

The Wrong Question

by

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Let there be no doubt, being a squadron commander is the best job in our Air Force. Being at the fulcrum of people and mission is exciting, demanding and deeply satisfying. Squadron command is the point where there are no excuses, where authority and responsibility meet in a fine balance with the desire to improve people's lives while executing our nation's defense. This is my second command tour, and I still love every day of it. But it is not all a bed of roses. One of the truly frustrating tasks commanders face today is talking to young men and women who are leaving our Air Force, trying to figure out why they're leaving and what we can do to keep our most valuable resource from exiting. Part of the answer is that we're asking the wrong question.

"Why are you getting out?" The answers vary but have three common threads: family, money, and trust. A composite answer: "I love my family and don't want to be away from them; I can make much more money with XYZ Corporation to support my family; I won't ask my spouse to give up her/his career; I don't have any confidence in the _____ system (fill in the blank with one or more of the following: assignment, promotion, retirement, medical)"; and, most troubling of all, "I don't believe you or the USAF leadership when you tell me it'll get better, I've heard that my whole career."

Please don't misread this. These young people are deeply anguished by this decision. This is usually the most difficult decision they've ever made and it normally takes a notification of assignment, the service commitment they'd incur by going to PME, or some other outside impetus to "force" the decision. They tell me they love the Air Force, our mission, and the people with whom they share that mission; and I believe them. The best evidence is their nearly universal intention to join the Guard or Reserve.

So what are we to make of this? Has our Air Force become so unattractive that we can't keep our best people, or even our average people? The current retention figures across the Air Force are abysmal. Unless we find some answers soon, we may again face the prospect of a "hollow force." I remember all too well from the 1970s what serving in that type of force is like. The notion that the Air Force that won Desert Storm could be headed again toward being that hollow force in less than a decade should cause each of us to ask what part we can play in the solution.

Attacking the exodus from what we learn asking "why are you getting out" leads to solutions like increased reenlistment bonuses, flyer bonuses, and changes in deployment cycles. None seem to be working. I can remember facing each of the family, money, and trust issues after the Vietnam War. In each case my answers and those of

many of my generation (and those since) was the same as today's....but we stayed. So what is the difference? Perhaps we're asking the wrong question.

A better question is "why aren't you staying in?" Asking this question changes the range of answers from the negative approach of what might be better elsewhere, to the positive set of attractions that caused us to join the Air Force in the first place: patriotism, a calling to serve the nation we love, and in that service joining a community apart, a feeling that, regardless of our fate, we were part of a larger family that would always be there to take care of our families. There was a time not very long ago that people made an affirmative decision to stay in despite relatively low pay, long hours, family separations, and never ending problems with the "systems" that support our careers and our families. Why then and not now?

I would summarize the reasons for staying as our "Air Force Culture." That culture began with the knowledge that we were all part of something bigger than ourselves. We were a large family—a family "apart"—serving our nation. Ours was a distinct "way of life" unattainable, not even understandable, on the "outside." That way of living included a life style centered on our squadrons, wings and the base we called home. We held a core belief that we were a profession apart, with a value system which, while difficult to uphold, made all of us understand that we were members of a community which aspired to be, had to be, "better" than the values of the community we served. As I saw it, admittedly from a distance which blurs some of the less attractive aspects, that Air Force Culture made "staying in" so attractive that all the undeniable financial and family reasons for "getting out" never could overcome what became for me, my family and my comrades in arms a way of life.

The components of that Air Force Culture and the way of life it created are difficult to enumerate without seeming trivial. No one component can stand by itself against tests based on "sound business practices," situational ethics, or the values of the moment. However, taken together these cultural aspects of the Air Force way of life added up to something so special that millions of men and women made a positive decision to earn far less money, endure far more sacrifice, and spend far too much time separate from their families rather than give up this way of life.

