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MILITARY AVIATORS

Assignment Policies and Practices





United States
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National Security and
International Affairs Division

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The Honorable Sam Nunn
Chairman, Committee on Armed
Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Les Aspin
Chairman, Committee on Armed
Services
House of Representatives

As required by the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1990 and 1991, we reviewed the aviator assignment policies and practices followed by the armed services to accommodate the assignment preferences of aviators within the services' operational needs. Our specific objectives were to (1) determine service policies regarding aviator assignments, (2) describe how assignments are actually made, (3) identify the extent of aviator input into the assignment process, and (4) identify aviator views regarding the assignment process. We have briefed the Senate Committee on Armed Services staff on the preliminary results of our work and provided copies of the briefing to the staff of the House Committee on Armed Services. This report summarizes and updates the information presented in the briefing.

Results in Brief

The Department of Defense (DOD) develops and implements general policies that affect the aviator assignment process in certain general areas. Examples of these policies include establishing tour lengths for overseas locations and implementing aviator career incentive pay requirements. However, DOD is not involved in making specific assignments within a service.

Each of the services has its own policies and procedures for assigning aviators, and we found that the services were generally following them. Aviator assignments in each service are affected by aviator-specific requirements, such as flying time, as well as requirements applicable to all officers, such as overseas assignments. Aviators' career needs and desires are considered in assignment decisions. However, the services' needs are their main concern.

The aviators provide assignment preference statements that indicate location, educational, and specific assignment requests. The assignment

requests are weighed against service needs and the developmental needs of the aviator before making assignments. Generally, proposed assignments are discussed with the aviators before they are finalized.

Available information indicates that assignments are important to aviators. However, other factors such as family separation, job satisfaction, and availability of civilian job opportunities were generally cited as more important factors affecting aviators' decisions to stay in or leave the service.

Scope and Methodology

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1990 and 1991 requires us to analyze "the effectiveness and efficiency of the aviator assignment policies and practices of the Armed Forces, including an analysis of the policies and practices followed in accommodating the assignment preferences of aviators within operational needs of the Armed Forces." The act requires us to report our findings to the Senate and House Committees on Armed Services.

To accomplish our objectives, we reviewed pertinent DOD and service regulations and guidance, correspondence, and studies. We examined the assignment process in each of the services, observed actual assignments being made, and discussed the process with assignment managers and aviators. We also interviewed DOD and service officials.

Documentation, previous studies, and prior indications of problems in the area of aviator assignments varied by service. As a result, we relied more heavily on aviator interviews for the Army and on studies, surveys, and transaction records for the other services.

We conducted our review from August 1989 to May 1990 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We discussed the information in this report with responsible agency officials and incorporated their views where appropriate.

Appendixes I through IV provide information on aviator assignment policies and practices in the Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Army, respectively.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretaries of Defense and the Army, Navy, and Air Force and other interested parties. We will make copies available to others upon request.

If you or your staff have any questions, please call me on (202) 275-3990. The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix V.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul L. Jones". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "P".

Paul L. Jones
Director, Defense Force
Management Issues

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Abbreviations

DOD Department of Defense

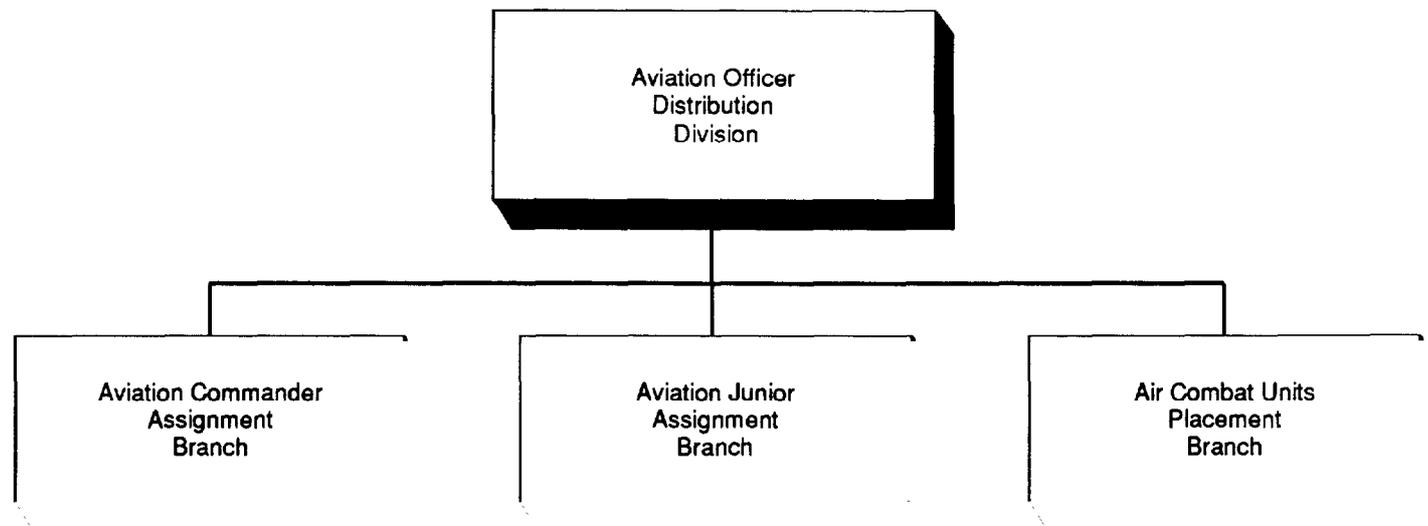
Navy Aviator Assignment Process

Background

The aviator assignment system is designed to allow the Navy to develop the officer's individual aviator combat skills, leadership abilities, and experience required to ultimately fill senior leadership positions. The term aviation officers refers to both pilots and naval flight officers, which includes specialties such as radar intercept officers and aerial reconnaissance specialists.

