

Fixed-wing Pilot Retention

Barriers, recommendations, and broader implications

by Maj Jim Bernthal (Ret)

In recent years, economic growth leading to increased job opportunities and reports of job dissatisfaction have coincided with fixed-wing military pilots leaving active duty service at unprecedented rates.¹ Whereas in the past, a slow economy has deterred pilots from leaving active duty, current studies have shown that pilots have been leaving active service at alarming rates when the economy has been uncertain or even poor.² These studies have also revealed that many pilots who stay do so begrudgingly, causing experts to assert that poor economic conditions provide only temporary relief from even higher attrition rates. This phenomenon has created national defense readiness concerns among top U.S. leaders, as pilot staffing has decreased to unacceptable levels within all our military branches.³ As a retired Harrier pilot, I found the mass exodus of Marine aviators troubling and chose to focus on this topic for my doctoral dissertation. In January of this year, I earned a PhD in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, which focuses on the study of human behavior in organizations and the workplace. The doctoral dissertation conducted for this terminal degree is entitled “A Qualitative Descriptive Study of Job Expectations, Job Satisfaction, and Retention Among Fixed-Wing Marine Pilots” for those interested in accessing the study.⁴ This article has been produced using information attained from that dissertation. It is essential to note that the data from the study was collected during the pandemic, and while the economic future of the United States was uncertain, the findings support a widespread retention problem within Marine fixed-wing aviation. It is also

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relevant to emphasize that retention is not solely a fixed-wing pilot concern. Many other MOSs are unable to retain the quality and quantity of Marines desired to sustain operational readiness.⁵ Although it was my goal to investigate barriers to fixed-wing pilot retention while discussing the study's findings with experienced Marines from other MOS's, a high degree of agreement was noted. Thus, it is likely that problems similar to those found in the study are present within other Marine Corps MOSs.

As recommended by prior researchers, the pilot crisis was investigated from a qualitative perspective using qualitative description as the research design.⁶ The theoretical construct which drove the examination was Porter and Steers' met expectations model, which has been used in both military and nonmilitary applications. Those implementing this model assess what an individual expects to encounter in a career and what they experience as well as how this relationship relates to job satisfaction and retention.⁷ Expectations are not fixed targets and are adjusted with experience to represent realistic outlooks. Expectations are spectrum-based, and certain factors are more important than others when considering their overall effect. Because of these considerations, it was crucial to recruit experienced pilots. Table 1 (on following page) summarizes participant

demographics for the two data collection instruments used in the study. These instruments will be briefly discussed in the following section. Participants comprised active duty personnel, reservists, transitioning active duty, and those who had left the Marine Corps. The participants were highly professional and held no animosity toward the Marine Corps; rather, they held the Corps in high regard. These individuals volunteered in order to communicate the reasons they left the Marine Corps in the hope that their input will facilitate better future retention.

Prior investigators conducted rigorous and replicable studies but admittedly left notable gaps in their findings.⁸ Using surveys, questionnaires, and literature reviews, previous authors were able to identify several barriers to pilot retention such as “operational tempo” and “work unrelated to flying,” but using these data collection strategies left much to be revealed. For example, they did not allow for a comprehensive analysis of what specific issues were troublesome regarding these broad categories, their overall influence, and what can be done to create higher job satisfaction and retention levels in the future. To answer these questions and fill these tremendously significant gaps, detailed interviews and questionnaires with experienced active duty, transitioning, and former fixed-wing Marine pilots

<i>Pilot Demographics</i>		
<i>n</i>	Questionnaire Participants 30	Interview Participants 12
Avg. Age	37	39
Avg. Years Served	11.2	13.1
Total Deployments	72	31
Avg. Deployments/Pilot	2.4	2.6
Rank	LtCol - 1 Maj - 18 Capt - 11	LtCol - 1 Maj - 9 Capt - 2

Table 1. Note: Of the pilots interviewed, eight held at least weapons training officer and division lead qualifications, two were Weapons and Tactics Instructors, and one was a TOPGUN graduate and instructor. Table 1 summarizes pilot demographics for both data collection instruments. Pilot qualifications were not asked via the questionnaire.

were conducted. The data collection instruments, the Marine Aviator Job Satisfaction and Retention Interview and Marine Aviator Job Satisfaction and Retention Questionnaire, were self-designed and subsequently field-tested by active duty, fixed-wing Marine pilots and subject to a panel of experts. Both the field test and expert panel included active duty and former fixed-wing Marine pilots from different fixed-wing aircraft.