Today, the core of that way of life remains, untouched. Our core values and the driving logic of patriotism and service to our nation are as strong a touchstone as ever. What is fast eroding is the edifice of the social fabric we wove around that core. That social fabric encompassed our entire lives. From schools, scouts, sports, clubs, spouse's groups, to our chapel (our word for church), nearly everything we did and everyone who mattered—work, play, worship, our family and friends—centered on our squadron and "the base." We moved often but saw the great positive aspect of this living civics lesson for our world-travelling children. We chose to live on base not because it was cheaper or closer to work but because that put us at the center of everything that "mattered" in our lives. The base was where we and those we loved received medical and dental care and we knew that care would be provided throughout our lives whether we were there or TDY.

So what happened? Much of this social fabric is still in place, we just don't use it. Why? I believe two trends have put our way of life at risk. The first is the notion that we should not be "a society apart." This sociological argument makes it easier to "outsource" and "commercialize" and thereby eliminate parts of our community. It's also an important counter to the idea of "staying in." Staying in what? If the military is more and more like the civilian community, operating on the same economical, social, and legal norms, then why accept less money for the same work. The answer used to be much easier: it's not work, it's our profession. The distinction becomes more and more difficult to make as we see fellow professionals replaced by contractors and the social fabric of our profession, the many small pieces of our way of life, slowly replaced by businesses which just happen to be on base.

The second trend is the budget-driven process of putting everything on a "sound business approach." The result of this made everything cost marginally more. You want a chapel, pay for it. You want a club, pay the same for that meal as you pay downtown. You want medical care, child care, scouts, sports, then pay for it. Many still "pay for it," but not enough of us. Issue by issue, each of these elements of our social life has been cost-profit analyzed and driven to a "pay for service" basis. And somehow in this single issue approach each small nick in the fabric of our AF Culture seemed logical; but, taken in the aggregate, these decisions have come close to destroying our way of life. It's dangerous to even say "squadron bar" these days because the "sound business approach" of MWR can't survive the competition and the drive to eliminate alcohol-related incidents made it easier just to write off many important aspects of our social way of life.

If this is starting to sound like your typical whining letter to the AF Times, let me quickly state that I do not question any of the discrete decisions that brought us to this situation. It is far too easy to challenge decisions we didn't have to make. Our force is smaller, our budget is smaller, and our leadership has made decisions that had to be driven principally by our mission. Those "tough decisions" were always between two good options; that is the nature of and what makes a decision hard. Our leaders were forced to choose the mission while attempting to balance our people and the quality of their lives.

A recent retirement speech—published in the AF Times and circulated via email—has gained a following. That speech basically attacked every supervisor in the Air Force and said we don't care enough. We don't hand out "golden apples" or tell people we want them to stay. Staff personnel don't think about the operators when making decisions....and on and on. The speaker got one thing very right, it was time for him to move on. But he did give us an always useful reminder of how important a simple "you're doing a great job and I appreciate it" is to the morale of those for whom we're responsible. What I believe he got very wrong is the notion that the leadership doesn't care and that there are simple solutions to the problems we face. Part of the reason there is so much "turbulence" is that our leaders are trying everything they can think of to try to fix what they know is a serious problem. Instead of taking the age-old "it's the leadership's fault" tack, perhaps we should look a little closer to home for solutions.

What can we do about all this? Let me begin by pointing at myself and my fellow squadron commanders. Too often we are choosing to travel the easier road. The specter of political correctness, potential incidents and IG complaints—especially where alcohol and the potential for DUIs are involved—has made this all too easy. However, I don't remember any four-star directives telling me to take the easy way out or even that I shouldn't have a "squadron bar." It goes without saying that if you don't allow alcohol to be a part of any Air Force activities the DUI rate on base will go down. My opinion is that the DUI rate would just go up off base or returning to base. I can do a much more effective job of ensuring my squadron "takes care of each other" when social activities are centered on my unit and not "downtown."