The Naval Military Personnel Command's Aviation Officer Distribution Division is responsible for aviation officer assignments. Within this division, placement officers and detailers¹ work together in an effort to match assignment requirements with aviator qualifications. Placement officers are concerned with filling command requirements, while detailers represent individual aviator career needs and personal desires. Figure I.1 shows the structure of the Naval Personnel Command, Aviation Officer Distribution Division.

Figure I.1: Structure of the Naval Personnel Command, Aviation Officer Distribution Division



¹Detailer is the term used in the Navy to describe the people who make personnel assignments.

As of November 1989, the Navy had 14,247 aviators at the rank of commander and below (8,863 pilots and 5,384 naval flight officers). Table I.1 shows the number of pilots and naval flight officers by jet, propeller, and helicopter communities.

Table I.1: Number of Pilot and Naval Flight Officers, November 1989

Communities	Pilots	Naval flight officers	Total
Jet	2,991	2,817	5,808
Propeller	2,587	2,567	5,154
Helicopter	3,285	0	3,285
Total	8,863	5,384	14,247

During 1989, the Aviation Officer Distribution Division assigned 6,094 aviators. According to Navy officials, about one-third of all aviators typically receive new assignments each year. Length of assignments can generally vary from 1 to 3 years, although some may be shorter or longer. Factors that influence assignment length include whether an aviator is assigned to an overseas or U.S. sea or shore position or whether dependents accompany an aviator to certain overseas duty stations.

Assignment Policies and Practices

The primary policy and procedural guidance used for making aviator officer assignments is contained in the Navy's Officer Transfer Manual (NAVPERS 15559), Officer Distribution Manual (NMPC.4 Instr. 5400.IG), and the Naval Military Personnel Manual. These manuals govern assignments for all Navy officers, not just aviators. They provide detailers with the latitude to administer three basic requirements that govern each aviator assignment—the needs of the Navy, the officer's career needs, and the desires of the individual.

The needs of the Navy are the primary consideration in an aviator's assignment and take priority over all other factors. Career path assignments of all aviators follow a distinct sea/shore rotation pattern. The first assignment of virtually all new aviators is to a flying-intensive sea position, generally aboard an aircraft carrier. Subsequent assignments are based on the number of aviators required to serve in flying positions at sea and ashore.

An aviator's individual desires are also an important part of the assignment process. Our review indicated that Navy detailers, when making assignments, are sensitive to such personal factors as a working spouse,

children in school, or dependents who are receiving special medical treatment.

Actions that occur during the assignment process can generally be grouped into two distinct time periods: actions that begin 9 to 12 months and then 6 to 9 months before an aviator's projected rotation date.

For the first period, the process begins with a placement officer, within the placement branch, who posts a list of the positions that are expected to be vacated. Sea and shore coordinators, within the assignment branch, use this list to compile positions for applicable sea and shore assignments and to rank the order in which the positions need to be filled. These coordinators send the list of positions to a community-specific detailer (e.g., jet detailer or helicopter detailer). The detailer then attempts to match the positions with aviators due for new assignments.

In the second period, detailers communicate with aviators by telephone, letters, or personal visits. Each detailer maintains a file of telephone conversations or other contacts with aviators. Through contacts with aviators, and the information obtained during the first period, detailers attempt to balance the Navy's needs with the individual's career needs and personal preferences.

Once a detailer and an aviator agree to a proposed assignment, the assignment must be approved by the applicable sea or shore coordinator and the gaining placement officer. As part of the acceptance process, subspecialty education waivers and need for training updating are considered. Subspecialty education waivers provide the Navy with a process to assign aviators who have received post graduate education to positions suitable to their educational background. Also, when an aviator is assigned from a nonflying position to a flying position, his/her flying skills may need to be updated. Detailers try to visit naval bases semiannually to inform aviators about assignment policies and procedures administered by the Aviation Officer Distribution Division.

Our review of Navy assignment manuals, policies, and processes and discussions with assignment and placement officers identified six practices and criteria the Navy uses to make aviator assignments.

1. Requirements. Navy requirements or needs are reflected in the number of aviators authorized for each activity (i.e., squadron or training command requirements), as shown in the Officer Distribution

Plan. Requirements are satisfied by assigning the best qualified aviator to available positions.

2. Sea and shore projected rotation date. An aviator's projected rotation date from a sea or shore position signals an aviator's availability for a new assignment.

3. Evaluation reports. An aviator's performance rating records the quality of job performance of each aviator relative to others of the same grade and comparable experience. It provides information on duties performed and an evaluation of personal and professional characteristics.

4. Career path consideration. An aviator's career path involves rotation between sea and shore assignments. This rotation pattern is influenced by the number of aviators required to serve in flying sea and shore positions. Furthermore, as part of the process for maintaining an aviator's flying skills, detailers try to ensure that aviators are assigned to positions that will enable them to qualify for aviation career incentive pay.

5. Commanding officer's endorsement. Placement officers are in routine communication with gaining and losing commanding officers to discuss an aviator's specific skills and experience and those that are needed to fill vacant positions.

6. Subspecialty codes. Aviators who obtain post graduate education acquire technical or managerial subspecialty skills. When the Navy provides formal education, it wants to assign the aviator to a position where the aviator's education can best be used.

Aviator Input Into Assignment Decisions

The Navy's assignment practices accommodate, within the operational needs of the Navy, aviator assignment preferences. Basically, aviators provide input into the assignment process by completing an Officer Preference and Personal Information Card (NAVPERS 10301/1) and an officer data card, and through personal contacts with a detailer.

The preference card lists, in order, the aviator's preference for his or her next assignment. It is submitted at least annually to the detailer. The officer data card contains personal information, such as assignment history, rotation dates, education, and dependent status. Because some of this information is also used for selection boards, aviators can annually

review and verify the information. Personal contact consists of telephone calls, written correspondence, and visits between aviators and detailers.