Upon completing the study, a thick, rich description was uncovered from Marine Corps pilots comprising all four of the Corps' fixed-wing communities: F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter, AV-8B Harrier, F/A-18 Hornet, and the KC-130 Hercules. The information shared in this article has been condensed from 190 pages of original data; 958 sections of text were coded from the data, leading to 66 candidate themes and 9 final themes. The nine themes affecting job expectations, job satisfaction, and retention in order of importance as perceived by the author were:

1. Participants described problems with Marine Corps leadership.
2. Participants described cultural problems within the Marine Corps.
3. Participants described the overall workload and tasks unrelated to flying as untenable.
4. Participants described insufficient levels of operational readiness.
5. Participants described insufficient flight time.

6. Participants described high levels of overall operational tempo.
7. Participants described insufficient work-life balance.
8. Participants described flawed promotion processes.
9. Participants described concerns with AVB.

The themes were either discreetly (themes 1 and 2) or overtly (themes 3–9) present in the literature review conducted to study pilot retention. The study detailed the significant themes, sub-topics, and prevalence of job expectations, job satisfaction, and turnover. This was done to inform Marine leadership of barriers to retention and how they can be mitigated. Each theme will now be summarized using participant quotes and questionnaire responses to provide perspective. Quotes taken from interviewees will be identified below by using the terms “interview participant” or “interviewee.” Quotes taken from questionnaire respondents will be identified as “questionnaire respondents.” Finally, at least one questionnaire response concerning each theme will be revealed along with their total agreement rating (“agree” and “strongly agree” rows added). The summary will be followed by recommendations and the author’s concluding thoughts.

Summary and Explanation of Themes

1. Participants described problems with Marine Corps leadership.

Choosing leadership and culture as the most critical issues was based on

the fact that these two factors affected everything else in the study. In this sense, leadership and culture were not only problems in and of themselves but foundational to all the barriers to pilot retention. These two themes were so closely connected that they were nearly indistinguishable. However, a culture cannot exist without a governing body of leaders; therefore, leadership will be addressed first. While leadership was not directly identified during the literature review, it became immediately pervasive upon conducting the first interview and remained thematic throughout the entire data collection process.

Leadership problems were directed at the squadron (micro) and organizational (macro) levels of the aviation community as well as the broader Marine Corps. For example, one questionnaire respondent stated,

MAG tasked squadron with night strafe EWTGPAC frag to support night CAS when no one is current for that flight. Doing more with less has killed good dudes and crashed airplanes, and has been completely counterproductive to the mission of maintaining readiness.

Another questionnaire participant wrote, “We are left with the ‘best of the rest,’ and many of the commanders we are getting shows that trend.”

FMF pilots also stated they could not have open conversations with leaders because of a lack of trust. For example, one interview participant stated,

but if you could go and have career conversations without reprisal, where you can speak freely (that would be productive). Not like if I say this to this guy I’m never going to get a qual again, I’m not going to fly the (names aircraft type) anymore.

Another interview participant stated, “But you have to keep things secret, you never show your cards in the Marine Corps. I didn’t even say a peep to anyone until the day I had my paper form to get out of the Marine Corps.” After a long discussion, this same interview participant simply stated, “it just boils down to I became disillusioned with the leadership of Marine aviation.” Continuing, another IP communicated

the same sentiment when he said, “I lost faith in the Marine Corps regarding what they say and what they do.”

Participants also described problems that arise due to constantly changing leadership, such as losing corporate knowledge and new squadron commanders wanting to make a name for themselves. Specifics included implementing new measures such as programs leading to more work and requesting the squadron deploy and detach as often as possible regardless of the squadron’s recent deployment history. For example, one interview participant stated,

you get a new CO [commanding officer] every year and a half and when you get a CO, he’s fresh and he’s ready to go but the squadrons had their nose to the grindstone for a couple years now. And you get another skipper and the squadron just got off deployment, that’s how it goes, and you get a new skipper, and he’s chomping at the bit for the next deployment. Because he wants to get one within his year and a half tenure. So you never get a break, really. Pretty abysmal.

Another interview participant stated, “I feel like the Marine Corps puts people in a position that doesn’t let them be good people. There is so much pressure it turns them into something they don’t really want to be.” This participant discussed several significant events that he was forced to miss even though he was not deployed during these times. When asked via the questionnaire, “Marine Corps leadership is ill-informed regarding the time and effort it takes to maintain and gain pilot proficiency placing unrealistic demands on their time,” there was a total agreement rating of 97 percent, with 90 percent selecting “strongly agree.”