Now before I get the PC crowd in too big an uproar, I am not suggesting we de-emphasizing the importance of strong leadership to curb the excesses of young people drinking or helping our personnel afflicted with the disease of alcoholism. Every day I look at the pictures on my office wall of all the people I've tried to lead. Staring back at me is a Staff Sergeant whose struggle to find answers to his disease I shared. That disease finally led him to commit suicide by hanging himself after his next commander ran out of options and he was discharged. I know all too well that you can't look the other way and "hope" that kind of problem away. It takes strong leadership, constant emphasis and, in the end, we're faced with the tough reality that some of our best people won't be strong enough to conquer their demons. The vast majority of those faces look back and say, it was hard, but it was fun and I'm still in our Air Force. But for how long. The fun has diminished, the rewards of shared sacrifice aren't as apparent, the price tag for continued service seems too high to too many. Are there any answers? Absolutely.

A first step is for squadron commanders to let their natural desire to create a family overrule the very real fear that one mistake will mean the end of their career. I've known hundreds of squadron commanders over the years; some I hated, some I loved, but I respected almost all of them. Nine out of ten wanted to command so they could make "their" peoples' lives better while accomplishing a tough but incredibly satisfying job. The satisfaction comes from seeing people grow and achieve their potential while enjoying their service.

I'm not preaching, I'm as guilty as the next commander for coming down on the "safe" side. The core function of command is providing people the tools they need to accomplish our mission and achieve their personal potential. Part of that function is balancing the long hours and hard work with security and fun. Security comes from confidence that everything that can be done will be done to take care of them and their families. Fun. When exactly did this critically important attribute of our culture disappear? Best I can tell it was so gradual we didn't notice it. Squadron commanders are the owners of this problem; only we can give our personnel the "clearance" to re-install this all-important part of our AF culture. I'm not talking about a picnic once a quarter. The "fun" part of being in the Air Force fifteen years ago was the good natured verbal combat, competition between flights, Friday afternoons at the bar, hail and farewells which our spouses dreaded but we reveled in....the list is very long.

Another important step is to return to the natural positiveness we once possessed as a culture. Sure, we were unappreciated, underpaid, overworked, and generally abused; and we loved it. We were all in it together and that sharing in adversity made us a family. A positive approach to our future will allow us to see that many of the trends I've called problems for our Air Force culture may, in fact, turn out to be opportunities. As we contract out non-deployable functions, our Air Force will become a true warrior-only force. The exciting movement towards an expeditionary Air Force offers tremendous openings for reinstating a culture more clearly focused on our mission. Ten expeditionary air forces may provide an opportunity for something approaching a "regimental" system where we can spend longer periods of our service life with the same people. Mentoring is a long-term process that should last a significant period of time. The current two to three year rotations result in the concept of "mentor" meaning nothing more than a good supervisor. If we can spend ten years in the same EAF, mentoring may have the potential to reinvigorate our culture.

"Competitive Sourcing" can result in a system where contractors support the warrior class we are meant to be. It will take some new thinking about how contracts are written but most people want to be appreciated for their work, not resented; contractors are no different. But we have to write contracts that support warriors and clearly define how that support is to be provided, not just the latest "sound business practices." Airmen in jobs that are "outsourced" must have the opportunity to retrain in warrior skills. Contracting out of commercially available support functions can result in a more cohesive air force than we've ever had before.

I've focused on squadron commanders, but every airman owns a part of the solution. The individual price is twofold. We must all commit to paying the price for our culture, and then follow through. The small monetary differential required to rejoin the squadron and base culture is only worth it if enough of us pay the price. No matter how much you want to make it work, it won't take too many trips to the club only to find it empty before people quit coming. If each of us takes the time to remember why we joined, perhaps we'll decide to come home and rejoin our Air Force culture. Choosing to drive back to the base for scouts, chapel, movies, clubs, squadron functions at "the bar," all are choices we make as individuals. But, if enough of us make those choices, we'll find our Air Force family waiting. Our Air Force culture is there for us to retake and reform for our future.

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