To help determine whether actual practices and the stated processes were generally consistent, we reviewed decisions involved in 14 recent aviator assignments. Our information was based on interviews with detailers and a review of the detailer's records that included aviator preference cards, officer data cards, records of personal contacts with aviators, and documentation of their rationale for making each assignment. Of the 14 assignments, 6 resulted in aviators receiving their first choice. In those cases where aviators did not receive their first choice, three assignments were based on the needs of the Navy, and five were based on career development needs of the aviators. According to Navy officials, 12 aviators were happy or satisfied with their assignments and 2 were unhappy with their assignments. The number of assignments we reviewed was too small to project the results to the universe of all assignments.

Aviators' Views of the Assignment Process

The Navy Personnel Research and Development Center, as part of a comprehensive study on career development, has been collecting data since 1982 on aviator attitudes about detailers and the assignment process. The most recent results, based on questionnaire responses of 5,028 aviators, were published in the Center's August 1988 report, entitled Officer Career Development: Problems of Three Unrestricted Line Communities (TR 88-13).

Overall, 75 percent of aviators reported they were pleased with their most recent assignment. More specifically, 58 percent said they were satisfied with the information detailers had conveyed to them during discussions about assignments. However, only about half believed that the detailers were concerned about meeting their needs. In addition, about 18 percent of a sample of comment sheets allowing respondents to identify any areas of concern about their careers contained negative comments on the assignment process.

The Navy administers a separation questionnaire to identify why aviators leave the service. From a list of 30 items, aviators are asked to rank those factors that influenced their decision to separate. The questionnaires are completed on a voluntary basis and reflect the views of both voluntarily and involuntarily separated aviators.

In responding to the separation questionnaire from 1984 through 1988, former pilots and naval flight officers cited several key factors influencing their decisions to leave the Navy. The number one reason given by both pilots and flight officers was too much family separation. Additional reasons, in order of importance for pilots, were too much crisis management, problems with assignment/detailing, inability to sufficiently plan and control career, and erosion of benefits (retirement, commissary, etc.). The additional reasons cited by flight officers, in order of importance, were erosion of benefits, inability to sufficiently plan and control career, too much crisis management, and problems with assignment/detailing.

GAO's Assessment

Our evaluation of the Navy's aviator officer assignment practices indicates that the Navy is following its formal assignment policies and procedures. For each assignment we reviewed, detailers maintained records that documented their decisions. Furthermore, the assignment practices accommodate, within the operational needs of the Navy, aviator assignment preferences. Research performed by the Navy Personnel Research and Development Center, which separated the characteristics of assignments and detailing, indicated that aviators generally viewed their assignments in a positive way, although only about half the aviators believed the detailers were concerned about meeting their needs.

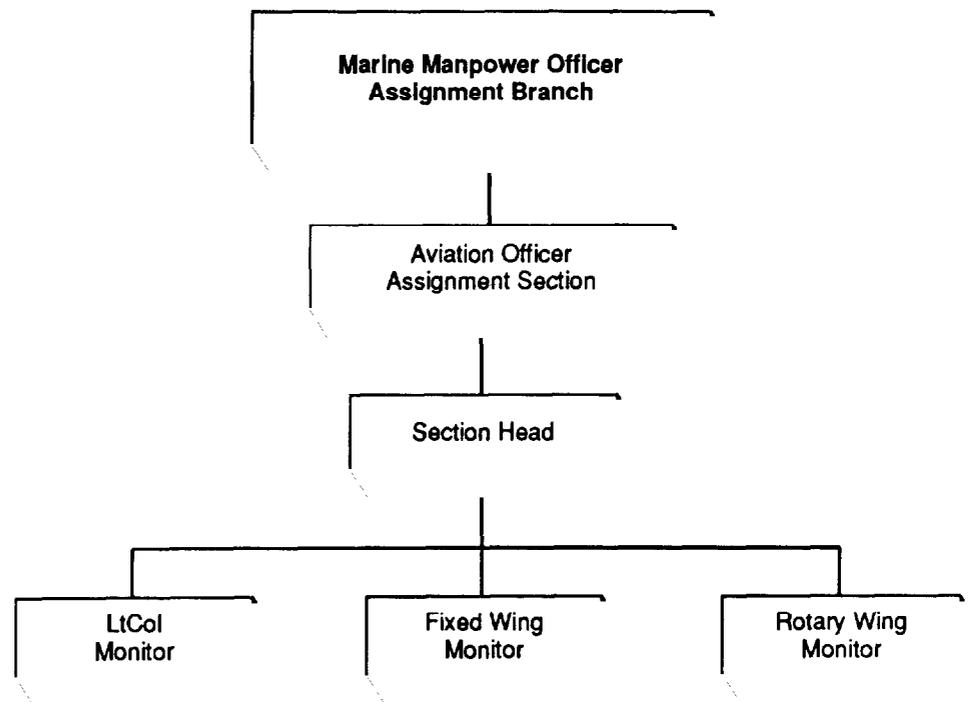
Marine Corps Aviator Assignment Process

Background

The Marine Corps' aviator assignment system is designed to guide aviators along a career path that will develop their individual aviator skills and provide experience for future command positions. Aviation officers include pilots and naval flight officers, such as bombardier navigators and aerial reconnaissance specialists.

The structure of the Aviation Officer Assignment Section, within the Marine Manpower Officer Assignment Branch, is shown in figure II.1. Within the aviator assignment section, assignment managers, known as monitors, are responsible for matching position requirements and aviator qualifications.

