make changes and accept risk as they see fit. Each wing commander can create local policies giving subordinate commanders the flexibility to adjust their pilot's schedules. These commanders can then create squadron level operating instructions (OIs), allowing pilots to maximize the time they spend at home as long as their work, and accomplishment of the unit's mission, does not suffer.

Finally, creating a flying only career path for pilots has great potential to improve the satisfaction of many, since this change would allow pilots a choice between focusing on their primary job or taking on the additional responsibility required in striving for leadership positions. At the time of this writing, this potential change is actually being pursued by the USAF with an experimental "Aviator Technical Track" within the mobility pilot community (Pawlyk, 2018). This track allows pilots to become technical experts in the flying community while reducing non-flying related duties and allowing them to stay in one location longer (Pawlyk, 2018). This "pilot program" will help prove or disprove the viability of a pilot only track and if successful should then be introduced in those pilot communities facing the greatest retention issues before finally being

expanded service-wide. With the foundation already created, the implementation for said program should be relatively easy, requiring leadership to mirror the test program only making the changes needed to account for differences between the pilot communities.

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of Solution #1**

Just like the solution itself, the process of implementing the solution, especially one with multiple parts, will have factors and stakeholders that play a significant part in its success and are worthy of exploration. Many of these listed will be the same as those provided previously, but some may be different as their role may not become clear until the implementation process begins.

#### **Leader's Role in Implementing Solution #1**

As would be expected, particularly in an organization like the USAF that relies so heavily on leaders and chain of command, leadership at all levels take on a key role in the implementation of Solution #1's multiple proposals. This begins with USAF senior leaders supporting and pushing the need to re-evaluate the deployment process and potential changes. For this tactic to have a chance of succeeding, leaders will need to be all-in and be prepared for a protracted struggle from those who do not see the need for change. If successful, and changes to the USAF's deployment structure and schedule are possible, then leadership will shift to supporting the new policies and disseminating those down to lower levels. Leaders at these lower levels will have an easier time since they will be enforcing established policy, ensuring their subordinate commanders are following the new rules.

For the other pieces of this solution set, including less additional duties, more flexible work schedules, and a flying only career track the role of leadership is more

straight forward and traditional. Senior leaders will have the largest role in creating the flying only track, and this will center on building support and providing messaging to their subordinate organizations in preparation for service wide-implementation based on the results of the test program currently being conducted. Local leaders will then ensure the message gets out to their people and prepare the necessary local policies and procedures for dealing with two separate groups of pilots, those who are flying only and those who strive for leadership positions. Additionally, local leaders will be the primary focal point for instituting policies for both reducing additional duties and for creating flexible schedules. These options can be implemented at the local level using current AFIs as a basis and the main concern will be providing the reasons for, and potential positive outcomes from, the changes to all of their people, including those who are not directly affected. This will help to ensure a successful implementation phase and improve the strategy's sustainability over the long run. According to Liu and Wang (2011) leaders should pay close attention to improving the work/life balance of their employees as this directly relates to positive retention outcomes.

### **Building Support for Solution #1**

As mentioned before, one of leadership's main roles in the implementation of all aspects of this solution is generating buy-in from stakeholders at all levels. Without the support of all the key players, then any solution will have a difficult time being implemented and making a lasting contribution to solving the problem. Where this solution is concerned the three parts of the plan that will need the most support involve decreasing deployments, beginning a flying only career track, and hiring additional employees in order to reduce additional duties. Concerning the first issue, while research

conducted by the USAF may show that it is feasible to change the deployment schedule and deployment requirements, the real struggle will be convincing the Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCC) who are in charge of the deployed forces that they no longer need all of the resources that are currently given to them. Like many leaders, they may not want to part with the power they have been given. The ability to convince these individuals of the need to remove these forces will go a long way towards making this goal achievable. Gaining this support will require the USAF to show, without a doubt, that the deployed mission will not suffer in any way by reducing the number of individuals and equipment deployed.

For the tactic of creating a flying only track, the largest amount of support will need to be generated from within the USAF, in particular current leaders of flying units. This tactic's champion will need to convince these leaders that the positives gained through improved retention and employee satisfaction outweigh the fact that less pilots will be available to fill non-flying and leadership positions. The results from the current USAF pilot program will be the first step in making this argument. For those outside the pilot community, while buy-in is not crucial, showing them how an increase in manning and satisfaction on the pilot side can have a positive impact on them, can improve understanding of the actions being taken and make for smoother implementation.