2. Participants described cultural problems within the Marine Corps.

As previously noted, culture and leadership influence each other. This is especially true in an organization such as the Marine Corps, which has earned such a coveted place in history. No commander wants to weaken the Corps or tarnish its reputation. Rather they seek to uphold the cultural norms even when this comes at a cost to overall mission effectiveness. This fact was exemplified

during the Budget Control Act of 2011, which decreased the military’s operating budget and forced the Marine Corps to reduce its force size and support structure.⁹ Despite this fact, the Marine Corps maintained its operational tempo, which negatively impacted deployment-to-deployment ratios, as fewer troops were deployed more often.¹⁰ Even prior to the drawdown in force size, Allison (2010) asserted,

Marine Corps squadrons face a nearly impossible task of completing all required annual Marine Corps Training, aviation-related ground training, aviation training, and maintenance procedures while balancing administrative duties unrelated to their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). The total time of all these requirements exceeds the time allotted in one year.¹¹

Every participant in the study corroborated this claim.

The following are just a few of the candidate themes and quotes comprising the cultural component communicated by Marine Corps fixed-wing pilots during data collection:

- a. Pilot MOS not understood/recognized by ground forces.
- b. The Marine Corps cannot say no.
- c. The Marine Corps is vindictive.
- d. Doing more with less/the Corps is stingy (and not just with money but good deals).
- e. The Corps is no longer a fun organization/ too politically correct.

Concerning the Marine Corps’ inability to say no, one interviewee stated,

At the O5 and below level, it felt like we could not say ‘no.’ And it’s like OK, you want me to do this (sortie, large force exercises, DET etc.) and say we’re at 70% readiness, I’m not allowed to give you 70% of the results (the Corps Demands 100%).

This quote sums up so much of what was conveyed throughout the study. Pilots communicated that they are asked to give their all but didn’t get that same support in return. This caused one interview participant to state, “If I was running a business, I would tell them (the Marine Corps) they are failing miserably because they are too stubborn to understand that it only goes so far. Semper Fidelis only goes so far.”

Participants also routinely conveyed that a lack of understanding exists within the Marine Corps regarding the workload required of FMF pilots. It takes years and millions of dollars to train a single pilot.¹² This training must continue to maintain proficiency and gain advanced qualifications when a pilot gets to an FMF squadron. However, when pilots reach the fleet, they are tasked with an insurmountable amount of non-MOS specific work, causing numerous problems.¹³ Some of these issues will be discussed further in the following sections. To illustrate, a questionnaire respondent stated,

During my FAC [forward air controller] tour, I don’t recall the infantry Company Commander (a fellow O-3 peer) having to worry about writing a schedule for the next day for his Marines, or having to be the unit Safety Officer.

Additionally, one IP stated,

Obviously, the Marine Corps is an infantry-centric organization, and as a wing Marine, you’re expected to be able to lead an infantry platoon. So you had to go to the range, you had to go do your ground training; you had to go do the PFT, CFT. These were requirements on top of an already manic type of schedule, and the infantry and ground guys don’t understand. You get sergeant majors that come over for the 1st time who say, ‘I used to make fun of you guys but seriously you all work hard, you all work hard! You all put the ground side to shame.’ You know, and I’ve been on both sides unless you’re in the field with the grunts, your days are pretty easy. You come in, you PT, tons of time to PT, work on classes, you work on some PME; but as you know, in the wing, in the squadron, the workload is intense.

When asked, “The Marine Corps could do a better job of creating a culture in which pilots want to be promoted,” 13 percent agreed, and 65 percent strongly agreed for a total agreement rating of 78 percent.

3. Participants described the overall workload and tasks unrelated to flying as untenable.

It must be noted that this topic does not include deployments and overall operational tempo. That theme will be discussed in a subsequent section; however, when Marine pilots were doing the things they expected, such as flying, deploying with their squadrons, and joining infantry units as FACs, they displayed high levels of job satisfaction. Outside of leadership and culture, the most pervasive barrier to retention was the type and amount of work pilots consistently performed. This discrepancy between what a person thinks or expects to do in their career and what they actually do is the central tenet of the met expectations model. Pilots routinely described working ten to twelve hours per day, often six days per week, conducting mainly non-flying duties. A questionnaire participant stated, “Flying really was my side hustle. My performance assessment was based primarily on my ground-job performance.”

Additionally, pilots must perform mandatory training to include Marine Corps Mixed Martial Arts Program, annual rifle and pistol qualifications, swim qualifications, Personal Fitness Test/Combat Fitness Test, and training in the gas chamber. Marine pilots must also engage in professional military education (PME), such as appropriate career-level schools and programs such

as the Marine Corps Foreign Language Program.¹⁴ Many of these initiatives must be completed on the pilot’s own personal time to be promoted.¹⁵ One noted, “The total time of all these requirements exceeds the time allotted in one year.”¹⁶ Marine pilots stated they were subject to seemingly endless other types of training, much of which they believed to be politically correct social programs. One IP stated,

we had so many programs and what I would consider to be social programs. We were being utilized a little bit like a science project because the government can tell you, you will do this, you will integrate in this way, you will provide training and oversight management to these social considerations.

