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Key Points

Air Force recruiters are among the hardest working Airmen and are the Defense Department's smallest, yet most productive recruiting force. Already exhausted, they must now bring in thousands of additional young Americans on top of their normal quotas to fuel the service's manpower growth.

Recruiting leadership is warning that recruiters may be reaching a breaking point if they remain thin in numbers and resources. The recruiting force needs more personnel, greater and stable levels of funding, investment in technology, and freedom from outdated and onerous regulations that hamper productivity.

The Air Force's forthcoming new recruiting strategy is an opportunity to ensure the service is addressing the needs of recruiters at all levels. By tackling the issues now, service leadership will avoid having to face even greater problems downstream.

Aim Higher: It's Time to Boost The Air Force's Recruiting Enterprise

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Abstract

Air Force recruiters are the Defense Department's smallest recruiting force, yet its most productive. But they are a force under strain. They need relief and greater support as they drive the Air Force's growth in 2016 and beyond. Active Duty, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reserve recruiters consistently meet or exceed their respective component's annual accession goals despite severe funding and personnel shortages. Their sustained success over the years has shrouded from many eyes the extreme difficulties they face.

However, the funding shortages, especially for marketing and advertising, coupled with lack of access to certain technology and stifling bureaucracy, take their toll. Already facing these limitations, the recruiting force must now bring in thousands of additional accessions—on top of the normal annual crop of recruits—to fuel the Air Force's ongoing manpower increase. Further, recruiters must find the right type of intelligent young Americans to operate and maintain the service's increasingly sophisticated airplanes, satellites, and cyber networks. Those are difficult tasks given the small pool of interested—and eligible—youth from which the recruiters must draw.

Air Force leadership should act now to address these issues. The recruiting enterprise needs more personnel. It also requires a steady and reliable stream of advertising and marketing funding and investment in technology so that its recruiters can be a truly effective mobile force. Coupled with this, the Air Force should streamline regulations and procedures that prevent full exploitation of technology and unduly burden its recruiters.

Introduction

The Air Force's marketing slogan is "Aim High." It is a call out to would-be recruits that joining the Air Force would give them opportunity to work with the most advanced, cutting-edge technology while fulfilling their potential as individuals, experiencing the world, and defending the nation.

For decades, Air Force recruiters have successfully sold that message—and other marketing catchphrases—to young Americans and have brought in enough of the best and the brightest of them to fill the ranks of the enlisted force and officer corps. The recruiters' sustained success has created the perception that, no matter the state of the economy, no matter the overall state of the nation, inspired youth would always flock to recruiting offices in large numbers to enlist, and the recruiters would always deliver enough of them to meet the demand.

Over the past decade, the Air Force has decreased the size of its recruiting enterprise, leading to the point that it finds itself today severely short of manpower and resources. This comes at the time that the Air Force is growing in size—with plans to increase end strength by at least 8,000 Airmen by the end of 2017—and service leadership is relying on the recruiters to drive the manpower increase and find the right type of intelligent young Americans with science and mathematics backgrounds to operate and maintain the service's increasingly sophisticated airplanes, satellites, and cyber networks.¹ This also comes at a point in time when the Air Force—along with the Defense Department overall—is spearheading a drive to expand recruiting efforts into new markets to reach more young Americans across the nation's evolving demographic landscape.

Air Force recruiters—the US military's smallest, yet most productive recruiting force—

have been successful thus far in securing the new recruits, or "accessions," to feed the manpower growth in Fiscal Year 2016 and are expected to meet or exceed the fiscal year's accessions goals. However, recruiting leadership is warning that they may be reaching a breaking point if they remain thin in numbers and resources.

"We are struggling," said Maj Gen Garrett Harencak, commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service, which is headquartered at JB San Antonio-Lackland, Texas.² "We are hopelessly undermanned and under-resourced," he said in discussing the Active Duty's recruiting force. Recruiters are "not anywhere-near funded" where they should be, given the importance of their mission, he said.

The recruiting enterprise is "profoundly unrecognized" within the Air Force "due to a corporate process that does not understand recruiting and doesn't understand the value of our brand and getting the message out," said Harencak. Today, only a handful of the Air Force's nearly 200 general officers have recruiting experience.³ In comparison, 35 of the Marines Corps' 87 current general officers—40 percent—have such experience.⁴

The Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve face similar challenges in some respects and also have their own component-specific recruiting issues. In some ways, however, the Air Force Reserve's recruiting force appears spared from the Active Duty's and Air Guard's woes.

"Never in the history of our Air Force have so few Air Force recruiters been asked to bring so many people in," said Harencak of the situation in Fiscal Year 2016. The fact that the recruiters are meeting the service's demands is "a miracle" they are making happen, he said. Fiscal Year 2017 promises to be even more difficult, as the "recruiting force already is exhausted," he said. Plus, the recruiters will enter the new fiscal year without the normal backlog of accessions who enter service in the first several months, and the recruiting force will start off Fiscal Year 2017 with limited marketing funding, he said.

To counter these pressures, the Air Force needs to "aim higher" for its recruiters. The re-

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recruiting force needs more personnel. It also requires a steady and reliable stream of advertising and marketing funding to get—and keep—the Air Force’s brand out in the public eye. Recruiters also need investment in technology so they can be truly effective and efficient when working away from their offices. And, to the extent possible given the laws protecting recruiting candidates’ private information, recruiters need relief from onerous and counterproductive regulations and procedures that hamper them from exploiting technology and unduly burden them in processing accessions.

Comprehensive Recruiting Strategy _____

These recommendations do not imply the Air Force is doing nothing to support its recruiters. However, based on interviews with recruiters and uniformed officials in the recruiting leadership, clearly there is more to do. Already in the Air Force’s Strategic Master Plan of May 2015, service leadership recognized the need to transform the recruiting force.⁵ “Our current recruiting efforts will need to modernize to meet both the future talent pool and the ever-changing requirements

of tomorrow’s force,” states the document, which is meant to help guide the service in how it organizes, trains, and equips Airmen in the coming decades. “We will capture new demographics in recruiting efforts, focused not merely on race or gender, but also talent, background, and experience,” states the master plan.

To support this transformation, the Air Force is developing a comprehensive recruiting strategy, said Jeffrey R. Mayo, the Air Force’s deputy assistant secretary for force management integration.⁶ The service is working to have the strategy together by the end of Fiscal Year 2016 and will incorporate it in the master plan’s human capital annex, he said.⁷ The strategy calls for creating greater synergy and collaboration between recruiters across the components through new guidelines and policies, and for making them more efficient through greater use of

technology and online tools. The Air Force sees the recruiting strategy as a way to mitigate the shortfall it faces in recruiting manpower, said Mayo.

However, there is recognition that some number of additional recruiters is still needed. As part of the Air Force’s end-strength growth, the service has notional plans to add about 100 new Active Duty recruiters to the force starting later in Fiscal Year 2017, according to the Air Staff’s Manpower, Personnel, and Services directorate.⁸

A key component of the new recruiting strategy is to have recruiters across all the service’s components and recruiting areas (i.e., recruiters who bring in enlisted accessions versus those who recruit new officers and those who attract new civilian personnel) share information on recruiting leads (i.e., information on promising aspirants) through the Air Force Recruiting Information Support System-Total Force (AFRISS-TF), a content management system that enlisted accessions recruiters use today for managing accessions processing.⁹ The Air Force intends to expand its use to its officer accessions recruiters and also the recruiters who bring in the service’s civilian employees, said Mayo. Integrating the civilian recruiters with the work of the enlisted and officer accessions recruiters is “a new wrinkle” for the service, he said. Ultimately, the service wants every recruiter to be able to identify persons who are promising candidates for service—even if not in their own area—and to pass high-quality information on those candidates through AFRISS to the right recruiter, so the latter may pursue them.

For example, if an officer accessions recruiter meets a high school student who doesn’t want to go to college, but is mechanically skilled and seems interested in joining the Air Force, that recruiter should not consider that person as a dead lead and move on. Rather, the recruiter should pass on the person’s information with enough detail via AFRISS to an enlisted recruiter. This will require some cultural changes among the recruiters in terms of their level of understanding as to what a quality lead is for their recruiting colleagues in different areas, said Mayo. It will also require recruiters to buy into the idea of making it a part

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of their normal routine to help their colleagues in this manner. Mayo said service officials believe that they are modifying AFRISS so that it will be straightforward and easy to enter the leads. Further, he thinks recruiters will soon recognize that their efforts are worth it, as they will benefit, too, from the quality leads they receive from their colleagues.