Figure II.1: Structure of the Marine Manpower Officer Assignment Branch



As table II.1 shows, the Marine Corps had 3,933 aviators at the ranks of first lieutenant through lieutenant colonel, as of February 1990. This includes pilots and naval flight officers in the jet and propeller communities and pilots in the helicopter community.

Table II.1: Number of Marine Corps Pilots and Naval Flight Officers as of February 1990

Community	Pilots	Naval flight officers	Total
Jet	981	500	1,481
Propeller	258	11	269
Helicopter	2,183	•	2,183
Total	3,422	511	3,933

During fiscal year 1989, the Aviation Officer Assignment Section assigned 1,243 aviators. According to Marine Corps officials, about one-third of all aviators generally receive new assignments each year. Length of assignments usually vary from 6 months to 3 years. Factors that influence assignment length include whether an aviator is assigned to training, or an overseas or U.S. position, or whether dependents accompany an aviator to certain overseas duty stations. Commanding officers may assign aviators to different positions once the aviator arrives at a location.

Assignment Policies and Practices

The primary policy and procedural guidance used by the Aviation Officer Assignment Section for making aviator officer assignments is contained in the Marine Corps' Personnel Assignment Policy Order (MCO 1300.8P) and the Staffing Precedence for Officer and Enlisted Billets (MCO 5320.12A). These policies and procedures govern assignments for all Marine Corps personnel, not just aviators.

Basically, these policies and procedures provide assignment officers with the latitude to make assignments that consider the needs of the Marine Corps and the career needs and desires of the individual.

The needs of the Marine Corps are the primary consideration in an aviator's assignment. The Marine Corps manages aviator assignments to help ensure assignment or career patterns support manpower requirements and that aviation skills are developed along with leadership skills that are required for future command positions.

An aviator's individual or family considerations also affect assignments. Our review indicated that assignment monitors are sensitive to personal considerations, such as children in school and a working spouse, when making assignments.

Actions that occur during the assignment process can be grouped, for the most part, into two distinct time periods: those actions that begin

approximately 12 months before an aviator's scheduled reassignment date (called slated estimated departure date) and those that begin about 6 months before.

During the first period, a list of staffing goals is developed for each Marine Corps activity (i.e., company, squadron, and air wing). The monitors use this list to prepare a time-phased list (slate) of billets (positions) that are expected to be filled in their specific communities. Monitors then send aviators a list of available positions and a questionnaire to identify assignment preferences and special needs. The position list enables aviators to plan for any opening and be aware of what time frames are involved. The questionnaire requests information on assignment preferences, desired training, and any special circumstances of which the monitor should be aware (e.g., special medical needs for dependents).

During the second period, monitors communicate with the aviators; match Marine Corps, career, and personal needs; and notify the aviators of their orders. They communicate with aviators by telephone, letters, or personal visits. Each monitor maintains a file of telephone conversations or other contacts with aviators. According to monitors, depending on available funds, they attempt to visit each continental U.S. and overseas location at least once every 2 years to inform aviators of assignment policies and procedures administered by the Aviation Officer Assignment Section.

Once a monitor and an aviator agree to an assignment, the monitor prepares the orders. The orders are approved, within the Aviation Officer Assignment Section, by an officer who is at least two grades higher than the aviator being assigned. For example, orders prepared for a lieutenant colonel must be approved by a general, and orders for a major must be approved by a colonel.

In our review of the Marine Corps assignment policies and processes and through discussions with monitors, we identified six practices and criteria the Marine Corps uses to make aviator assignments.

1. **Requirements.** Marine Corps aviator requirements or needs are reflected in the number of positions authorized for each activity (e.g., company, squadron, and air wing), as shown in the Marine Corps staffing goals.

2. Aviator career development patterns. An aviator's career potential is developed in a variety of flying and nonflying assignments to develop skills and experience needed to perform in senior leadership positions. An aviator's evaluation report, known as a "fitness report," contrasts the performance of an aviator relative to others of the same grade and comparable experience. Furthermore, as part of the qualification process, a monitor ensures aviators receive assignments that permit them to qualify for continuous aviation career incentive pay.

3. Slated estimated departure date. An aviator's availability for an assignment is determined by his/her scheduled departure date. This date is used by monitors to project, on a yearly basis, the positions that are expected to be vacated.

4. Overseas control date. This date determines when an aviator is due to be assigned to an overseas tour. All aviators are required to serve an overseas tour once every 6 years. An assignment to a Navy ship meets the Marine Corps overseas tour requirement.

5. Seniority. Monitors are notified of expected promotions and ensure that assignments are commensurate with an aviator's rank.

6. Individual preference. Monitors solicit an aviator's preference for his/her next assignment about a year before the aviator's scheduled departure date. Assignment monitors try to assign aviators to positions of their choice.

Aviator Input Into the Assignment Process

Our review indicated that the Marine Corps' assignment practices accommodate, within the operational needs of the Marine Corps, an individual's assignment preferences. Basically, aviators influence the assignment process by completing a questionnaire provided by the monitor plus personal contacts with monitors.

Each aviator who is scheduled for a new assignment is requested to complete a short questionnaire. Aviators are asked to list their assignment preference, the number and ages of dependents, training preferences, and any special needs the aviator may have. This information helps the monitor match the aviator's personal desires with available positions. Personal contact consists of telephone calls, written correspondence, and visits between aviators and monitors.

To help determine how the process actually works, we reviewed 18 recent aviator assignments. We interviewed monitors and reviewed their records, which included questionnaires completed by aviators, records of personal contacts with aviators, and documentation of their rationale for making each assignment. In this sample, 11 aviators received their first choice. In those cases where aviators did not receive their first choice, five assignments were based on the needs of the Marine Corps, and two were based on aviators' career development needs. The number of assignments we reviewed is too small to project the results to the universe of all assignments.