Finally, if it has been determined that there is a need to hire additional personnel in order to take on the extra duties removed from the pilot force, support will be needed from both that organization's senior commander and the personnel office. For the senior commander this support amounts to a willingness to make the unplanned budgetary changes needed to hire an additional individual. For the personnel office, it involves



going through the process of creating a new position and ensuring that it is on the books and legal. If this support is not gathered then the chances of hiring the needed position are very low.

### **Global / External Implications for the Organization**

Upon examining any other potential wide-ranging implications that the USAF may face upon implementing this particular solution set, a few do come to mind. On the negative side, there is the potential to upset the other services who might see the act of lessening the USAF's deployments as unfair and generating more stress on their own forces. On the positive side, the potential increase in pilot retention that this solution may create will not just provide the USAF with more resources and experienced operators, but also improve the service's ability to meet its national security commitments and defend the nation.

### **Evaluation and Timeline for Implementation and Assessment**

With this proposed solution set presented, a look at the potential timeline for its implementation and how the solution's success or failure will be evaluated is warranted. To start, the implementation timeline for each of the four parts of the solution will vary. Decreasing deployments will take the longest by far as it will require years to conduct the needed manpower studies and then gain the support and permissions required. Because of this timeline, it is also the individual solution that, while suggested often by the study's participants, is the least likely to make a timely impact to the retention issue. Creating a flying only career track has the next longest timeline, and one that should be done in phases. Fortunately, the service has already begun this phased implementation with the creation of a pilot program in Air Mobility Command (AMC) (Pawlyk, 2018). The

results of this initial test will be used to determine if continuing to the next phases, expanding the program within AMC and then to other Major Commands, will be worth the time and effort. While it has not been stated, it could take years to get usable results. The last two parts of the solution regarding less additional duties and flexible work schedules, are the simplest when considering a timeline as they could be implemented now by local leaders, and should only take a few months to produce results, either positive or negative.

The best way to assess the success of any of this solution's parts is basically the same, though each strategy would need to be assessed separately. The overall goal is to improve pilot retention within the USAF, so that is the marker by which to gauge the solution's success or failure. Leaders need to start the assessment by looking at the rate of retention and pilot loss currently being experienced in the USAF pilot community. As the parts of this solution set come on line the retention rate should be reexamined at no less than six month increments in order to see how, and if, the number changes. Basically, if flexible work schedules and reduced additional duties are implemented in October, check the retention rates at that point and then again in April. Continue checking the rates every six months until a discernable pattern is found and a determination of success (increased retention rates) or failure (reduced or unchanged rates) occurs. With this data changes can then be made to improve the current strategy or begin again.

### **Solution #2**

Moving from the more complicated solution set provided in Solution #1 focus can shift to the second, and final, solution being presented, that of improving leadership

within the USAF. Northouse (2016) provides that, “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal,” (p. 6). While not the only definition, it does provide a good basic understanding of a complicated topic and a starting point for this solution.

The importance placed on leaders within the military, due to its hierarchical nature, ensures that leaders at all levels have a prominent hand in any changes that may take place, both in the planning and execution arenas. During the course of data gathering for this study, leadership was mentioned often by the interviewees and, while not a prominent reason that pilots left the service early, it was cited repeatedly in association with other reasons for leaving and as a potential solution. With this in mind, the focus of this solution will be on improving leadership within the USAF through refining leadership training within the already established Professional Military Education (PME) system and by establishing a leadership training program run at the wing level, aimed at junior officers approaching their first leadership positions.

### **Support for Solution #2**

In order to provide support and stress the uniqueness of leadership to the issue of pilot retention in the USAF, the most logical place to begin is with the study’s findings. Where the topic of leadership was concerned, while only six of the study’s participants listed it as a deciding factor in their decision to leave the USAF, a fairly low number, 10 provided that fixing leadership within the service as a way to improve retention. This dichotomy is interesting and shows that while leadership may not have been a direct factor for most individuals, it is still important as almost half of the respondents believed that an increase in “good” leadership would reduce the number of pilots leaving the

service early. According to one interviewee leadership, “varied so much and that was the problem.” Another stated that, “The thing that frustrated me the most about “leaders” in the Air Force was how they all seemed obsessed with promotion and career advancement above all else.” Continuing this theme another participant said, “I only had one great leader...the other seven SQ/CC I had were lousy...toxic.”

Statements like this show a definite problem within the USAF’s corps of leaders. Leaders are supposed to be the ones bringing people together and taking care of team members in order to ensure success of not just the organization, but the individual as well (Northouse, 2016). The way that leaders present themselves and the style they use can have definite effects, both positive and negative, on employee motivation, satisfaction, and ultimately retention (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). Because if this, a change in the way leadership is currently taught, to include additional supplemental training, has the potential to improve not just pilot retention but unit culture and cohesion as well.