Another piece of the new strategy is to expand the use of data analytics—in this case “microtargeting”—to help recruiters connect with promising young Americans who might otherwise fall through the cracks since they might not appear interested in serving, or “propensed,” at first glance. The idea here is to use the technology to analyze data available on young Americans in a given region to generate quality leads on skilled individuals, thereby saving recruiters time and expanding the pool of candidates from which the Air Force draws, said Mayo. For example, service officials hope that analytics could rapidly winnow a list of a million names of youth in a multi-state

area to about 1,000 individuals for engagement, he said. “It gets us out of recruiting in the places where we always recruit. When you have low numbers of recruiters, you tend to have to focus on the propensed population, but that continues to make us look like we currently do, which may not be as diverse or as high quality as we need,” he said.

To support the new recruiting strategy and to assist with geographic diversity, the Air Force is preparing to launch a recruiting test in New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont) in September 2016. Expected to last into most of Fiscal Year 2017, if not longer, the exercise will entail enlisted, officer, and civilian recruiters across the three components all working within AFRISS-TF and sharing leads, said Mayo. The test will be phased. At first, officer recruiters will work out the kinks in how they use AFRISS. It will then incorporate enlisted accessions recruiters, and final-

ly bring in civilian recruiters, he said. “We hope to get some good lessons out of the test,” he said, noting that New England is an area of the country from which the Air Force would like to attract more young Americans to serve.

The Most Productive Recruiting Force _____

The Air Force has some 2,200 recruiters across its three components. This includes about 1,350 recruiters for the Active Duty, some 650 Air National Guardsmen who handle recruiting and retention issues for their component, and 270 Air Force Reserve recruiters. The decade of cutbacks has left the Active Duty recruiting force short about 330 recruiters, said Harencak.¹⁰ The Air National Guard also needs more recruiters, said Brig Gen Jeffrey B. Cashman, director of the component’s manpower, personnel, and services organization.¹¹ “We are relatively underinvested in this enterprise. If we [in the Air Guard] hope to grow our numbers to support any other mission in the Air Force, we probably first need to grow our numbers here,” he said. The Air Force Reserve said it fielded additional recruiters in Fiscal Year 2016 and will do so again in Fiscal Year 2017 to meet recruiting requirements; it did not indicate a need for additional recruiters beyond that.¹²

An Active Duty recruiter brings in 2.2 recruits per month on average. An Air Guard recruiter delivers at a rate of nearly three accessions (2.99) a month on average, while an Air Force Reserve recruiter produces 2.75 accessions per month on average. By comparison, US Navy Active Duty recruiters average 0.9 accessions per month; US Army recruiters: 0.8; and US Marine Corps recruiters: 0.7.¹³

“Our incredible advantage is our recruiters,” said Harencak. “No offense to any of the other recruiters, but our recruiters outperform every other recruiter in any other service ... despite our resource and funding problems, despite the economy, despite the exponential increase in the people we have to bring in,” he said.

Active Duty recruiters normally access persons with no prior military service, while the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve bring in

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The approximately 1,200 Active Duty recruiters who handle enlisted accessions are spread across 695 offices and 179 part-time offices that cover recruiting zones in the 50 US states. There are also eight offices in US territories and overseas: Puerto Rico: 3, England, Germany, Guam, and Japan: 2, including one on Okinawa.

large numbers of new members with prior military service, such as an Airman transferring from the Active Duty component. For example, some 60 percent of the Reserve's accessions have prior military service, with prior-service Airmen accounting for about 50 percent of the component's total accessions.¹⁴ The two reserve components also offer mostly part-time, versus full-time opportunities to serve. If an aspirant's civilian job is in the cyber field, "we want to capture that and bring them on into the cyber world in the Air Force Reserve," said Col Christopher F. Nick, Air Force

Reserve Command Recruiting Service commander.¹⁵ Air Guard recruiters concentrate in their state on filling positions for the local wing that they support. Reserve recruiters also are unit-centric, whereas Active Duty recruiters work in a local recruiting zone, but are not tied to supporting a specific unit.

A recruiter's job is definitely not a 9:00 a.m.-to-5:00 p.m. endeavor five days a week. Recruiters work long days inside and outside of their offices. In fact, recruiters are among the hardest working Airmen, said Harencak. Echoing these comments, one senior Air National Guard recruiter noted that the recruiting force this recruiter oversees is "overworked and overwhelmed," in addition to being short of staff. A second senior Air Guard recruiter said it can take months for a replacement to arrive when an Air Guard recruiter leaves a position. In the interim, the rest of the recruiting force supporting the local wing has to pick up the extra load to meet the accessions goals. Highlighting the stress on the force, this recruiter said there has been a 60 percent turnover in Air Guard recruiters in the recruiter's state in the past two years due to burned-out recruiters leaving for other positions within the component. "We are tired. We need more manpower and more money," said this senior recruiter. "My recruiters work to the bone."¹⁶

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Among the Air National Guard's recruiting and retention force are some 550 who are so-called production recruiters, meaning they have accession goals to meet. They work out of offices located on the installations out of which the Air Guard's 90 wings operate. The component also operates 45 off-base storefront offices in several communities near wing installations, and a handful of the recruiters work out of Active Duty bases to attract Airmen coming off of Active Duty. Air Guard recruiters collectively bring in the component's new enlisted personnel, officers, healthcare and legal professionals, and chaplains.¹⁸

The Air Force Reserve's approximately 270 recruiters include 154 who are primarily responsible for enlisted accessions; 35 who recruit officers and health professionals, and 73 who deal with in-service military personnel who want to transfer to the Reserve. There are also eight "critical-skills" recruiters who perform missions like bringing in accessions to populate a unit that is taking on a

new mission. Like the Air Guard, the Reserve does not have dedicated recruiters for legal professionals or chaplains. The Reserve operates 290 recruiting offices: 172 on base and 118 off base.¹⁹

Storefront offices have the advantage of being easier for prospects to access than an on-base office, due to the security checks required to get on base.

The Air Force Recruiting Service began consolidating Active Duty recruiting offices in 2012 under a construct designed to create centralized flight-centric offices, or hubs, and satellite offices

assigned to the hubs. Under the plan, the Air Force would reduce from 925 enlisted accessions offices and 183 flight chief offices to 359 offices: 159 hubs and 200 satellites. The first hub opened in April 2014 in Macomb Township, Mich., north of Detroit. As of mid-June 2016, there were 33 hubs completed, with another three on contract, leaving 123 remaining. However, AFRS officials are now reassessing the plan, questioning whether centralizing its recruiters would affect their production in the long run.²⁰

In July 2015, an Islamic extremist gunman opened fire at two military recruiting centers in Chattanooga, Tenn., killing four Marines and one Sailor at a Navy office and wounding several other people. The incident caused the Air Force to review its force-protection measures and implement changes to ensure the safety of its recruiters and those who visit its off-base offices. All Active Duty and Air Force Reserve enlisted storefront recruiting offices are open, but not all Air National Guard storefront locations have reopened since the incident.²¹

Reaching Out _____

The Air Force is now asking its recruiters to bring in thousands of additional new Airmen in Fiscal Year 2016—and most likely in Fiscal Year 2017—in addition to the normal annual crop they bring in to account for attrition through separa-

tions and retirements. It is asking them to connect with a special breed of young Americans who have the aptitude to handle increasingly complex and sophisticated cyber networks; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems; and remotely piloted aircraft (RPA). It's more difficult to find these types since they also have to meet the security requirements for these jobs. The Air Force is also instructing its recruiters to branch out even more to tap into new demographic markets (e.g., Spanish-speaking) and re-engage in geographical areas (e.g., New England) that are not currently fruitful. One reason for this outreach is so that the service can grow in diversity and inclusiveness.

At the macro level, the Air Force is already diverse and reflective of American society in some ways, such as having overall percentages of black and Hispanic Airmen roughly equal to percentages of blacks and Hispanics in the US population (the Air National Guard is currently the least diverse component in this sense).²² However, the service wants to do better. “We don't have as much diversity in the operational fields as we do in the support fields,” said Mayo of the Air Force Secretariat. “Operational areas tend to be a path towards promotion, so if you do not have the diversity in the operational fields, that starts to be a barrier to having diversity throughout all ranks across the force,” he said. The service also seeks greater geographic diversity across its ranks and mission areas, and a balanced mix of Airmen from various backgrounds, he said.²³ Already, “the Air Force Reserve recruiting force is hugely diverse,” said Air Force Reserve Command's Nick. “That leads to us being more diverse in our recruitment,” he said. For example, at about the halfway point of Fiscal Year 2016, 35 percent of the Reserve's enlisted accessions were minorities and 29 percent were females, he said.