Aviators' Views of the Assignment Process

In March 1989, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower and Reserve Affairs met with over 600 Marine Corps aviators at various command and training sites throughout the continental United States. During these meetings, aviators completed questionnaires and discussed relevant issues concerning their future plans for remaining in or resigning from the Marine Corps.

The survey results indicated that 45 percent of the respondents were undecided on whether to stay or leave, 33 percent planned to remain, and 22 percent planned to leave. The number one factor cited for those planning to remain in the Marine Corps was job satisfaction. The four main reasons cited by aviators for leaving the Marine Corps included alternative civilian aviation career opportunity, lack of augmentation opportunity,¹ too much family separation, and too much bureaucracy.

GAO's Assessment

Our review of Marine Corps aviator assignment practices indicates that the Marine Corps is following its formal assignment policies and procedures. For each assignment we reviewed, monitors maintained records that documented their decisions. It appears that assignment practices accommodate, within the operational needs of the Marine Corps, aviator assignment preferences.

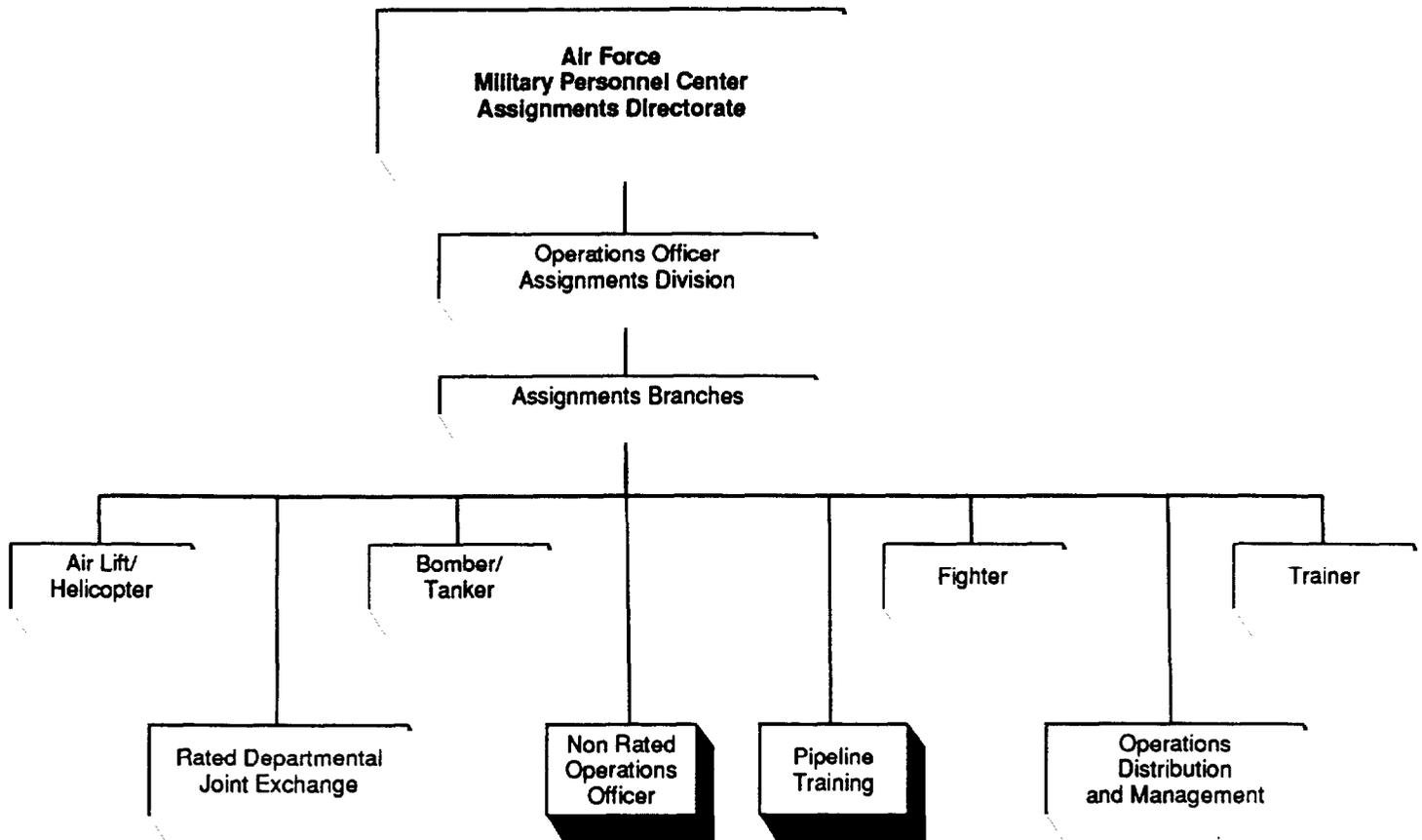
¹Lack of augmentation opportunity refers to active duty reserve aviators that are denied the opportunity to be converted to a regular duty status. According to Marine Corps officials, funds were not available for augmentation in fiscal year 1990.

Air Force Aviator Assignment Process

Background

The Air Force Military Personnel Center's Assignments Directorate, located at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, has primary responsibility for implementing assignment policy and practices. The Operations Officer Assignments Division has eight branch offices responsible for making the assignments. At the beginning of fiscal year 1989, the Air Force had 32,297 aviators. This included 22,444 pilots and 9,853 navigators through the rank of lieutenant colonel. Figure III.1 shows the structure of the Assignments Directorate.

Figure III.1: Structure of the Air Force Military Personnel Center, Assignments Directorate



Assignment Policies and Practices

Air Force policy is that aviators are officers first and aviators second. This requires that the aviators be trained to be "total" officers in preparation for higher levels of management responsibility. This has created

the need for career-broadening aviator requirements, including non-flying staff positions at the major command and Air Staff levels, rated supplement (positions not requiring aviators), and professional military education positions. This precludes pilot/navigator specialization and has contributed to the perception that the assignment system gives aviators little or no say in the assignment process.

