

U.S. Fighter Pilots in Short Supply As War Demands Grow



realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/08/27/us_fighter_pilots_in_short_supply_as_war_demands_grow_112156.htm

Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson was in the Middle East last week to get an up-close view of America's air wars. Her takeaway from a 10-day trip to Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan and Afghanistan: These wars cannot be won without significant U.S. air support.

The indispensability of U.S. air power, meanwhile, has created a serious pilot deficit in the Air Force. Combat demands keep growing as the Air Force continues to lose pilots left and right.

Immediately upon her return to Washington, Wilson signed off on new incentive pay measures to try to keep Air Force pilots from fleeing to commercial airlines.

The numbers are especially worrisome in the fighter pilot category, Wilson told reporters Friday.

Including active duty, Air National Guard and reserve, the Air Force has a requirement for 20,352 pilots, including 5,292 fighter pilots. The force today has 18,808 pilots. But fighter pilots account for most of the overall deficit of 1,544. The Air Force today is 1,211 short of what it needs.

Wilson laid the blame on commercial airlines that have stepped up efforts to lure military pilots. Most companies require 1,500 hours of flight time for pilots to fly regional airlines, but military aviators can be hired with only 750 flight hours.

To tackle the problem in a systematic way, Wilson for the first time assigned a general to run an "air crew crisis task force." Brig. Gen. Mike Koscheski, who formerly was chief of strategic planning and integration for the Air Force, will be responsible for pilot recruiting and retention.

First order of business is to boost aviation incentive pay, commonly called flight pay, for both officer and enlisted aviators. This is the first time such pay is being increased since 1999. The Air Force also is expanding the aviation bonus program and will be asking retired aviators to volunteer to return to active duty to fill "critical-rated" staff positions.

Air Force retention incentives for aviators with fewer than six years of aviation service have not been increased since 1980.

"We can't afford not to compensate our talented aviators at a time when airlines are hiring unprecedented numbers," said Wilson.

The new compensation policy takes effect Oct. 1. Incentives for officers will increase from \$840 to up to \$1,000 per month, and from \$400 to \$600 per month for enlisted.

One relatively bright spot in the pilot workforce is unmanned aviation. The Air Force for several years suffered severe shortages of remotely piloted aircraft operators as demands in war zones soared. The RPA pilot gap compelled the Air Force two years ago to dramatically increase pay and bonuses. "We could not possibly keep up with the demand," Wilson said. "We have made progress. We're on track for our recovery plan."

It is not clear how much of the fighter pilot shortage resulted from aviators switching from manned fighters to RPAs. Regardless, the Air Force now has to climb out of a deep hole.

And the workload is about to get heavier. The Pentagon is mapping out the details of a new strategy for how U.S. forces will support the Afghan military in its fight against the Taliban and the ISIS affiliate Khorasan in Eastern Afghanistan. There is a strong chance that air support to Afghan forces will need to be augmented, said Wilson. “We are now looking at the president’s guidance,” she said. The Air Force already is deeply involved in a “train and assist” mission with the Afghan air force, teaching them how to fly A-29 Super Tucano turboprops.

As they ramp up the fight against the Islamic State and the Taliban, the Iraqi and Afghan militaries will continue to turn to the U.S. Air Force for help finding and striking targets. “The Iraqi military is taking the fight to ISIS despite significant casualties — with significant support of American and coalition air power,” Wilson said.

“It’s very important,” she insisted, “to continue to take the fight to ISIS and to extremist groups.”

Sandra Erwin is a national security and defense reporter for RealClearDefense. She can be reached at serwin@realcleardefense.com. Follow Sandra on Twitter [@Sandra_I_Erwin](https://twitter.com/Sandra_I_Erwin).