Air Force Recruiters already utilize much technology in their jobs, but there is room for improvement. The Air Force prides itself as the most technologically advanced military branch of the US armed forces. It also boasts that it attracts young Americans who score best on aptitude tests. But the recruiting force is not always able to reflect

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that sophistication during meetings with prospects. “It doesn’t help ... when our recruiter pulls out a computer that the kid used when he was 12,” said Harencak. “He has to fill out a form and we have to take the data from the form that he filled out manually and manually put it into the [old] computer,” he said.

To remedy that would take “a relatively small amount of money,” said Harencak. “We could bring the entire recruiting force to tablets, to thumbprints, to electronic signatures, to systems that talk throughout from when the kid becomes interested to when the kid is accessed into basic military training at Lackland. It could all be done without paper and it could all be done electronically seamlessly. Yet, we are not there simply because ... we haven’t been given the meager amount of funds it would take,” he said.

Lack of money is not the only impediment to the recruiting enterprise’s ability to apply certain types of technology. “There are restrictions put on us by law that say we cannot act the same way the commercial sector can,” said Timothy J. Hanson, AFRS’ strategic marketing chief.²⁴ “There are best practices in the commercial industry that we just can’t use,” he

said. An example is the limitation on the use of “persistent cookies.”²⁵ “The Department of Defense does not allow us to use persistent cookies to track website visitors or online behavior of an individual. We know that the commercial sector could do that. We are only allowed to track an IP [internet protocol] address, so, we can’t make the connection between a person and an IP address. Nor can we buy certain types of information and house it” due to the laws protecting an individual’s personally identifiable information (PII), he said.

That said, there are opportunities for greater exploitation of publicly available data for generating leads, said the Air National Guard’s Cashman. “I think we can do better,” he said. “We need to innovate more frequently than we do. We spend a lot of time doing ‘same as it ever was’ and wonder why we get the ‘same-as-it-ever-was’ results,” he said. Similar to the microtargeting efforts that Mayo of the Air Force Secretariat discussed, Cashman said this could involve data mining publicly available records to connect to members of a local high school football team or tapping into Veterans Affairs Department references to persons who have left full-time military service and have moved into a local area. “Those are some of the innovations we are trying to use in our recruiting enterprise,” he said.

Cashman began his assignment in May 2016. As part of his job responsibilities, he oversees the Air Guard’s recruiting operations. The fact that the Air Guard now has a one-star general accountable for the results of the recruiters and advocating for their requirements demonstrates the importance that the component’s senior leadership places on the recruiting mission, he said.

Compared to private industry, which is able to adapt new technology in a timely manner, Cashman said the rate of technology refresh for Air National Guard recruiters is “way too slow,” coming in at several years at best. He said he is looking into eliminating paper forms, a move consistent with the Defense Department’s push to have a paperless, all-digital system within the next five years for recruiting and processing new personnel. For example, he said he would like the Air Guard to develop a tablet application so that prospects could enter their biographical data necessary for their background investigations and security clearances. This would spare recruiters from having to write everything down and then enter it themselves. “It is a huge waste of recruiter time,” he said.

Air National Guard recruiters interviewed said they needed better laptop computers and desktop printers and scanners. Transitioning to the Apple iPhone was a welcomed move. Some

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of them also favored having mobile printers and scanners so that they can be fully functional on the road, such as being able to scan an aspirant's driver's license and social security card on the spot. Having electronic tablets or so-called "two-in-one" devices that have both laptop and tablet modes is helpful and desired, but the recruiters said they currently are not able to utilize them fully due to counterproductive regulations and policies as well as security considerations, at least some of which they thought should be surmountable. For example, they would like to be able to access their office network securely via a virtual private network on their mobile devices while on the go.

"In multiple arenas, there are impediments," said one of the senior Air Guard recruiters referenced earlier. "They come to us and say, 'OK we will make you a mobile recruiting force with tablets, printers, and scanners,' but then the communications folks will say, 'We cannot put you on our network with that [equipment]' ... or people will say, 'We really want a hand-signed form and do not want a digital signature.'" The recruiter continued, "We are almost tied to our desks. You leave the desk to go meet someone and then you have to come back to your office to do all of the data entry because [with] the tools that we have ... you can't connect to the system you want on the military network."

Conversely, Nick said Air Force Reserve recruiters are well equipped. "I am very satisfied with the technology that we have," he said. "Everyone doesn't have a tablet, but when we go out for an airshow, we will have people who walk the crowd and they have tablets and they will go up to someone and [talk with them] and they can input that stuff right into the tablet right there," he said. Reserve officials, he said, continually evaluate new online tools and technology from across the civilian and military sectors and incorporate them into the recruiting force when there is a clear cost-effective benefit that is congruous with the component's security requirements.

Other areas for improvement involve simplifying and streamlining processes and regulations for accessing a person. Right now, for example, there are different interpretations by wing of what needs to happen to clear someone medically to join an Air National Guard unit, and transferring someone from the Active Duty component to the Air Guard can also vary by unit. "The [inconsistent] processes are what wears the recruiter out," said the senior Air Guard recruiter.

The Air National Guard also needs more vehicles for its recruiters, said Cashman. Currently, it has about half as many cars as recruiters, but is working to have one car per recruiter, he said.

Maximum Benefit, Maximum Exposure _____

Lack of funding for marketing and advertising is one of the Air Force recruiting enterprise's largest challenges. The Active Duty recruiting force had "a bona fide requirement" for \$91 million for these purposes in Fiscal Year 2016, said AFRS' Harencak. This money pays for items like radio commercials, an online presence, displays at county fairs and air shows, and promotional materials to hand out at job fairs. The Air Force Recruiting Service asked for \$75 million in Fiscal Year 2016, but ended up getting only \$22 million, he said. After much advocating, AFRS received another \$25 million about six months into the fiscal year, he said. Still, that brought the recruiting service up only to roughly half of its need. In comparison, the US Army spends around \$210 million for its marketing and the US Marine Corps has spent about \$80 million annually over the past two decades, noted Harencak.²⁶

Exacerbating the inadequate funding levels is the lack of having a steady and reliable funding stream that the recruiting service knows will be available to it at the beginning of a new fiscal year, said Harencak. The other services, even the Coast Guard, enjoy this predictability, he said. This enables them to execute a marketing campaign that has "maximum benefit and maximum exposure," he said. For example, they are able to buy National Football League commercial space and negotiate the

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best deals on the most advantageous time slots since they can commit funds upfront. “By the time we get our money, we are at a distinct disadvantage. We might be able to get some of those prime spots, but we are going to pay a lot more for [them],” he said.

A stable funding profile also makes it possible for the service to get its brand out more effectively and to keep that brand in the public eye. Stable funding, for example, has enabled the Marine Corps, to maintain its motto, “The Few, The Proud,” for decades, and focus groups show that

the motto has stuck with young Americans, said Harencak. (The Air Force hasn’t had that same consistency. It brought back “Aim High” in September 2014 after a 15-year hiatus as part of the “I am an American Airman” recruiting campaign.²⁷) “We would like to have a level of reliable funding that we get at the beginning of the [fiscal]

year, which allows us to make the proper use of that money and to get the full effect out of it,” he said.

Stability in branding is essential, especially since fewer young Americans have a direct connection to the US military nowadays, are knowledgeable about it, and are inclined to join. In 1995, some 40 percent of young Americans had a parent or other close relative who was in the military, or who had served, said AFRS’ Hanson. By 2014 that number had sharply declined to 16 percent he said. As a result, the recruiting enterprise now has to expend much effort in educating the public, and interested youth, about the Air Force, said Michael A. Romero, AFRS’ staff director.²⁸ “We are doing a lot of education we’ve never had to do just to get them to start to talk to the recruiter,” he said. This reinforces why it is so important for recruiters to get out of the office as much as possible to engage young Americans at grassroots events like college fairs, county fairs, air shows, and sporting events.

There is then the issue of who actually qualifies for military service, even if interested. Compared to past decades, recruiters face a diminished

pool of young Americans who qualify. “There just aren’t that many eligible kids out there,” said Harencak. Currently, roughly one quarter of high school students qualify for service in the Air Force, meaning they are in good health, do not have a criminal record or use illegal drugs, do not have face tattoos or excessive arm tattoos, and can pass the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB).²⁹ Harencak provided this breakdown: There are some 20 million 16- to 21-year-olds in the United States. When one factors those who are academically eligible to join the military (i.e., graduate high school, can pass the AVSAB), that number goes down to 11 million. That total then shrinks to 4.4 million after eliminating those who have criminal records, substance-abuse issues, excessive tattoos and body piercings, disqualifying medical conditions (e.g., asthma, scoliosis, obesity), and financial problems (e.g., inability to pass a credit check). Among those 4.4 million are roughly 500,000 who are inclined to serve in the military due to factors like having an “influencer” in their lives, such as a parent, uncle, coach, or high school counselor, who has served in uniform or encourages them to consider a military career.³⁰ Harencak said it is the group of 4.4 million who would qualify for military service that the Air Force markets to.

