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Balancing Rated Personnel Requirements and Inventories

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Summary

For more than a decade, the Air Force has experienced shortages of rated officers. Since the early 1990s, force structure has declined over 50 percent, reducing the capacity to produce and absorb new rated officers. Requirements for rated officers have declined as well, but the Air Force has not been able to reduce nonflying rated billets (most of which are staff positions) in proportion to the force structure reductions. As a consequence, the Air Force has attempted to produce and absorb rated officers at the maximum possible rate.

The effort has not been enough. At times, the overall inventory of rated officers has been sufficient to fill overall requirements, but there have always been specific categories—fighter pilots, in particular—in which large shortages have been a way of life. Even the overall picture has deteriorated in the past year or two, as new requirements have emerged for categories such as unmanned aircraft systems (UASs), new special operations forces aircraft, and the creation of Air Force Global Strike Command.

In February 2009, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force chartered the Rated Staff Requirements Integrated Process Team (IPT) to recommend courses of action for (1) balancing rated staff requirements with rated inventory and (2) subsequently maintaining them in balance. Because the inventory has been made as large as possible, the IPT had to reduce the number of positions to which rated officers are assigned. However, because rated staff positions have been reviewed repeatedly and found to be valid requirements, the IPT rejected the notion of eliminating requirements. Instead, it directed the owners of rated positions—major commands, field operating agencies, direct reporting units, joint agencies, Headquarters Air Force, and the Secretary of the Air Force—to recategorize specified numbers of staff positions. The owners, in other words, were instructed to find people other than active rated officers to fill those positions. The replacements could be civil servants or contractors (particularly individuals with prior rated experience in uniform), members of the Air National Guard or Air Force Reserve, active nonrated officers, or enlisted personnel.

Owners were able to recategorize 836 positions, enough that requirements and inventory projected for the end of fiscal year (FY) 2010 are nearly in balance, and progress is being made in filling the recategorized positions.

The remaining task, and the primary focus of this report, is to devise a process that will maintain the balance between rated requirements and inventory over the long term. This process should include the following five actions:

1. The Air Force should institutionalize a version of the recategorization process pioneered by the Rated Staff Requirements IPT. Owners currently conduct an annual review of all rated positions to ensure that they require rated expertise and are necessary for accom-
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1. Accomplishing the Air Force mission. But the review takes no notice of possible inventory shortages and should therefore be changed to account for such shortages. Each owner should be given a rated authorization quota for each category of rated officers (i.e., separate quotas for fighter pilots, bomber pilots, etc.) and should be prohibited from labeling a position “authorized” unless it falls within the quota. Owners could trade quotas among themselves and could recategorize positions that do not fall within their quotas. (See pp. 9–12.)

2. The Air Force must streamline the processes for converting the recategorized positions. The IPT arranged to include funding in the current program objective memorandum for 572 civilian positions by the end of FY 2013. Some analysis has also been conducted to identify Air Force specialty codes that could have some of their members assigned to formerly rated staff positions. But work remains. (See pp. 13–15.)

3. The Air Force should plan for the effects of major actions on rated requirements. Major actions are, for example, the reorganization or formation of a major command (e.g., Air Force Global Strike Command) or a major acquisition program (e.g., growth of the UAS force structure). We recommend requiring that a new appendix on rated requirements be included in each Program Action Directive, the standard planning document for a major action. (See pp. 15–16.)

4. Some of the actions the Air Force can take have primarily long-term effects on the balance between rated inventory and requirements. The recent creation of new career fields for UAS operators and nonrated air liaison officers will eventually alleviate the shortage of rated officers and will provide a substantial increase in the number of people who have sufficient experience to fill rated staff billets, but this will take time. The Air Force could also redesign positions to concentrate tasks that require rated expertise in fewer rated positions and could spin off tasks that do not require rated expertise into new, nonrated positions. (See pp. 16–18.)

5. Projections, especially of requirements, can change rapidly and unpredictably. The aircrew management system must be responsive to avoid having changes throw it out of balance. The system would gain much in responsiveness if it could meet rated requirements while producing and absorbing rated officers at rates below capacity, on average. Maintaining some spare capacity would also help to prevent backlogs of students awaiting training and overmanning of operational units. (See pp. 18–20.)

Logically, spare capacity could be established by either increasing capacity or reducing production and absorption. Options for increasing capacity are generally beyond the scope of this report (but see Taylor, Bigelow, and Ausink (2009) for a discussion of how Air Reserve Components assets—especially highly experienced pilots—could be used to increase absorption capacity). Reducing production may seem unpalatable, as it would reduce future rated inventories, but the process itself will provide ways to cope with those inventory reductions and thus will reduce the problems of doing so. It may be possible that modest reductions in production and absorption could even show a net benefit.

These elements, we feel, could be implemented in the current aircrew management system with little disruption. Various organizations would acquire new responsibilities and/or face changes to some existing responsibilities. But existing responsibilities would not be shifted from one organization to another.
The five actions recommended here do not include an enforcement mechanism, which we feel is needed. It would be advantageous for each owner of rated positions if all owners embraced the process. But individual owners might feel that they could have extra rated officers assigned to them if all other owners embraced the process while they refused to do so. An enforcement mechanism would ensure that all owners live within their rated authorization quotas. (See pp. 21–23.)