One interview participant showed frustration with this type of work, stating,

Yeah, our joke ... was pretty soon we would have safety stand-downs just to do our day (ground) jobs between all the annual training stuff where we had to shut down the flight schedule so we can talk about suicide training, sexual assault, and all those kinds of things and I think the Marine Corps made a large pivot I mean, I see it in corporate America where maybe CYA is a bad way to say it but ... (that’s what the Marine Corps is doing).

One questionnaire respondent wrote

I signed up to fly fighters and go to war. I did not sign up for endless MarineNet training on information assurance, record keeping, tobacco cessation, alcohol dependence, etc. More time-wasting computer training gets piled on every year and detracts from the mission ... I saw a steady mission queen of non-value-added requirements to the point where we could spend multiple, valuable training days doing (expletive) safety stand-downs talking about 101 days of summer and campfire safety rather than flying and fixing airplanes.

Concerning the overall workload, one interview participant asserted, “When I was the daily schedule writer/assistant operations officer, I was in every weekend working on the weekly.” Another interview participant stated, “Yes, so I think there’s too much on people’s plates as a pilot. That’s why you see 11 to 12 hour days every day. That ends up burning people out. I didn’t think there was going to be so much ground stuff to do.” A questionnaire participant wrote, “In most fleet units, you have to spend way too much time at work (10-11 hours per day, every day). This needs to change, as well.” When questionnaire participants were asked, “Tasks unrelated to flying took up more time, energy, and resources than I expected,” 13 percent agreed, while 87 percent strongly agreed for a combined total agreement rating of 100 percent.

4. Pilots in this study described they experienced insufficient levels of operational readiness.

The Heritage Foundation conducted a study that rated the Marine Corps’ current capacities, capabilities, readiness, and overall strength.¹⁷ They rated the Corps’ capacity as weak, capability as marginal, readiness as marginal, and gave them an overall grade of marginal. Paxton asserted that 80 percent of the Marine Corps’ operational squadrons lacked the minimum number of Ready Basic Aircraft as tactical fixed-wing assets such as the F/A-18 and AV-8B are aging.¹⁸ Additionally, complications with the F-35 are hindering its ability to replace these older aircraft. Parts for



The combined time spent with Annual Training Requirements and collateral duties drive some aviators to leave the Marine Corps. (Photo by Sgt Tyler L. Main.)

these aircraft are also an issue; as Paxton proclaimed, “They must also have a complete block of vital spare parts, which have taken on even greater importance as we work to reset aircraft fleets flown hard over fourteen years of conflict.”¹⁹

The participants of this study supported these findings. It was evident that pilots felt they lacked the manpower and equipment to maintain sufficient combat readiness. Discussing operational readiness, one respondent to the questionnaire stated, “We never had the people, parts, or planes we needed.” One interview participant asserted,

Of course. You don't have enough parts to fly airplanes and that's the reason why we had all the problems we had. And then we had the MAG COs with great ideas like if you had a squadron that was below 50% readiness then no squadron could fly period; 50% is pretty much the Mendoza line, you were below that a lot of days, but if you have one or two good jets fly them. So we had problems with that (operational readiness). Then, specifically when I was deployed (during war), and parts started getting short and things started getting a little rushed, and things were starting to get overlooked—that always gives you pause.

Additionally, pilots stated concerns regarding expectations to deliberately falsify aircraft readiness numbers and complete flights and log flight codes even when the criteria were not met. This practice is contrary to what Marine officers are taught about integrity and leadership and was not expected. When asked about operational readiness, one interview participant asserted, “Ticking boxes green is all that matters. I think it would be rare to say that any unit I have been with was at TO [table of organization] for personnel or equipment.” Another interview participant stated,

there's some fuzzy math going on in maintenance for what we have ready for ready basic aircraft because it used to be if you fell below 50% you have to cancel your schedule for the day and you had to work on jets. But it was funny because we always end up being 75% to 80% and it was like what? We've got 5 jets out there.

When questionnaire participants were asked, “Proper staffing (both quantity and quality) impacted operational readiness within the squadron(s) I served,” 36 percent agreed, while 55 percent strongly agreed for a combined total agreement rating of 91 percent. When asked, “FMF squadrons lacked sufficient aircraft and parts to maintain combat readiness,” 13 percent agreed, while 77 percent agreed for a total agreement rating of 90 percent.

5. Pilots in this study described insufficient flight time.

Another primary concern discussed by participants in this study was a lack of consistent flight time as well as generally low overall flight time. This was communicated as a cultural problem, a leadership problem, and an operational readiness problem. One interview participant commented,

You sign up for the Marine Corps in our case to be pilots and think I want to fly airplanes and kill bad guys, and you want to focus on the weapon system, which is the jet but so much of your fitrep is based on how you do your ground job, which isn't your primary MOS.