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to Solution #2**

When considering improving leadership within the USAF the stakeholders and factors involved are fairly straight forward. To begin, USAF pilots themselves would be the first stakeholders to consider. They would benefit the most from this proposed solution and any improvement has the potential to enhance retention within this critically stressed field. Moving on, the next stakeholders would be the leaders being trained. These individuals must attend PME at certain times in their career so an improvement in the content of any leadership training during these mandatory courses could be easily included with little to no negative impact on the students. Finally, the last stakeholder to consider would be the academic organization that conducts the training, Air University

(AU). AU's mission is to, "Develop leaders, enrich minds, advance airpower, build relationships, and inspire service" (Air University, 2019a). With this in mind, AU has a set syllabus for all of its courses and maintains that standard until it has deemed a change is required, and syllabus changes do occur on a fairly regular basis. This flexibility should allow for an easy change as long as the case can be made to AU leadership and to Air Education and Training Command (AETC), AU's parent organization.

### **Policies Influenced/Influencing Solution #2**

Just like Solution #1, this solution also has USAF policies that will have an impact on implementing this solution and so must be deliberated. The first policy to consider is AFI36-2656, which covers developmental education within the USAF to include who is eligible, when they attend, and how they are selected. This policy may need to be revised to include a section for the supplemental leadership training proposed in this solution. In addition, AU has its own set of policies and directives that have the potential of being influenced/influencing this solution. These publications include Air Force Handbook (AFH) 36-2235 volume 10 and Air Force Manual (AFMAN) 36-2234 covering how instructional systems and courses are developed and integrated into the USAF educational structure (USAF 1993; USAF, 2002). These publications will prove to be important as the new leadership training program must follow these instructions in order to be accepted.

### **Potential Barriers and Obstacles to Solution #2**

Compared to the first solution set presented, this particular solution should not create as much resistance. In short, this solution is looking to just modify existing practices involving leadership training and development within the realm of PME as well

as create a separate, and much smaller, leadership program at the local level. Any potential resistance would come from one of two places. The first source of resistance would be from Air University itself as that organization's leaders may see this change as a negative commentary on their current leadership syllabus, and in response put up resistance to the change. Change agents will need to ensure that the AU understands that this is not an attack on their programs' content or quality, but an evolution of leadership education that takes into account new thoughts and ideas about leadership and leader/follower relationships. As provided by Northouse (2016) leadership is a difficult topic to pin down, constantly changing over time and requiring flexibility in thinking and doing by leaders everywhere.

Second, resistance could come from individual members and leaders themselves who may think the current way the USAF provides leadership training is acceptable and that they, personally, do not need additional training and that their leadership style and ability is "just fine." To counteract this type of resistance education and messaging will be the key component. Ensuring these individuals are aware of the benefits this training will provide them and the USAF will be critical. Using civilian businesses and their leadership practices as examples of success and failure with regard to leadership training could help press the issue and spread understanding that being a leader is a continuous learning process.

### **Financial/Budget Issues Related to Solution #2**

From a financial standpoint, this solution does raise a couple of financial issues. The biggest issue would occur in conjunction with developing the new local leadership program. This program would require development of a program and the required

materials, each of which would require budgeting to support not just initial development but continued improvements and materials. Additionally, if the USAF decides to contract out the teaching this course then that decision will bring with it the financial obligation to pay for enough trainers to present the material to members all over the world. The second financial issue would be the funds needed to modify the existing leadership courseware at Air University. While mainly a programmatic and material issue, it will still be costly and garner attention since the change would need to be made within all of AU's subordinate PME schools.

### **Other Issues or Stakeholders Related to Solution #2**

This solution is fairly straightforward in concept and application. Because of this, only one other major issue/stakeholder needs to be considered, that of the individual pilots and officers that will be impacted by the creation of a new leadership training program. Specifically, the impact of this program on their already stressed time and family lives. One of the main goals of this study, and provided in detail in Solution #1, is to create a better work/life balance for USAF pilots. One major aspect of that goal is to reduce additional requirements and the amount of time that USAF pilots are away from their families. In order to take this into account, the positives that creating a new mandatory training program will have on leadership development must be weighed against the additional time requirement this places on members and the impact on their work/life balance. This issue has the potential to effect the way the program is implemented in order to ensure the training does not pull pilots away from their family responsibilities any more than it needs to.