Air Force officers move or are reassigned to fill existing or projected vacancies. Vacancies most often occur when officers retire, separate, or complete an overseas assignment. Other openings develop when officers are selected for continental U.S. operational assignments, for professional military education, or academic programs sponsored by the Air Force Institute of Technology. Officers finishing some departmental, joint service, or other controlled tour must also be replaced. In addition, officers may be reassigned when the number of officers authorized for a career field changes. Changes in mission, base closures, and unit moves to new locations all affect the authorization structure and may generate needs for reassignments.

Assignment teams at the major commands and separate operating agencies serve as intermediaries between the commanders or supervisors and the Military Personnel Center. The assignment managers at the Military Personnel Center, along with the commanders, provide professional development guidance and assignment information to officers. In addition, they maintain officer assignment folders, track requirements, and participate in a rated officer¹ review process. The assignment managers also identify officers who are in a must-move situation (e.g., completion of a maximum controlled tour on the Air Staff or an overseas tour) and make preliminary assignment decisions for the aviators. Once the assignment managers identify the officers who are the best candidates for a particular assignment, they work with the assignment teams at the major command or separate operating agency to finalize an assignment. They then process and enter the assignments into the Personnel Data System.

The primary concern of the officer assignment system is to fill Air Force requirements. In filling those requirements, the officer's qualifications (experience, education, performance, training, and availability) are the key concern. However, Air Force policy also requires that commanders,

¹Rated officers are pilots and navigators in the grades of lieutenant through lieutenant colonel.

supervisors, and personnel officers at all levels give maximum consideration to career progression when making or recommending an assignment.

Because assignments are to complement the officer's professional needs, the commander's involvement is an important element in the assignment process. The aviator prepares an Officer Assignment Worksheet (Form 90) to express personal preferences for the next assignment. The worksheet also provides an avenue for the officer and his/her commander or supervisor to communicate how an officer's professional development needs can be balanced within the needs of the Air Force.

Considerations that affect assignment practices include (1) time on station, (2) overseas eligibility, and (3) limits on consecutive staff assignments. First, according to Air Force guidelines, when all factors are equal, the time an officer has been at one location is to be the primary consideration in selecting an officer for a move. This is an effort to stabilize the lives of Air Force members and their families. Second, officers' current time on station must be at least 36 months before they can move within the continental United States and 24 months to move overseas. The Air Force also tries to ensure that officers are not required to spend more than their fair share of time overseas. Third, after an officer has completed at least 9 years of flying, assignment to flying versus non-flying duty is to be determined by the aviator's need to maintain his/her flying ability. As a general rule, assignment managers try to avoid assigning an officer to consecutive tours out of the officer's primary aircraft.

There are several exceptions to the normal assignment process. A shortage of aviators for specific major weapon systems can result in some aviators receiving a greater number of flying assignments due to the need to fill these positions first. This can be caused by the introduction of new weapon systems, low retention rates, or the phasing out of older weapon systems. An excess of aviators in a major weapon system can result in some aviators receiving fewer flying assignments and possibly filling positions that could not be staffed by aviators from weapon systems with inventory shortages.

Another exception allows commanders at the rank of lieutenant colonel or higher to request a specific officer by name. Also, in the event of force structure changes, such as base closings, assignment managers may need to reassign the aviators in such a way that the top officers are equitably distributed. In addition, the join-spouse option allows for

assigning the aviator and his/her officer spouse to the same base. In some cases, the Air Force acknowledges that lieutenant colonels are not considered for some of the better staff assignments because they have been passed over for promotion. Finally, aviators with less than 1 year of service commitment remaining have 7 days to decline an assignment (in which case they must apply for separation or, if eligible, retirement, but the Air Force determines the separation date based on its needs at the time).

Aviator Input Into the Assignment Process

The assignment selection process uses information from three major sources: the Officer Assignment Worksheet, the commander, and the assignment manager. Officers and their commander or supervisor use the worksheet to communicate assignment preferences and recommendations to the Military Personnel Center for the next assignment. According to Air Force regulations, the commander is to play an active role by (1) reviewing the officer's progression relative to career development requirements, (2) making recommendations to the assignment officer, and (3) counseling the officer concerning the new assignment. The Air Force considers the commander's involvement to be the cornerstone in each officer's professional growth plan.

In our observations of how assignment managers make actual assignments, we found that they followed the regulations and policies and accommodated the views of aviators when possible.

Aviators' Views of the Assignment Process

In December 1986 and January 1987, the Air Force Military Personnel Center conducted an officer retention survey directed specifically at active duty pilots. It received responses from 4,230 pilots. We reported some of the Air Force survey results in our June 1988 report.² One area of inquiry asked pilots to rank job factors according to importance. Having a say in job assignment ranked in the top five for those pilots with 11 years of service or less. Pilots were also asked to assess their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with 29 job factors. Dissatisfaction with not having a say in the base assigned and specific job assigned were among the five job factors listed as least satisfying.

²Air Force Pilots: U.S. Air Force Requirements, Inventory, and Related Data (GAO/NSLAD-88-163, June 1, 1988).

In response to concerns about the assignment process, in September 1987 the Air Force established a working group to examine the personnel system and to recommend a redirection of the officer corps toward a program of professional development. This redirection included providing more flying time early in the aviator's career, realigning professional military education, and revising the Officer Assignment Worksheet to focus only on the next assignment.

In July 1989, the Air Force established the Officer Separation Feedback Program to obtain feedback on why officers were voluntarily separating from active duty. The survey questionnaire is given to the officer at the time he/she submits a request for separation. Completion of the questionnaire is voluntary. As of October 31, 1989, a small percentage, only 115 (including 100 pilots and navigators) of 1,258 officers, had responded. The preliminary results listed several factors that the aviators identified as contributing to separation. Ranked in order of importance, they were (1) availability of civilian jobs, (2) the quality of senior leadership, (3) little say in assignment location, and (4) little say in the assignment process.