To this point, a respondent from the questionnaire stated, “This job consumed every minute of my time, and I often never thought about my flight until I was walking into the brief. It was like flying was 1% of my job or a minimal collateral duty.” One questionnaire respondent wrote,

Flying in my squadrons was viewed as a good deal or a hookup by the leadership. There was little funding for parts, and constantly had downed jets. On the rare occasion when you got multiple flights per week, the CO would always come gloat to us about how he hooked us up and that we had been rewarded for our good work on our ground jobs. This made the entire ready room want to quit, and we did. Within 18 months, the entire ready room had a DD-214.

Regarding flight time and safety, one interview participant stated,

I was so clued into operations and training, I saw the impact that it (lack of flight time) had on the younger pi-

lots around me, and it was really disturbing. And things that I saw pilots doing in the air, mistakes they were making, it was disturbing, honestly. ... but those kinds of little mistakes ... came down to ... a reduced level of situational awareness because of lack of proficiency and task saturation. It got scary, honestly.

Finally, most pilots stated that flight time was not consistent, maintaining it came in “ebbs and flows” or “feast or famine.” Participants were in agreement that they primarily got consistent flight time only when deployed and did very little flying when they were home. One interview participant stated, “there were months in my logbook where I have one to two hours. You know the fact that I went to Iraq, and I was able to fly a bunch out there, got me over 500 hours for my first tour, which is pretty good.”

Low and inconsistent flight time was a significant factor concerning pilots deciding to leave the Marine Corps. One interview participant said, “Yes. I'd say one of the biggest factors (of me getting out) was low flight time.” When asked, “I expected to receive more flight time as an FMF pilot,” 26 percent agreed, while 58 percent strongly agreed for a total agreement rating of 84 percent.

6. Participants described high levels of overall operational tempo.

Pilots in this study largely separated deployments and overall operational tempo as two distinct subjects. In general, they expressed high levels of job satisfaction when deploying as squadron pilots. One interview participant stated the following regarding his first combat deployment, “So the most rewarding thing I have ever done professionally was that deployment. You know, doing what you were trained to do, reconnaissance, patrol reconnaissance, you know, just everything. We were doing it all, so that was very rewarding.” Marine Corps fixed-wing pilots were also very satisfied when deploying as FAC's/air officers. However, not all deployments were rated equally. In particular, participants displayed disdain toward Individual Augment billets/deployments. One questionnaire respondent stated,

Non-flying IA [Individual Augment] deployments detracted from MOS qualification progression, increased operational tempo, disrupted unit cohesion, and adversely impacted the quality of life of the Marine and his family due to their typically short notice, unexpected nature. This affected me personally as well as at least half of the other company-grade officers in my FMF unit.

Pilots in this study expected to be subject to high operational tempos. However, there comes a time when pilots believe they are deploying too often and without enough dwell time. For example, one interview participant conveyed,

My dwell, by the time you factor in workups and all the other stuff, was about 1:1. And while I was on the MEU, I got an email from the Battalion Air Officer; (this is like August) that said, hey, man, we're looking forward to seeing you in February. I was thinking what?

Operational tempo, however, includes more than just deployments. It includes workups for deployments, detachments, temporary additional duties, and supporting other exercises to include large force exercises and the pace of squadron life, to include ground jobs and tasks unrelated to flying. With regard to non-deployment operational tempo, nearly every respondent communicated they thought operational tempo would be high but was much more demanding than they anticipated. For example, this interview participant stated, "I thought it was going to be busy, but it was much busier than I expected. Because we were working crazy hours in the unit." While another interview participant indicated, "the operational tempo at home potentially was (a reason I left). It was really hard on my family. The thing that actually killed me the most about the in-between deployments piece and the thing that turned me off the most about staying in the Marine Corps was the consistent, when you got home, you didn't stop." When asked,

The deployment/ operational tempo experienced was higher than I expected," 32 percent agreed and 26 percent strongly agreed for a total agreement

rating of 58 percent. While this is a high total agreement rating and indicates a problematic area, it is far from the 100 percent total agreement rating concerning the "overall workload and tasks unrelated to flying" theme. This suggests that pilots not only expected to deploy and work hard but actually enjoyed that part of their careers. However, 68 percent agreed with the questionnaire when asked, "Deployments/ operational tempo negatively affected my job satisfaction.

This indicates a deployment-to-deployment problem that was also stated in the literature review.

7. Participants described insufficient work-life balance.

With the themes stated thus far, it should come as no surprise that pilots said they focused almost all their attention on work, leaving family and personal issues on the backburner. One interview participant asserted,

And you just got back from six weeks gone from home, and you got back Monday, and the planes were a mess because you're leapfrogging them, leaving them in Nashville or wherever we had to leave them ... So now you're scrambling all week to get the things ready to get up to 50% which was almost impossible. So you're working on a weekend where guys really deserve the weekend off, which exacerbated the problem that you need to let people go home, spend time with their families, and now are keeping them longer because were chasing operational readiness.