Advances in technology like the internet do allow interested parties nowadays to familiarize themselves with the Air Force and with career opportunities—through places like Facebook or www.airforce.com, the service’s marketing website—before they actually have to reach out to a recruiter. “Young people today are well connected. They do a lot of research before they ... tend to want to be able to talk to somebody ... to validate what they have heard or learned,” said AFRS’ Hanson. Even then, their first contact may not a face-to-face interaction, but rather an online chat with a recruiting advisor. Because of these changes, “the majority of the walk-ins have stopped,” said Harencak.

The Air National Guard also has seen a significant decrease in walk-in traffic at recruiting offices, said Cashman. Accordingly, he said he regards storefront recruiting offices as a “20th centu-

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The reserve components are similarly hard-pressed for marketing and advertising dollars. The Air Force Reserve received only \$8 million in the fiscal year, much less than the \$15 million to \$20 million it usually receives.

ry model” that the component expects to move beyond. “We are pulling back from that. I don’t think you will see many storefronts in the future,” he said. Recruiters’ best work is “done out in the field, at the schools, at the fairs, out talking to people. If I

could have my way, I’d have my recruiters work like state troopers out of their cars,” he said.

Conversely, the Air Force Reserve’s Nick said walk-ins are still an important part of Reserve recruiting. “I think it is the location you are in that varies the amount of walk-in traffic that you receive,” he said. “You may be in a town where it is very pro-military, and you get a ton of walk-in traffic. But someone might be in some other state where you really have to go out and prospect and go out into the community and visit the local high schools, visit the local colleges to get it out there because there is not a lot of walk-in traffic,” he said.

Whatever the case, at some point, the face-to-face meeting with the recruiter takes place. “Once someone wants to flip the switch and says, ‘I want to join,’ that’s when we have got to start talking to them,” said Cashman. “Personal contact becomes the coin of the realm at that point,” he said. Feedback from new accessions indicates that these conversations with the recruiter are the “most impactful” factor in their decision to join the Air Force, said AFRS’ Hanson.

The Air Force Recruiting Service’s advertising firm is GSD&M of Austin, Texas. Among its other clients are Southwest Airlines, Walgreens, and John Deere. Harencak said GSD&M is “incredibly capable” and “very cutting-edge” in what it does. “It becomes frustrating when we can’t apply and use that capability simply because we don’t have the funds to do so,” he said.

GSD&M does “an incredible job with analytics,” and there is no analytical marketing tool that AFRS is not up to speed on, said Harencak. “We know about them all. We know how to use them.

We are prepared to use them. We just can’t a lot of times because we can’t afford [them] or we can’t do it in the quantity or the volume we need to really pay the dividends,” he said.

Still, the Air Force makes “fairly sophisticated use of online tools” to analyze data, define target markets, and then reach out in those markets, said Hanson. For example, AFRS works with the ad agency to target young Americans who exhibit characteristics that potentially would make them strong candidates to be Battlefield Airmen. “We define them as young men who are adventurous, they are fitness people, like outdoor sports, ... attend crossfit gyms, ... do adventurous racing, or subscribe to outdoor magazines, ... and have hunting and fishing near them,” he said. With that information in hand, GSD&M can “serve ads to them in the different platforms they may go,” he said.

The reserve components are similarly hard-pressed for marketing and advertising dollars. The Air Force Reserve received only \$8 million in the fiscal year, much less than the \$15 million to \$20 million it usually receives.³¹ The Reserve’s advertising activity—funding for which, like the Active Duty, comes in piecemeal—is “a huge builder for direct leads for us,” said Nick. With the severely constrained advertising budget in Fiscal Year 2016, “we have seen a significant decrease in our leads,” he said. Plus, it’s difficult to regain an audience quickly after having fallen off its radar, said Nick. “That is a huge challenge,” he said. The Reserve uses Blaine Warren Advertising of Las Vegas.

The Air National Guard’s requirement in Fiscal Year 2016 was \$72 million, but it asked for, and received, just \$16.6 million.³² The component also is facing difficulties in having a coherent marketing strategy in the fiscal year, but this is partly self-inflicted. On top of limited funding, the component has been operating under week-to-week contracts with its advertising agency, LMO Advertising of Arlington, Va., in place of a yearly arrangement, which it is still negotiating. That’s because the Air Guard was in the midst of revamping its contract processes—a time-consuming enterprise—when the previous annual contract expired last year.

“As a result, the Air National Guard has been forced to implement a series of gap-filling marketing contracts to buy more time to get the rigor invested in the contract it wants,” said Cashman. “That has really compromised our ability to put together a coherent plan,” he said, noting that he expected resolution of the contract situation by next fiscal year. LMO Advertising also supports the Army National Guard and Coast Guard as well as National Geographic and Marriott Hotels International.

Another factor for the Air National Guard is that its marketing activities are also more fragmented, compared to the other components, said Cashman. “We are really not one subset of Air

Force recruiting, we are 90 subsets of Air Force recruiting, because the target demographic for each of our 90 Air National Guard wings is about a 50-mile circle around each of their geographic locations,” he said. “We run a marketing campaign at the national level because we appreciate the value and status attached to a national brand, but in each of those 90 markets,

there is a different appetite for different things.” For example, while one wing may prefer a local radio spot, another unit may favor a billboard advertisement in the same scenario. “I could spend a lot more marketing dollars than I do right now. If I had more, I would spread them out across those 90 markets” and give more autonomy to the wings for their markets once the Air Guard covered the baseline national branding, said Cashman.

With limited marketing and advertising funding, it’s important for the recruiting force to be able to gauge the effectiveness of its outreach activities. Several years ago, the inability of the Army National Guard to overcome the perception among some lawmakers that its multi-million-dollar sponsorship of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) was not resulting in a worthwhile return (i.e., sufficient number

of recruits) led the Guard to end its relationship with the racing organization as well as an IndyCar sponsorship.

That experience, along with a larger Defense Department-wide push for accounting for all expenditures, has moved the military branches to track these expenses more closely. For example, the Air Force Recruiting Service has a partnership with Richard Petty Motorsports (RPM), a race team that competes in NASCAR events. It is one of the sponsors of Aric Almirola’s No. 43 Ford. AFRS characterizes the partnership as “very cost-effective, delivering a solid return on investment in terms of media exposure, lead generation, and accessions.” In 2015, the partnership generated \$1.7 million in media exposure, delivered more than 7,210 leads, and resulted in 335 recruits, according to the recruiting service.³³

Discerning the effectiveness of some marketing outreach can be quite subjective. Recruiters say it takes interactions (e.g., face-to face contact, phone conversation) with about 100 young Americans to yield one accession. And, for each interested person, six “touches” (e.g., seeing a billboard ad, hearing a radio ad, meeting someone in the military) on average are necessary to make an impression on that person to reach out to a recruiter. It is difficult to measure the impact of each advertisement or engagement alone. “When you survey a candidate, they can’t remember those previous five touches that prepped the battlefield in their brain, if you will. They might be able to tell you the one moment that the light bulb came on for them, but there was an investment in marketing and communications made prior to that in order for that sixth [touch] to land,” said the Air Guard’s Cashman. “That’s why objectively measuring the effectiveness of a marketing campaign is so tough. . . . You cannot trace a single advertising effort to the number of people who come in the door,” he said.