### **Implementation of Solution #2**

Moving to the implementation of Solution #2, it is interesting to note that this proposed solution is much simpler in theory and so also in the implementation process. Starting with the current leadership programs within Air University, the entirety of implementation will consist of a modification of current syllabus and leadership training techniques. Once the decision to update the current leadership training is made then AU would bring together a team of leaders and teachers from all of its subordinate schools to decide on the exact nature and direction of the change. This group would create the overall vision of the new leadership training programs' focus and goals. The members would then go back to their respective schools and create the actual plans for implementing the changes within the paradigm of each school's mission. For example, Squadron Officer's School is meant to develop officer's that are just beginning to be placed in leadership positions, so the new teaching plan would focus on more tactical leadership at lower levels within organizations, working directly with employees and building the base for positive leadership styles such as transformational and servant leadership (Air University, 2019b). Once the plans are developed then leadership can phase them in to each school over a period of time based on what makes the most sense due to start dates, course lengths, and the complexity of the training delivered.

With regard to implementation of a new locally based leadership program the first step is the development of the syllabus and materials, ideally through a partnership between AU and the USAF's MAJCOMs based on individual leadership requirements and need of each command. Multiple examples of leadership training programs exist in the corporate world and can be used as a basis for the creation of such a program. One



such program is Harvard Extension School's Essential Management Skills for Emerging Leaders professional development course (Harvard University, 2019). This course's general structure of building leadership knowledge within each participant through reading articles and case studies followed by in-person training in a classroom environment could prove to be a good model for this solution (Harvard University, 2019).

Once the course has been developed, no matter the structure chosen, then several bases should be selected as test beds for each MAJCOM, looking for any issues that may arise. This slow application will allow time to test the syllabus and make changes needed to account for any variables not yet considered. Once the proverbial "bugs" have been worked out, implementation can spread to all other bases and full program evaluation can truly begin.

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of Solution #2**

While many of the factors and stakeholders that would play a role in the implementation of this solution have already been discussed in one way or another, a short synopsis is warranted. The first stakeholder would be USAF leadership. These individuals must understand and fully support the change in leadership training in order for it to take root and make a difference. Additionally, Air University as a whole will play a major role in the solution's implementation within the formal professional military education structure, necessitating their support as well. Finally, local leaders must understand the reasons for the change in order to properly message to those officers and pilots participating in the program the need for the new leadership training requirement, providing the best opportunity for it to be a success.

### **Leader's Role in Implementing Solution #2**

Delving a little deeper into the role that leadership will play in the implementation of this solution, it becomes apparent that along with providing the direction and drive for a new approach to leadership training, leaders are also essential in creating buy-in from the different stakeholders affected by the change. Creating this buy-in begins with senior leaders developing messaging that provides the reasons for the change and the positive outcomes expected for the service as a whole as well as for the individual members. Keeping the intent of this study in mind, this messaging would need to include how developing better leadership will lead to improved lives and careers for USAF pilots.

With this messaging created, it then becomes incumbent on each subordinate level of leadership to take that message, adjust it as needed to fit the particularities of their organization, and provide it to their people. If leaders truly believe, and can show, that the change is a good one then garnering support from individual employees will be easier and give the new leadership programs a better chance to succeed.

### **Building Support for Solution #2**

Now armed with an understanding that the main role leadership plays in the implementation of this solution revolves around building support and buy-in, a closer look at how this task can be accomplished is justified. From the senior USAF leader perspective this buy-in starts with them. Truly championing the idea of overhauling the USAF's leadership training paradigm, in-particular what types and theories of leadership are taught as well as how it is taught, requires an understanding of how leadership currently impacts the lives of its pilots and their retention decisions, as well as the vision to see how this evolution of leadership education can improve the service and the lives of

its people. In essence, knowing that leadership touches all aspects of an individual's career and that the more capable and well-rounded the leader, the more engaged and committed the employee. With senior leaders on board, then the message must be channeled down the chain of command to lower levels of leadership who must then garner the support of subordinates who are affected. The best way to accomplish this would be through concentrating on the positive impacts that improved leadership and training will have on their lives, that a more responsive and understanding corps of leaders would be beneficial as advocates for the pilot corps and their unique needs and concerns. This can be messaged in many different ways from meetings to policy letters and videos. The crux would be to ensure the message gets out to everyone and that it's honest and relatable.