After discussing work-life balance, this interviewee summed up his thoughts by stating it was, "Bad! That was a large factor in me departing. I loved the job. I had my dream job, but I was not a happy person." Another interview participant asserted, "12 hours days at least. Hopefully you are not working weekends. If you're working weekends, its 12 hour days there. Yeah, there's no work-life balance." When asked, "As a Marine pilot, I expected better work-life balance leading to a higher quality of life," 45 percent answered agree, while 32 percent responded strongly agree for a total agreement rating of 77 percent.

8. Pilots in this study described flawed promotion processes.

Regarding promotions, participants in the study communicated several concerns. One topic that continually arose was the lack of consideration given to the pilot's actual MOS/flying skills concerning promotion. Unanimously, pilots believed the majority of consideration for promotions was given to their ground job performance. They stated this was because infantry officers are in control of pilot promotions, and they do not understand aviation. Therefore, pilots emphasized that they were promoted via the same criteria used to promote ground officers. For example, one interview participant stated,

But when the Marine Corps was looking at me for promotion and they didn't look at all of those other things that I did and give those things the equivalent weight as some of the other things they look at. And it's because aviation is such a small slice of the evaluation piece. That is what tripped my decision to leave. Because I saw all of the hard work that I put in over the years, all the overtime that I put in, it wasn't being valued by the Marine Corps. Why would I stay there? That's like normalized deviance; why would I endorse that as an ongoing way to do business?

One questionnaire participant responded, "Tasks unrelated to flying take up 95% of your daily effort. Additionally, your fitrep was written off of your performance of non-flying accomplishments." Another interviewee asserted, "promotion boards are (run by) grunts, and they want to see FAC tours. I had a combat FAC tour, and that helped me a lot to get promoted to major."

Because of their belief that pilots are promoted by infantry officers based on their ground job, they stated their concern that the Marine Corps was not promoting the best pilots but rather those who looked good on paper to ground personnel. For example, one interview participant stated, "As a matter of fact, I think one of the biggest problems in the Marine Corps is most of their best people leave early. I mean, that's what you're kind of getting at; why are they leaving?" A questionnaire respondent

put it this way, “Is the Marine Corps doing all it can to keep the best people for the jobs it has? To that, I would say, ‘No.’ This is particularly true in aviation, where a bunch of people who have spent their lives differentiating themselves has no ability, in the Marine Corps’ eyes, of differentiating themselves.” When asked directly via the questionnaire, “My expectations regarding Marine Corps pilot promotions were not met,” 23 percent agreed, and 36 percent strongly agreed for a total agreement rating of 59 percent.

9. Participants described concerns with AVB.

When discussing the total compensation package Marine Corps pilots receive, it was clear they did not join the Marine Corps to become wealthy. For example, an interview participant said, “This is a service, this is a public service, I didn’t join the Marine Corps thinking I was going to get rich.” However, they also communicated a deep understanding that their training and education could lead to well-paying opportunities outside the Marine Corps, specifically, but not limited to, the major airlines. Pilots make more money working for the airlines, work much less, have no collateral duties, and do not deploy. For example, one interview participant said, “the guys who go to the airlines, cut your teeth for three or four years, and they are in the \$180,000 per year range, working three days a week and someone else is doing your flight planning for you.” These were not simply off-the-cuff remarks. Marine pilots indicated that they had conducted detailed cost-benefit analyses to weigh their career decisions. The literature review corroborated the pilots’ investigative labors.²⁰

The retention bonus was also brought up continuously. Many pilots discussed the fact that the bonus is only used by the Marine Corps when absolutely needed. Thus, Marine pilots, unlike their Air Force counterparts, are unable to count on receiving an annual retention bonus. One interview participant stated,

The thing that rubbed me wrong about it (the bonus) was the Navy guys who were department heads got bonuses to the tune of 25 to 30 grand per year,



Reducing force size while maintaining operational tempo combine to decrease pilot readiness and retention. (Photo by SSgt Amanda Stanford.)

and you’re showing up doing the same job, and you’re getting nothing. And you think, how is this fair?

This interview participant stated,

I told Gen ... (names very senior general), you’re asking me to commit to you, and you’re asking me to give up this chance to go to the airlines, you’re asking me to give up this amount of seniority, and quality of life but your only willing to commit to me this little bit of money to 16 years. I told him Semper Fidelis should go both ways. The Air Force takes it (the bonus) out the 20 (years); I just thought that was insulting.