There are also larger market forces at play that complicate the matter, such as the overall state of the economy. Generally, a stagnant economy makes young Americans more inclined to consider entering the military, since they do not view their

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Attempting to capture marketing cause and effect can also be stifling and counterproductive for the recruiting force. Current Air National Guard policy stipulates that advertising and marketing funding flows down from the national level and be auditable. In the past, each Air Guard wing had its own advertising budget for local use and could spend the money in areas it found most appropriate like buying branded pens and lanyards to go along with marketing literature for grassroots outreach events.

chance of landing a job in the private sector as high. Another dynamic is the perception—and corresponding weariness—many Americans have of the US military’s prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the more recent air campaign in Iraq and Syria against the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Since so few of the nation’s citizens have borne the burden of fighting these conflicts, this might dissuade youth from wanting to enlist and similarly carry the load for their country. “Recruiting Airmen in 2002 with the enemy at the gate was easier than it is today,” said Cashman.

national level and be auditable. In the past, each Air Guard wing had its own advertising budget for local use and could spend the money in areas it found most appropriate like buying branded pens and lanyards to go along with marketing literature for grassroots outreach events. Nowadays, the recruiters are hard-pressed to have a handful of these items on hand. “Back in the day, we had our own money and we didn’t run out of supplies,” said one of the senior Air Guard recruiters previously referenced. “Now, it is embarrassing to have to go to events and have nothing to give out.” Such scarcity is painfully evident at events where an Air Force recruiting table is near an Army or Army National Guard recruiting set-up replete with “SWAG,” the “stuff-we-all-get” giveaways that draw people in.

This Air Guard recruiter described a scenario with an event attended by 500 prospects. Ideally,

recruiters would like to have an ample supply of business cards and pens and lanyards and perhaps more items to give out. However, due to the one-accession-per-100-contacts rule of thumb, the recruiters will get only five pens for the event, since auditors, in theory, can tie each of those pens to an accession. “That’s how silly it has become,” said the recruiter. “The auditability I understand to hold people accountable, but it has gotten out of control. ... We used to be walking billboards. We’ve lost that.”

Supporting Air Force recruiting and retention is one of the roles of the Thunderbirds F-16 aerial demonstration team, which falls under Air Combat Command. The team does this by inspiring the public through its precision flight demonstrations at air shows and special events around the country and by assisting the local recruiting unit when visiting an area in engaging potential recruits and in materializing leads. It has Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages that continually highlight the Air Force’s and the Thunderbirds’ mission.

The Thunderbirds’ annual operating budget is approximately \$35 million, according to Air Combat Command.³⁴ The Air Force has no specific appropriated funds set aside for Thunderbirds’ marketing and recruiting activities; legally, it may not use such funds for Thunderbirds promotional items. However, Lockheed Martin typically gifts the Air Force \$100,000, which pays for Thunderbirds lithographs, brochures, pins, lanyards, and gliders for distribution at show sites and school visits.³⁵ The company’s funding also supports the maintenance of the Thunderbirds website. Air Combat Command does not have specific statistics linking new Airmen who joined the Air Force due to the Thunderbirds. However, it does work with the Air Force Recruiting Service to track metrics on registrants and leads generated at each air show the team attends. In 2016, it has revamped these efforts to capture a more comprehensive snapshot of the effectiveness.

The Active Duty component also has mobile and relocatable assets that support recruiting outreach at events like air shows. In its Air Force

The Active Duty component also has mobile and relocatable assets that support recruiting outreach at events like air shows. In its Air Force Performance Lab, visitors can virtually fly an F-35A in it and learn about the Air Force via tablet-based setups. In the Rapid Strike semi-truck-based simulator, visitors can experience an F-22 flight, C-17 airdrop, or special operations.

Performance Lab, visitors can virtually fly an F-35A in it and learn about the Air Force via tablet-based setups. In the Rapid Strike semi-truck-based simulator, visitors can experience an F-22 flight, C-17 airdrop, or special operations. There is also the Vapor Special Operations Supercar that is outfitted with a custom stealth body kit, stealth exhaust, forward-looking infrared radar, and 360-degree surveillance camera to highlight the Air Force's technology, ingenuity, and innovation.

The Air National Guard also operates a mobile recruiting vehicle to deploy at fairs and air shows. "It is a big

attraction and people line up and wait to get into. It has got computer screens on the outside to register contact information and inside has computer games to show the Air Force mission," said Cashman. Unfortunately, lack of funding impacts its use, as it is often not in use. "It spends most of its life sitting in a warehouse parking lot someplace for want of funds for us to put it into play," he said.

The Air Force Reserve, among its activities, sponsors former NASA astronaut Leland D. Melvin who does public service announcements and gives talks to college students. He conveys opportunities in the Reserve for those with science and math backgrounds. Since he is a black American, he also reaches out to black students to inspire them to believe in themselves and succeed in life, as he has. "With him being an astronaut and us focusing on [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics careers], that obviously relates to our demographic," said Nick. "He has been absolutely phenomenal for us," he said.

The Active Duty's recruiting website, www.airforce.com, is user-friendly and easy-to-navigate, it showcases the service and provides background information for those interested in joining. It is a

modern, mobile-first platform, meaning it is optimized to offer a touch-enabled experience on the comparatively small-sized screens of cellphones and tablets. But it also scales well to the large screens of laptop and desktop computers. The site features vivid photos and videos showing Airmen in action, the airplanes they operate, and technology they use. Sections highlight the Air Force's mission, describe educational opportunities for those aspiring to be Airmen, outline career opportunities, and discuss life as an Airmen and as an Airmen's family member. There is also information on how to join, including answers to common questions on requirements and eligibility, the process of enlistment, and benefits. One can also engage with a live chat with an advisor, and fill out a short application to have a recruiter make contact. Some of the recruiter contact information was outdated during a review in early June 2016, but otherwise, the website is impressive.

The Air National Guard's well-crafted equivalent is www.goang.com. Also optimized for mobile devices, it is equally user-friendly and modern and allows visitors to navigate the website easily to learn more about the Air Guard and career opportunities with the wing in one's local area. It also provides links to chat with an advisor and reach out to a recruiter.

The Air Force Reserve operates www.afreserve.com. It is also modern and user-friendly, but comparatively simpler in design. It is straightforward for visitors to find the information they seek on the Reserve, such as job opportunities, benefits, locations, missions, and how to join. They can also chat online with a civilian e-advisor (who is a prior Reserve recruiter), who can address questions, distribute leads to recruiters, or even connect a prospect to a local recruiter. Unlike the Active Duty and Air Guard websites, afreserve.com, as of July 2016, was not yet optimized for mobile devices and visitors must navigate on cellphone and tablet screens by pinching and zooming in order to see everything at its pages.

Most individual Air National Guard wing websites also have information posted at a "Ca-

recruiters” sections on how to join the unit, career opportunities, and contacting a recruiter. Some state Air National Guard organizations, and some individual wings, also have iOS and Android apps; these include sections that provide information on recruiting. One standout is the Oregon Air National Guard’s app. It has easy-to-find hyperlinks to text or call a recruiter in one’s local area. The links to information on Air Guard careers connect to the www.goang.com website, making the experience mobile- and user-friendly. The Mississippi Air National Guard’s app similarly makes it easy to find information and contact a recruiter. Some Air Guard apps need work. For example, one wing’s app is useful, but the links related to recruiting forward the visitor to non-mobile-optimized webpages at the wing’s website. The user experience is not smooth.

Some Air Force Reserve wings, but not all, post recruiting information at their respective website. For example, the 920th Rescue Wing at Patrick AFB, Fla., has a page at its website listing the contact information of the unit’s recruiters.

Air Force Recruiting Service also operates the US Air Force Recruiting Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/USAirForceRecruiting>) that features daily posts highlighting career fields, showcasing photos of airmen and equipment, and even

offering practice questions for the ASVAB. Every Tuesday, AFRS hosts a live chat at the site, enabling interested parties to ask questions and receive a live response. On June 15, 2016, for example, questions included how many concussions would disqualify someone from being able to enlist; whether a single parent would have to give up custody of a child to serve; and what types of laser eye surgeries

the Air Force accepts for someone who wants to become a pilot. AFRS also periodically sponsors live career chats at the Facebook page with Airmen in a particular field who describes his/her job and takes questions.

Recruiters across the three components use social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to varying degrees. Some recruiters said they do not find it useful and avoid it.

Not all technology proves to be useful for recruiting purposes. The Air National Guard has found that online job-posting websites have not proven to be fruitful for finding qualified, interested individuals to join the component.³⁶ The Air Force Reserve has generally discontinued the use of quick-response codes in advertising and marketing materials due to their limited adoption by users—unless they received a gift or prize for doing so.³⁷

Manpower Upswing

The Air Force is relying on the recruiting force to play a major role in bulking up the size of the force after several years of steep decline. Budget cuts forced the Air Force to downsize from some 330,000 authorized Active Duty Airmen in Fiscal Year 2013 to an all-time-low of about 313,000 authorizations just two years later (to go with approximately 105,000 Air Guardsmen, 67,000 Reservists, and 183,000 civilian employees).³⁸ The Air Force leadership felt compelled to take this drastic, unwanted step to pay for the service’s much-needed materiel modernization (e.g., fielding the F-35A Lightning II stealth fighter, KC-46A Pegasus aerial refueling aircraft, and B-21 Long Range Strike Bomber) after Congress imposed severe funding cuts on the US military through budget sequestration legislation in 2013.