The only other group to look at, and one that would need to be approached in a unique way, would be the leaders and staff at Air University. Since many of these individuals are academics, it would make sense to approach the argument from this angle, focusing on the idea that this change is a standard syllabus modification responding to the evolutionary nature of leadership. The important point would be to ensure they understood that it was not an indictment of their current method or their ability to teach, just a much needed update of the leadership curriculum.

#### **Additional Considerations for Implementation and Assessment**

The final considerations for both implementation and assessment of this solution focus around its intended purpose. While improving leadership training is important in any organization and should be a regular point of development, the intent of this study is to understand and improve pilot retention in the USAF. With this in mind, the end goal

of this solution is to increase retention by improving leadership. Since leadership touches so many aspects of a USAF pilot's career and life, the more involved and truly caring a leader is the happier and more content the member and the more willing they are to stay. Maintaining focus on this outcome will ensure the solution is implemented with the right mindset and that the assessment is not centered specifically on the quality of leaders and leadership, but on its impact over time with regard to retention numbers.

### **External Implications for the Organization**

Looking at this solution from an external perspective, some external implications for the organization begin to appear. Focusing on the aim of the study, the ability to improve pilot retention within the USAF allows the service to meet its mandate with regard to national defense and national projection of strength. This ability to meet demands creates a more secure nation and proves to our allies that the USAF is able to support and defend them as necessary. Additionally, evolving the USAF's ability to provide first rate continuing leadership training, creates the potential to develop capable leaders that are the envy of other services and government organizations. Creating a benchmark leadership program that other organization want to emulate can only increase the USAF's standing among its peers.

### **Evaluation and Timeline for Implementation and Assessment**

Implementation of both parts of this solution should be relatively easy. Each can be started quickly though results may not be visible for some time. Starting with the leadership training syllabus at AU, this solution does not need to be phased or staggered much at all. Once the curriculum has been developed, approved for each subordinate school, and a basic beginning academic year chosen, the new plan can be rolled out on

whatever date is most appropriate based on when each individual course begins. Moving to the creation of a new local leadership training program, the implementation plan would be a little different. Due to the larger financial burden that creating a new program at each flying base would entail, it makes sense that starting with a pilot program to test the plan's effectiveness would be appropriate. By choosing a few bases within each Major Command (MAJCOM) and using these locations as test beds, the program's efficacy can be determined and the data needed to make a decision on expanding the program to other bases gathered.

With regard to assessing both parts of the solution the plan would be very similar to Solution #1, essentially measuring the rate pilots are leaving the service before starting the solution's parts and then again sometime after implementation to see if there is a difference. This is deceptively simple though since it takes time to train leaders and allow them to grow and reach positions of impact. This aspect would require the second measure of retention to occur after an acceptable time has passed, allowing the effects of the leadership changes to really make an impact. This would be at least a year, though it would probably take longer to get full results. After this initial period of time, taking measures of USAF pilot retention rates every six months for several years would deliver the best story and the most accurate data on the solution's success.

### **Change Theory**

Switching gears slightly, since both solutions involve changes that need to be made, some small and some very large, taking a quick look at change theory and how it would apply to the development and implementation of both solutions is appropriate. In the broadest terms change is happening all the time, due to factors both inside and outside

an organizations control. According to Burke (2014) this change comes in two major forms, either a revolutionary change springing from a major shift in mission, leadership, or culture, or an evolutionary change that occurs gradually and almost organically based on outside influences.

The two solution sets provided in this project have parts that fall into both categories, with changing deployments and the way leadership is taught in the USAF falling more into the realm of revolutionary, while flexible work schedules and reduced additional duties falling more into the evolutionary regime. Either way, the changes and change process must be fully understood by those agents advocating for them and their must also be an understanding that the path to real change is never easy or a straight line (Burke, 2014). In fact, a look at the different change theories and models such as the life-cycle theory, teleological theory, evolutionary theory, and Lewin's three steps shows that there are just as many different schools of thought on how to change organizations as there are potential changes to make (Burke, 2014). In summary, regardless of the path the change agent chooses, being as prepared as possible through gaining stakeholder buy-in, anticipating resistance points, and acknowledging limitations will help facilitate the dynamic change needed to be successful and lasting.

## **Implications**

### **Practical Implications**

Up to this point in this study the discussion has focused, as it should, on the aim of the study which is to create a grounded theory concerning the pilot retention crisis, as well as evidence-based solutions for the problem of retention. Now that this aim has been achieved with the creation of the USAF pilot quality of life retention theory and

presentation of two potential solution sets, consideration can shift to the possible implications of the project's results.