Air Force officials have also indicated they are sharply curtailing "by-name" requests so that, with rare exception, the normal assignment process will not be bypassed by senior leaders hand-picking officers. Also, where possible, the Air Force will continue to assign officers who are married to each other to the same geographical area, but will counsel both officers on the potential risks of such assignments to their individual careers. Also, lieutenant colonels passed over for colonel are to remain eligible for consideration for prime assignments. In addition, officers with more than 12 months service commitment remaining can apply for separation in lieu of an assignment, although the Air Force decides the release date based on its needs at the time.

GAO's Assessment

We found that the Air Force follows established policies and procedures in making aviator assignments and that, to the extent possible, it accommodates the personal preferences of the aviators when making those assignments.

The January 1987 retention survey and data from the separation feedback program reflecting aviator concerns are being used by the Air Force to improve the assignment process. We believe the Air Force initiatives are positive steps. Although preliminary results from the officer

Appendix III
Air Force Aviator Assignment Process

separation feedback program indicate little change in the aviators' perceptions of the process, only a small percentage of separating officers have responded. Because some time will be required before many aviators experience the effects of the changes resulting from the Air Force initiatives, we believe it is too early to evaluate the impact of these initiatives.

Army Aviator Assignment Process

Background

Most Army aviators are members of the Aviation Branch of the Army. The exceptions to this rule are the medical evacuation aviators who are members of the Medical Service Corps. The Aviation Branch, which was established on April 12, 1983, is 1 of the 16 basic branches of the Army through which officers enter the service. Prior to the establishment of the Aviation Branch, aviators were required to serve at least a 5-year tour of duty with their parent branch (i.e., armor or artillery).

Army aviators fall into two categories: aviation commissioned officers¹ and aviation warrant officers.² In fiscal year 1989, the Army had 13,839 aviators: 7,227 commissioned officers in grades through lieutenant colonel (including 427 in the Medical Services Corps) and 6,612 warrant officers.

Aviation commissioned officers typically have operational flying assignments early in their careers and later command aviation units and employ these units in combat as an integral part of combined arms operations. Aviation commissioned officers are managed within the framework of the Officer Personnel Management System. The Army philosophy is that all commissioned officers must be well-rounded, multi-skilled generalists. At a minimum, this means that all officers must be skilled in a branch of service, such as aviation, armor, or infantry, and a functional area, such as personnel.

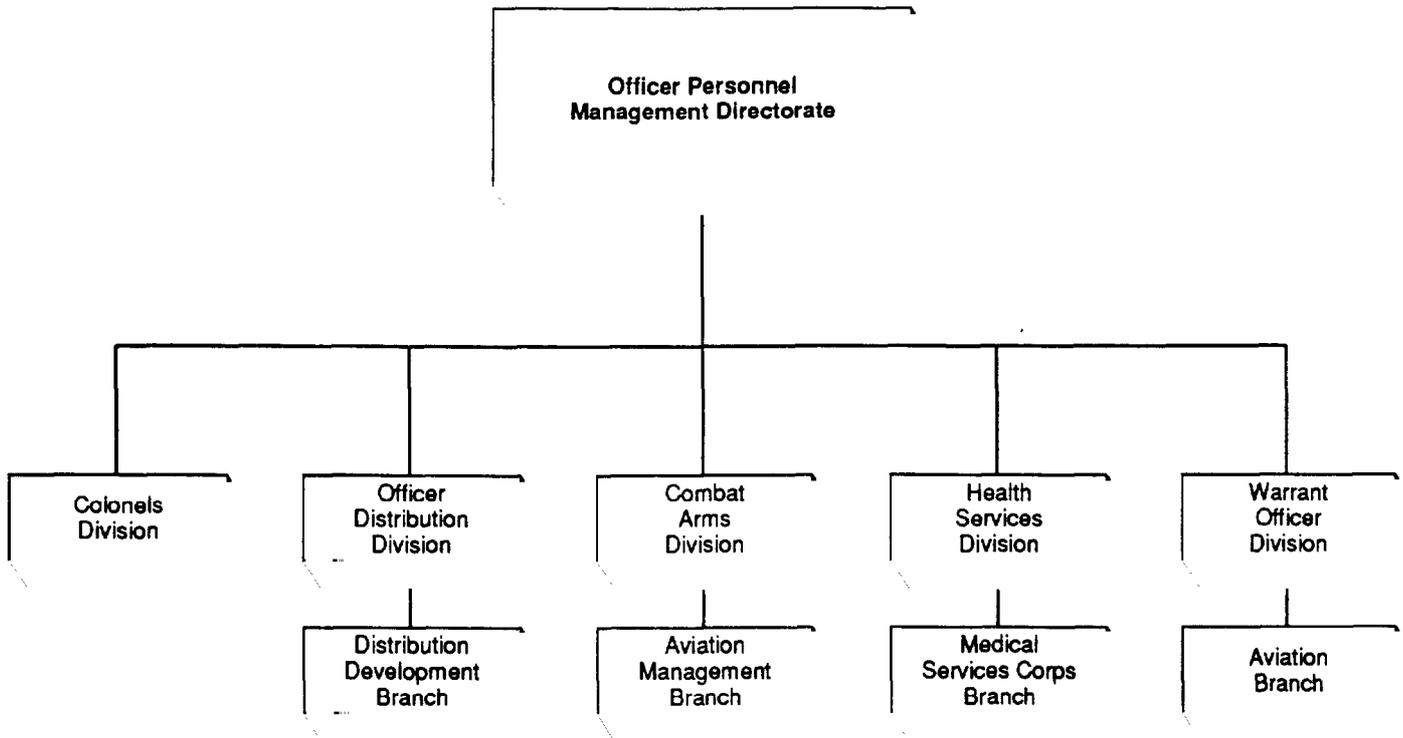
Aviation warrant officers are unique because they fill a dual role—they are both combat warriors and the core of technical expertise. Aviation warrant officers are highly specialized experts and trainers who operate, maintain, administer, and manage the Army's equipment, support activities, or technical systems for their entire "fly-only" career. They spend most of their active duty time in operational flying positions.