However, the geopolitical landscape abruptly changed in 2014, placing more demands on the Air Force and US military overall. Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014. The United States reacted by beefing up its presence in Europe to demonstrate its commitment to its NATO allies, including periodic temporary rotations of Air Force fighters and bombers there. In June 2014, the United States and its coalition partners began an air campaign in Iraq and Syria against Islamic State forces. China also engaged in provocative actions in the South China Sea, including claiming international waters as its own, adding to the

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demands for a strong US military presence in that region. At the same time, Congress' reluctance to allow the Air Force to retire aging force structure, like its fleet of A-10 Thunderbolt II ground-attack airplanes, placed additional strains on the Air Force, highlighting the need for higher force levels.

Congress supported the move. Coupled with lifting the funding limits of budget sequestration on the Pentagon in 2015, lawmakers granted the Air Force an end-strength increase to 317,000 Active Duty Airmen in Fiscal 2016, up some 4,000 authorizations from the previous fiscal year. Air Guard manpower increased by some 500 authorizations to 105,500 Airmen, while the Reserve's authorizations moved up some 2,100 Airmen to 69,200. The planned manpower increase is not expected to stop there. While the Air Force did not officially request another end-strength increase in its Fiscal Year 2017 budget request, due to higher priorities under its still-tight budget, service leadership made clear to Congress the Air Force has the requirement to beef up Active Duty end strength to at least 321,000, perhaps more, to address shortfalls in critical missions like RPA operations, cyber, ISR, aircraft maintenance, and nuclear enterprise support.³⁹

The House supported this end-strength bump—and the corresponding \$145 million in extra funds to cover the costs of the extra manpower—through language added to its version of the Fiscal 2017 defense policy bill. Conversely, the Senate did not support an end-strength boost in its version of the legislation. Senate and House authorizers were left, therefore, to resolve the issue in conference before the final version of the bill that will go to President Barack H.

Obama for his signature. As of early August 2016, the legislation was still pending.

Under US law, the Air Force Secretary, like the other service Chiefs, may grow end strength by up to two percent above the congressionally authorized level. Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James has indicated to Congress that she intends to increase the Active Duty end strength in Fiscal 2017 to at least the 321,000-Airmen level.⁴⁰ (She could legally grow the force as high as 323,340 Active Duty Airmen in Fiscal Year 2017 if Congress keeps the authorized level at 317,000.⁴¹) The issue is whether Congress will provide the additional funds to cover the extra manpower. Without additional funds, the Air Force would have to pay for these Airmen from within its planned budget topline, having to take money from other priorities.

Plans are for Air National Guard end strength to grow by 200 Airmen in Fiscal 2017 to 105,700. The Air Force Reserve would fall by 200 to 69,000 in Fiscal Year 2017.⁴²

Growth even to 321,000 Active Duty Airmen represents only a portion of the additional personnel the Air Force truly needs to fill its manpower shortages, said then-Chief of Staff Gen Mark A. Welsh III in a speech on May 26, 2016, at Air Force Association headquarters in Arlington, Va.⁴³ Ultimately, the service requires between 40,000 to 60,000 additional Active Duty Airmen and a proportionate increase in Air Guardsmen and Reservists, he said, noting that this was an “educated guess” and acknowledging that this is “probably not going to happen.”

At the end of Fiscal Year 2015, the Air Force had 311,323 Airmen on Active Duty, although it had the authorization to be as high as 312,980 (60,516 officers, 248,464 enlisted personnel, and an allocation for approximately 4,000 Air Force Academy cadets), according to the Air Staff's Manpower, Personnel, and Services directorate. With the plan to increase the end strength in Fiscal Year 2016 by some 4,000 positions or “spaces” to 317,000 (61,940 officers, 251,060 enlisted, 4,000 cadets), the service will actually have to grow by about 6,000 persons or “faces” to meet that goal, according to the directorate.⁴⁴

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The Air Force's Fiscal Year 2016 recruiting targets call for bringing in some 4,400 officers and 31,165 enlisted personnel (including 250 prior-service Airmen who rejoin the force at the mid-grade level), according to the directorate. That's roughly 110 fewer officers and about 7,000 more enlisted accessions than the 4,511 officers and 24,194 enlisted personnel brought in Fiscal Year 2015.⁴⁵ AFRS' Harencak was confident that recruiters would make the year-end goals in spite of the hardships they face. To fill the need for new officer accessions in Fiscal Year 2016, the Air Force is significantly ramping

up Officer Training School (OTS) (now called Total Force Officer Training) production to 1,180, up from around 500 to 600 for line officers, with another 1,000 professional officers produced through OTS.⁴⁶ Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and Air Force Academy output will remain roughly the same at about 1,400 and 1,000 new officers, respectively.⁴⁷

The Air National Guard plans to bring in 11,605 Airmen in Fiscal Year 2016 (1,243 officers and 10,362 enlisted personnel), about 500 more than it accessed in Fiscal Year 2015, according to data the component provided. It is on track to meet that goal.⁴⁸ The Air Force Reserve aims to access 8,500 individuals in Fiscal Year 2016, according to the component.⁴⁹ Since its recruiters fill specific positions at wing locations, the Reserve does not establish separate enlisted and officer accessions targets. This goal is some 400 Airmen more than the Reserve accessed in the previous fiscal year. Reserve officials said they expect recruiters to exceed the Fiscal Year 2016 goal.

The accessions targets for Fiscal Year 2017 were still in flux, as of July 2016, for the three components. Notional estimates, still subject to change, called for the Active Duty recruiting force to bring in 30,250 new enlisted recruits, 250 prior-service enlisted recruits, and some 4,810 officers to reach the Active Duty end strength goal of slightly more than 321,000 Airmen (a notional mix of 61,717 officers, 255,227 enlisted personnel, 4,000 academy cadets), according to the Air Staff's manpower directorate.⁵⁰

The Air Guard said its estimated Fiscal Year 2017 recruiting goal is 11,352 new Airmen (1,589 officers and 9,763 enlisted personnel). That's several hundred fewer accessions than in Fiscal Year 2016. The Air Force Reserve said it is proposing bringing in some 8,500 accessions in Fiscal Year 2017, similar to Fiscal Year 2016.⁵¹

The average cost per accession (factoring both new enlisted personnel and officers) for the Active Duty component is \$27,600, according to the manpower directorate. The Air National Guard said it spends approximately \$15,000 on average per accession, and the Air Force Reserve said its costs are \$14,200 per accession.⁵² Those figures include all costs associated with recruiting: military personnel, operations and maintenance and other appropriations. Finding and processing a Battlefield Airman is far more expensive than accessing an Airman in specialties with lower entrance requirements. Similarly, a fully qualified doctor costs more to access than other types of officers.

As the Air Force grows, it will take between months and years, depending on the career field, for new, inexperienced Active Duty Airmen to learn their required skills, make it to their operational units, and have an impact. For example, "It takes five to seven years to transform a high school graduate into a fifth generation aircraft mechanic, or a college graduate into a fighter pilot with the experience to positively affect a unit's readiness," Maj Gen Scott D. West, director of current operations on the Air Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee's readiness panel on July 6.⁵³ That's why the Air Force is also working to retain as many experienced Airmen as possible through initiatives like selective reenlistment bonuses for certain enlisted personnel and allowing Air Guardsmen and Reservists to transfer to the Active Duty compo-

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ment for up to three years before returning to their reserve units.

Similarly, Cashman said the Air National Guard seeks to retain as many of its members as it can due in part to the declining experience level component-wide. “I have got trained, capable, experienced Airmen on my books. I would spend twice or three times as much to keep them versus having to recruit and train and deploy [new members],” he said. However, Congress has not allowed the Air Guard to apply unused funds from its budget to pay for retention bonuses in Fiscal Year 2016. That means, while the Air Guard currently is

offering enlistment bonuses, it has no retention bonuses, he said, noting he expects that situation to change going forward into Fiscal Year 2017.

The Active Duty component is now offering enlistment bonuses to those signing up in fields like Battlefield Airmen, aircraft maintenance, cyber, and some medical professions. The Air Force Reserve also is sponsoring enlistment bonuses in Fiscal Year 2016.