Addressing the problem of pilot retention within the USAF is an extremely important goal as it relates directly to maintaining the country's ability to defend itself and address its national interests (Woody, 2017c). From a practical standpoint, several implications result from this study's findings and the solutions presented. First, being able to slow or stop the constant flow of pilots out of the service means that the USAF is able to retain not just a more acceptable number of pilots to perform its missions, but its most experienced pilots as well. This improves the service's readiness as well as lessening the load placed on those pilots that stayed in. The results also showed that in order to keep people in you must consider their wants and needs. By improving quality of life factors, such as time away from family, the service can make a real impact on employee happiness and satisfaction, both major factors in retention (Hom et al., 2017). As pilots begin to see that the service does indeed care for their wellbeing and happiness, this will hopefully help to change the pervasive thought that to the service people are just assets to be used as needed without much consideration.

Additionally, improving employees' work/life balance and the resulting increase in retention will help the service save money over the long run. As Cardy and Lengnick-Hall (2011) provided, the cost of training new employees is much higher than the cost associated with retaining current personnel. This idea becomes even more apparent with regard to USAF pilot retention since it costs approximately \$11 million to train a fighter pilot from the start of training to operational readiness (McCullough, 2017). The money saved by improving retention and reducing the need to increase pilot production numbers

could then be used to help offset the costs associated with the implementation of this study's proposed solutions.

Finally, creating better leadership training and subsequently better leaders within the service equals a better organization overall. In support of this, Bilas and Adeeb (2017), state that leadership, "promotes the development and fulfilment of human potential of the people involved in the organization – their intellectual, spiritual, emotional, professional, and business potential," (p. 52). Improving leadership will not just help to address the issue of retention, but help to create an organization that is competently led and flexible enough to meet the needs of a constantly changing world.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As this study progressed it became clear that the scope was relatively narrow, due to constraints of time and money, and that there was the potential for additional research into other areas. For future researchers, several possibilities are available to expand upon this study's current line of research and inquiry. In this study the focus was in those pilots who had left the USAF and their reasons for this retention decision. One possible avenue for future researchers would be expanding the population being studied to include those individuals who stayed in the USAF until retirement. This change could provide an interesting set of information and counterpoint to this study's narrower focus.

Additionally, future researchers could expand the scope of the study further, including other career fields within the USAF that are having retention issues, such as aircraft maintenance, or even out to other services facing similar problems keeping their skilled pilots. This would provide data about an issue that is potentially bigger than just one service or career field.



### **Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice**

The results of this study showed that while leadership was not singled out as one of the main reasons behind USAF pilots' decisions to leave the service early, it was provided as one of the main solutions. That improving leadership, due to its critical role within the USAF, improves the quality of life for pilots and subsequently improves retention. This supports current leadership research from researchers such as Kark and Van Dijk (2007) and Keskes (2014) who provided that leadership affects employees in multiple ways to include positivity and that transformational leadership practices have a positive relationship with factors such as organizational commitment. While not necessarily creating an entirely new line of inquiry within the leadership realm, this study has supported some current beliefs concerning organizational leadership and reinforced the need for researchers to continue examining the relationship between leadership and retention.

From the perspective of putting theory into practice, this study showed that leadership touches many facets of employees' lives. With this knowledge, organizations need to ensure the individuals put into leadership positions are not just competent technical experts, but have the skills to support their people and improve the organization. Leaders themselves must be flexible and constantly open to learning by taking into consideration changes in leadership theory and utilizing multiple positive leadership styles such as transformational and servant leadership.

### **Summary of the Study**

Organizations face many challenges and obstacles during their existence that must be met and dealt with in order to survive and flourish in a constantly changing global

environment. One such issue is managing the organization's human capital through multiple means, to include retaining skilled employees (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). The United States Air Force has been faced with a real problem in this area, as it is losing its highly trained pilots at an unacceptable rate (Daniels, 2017). As mentioned previously, the service has been aware of the problem and attempted to counteract it using a variety of techniques, though the main focus is of a monetary nature centering on providing bonuses to its pilots (Losey, 2017). Unfortunately, this tactic has not had the desired impact and the issue is still present with no lasting solution in sight. To address this critical problem facing the USAF, this study focused its purpose on finding the underlying reasons for the pilot retention issue and then providing viable solutions.