When asked via the questionnaire, “The Marine Corps uses the AVB program only when they find themselves in a retention crisis,” 16 percent agreed, while 84 percent strongly agreed for a total agreement rating of 100 percent.

Recommendations

Participants in this study clearly communicated that the Marine Corps has closely related leadership and cultural issues, leading to other problems that led them to leave the Marine Corps. It could be argued that all the themes mentioned earlier stem from these two foundational issues. For example, before the draw-down, which started in 2011, the Marine Corps already had documentation that

their pilots were overworked.²¹ Despite this and the fact that they were reducing force size, the Marine Corps continued to maintain its operation tempo.²² This meant more work for fewer Marines, leading to numerous problems, including increased deployment to deployment ratios and decreased operational readiness. Moreover, the Marine Corps did not adjust for this increased workload by reducing other demands on their pilots. Based on the data collected from the study, which was corroborated via the literature review, the following measures are recommended.²³ If implemented correctly, it is this writer’s belief that job experiences will be more fully aligned with job expectations, which will lead to greater job satisfaction and an increase in quantity and quality of those desiring to remain on active duty.

1. Reduce non-pilot-related workload.

No other MOS requires the amount of continuous training and education to become competent in their profession. Unfortunately, this reality has been demonstrated by aviation mishaps, pilot deaths, and a lack of tactical proficiency leading to readiness problems. Pilots unanimously stated they were asked to do too much as fleet pilots. Allison (2010) documented this, asserting that FMF pilots are tasked with impossible

workloads. To reduce pilot workload, squadrons should add non-aviators and contractors to take over some of the ground jobs within squadrons.

Additionally, PME requirements should be changed (not eliminated) for pilots. Training requirements, primarily non-aviation-related training, should be reduced or, in some cases, eliminated. Leadership needs to allow this to happen. If the Marine Corps wants to reduce mishaps, promote mission effectiveness, and create an environment in which pilots wish to remain, they should allow their aviators to focus on being pilots as their primary MOS dictates. It should not be a collateral duty, as so many in the study indicated. It is this writer's fear that even if Marine leadership mandated some of these changes, other leaders would create or resurrect programs to make their Marines work harder for their own benefit. Sometimes it takes more courage to say no to leaders' requests for more.

2. Fix operational readiness.

Operational readiness problems have reduced mission effectiveness, decreased flight time, and increased aviation mishaps and pilot deaths. Pilots reported not having enough qualified people to run FMF squadrons proficiently. They also reported not having the necessary aircraft and parts to maintain operational readiness. Increasing operational readiness could be done by adding non-pilot Marines and contract support to include maintainers and professional S-shop staff. Facilitating FMF squadrons with contractors would increase operational readiness, enhance standardization, maintain corporate knowledge, and allow Marines to progress in their MOSs. Finally, a full audit of maintenance supplies must be conducted to determine what must be done to supply legacy platforms with the parts they need. If the Marine Corps is truly out of the necessary parts and supplies to maintain their aircraft, they need to reproduce them.

3. Educate non-pilot Marine Corps leadership to better understand the aviation MOS.

Pilots routinely state that ground

leaders do not understand the pilot MOS and FMF squadron life demands. This leads to a fundamental disconnect causing many of the issues brought up in this study. This needs to be rectified as ground officers, specifically those within the infantry, possess considerable decision-making power. Pilots asserted that ground leaders hold incorrect and often negative views toward those in the MAW. Pilots have a working knowledge of Marine Corps infantry units as the Corps is the only Service to train its officers in basic infantry tactics. They are also the only military force requiring its FACs to be pilots. Thus, many pilots serve and deploy within infantry units. However, because of Marine Corps structure and operations, infantry officers are not afforded the opportunity to serve in FMF squadrons and know little about the demands of squadron life. Although rare, when senior enlisted ground Marines are transferred into FMF squadrons, they communicate they never knew how hard wing Marines work and how demanding life is. An additional benefit to implementing this measure would be a more knowledgeable MAGTF.

4. Fix pilot promotions.

Pilot promotions should be fundamentally changed. A pilot is tasked with becoming an expert in a highly specialized aircraft. Training a single fixed-wing pilot costs millions of dollars and approximately three years to complete. Whereas the standard ground officer receives a few months of MOS training and gets to the fleet as a second lieutenant, it is not uncommon for pilots to join the FMF as captains. Because of their extensive training, pilots agree to an eight-year active duty commitment after earning their wings, while a ground officer has a total of a three-year active commitment. Consequently, pilots often get to the FMF as their The Basic School ground counterparts are finishing their initial military obligations. This results in a pilot completing their active duty service obligation at approximately twelve years of service, while their ground peers complete their active duty service obligation at the four-year mark. However, pilots

are promoted using criteria similar to ground officers, and MOS skill counts very little toward pilot promotions. Pilots repeatedly stated that their best pilots, including TOPGUN and Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course graduates, were either choosing to leave the Marine Corps or being passed over for promotion. It is believed they are being passed over because, while they have tremendous MOS talent and credibility, they may lack the type of fitness reports, ground jobs, or PME promotion board's desire. Passing over-qualified and well-respected individuals for these reasons is disappointing to the individual pilot, their peers, subordinates, and superiors, resulting in reduced trust and morale.