The Air Force accounts for a certain percent of attrition when it sets its recruiting goals for a fiscal year. For example, the goal of bringing in more than 31,000 Active Duty enlisted accessions in Fiscal Year 2016 factors that there will be about 2,000 enlistees who will not graduate basic military training (BMT), according to the manpower directorate.⁵⁴ Generally, around 5 percent of Active Duty enlistees do not make it through BMT and leave the service. The BMT attrition rate for new members of the Air National Guard is approximately four percent, while some four percent of new Reservists do not successfully complete the training as well.⁵⁵

Unlike Active Duty enlistees, who officially become a part of the Air Force upon swearing in at a military entrance processing station on the

day they ship to BMT, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve enlistees become members of their components upon taking the oath of accession and then join their units and start performing their duties prior to BMT, in many cases. Less than 1 percent of new Air Guardsmen do not make it through that initial training phase with their unit, according to the Air Guard. The Air Force Reserve’s loss rate here is some 3 percent, said Reserve officials.

Losses on the officer side are higher. For example, the Air Force Academy attrition rate for its Class of 2016 was around 23 percent, according to academy officials. OTS attrition currently stands around 9 percent, according to officials with the Jeanne M. Holm Center for Officer Accessions and Citizen Development at Maxwell AFB, Ala., which oversees OTS and ROTC issues. ROTC losses are generally between 15 percent and 20 percent per class for those cadets who have contracted with the Air Force with the intent of commissioning, said the Holm Center officials.⁵⁶

Force of the Future

Upon becoming Defense Secretary in February 2015, Ashton B. Carter announced his goal to build a Force of the Future by taking steps to ensure that the Pentagon continued to attract—and retain—the best and the brightest to serve in the all-volunteer joint force.

On Nov. 18, 2015, he announced the first set of initiatives under this rubric.⁵⁷ Among them was the establishment of an Office of People Analytics within the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to harness the Pentagon’s data analysis capabilities to inform those making the personnel policies to attract, recruit, and retain service personnel. He also said the Defense Department would examine ways to improve recruiting by rewarding military recruiters for the performance of their recruits in basic training and their initial term of enlistment. There would also be studies to understand better the factors affecting poor recruit outcomes and to identify the primary causes and anticipated impacts of having military recruits concentrated geographically and familially.

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Carter said the Pentagon would also explore how to increase the speed and ease with which Active Duty personnel transfer to the reserve components.

Building upon this, Carter on June 9, 2016, outlined additional Force of the Future steps, including some specifically designed to boost recruiting efforts.⁵⁸ Chief among them, he said the Defense Department would move over the next five years to a paperless, all-digital system for recruiting and processing new personnel. “Plenty of our personnel can tell stories about having to fill out the same packets of paperwork over and over again—not a good sign for a new recruit who’s been hearing that we’re the most technologically advanced military in the world,” he said in his speech that day at the Pentagon. “Force-wide, enlistment alone requires processing 70 to 80 million pieces of paper every year. That’s slow, expensive, and it’s inefficient,” he explained. This change is one component of modernizing the US Military Entrance Processing Command, he said.

AFRS’ Harencak said his organization already is working with 2nd Air Force at Keesler AFB, Miss., on developing a paperless accession

process. (The numbered air force oversees the Air Force’s basic military and technical training.) This would mean recruits would no longer have to carry an abundance of paperwork when they ship out to BMT, he said. Based on estimates, this would save nearly 54

hours in processing time per recruit, according to the recruiting service.⁵⁹

Carter also said the Defense Department would also leverage technological advances to expand the work of its Joint Advertising, Market Research, and Studies (JAMRS) program to build a precision recruiting database that can target the entire US population and not just certain demographics, said Carter. “[T]his is important, because our military’s geographic pools are shrinking,” he said. “Today 40 percent of those who join

the military come from just six states,” he noted. “Most ROTC and academy graduates come from northern states, while the vast majority of our enlisted force hails from states in the southern part of the country. In some ways that’s not surprising. Military recruiting tends to be most successful in the South, Southwest, and Big Sky Country, and it tends to be most difficult in the Northeast. But it’s also paradoxical, since the Northeast is among the regions with the highest percentage of young Americans eligible to serve.”

This situation has to change, and change now, if the Defense Department wishes to keep attracting top talent, said Carter. “We can’t keep fishing in the same old ponds. Instead, we have to fish in more ponds, new ponds, and ponds we haven’t been in in a long time,” he said. “We have to draw talent from our country’s entire pool of population.”

Accordingly, he said, the Pentagon will take a new approach. “Rather than identifying geographic and demographic groups that already have a higher propensity to serve, and sending recruiters to find people like them—which is what we do now, and will continue to do—we’re going to also build and use this precision recruiting database to identify those who’d be a great service member, but might not know it,” he said. “[W]e’re going to reach out and make it clear that [the Defense Department] is a place where they can be part of something bigger than themselves, where they can contribute to helping defend our country and making a better world, where they can improve themselves as they start out in life.”

This is in line with what Mayo of the Air Force Secretariat outlined as part of the Air Force’s expanded use of data analytics to identify a greater set of qualified young Americans for potential service. In fact, the Force of the Future initiatives build upon and complement what the Air Force has already been doing to transform its recruiting enterprise, said Mayo.

Another measure Carter outlined, which requires Congress’ approval, would enable experts and specialists in scientific and technical fields like cyber to join the US military at “a mid-career level” in the same manner that is currently authorized

On Nov. 18, 2015, [Carter] announced the first set of initiatives under this rubric. Among them was the establishment of an Office of People Analytics within the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness ...

only for medical officers. He was likely referring to field grade officers in the grades of O-4 (major) to O-6 (colonel). This would also give the services a greater degree of flexibility in recruiting experts in specialties who would otherwise be unlikely to join the military if they had to enter at the most junior officer grade.

Conclusion

The Air Force has myriad priorities and numerous missions operating with less than full manning and under-resourced. In that regard the recruiting enterprise is no different. But recruiters

are at the front line of connecting the Air Force to the American public. They are the ones who engage communities; they are the ones who find the right kind of young people that the service needs, and they are the ones who make an indelible impression on them to join.

“There is nobody out there who is more effective and efficient at recruiting than our individual recruiters,” said Harencak. “However, they are doing it at a tremendous personal cost to themselves.

... We are making it difficult

on them simply because we are not providing what they need in resources. ... We shouldn't be putting our recruiting force into that predicament,” he said.

Despite the demanding pace and pressures of the job, many recruiters still love their jobs and wish to remain in this line of work. Surveys of Active Duty recruiters from the Developmental Special Duty program who are concluding their first tours are showing that most of these Airmen wish to stay on as recruiters and that their functional managers from their previous jobs are releasing them so that they may remain. “The numbers that we are finding are actually surprising to us right now,” said Col Robert W. Trayers Jr., AFRS' vice commander.⁶⁰ “However,” he continued, “we have found by surveys that our recruiters across the board are at a point of exhaustion. We don't currently have a good way ahead to relieve them of their stress because right now, we are surging to meet the end strength of 317,000 Airmen by the end of [Fiscal Year 2016].” And then the Fiscal Year 2017 manpower growth awaits them.

The forthcoming new recruiting strategy holds the promise of addressing—and resolving—issues that the recruiters are facing. Therefore, it is crucial for service leadership to take the time now to “aim higher” and see what else the Air Force can do to bolster the recruiting force, like providing it with more resources and funding stability. Otherwise, one day soon, it may find the force in disarray due to unrealistic expectations and neglect. At that point, the fix would take even more time, money, and effort.

“If people would listen to what the recruiters are saying at the bottom level,” the situation would be better, said one of the senior Air National Guard recruiters. “Give them the tools they need and they will not fail.” ★

The forthcoming new recruiting strategy holds the promise of addressing—and resolving—issues that the recruiters are facing. Therefore, it is crucial for service leadership to take the time now to “aim higher” and see what else the Air Force can do to bolster the recruiting force, like providing it with more resources and funding stability.

Footnotes

1 This includes the Active Duty component's end-strength increase of 4,000 Airmen that Congress authorized in Fiscal Year 2016 and the Air Force's planned growth of some 4,000 additional Airmen in Fiscal 2017. Senior Air Force Official (Air Staff), author interview, May 26, 2016; United States Air Force: Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Overview (Secretary of the Air Force, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget), February 2016, <http://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-160209-036.pdf>; and United States Department of Defense: Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request Overview (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Chief Financial Officer), February 2015, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2016/FY2016_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

2 Maj Gen Garrett Harenca, USAF (Commander, Air Force Recruiting Service), author interview, May 20, 2016.

3 The author confirmed this via a query with the Air Force Recruiting Service and a June 2016 review of Air Force general officer biographies at: <http://www.af.mil/AboutUs/Biographies.aspx>.