In order to accomplish this mandate, the researcher, after providing a detailed description of the current problem and its negative impact on the service, addressed the pilot retention crisis utilizing a grounded theory methodology. This method focused on gathering data through interviewees with individuals who had experienced this retention decision personally and made the decision to leave the service. Interviews were sent out with the goal of getting 20 to 25 usable interviews returned. After a period of time, 21 interviews were returned and used for data gathering and analysis. Once coded and analyzed, the data provided some interesting findings, most notably that quality of life issues such as work/life balance and outside opportunities played the biggest roles in the current retention problem facing the USAF. The data from the study's participants also provided that strategies aimed at improving work/life balance issues, increasing employee satisfaction, and developing better leadership had the greatest potential of

reducing the number of pilots leaving the services early. These findings led to the development of the USAF pilot quality of life retention theory.

To potentially fix the underlying issues discovered in the data analysis, the project provided two main solution sets. The first dealt with the issue of work/life balance, specifically decreasing the amount of time USAF pilots were away from their families, improving opportunities, and lowering the amount of additional non-pilot duties they were required to perform. The tactics provided within this solution set involved both long term solutions such as reducing the number of deployments and creating a flying only career track, as well as shorter term solutions such as allowing for flexible work schedules and hiring additional manpower to take on duties not related to flying. Implementation of these tactics will differ as decreasing deployments and creating a new pilot career track involves many levels of planning and coordination, and will take years to become viable, while the others require less involved policy changes and can be delegated to the local unit level. Evaluation of these solution sets would involve measuring the current rate of USAF pilot attrition and then taking this same measurement every six months to a year. By comparing that beginning number with the later measurements success or failure can be determined and required changes can be made.

The second solution set is a little simpler and involved a change in the current leadership curriculum provided to officers while they attend PME and the development of a local leadership program at their home units. The first of these requires buy-in by Air University, but application should be simple as curriculum changes happen within academic institutions on a fairly regular basis. The second tactic would require a little more work in developing the program and hiring the instructors, but the potential in

providing quality leadership training early in an officer's career would mitigate any challenge that might arise. Evaluation of this solution set would be similar to that of the first solution set in terms of measurements taken, though it would still take time to get results as developing leaders and getting them into positions where their leadership can have an impact cannot happen overnight.

In all, the study has shown that the problem of pilot retention in the USAF is complex and not easy to solve. The reasons behind why pilots are leaving vary depending on each individual's experiences and needs, though the study did show that the concept of quality of life seems to play the largest role. Likewise, there are no cookie cutter solutions, and while short term fixes can be put into place to slow the tide of those leaving, lasting solutions will take time and require the USAF to take a critical look at its own policies and personnel practices. With this in mind, this project worked towards providing the service with a better understanding of what issues played the biggest role in service members' retention decisions as well as solutions that have the potential to greatly improve their day to day lives within the service. Through an evolution of its organizational culture and leadership, the service will be better equipped to meet its national security requirements by increasing satisfaction, commitment, and the desire of individuals to stay.

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*Appendix A*

<p>Interview Protocol: USAF Pilot Retention                  Time of Interview:                  Date:                  Method:                  Interviewer: Andrew Gray</p> <p>I would like to express my appreciation for your agreeing to be interviewed and participating in this research project. The goal of this study is to discover the underlying reasons behind the current USAF pilot retention crisis. Also, I want to remind you that your anonymity will be maintained and that all of your answers will stay strictly confidential. Due to the voluntary nature of this study, if at any time you decide you no longer wish to participate that is completely acceptable.</p> <p>Working Definitions:                  Retention - Staying on active duty past initial Active Duty Service Commitment (ADSC) to retirement.                  Leadership - Inspiring and persuading others to contribute directly to group or organizational success (Haslam, Reicher, &amp; Platow, 2011).                  Leadership style - The ways utilized by leaders to influence followers to contribute to the success of the group or organization. Styles can be either positive or negative (Haslam et al., 2011).                  Leaving early - Leaving active duty at initial ADSC or any time prior to retirement, most often prior to the 17-year mark.                  Active Duty Service Commitment - 10 years of active duty service in the USAF for pilots.                  Retirement - 20 years of active duty service in the USAF.</p>
<p><b>Demographic questions:</b></p>
<p>Rank when you left active duty:</p>
<p>Number of years on active duty:</p>
<p>USAF aircraft flown:</p>
<p>Marital status:</p>
<p>Number of children:</p>
<p><b>Open-Ended Questions:</b>                  (Please answer to your best ability and as thoroughly as possible)</p>
<p><b>Understanding retention in the USAF pilot community</b></p>

1. Provide a brief summary of your military career from commissioning to when you left active duty.

2. What does retention mean to you?

3. What do you believe is the USAF's perception of pilot retention?

**The decision to leave the service**

4. When you began your active duty career, what were your initial plans with regard to retention?

5. If this plan changed, at what point did this take place, and what factors lead to this decision?

**Leadership and retention.**

6. Thinking back over your career, you have served under many different leaders, can you describe the leadership styles of those you have served under?