Figure IV.1 shows the structure of the Officer Personnel Management Directorate, Army Personnel Command, Washington, D.C. There are eight assignment managers for the 6,800 commissioned aviators managed by the Combat Arms Division and five assignment managers for the 6,612 warrant officer aviators.

¹Commissioned officers are appointed by the President with the approval of the Senate.

²Warrant officers, who rank next below commissioned officers, are appointed by the Secretary of the Army.

Figure IV.1: Structure of the Officer Personnel Management Directorate, Army Personnel Command



Assignment Policies and Practices

Many Army regulations apply to officer (including aviator) assignments. The Officer Assignment Policies, Details, and Transfers regulation (AR 614-100) prescribes policies and procedures pertaining to the assignment, reassignment, details, and transfers of officers between commands, units, branches, specialties, and components of the active Army, or between services. The Overseas Service regulation (AR 614-30) provides policy guidance on eligibility and selection of soldiers for overseas service, tour length for soldiers serving overseas, deletion and deferment from overseas service, and curtailment and extension of overseas tours.

A primary factor considered in assigning officers is the needs of the Army, with overseas duty a priority. Other assignment considerations contained in Army regulations include the officer's

- career field, including the type of aircraft flown;
- professional development needs (i.e., career needs); and
- personal preferences.

Several different documents are related to the assignment of aviators.

- The Assignment Officer Smart Book is designed to help assignment managers accomplish their mission. It provides the basic tools and information required by the assignment manager, including processes, procedures, and examples of forms used. It also identifies the regulations and directives related to each process.
- The Army Aviation Personnel Plan, better known to aviators as A²P², is used as a career guide and covers the eight life-cycle personnel management functions (structure, acquisition, professional development, individual training and education, distribution, unit deployment, sustainment, and separation). It provides a personnel plan keyed specifically to the unique aspects of the active Army and Army Reserve aviation force. The plan contains all personnel policies and procedures and describes how they affect Aviation Branch soldiers—commissioned officers, warrant officers, and enlisted personnel.
- The Officer Personnel Management Directorate's Orientation and Counseling Guide (1987) contains information papers on frequently discussed officer personnel subjects.

Aviators' Input Into Assignment Decisions

Aviators provide input into the assignment process through the Officer Assignment Preference Statement (DA 483), which allows each officer to rank his/her first three choices by location or type of duty. An officer may rank two location choices for overseas assignments. The aviator can also discuss the upcoming assignment directly with the assignment manager. He/she may request a tour extension at an overseas duty station. The aviator may separate or retire from the Army if he/she feels that the assignment is not a good one, or extend their obligation to take advantage of a desired upcoming assignment.

Since the Army does not retain preference statements that were available when assignments were made, we could not review prior assignment files to determine the frequency of aviators receiving their assignment preferences. However, we spent several days observing assignment managers making assignments. On these occasions, the assignment managers compared the preference statements with available assignments to see if the preference and assignment could be

matched. In many cases, the assignment manager talked to aviators on the telephone to discuss available assignments.

Based on our observations of how assignment managers make actual assignments, and our discussions with assignment managers and aviators, the indications were that assignment managers follow the guidelines and regulations and accommodate the input of the aviators when possible.

Aviators' Views of the Assignment Process

To get some indication of aviators' perceptions of the assignment process, we interviewed approximately 50 aviators. We could not verify how widespread these perceptions are held or their accuracy. The aviators expressed the following perceptions about the assignment process.

- After completion of initial flight training, an aviator has little choice in the type of aircraft he/she is assigned to fly, while the type of aircraft the aviator is qualified to fly often determines available assignment locations (i.e., some aircraft are based at only a few locations).
- The preference statement does not ensure that an aviator receives his/her preferred assignment.
- An aviator needs more personal contact with the assignment manager to increase the probability of obtaining a preferred assignment.
- Assignment managers are more responsive to concerns of individual aviators now than they were in the past.
- Some aviators believe that assignment exchanges would help them to better match their assignment preferences. Although there is no regulation prohibiting it, aviators are not normally allowed to exchange assignments.
- Tour lengths are not stable. For example, some aviators say that their continental U.S. tours last only 24 months instead of the standard 48 months. Also, some aviators reported being reassigned on short notice, 6 weeks in some cases, although the Army goal for notification of a new assignment is 120 days.

GAO's Assessment

The Army's process of assigning aviators appears to consider the preference of aviators while allowing the Army's needs to be met. Our review indicated that the nature and extent of the instability of tour lengths in Army aviator assignments is caused primarily by the type of operational missions aviators are assigned to and a shortage of pilots for some aircraft types. For example, the change of Panama from a 3-year accompanied (dependents permitted to accompany the aviator) tour to a

1-year unaccompanied tour required a number of reassignments on short notice.

Opportunities for aviators to achieve a closer match to their assignment preference may exist through assignment exchanges. An informal assignment exchange program currently exists for enlisted personnel. Army officials, however, believe that the assignment process already includes sufficient involvement of aviators, thereby allowing assignment managers to make the closest possible match between the individual's preference and available assignments. They also expressed the concern that an assignment exchange program might be unmanageable and could raise expectations of aviators without greatly enhancing their chances for obtaining preferred assignments.

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