4 The Marine Corps' Manpower & Reserve Affairs Department provided the data in early June 2016.

5 The master plan is available online at: http://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/Force%20Management/Strategic_Master_Plan.pdf?timestamp=1434024300378.

6 Jeffrey R. Mayo, USAF, (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Force Management Integration), author interview, July 12, 2016.

7 The annex is available online at: http://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/Force%20Management/Human_Capital_Annex.pdf?timestamp=1434024283105.

8 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016.

9 AFRISSTF started out in the 1990s as an Air Force Reserve-developed platform called the Air Force Recruiting Information Support System-Reserve. It later morphed into the shared network across the components.

10 Data provided by Air Force Recruiting Service, Air National Guard Headquarters, Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service, and by Harenca, author interview, May 20, 2016.

11 Brig Gen Jeffrey B. Cashman, USAF (Director, Air National Guard Manpower, Personnel, and Services), author interview, June 16, 2016.

12 Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service response to query.

13 Data provided by Air Force Recruiting Service, Air National Guard Headquarters, and Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service in response to queries. Harenca provided numbers on Army, Marine Corps, and Navy recruiting averages during author interview, May 20, 2016.

14 Air Force Recruiting Service Recruiting Command data, provided in response to query.

15 Col Christopher F. Nick, USAF (Commander, Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service), author interview, June 6, 2016.

16 Senior recruiters (Air National Guard), author interviews, June 2016.

17 Air Force Recruiting Service data, provided in response to query.

18 Air National Guard Headquarters data, provided in response to query.

19 Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service data, provided in response to query.

20 Air Force Recruiting Service query, provided in response to query.

21 Status as of June 2016, confirmed via queries with Air Force Recruiting Service, Air National Guard Headquarters, and Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service.

22 The US population, based on the 2010 US Census data (<http://www.census.gov/2010census/data/>), has a demographic make-up of: white, 74.8 percent; black, 13.6 percent; Hispanic, 16.3 percent; Asian, 5.6 percent; and a male/female breakdown of 49.2 percent/50.8 percent. The Air Force's Active Duty component, as of March 31, 2016, was: white, 72 percent; black, 14 percent; Hispanic, 13.3 percent; Asian, 3.5 percent; and male/female, 80.9 percent/19.1 percent. The Air National Guard, as of June 2016, was: white, 80 percent; black, 9 percent; Hispanic, 4 percent; Asian, N/A; and male/female, 80 percent/20 percent. The Air Force Reserve, as of May 2016, was: white, 71 percent; black, 17 percent; Hispanic, 10 percent; Asian, 5 percent; and male/female, 73 percent/27 percent. The Air Force Personnel Center posts Active Duty demographics data online at: <http://www.afpc.af.mil/library/airforcepersonnel demographics.asp>. Air National Guard Headquarters provided the component's demographics data in response to query. Air Force Reserve demographics data (May 2016) are available at: <http://www.afrc.af.mil/Portals/87/documents/Snapshot/AFRSnapshotMay2016.pdf?ver=2016-05-19-145346-640>.

23 California, Texas, Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Georgia today account for more than one-third of the Air Force's enlisted accessions, according to Air Force Recruiting Service data, provided in response to a query.

24 Timothy J. Hanson, USAF (Strategic Marketing Chief, Air Force Recruiting Service), author interview, May 20, 2016.

25 A persistent cookie is a file that remains on a user's computer when browsing the internet until the user deletes it. The cookie is designed to allow for faster and more convenient online access since it remember the user's information and settings when the user revisits a website.

26 Harenca, author interview, May 20, 2016.

27 Air Force Recruiting Service Public Affairs, "Air Force Reveals Newest Recruiting Campaign," Sept. 9, 2014, <http://www.af.mil/News/ArticleDisplay/tabid/223/Article/496989/air-force-reveals-newest-recruiting-campaign.aspx>, accessed on July 15, 2016.

28 Michael A. Romero, USAF (Staff Director, Air Force Recruiting Service), author interview, May 20, 2016.

29 Non-prior-service persons wishing to enter the Air Force must take the ASVAB, a standardized multiple-choice exam. It tests for skills like word knowledge, arithmetic reasoning, and mechanical comprehension and helps recruiters determine the jobs for which a recruit might be best-suited. Some 62 percent of Air Force aspirants have passed the ASVAB since Fiscal Year 2013 (through May 2016), according to the Air Staff's manpower directorate, in response to query.

30 Harenca, author interview, May 20, 2016.

31 Nick, author interview, June 6, 2016.

32 Air National Guard Headquarters data, provided in response to query.

33 Air Force Recruiting Service data, provided in response to query.

34 Air Combat Command Headquarters data, provided in response to query.

35 Ibid.

36 Air National Guard Headquarters response to query.

37 Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service response to query.

Footnotes

- 38 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016; United States Air Force Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Overview (Secretary of the Air Force, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget), March 2014, <http://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-140304-039.pdf>; and United States Air Force Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Overview (Secretary of the Air Force, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget), February 2015, <http://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-150421-011.pdf>.
- 39 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016; United States Air Force: Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Overview (Secretary of the Air Force, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget), February 2016, <http://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-160209-036.pdf>; and United States Air Force Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Overview.
- 40 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016.
- 41 The maximum end-strength level is arrived at by taking $317,000 * 1.02 = 323,340$.
- 42 United States Air Force: Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Overview.
- 43 Welsh retired from the Air Force, effective July 1, 2016, after four years as Chief of Staff and 40 years in all as an Airman. Gen David L. Goldfein replaced him.
- 44 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016. As of March 31, 2016—halfway through Fiscal Year 2016—Active Duty end strength stood at approximately 312,600 Airmen (60,289 officers, 248,317 enlisted personnel, and some 4,000 academy cadets), according to the Air Force Personnel Center’s demographics data.
- 45 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016.
- 46 Ibid. The Air Force defines a line officer as a commissioned officer who is categorized as a combatant and may be eligible for operational command positions. A non-line officer is a commissioned officer categorized as a non-combatant (e.g., chaplains and medical personnel).
- 47 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016.
- 48 Air National Guard Headquarters data, provided in response to query. As of June 2016, Air National Guard end strength stood at 104,177 Airmen (15,125 officers, 89,052 enlisted), according to the component. That number placed it 1,323 members short of its 105,500-Airmen end-strength authorization for Fiscal Year 2016.
- 49 Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service data, provided in response to query.
- 50 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016.
- 51 Air National Guard Headquarters and Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service data, provided in response to query.
- 52 Data provided by Air Staff’s Manpower, Personnel, and Services Directorate, Air National Guard Headquarters, and Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service, in response to queries.
- 53 See testimony online at: <http://www.airforcemag.com/testimony/Documents/2016/July%202016/070616West.pdf>.
- 54 Senior Air Force Official, author interview, May 26, 2016.
- 55 Air National Guard Headquarters and Air Force Reserve Command Recruiting Service data, provided in response to queries.
- 56 According to Holm Center officials, the reasons OTS candidates do not make it through to receiving a commission vary by class, but generally include: self-initiated elimination, lack of adaptability, administrative action, medical issues, military training deficiency, and inadequate physical fitness. Air Force Academy cadets may fall out for similar reasons as well as academic shortcomings; they are also subject to courts martial if they violate the Uniform Code of Military Justice, said an academy spokeswoman. The ROTC program is open enrollment, meaning cadets may join the program and take academic and leadership courses without the intent of advancing all the way to a commission, said the Holm Center officials. Plus, there are various ways and points in the program where cadets can leave with no consequence, so the Air Force fully expects losses. Reasons for ROTC losses include: cadets whom the Air Force does not seek to retain into the upper class, cadets who fail to complete field training satisfactorily, cadets who disenroll after contracting, failure to meet Air Force standards (e.g., academic thresholds, medical, body fat, physical fitness, and core values), trouble with civil authorities, and failure to complete a degree in the contracted program of study (i.e., a major change from a technical to a non-technical field), they said.
- 57 Force of the Future fact sheet from Nov. 18, 2015, available online at: http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2015/0315_force-of-the-future/documents/FotF_Fact_Sheet_-_FINAL_11.18.pdf.
- 58 Force of the Future fact sheet from June 9, 2016, available online at: http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2015/0315_force-of-the-future/Fact-Sheet-The-Next-Two-Links-to-the-Force-of-the-Future.pdf. See also transcript of Carter’s speech from that day on the topic at: <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/795341/remarks-on-the-next-two-links-to-the-force-of-the-future>.
- 59 Air Force Recruiting Service data, provided in response to query.
- 60 Col Robert W. Trayers Jr., USAF (Vice Commander, Air Force Recruiting Service), author interview, May 20, 2016.

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