7. Did your leadership promote retention within your organization, and if so how?

8. What impact, if any, did the leadership exhibited by your squadron, group, and wing commanders have on your decision to leave the service?

**Family life and retention.**

9. How has your military career affected your family life?

10. What impact, if any, did family life consideration have on your decision to leave the service?

**Outside opportunities and retention.**

11. How much opportunity is available outside of the USAF?

12. Why are these civilian opportunities more enticing than staying in the USAF?

13. What impact, if any, did outside opportunity have on your decision to leave the service?

**Additional Information**

14. Thinking back, if anything could have changed your retention decision, what would that have been?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been asked?

*Appendix B*

Andrew Gray  
501 Sun Star Ct  
Roseville, CA 95747

October 3 2018

**Study Title: MASS EXODUS: AN EXAMINATION OF USAF PILOT  
RETENTION**

USAF Pilots:

I am a doctoral candidate at Creighton University. For my dissertation research, I am conducting a study on the current problem with low retention rates of United States Air Force (USAF) pilots. The aim of my study is to better understand the reasons that pilots may be leaving the USAF in the early or mid-stages of their careers and to seek potential strategies for increasing retention in the USAF pilot pool. I ask that you please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide whether you will or will not participate in this study.

Participants in this study are being asked to complete a written questionnaire with 20 questions. These questions examine different aspects of your career journey in the USAF including those factors that influenced your retention decision. Once you have completed the questionnaire, you will be asked to return your responses *via* e-mail.

A preliminary sample completion of the survey required approximately 30 minutes. Your time for completion may, of course, vary. I do not anticipate that it will take longer than 45 minutes for any participant to complete the survey.

There is only minimal risk for participating in this study. The only potential risk of involvement in this study that I can envision would be a possible risk of reprisal by former fellow pilots or superior officers. However, even this risk is negligible as I am only seeking to survey previous USAF pilots who are no longer serving on active duty in the USAF.

The potential benefits of the study include adding to the body of knowledge and understanding about the reasons why pilots are leaving the USAF at an unprecedented rate. My aim is to lead to a discovery of new strategies that may effectively counteract that trend. I do not anticipate that there will be any direct benefit to you personally for your voluntary participation in this study. No incentives are being offered for participating in this study; nor will you or anyone being asked to participate be negatively affected in any way for choosing to not participate in this study.



I will keep the identity of all participants in this study confidential to the extent provided by law. Your responses will only be reported in aggregate or anonymously, by use of an assigned code number, with the identifying key maintained by myself protected in a password-protected file. I will be the only individual with access to any identifying information about any participant.

Your participation in this study will be completely voluntary. Should you elect to discontinue participation at any time during the study, any information already collected will be discarded. There will be no penalty or repercussion of any kind for electing to not participate or leaving the study at any time and date.

Should you have any questions about the study, you may contact me at any time by telephone, (316) 305-8170, or by email at [AndrewGray@creighton.edu](mailto:AndrewGray@creighton.edu), or you may contact Dr. Bill Raynovich, my faculty advisor, (402) 651-8395, at any time, as well.

Sincerely,

Andrew Gray

*Appendix C***Bill of Rights for Research Participants**

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research subject.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
  - a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
  - b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

## Appendix D

**Institutional Review Board**

2500 California Plaza • Omaha, Nebraska 68178  
phone: 402.280.2126 • fax: 402.280.4766 • email:  
irb@creighton.edu

DATE: October 5, 2018

TO: Andrew Gray  
FROM: Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral

PROJECT TITLE: [1321258-1] MASS EXODUS: AN EXAMINATION OF USAF PILOT  
RETENTION

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: October 5, 2018

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The following items were reviewed in this submission:

- Application Form - Gray-Application for Determination of Exempt Status Observation, Survey, Interview.doc (UPDATED: 09/20/2018)
- Creighton - IRB Application Form - Creighton - IRB Application Form (UPDATED: 09/20/2018)
- Letter - Participant information Letter.wr.docx (UPDATED: 10/3/2018)
- Questionnaire/Survey - Gray - Interview Protocol.docx (UPDATED: 09/30/2018)
- Study Plan - Study Design-Protocol.docx (UPDATED: 09/20/2018)

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

If you have any questions, please contact Kathleen Stibbs at (402) 280-2126 or [kathleenstibbs@creighton.edu](mailto:kathleenstibbs@creighton.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral's records.