5. Offer a continuous retention bonus and maximize flight pay.

The Marine Corps offers sporadic retention bonuses. In 2017, they revived the bonus for the first time since 2011. This bonus was initially only offered to three communities and was subsequently broadened when the Corps started to realize the gravity of their retention problem. Whereas Air Force pilots are continuously provided a bonus to at least the twenty-year mark, Marine pilots are not. When it is offered, no one knows how long it will be accessible, and it is only offered for the duration leadership deems the pilot will commit to at least twenty years of service. This is frustrating to Marine pilots, and many consider it a cause of the Corps' egalitarian ethos. Additionally, many believe flight pay should be increased. These programs already exist and can immediately be maximized to incentivize pilots to stay in the Marine Corps.

6. Conduct exit interviews.

Pilots exiting the Marine Corps should conduct an exit interview where their anonymity is guaranteed. These interviews should be done with an impartial interviewer. The findings should be collected, analyzed, summarized, and viewed by commanding officers, headquarters Marine Corps, and those within the Corps' manpower division. Gathering and disseminating this information would allow leaders (at all levels) to implement strategies to facilitate

retention. Exit interviews should not only be extended to Marine pilots but all Marines leaving the Marine Corps.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps has a pilot retention problem fueled by, among other things, leadership and cultural issues. This article listed nine thematic barriers to fixed-wing Marine pilot retention and offered six mitigating recommendations. The information relayed in this article was extracted from this author's doctoral dissertation, *A Qualitative Descriptive Study of Job Expectations, Job Satisfaction, and Retention Among Fixed-Wing Marine Pilots*.²⁴ The intent of conducting the study was to communicate thick and rich descriptive text as conveyed by well-respected, seasoned pilots. This allowed the author to investigate and fill gaps in the literature, thereby expanding what is known about the pilot retention problem.

It is not unreasonable to infer that those from other MOSs—both aviation and non-aviation, and officer and enlisted—share similar job-related discrepancies as those relayed within this article. A high degree of agreement was noted when discussing the study's findings with a variety of Marines. This should not be surprising as they are, of course, members of the same organization. Additionally, the lens through which the study was viewed—the Porter and Steers Met Expectation Model—has proven to be a universally effective theoretical construct when considering job satisfaction. In particular, the model is suited to understand the relationship between job expectations, job satisfaction, and retention within a wide variety of military and non-military occupations.

Marine Corps leadership at all levels should take retention seriously. The Marine Corps will be a better prepared and more functional operating force when Marines in far greater numbers desire to stay. The Marine Corps and its Marines are too important to let this largely fixable problem go another day without being addressed. It is this writer's hope that the information communicated in this article will be used for positive change and not for punishment.

Marine Corps leadership is capable of delivering both.

Notes

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6. "Predicting Active Duty Air Force Pilot Attrition Given an Anticipated Increase in Major Airline Hiring"; and U.S. Congress, *House Armed Services Committee Hearing on 29 March, Military Pilot Shortage*, (Washington, DC: March 2017), available at <https://armed-services.house.gov>.

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10. John M. Paxton, *Statement of Gen John Paxton Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness*, (Washington, DC: March 2015).

11. Brett A. Allison, "The Impact of Ground Training on Aviation Readiness," (master's thesis, Marine Corps University, 2010).

12. *The Relative Cost-Effectiveness of Retaining Versus Accessing Air Force Pilots*.

13. "Future Retention of the Marine Corps' Top Performing Aviators."

14. "Proposed Solutions to Marine Corps Aviation's Fixed-Wing Pilot Shortage."

15. "Future Retention of the Marine Corps' Top Performing Aviators."

16. "The Impact of Ground Training on Aviation Readiness."

17. Staff, "U.S. Marine Corps," *Heritage*, (October 2021), available at <https://index.heritage.org>.

18. *Statement of Gen John Paxton Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness*.

19. Ibid.

20. *The Relative Cost-Effectiveness of Retaining Versus Accessing Air Force Pilots*; and "Military Pilot Shortage."

21. "The Impact of Ground Training on Aviation Readiness."

22. *Statement of Gen John Paxton Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness*.

23. "A Qualitative Descriptive Study of Job Expectations, Job Satisfaction, and Retention among Fixed-Wing Marine Pilots."

24. Ibid.

