AIR FORCE

Actions Needed to Strengthen Management of Unmanned Aerial System Pilots

Why GAO Did This Study
Since 2008, the Air Force has more than tripled the number of its active-duty pilots flying RPAs, which is the term the Air Force uses to refer to unmanned aerial systems such as the MQ-1 Predator. Due to increases in demand, RPA pilots have had a significant increase in workload since 2007. GAO was asked to evaluate the Air Force’s approach to managing its RPA pilots as well as their quality of life and promotion rates. For this review, GAO evaluated the extent to which the Air Force (1) has used a strategic human-capital approach to manage RPA pilots; (2) has addressed concerns, if any, about the working conditions of RPA pilots that may affect their quality of life; and (3) analyzes the promotion rates of RPA pilots.

What GAO Found
The Air Force has managed its remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) pilots using some strategic human-capital approaches, such as planning for the different levels of experience that it needs in these pilots. However, it continues to face challenges. High-performing organizations manage human capital to identify the right number of personnel and to target the right sources to fill personnel needs. In 2008, the Air Force determined the optimum number of RPA pilots—the crew ratio—for some units, but it did not account for all tasks these units complete. Air Force officials stated that, as a result, the crew ratio is too low, but the Air Force has not updated it. Air Force guidance states that low crew ratios diminish combat capability and cause flight safety to suffer, but the Air Force has operated below its optimum crew ratio and it has not established a minimum crew ratio. Further, high work demands on RPA pilots limit the time they have available for training and development and negatively affects their work-life balance. In addition, the Air Force faces challenges recruiting officers into the RPA pilot career and may face challenges retaining them in the future. High-performing organizations tailor their recruiting and retention strategies to meet their specific mission needs, but the Air Force has not tailored its approach to recruiting and retaining RPA pilots nor considered the viability of using alternative personnel such as enlisted personnel or civilians. Without developing an approach to recruiting and retaining RPA pilots and evaluating the viability of using alternative personnel populations for the RPA pilot career, the Air Force may continue to face challenges, further exacerbating existing shortfalls of RPA pilots. Moreover, the Air Force has not used direct feedback from RPA pilots via existing mechanisms, or otherwise, to develop its approach to managing challenges related to recruiting, retention, training, and development of RPA pilots.

The Air Force has taken some actions to address potentially difficult working conditions RPA pilots face, but it has not fully analyzed the challenge pilots face to balance their warfighting roles with their personal lives. RPA pilots operate RPAs from bases in the United States and live at home; thus they experience combat alongside their personal lives—known as being deployed-on-station—which RPA pilots stated negatively affects their morale. While the Department of Defense has committed to maintaining high morale for servicemembers, the Air Force has not fully analyzed the effects on morale related to being deployed-on-station, and thus it does not know whether it needs to take actions in response.

The Air Force monitors RPA pilot promotion rates, but has not analyzed factors that may relate to their low promotion rates. Statistical principles call for researchers to account for potential key factors in analysis because when they omit key factors, the relationships between other factors may not be accurately estimated. The Air Force analyzed promotions across a group of officers, including RPA pilots, and found factors that related to promotions in general. However, the Air Force has not analyzed the factors related to RPA pilots’ promotions specifically and, as a result, it does not have the information to determine what factors may affect their promotions. Consequently, the Air Force may not be targeting actions it is taking to raise RPA pilot promotion rates at the appropriate factors, and information it has reported to Congress may not be accurate.

What GAO Recommends
GAO recommends that the Air Force update optimum crew ratios; establish a minimum crew ratio; develop a recruiting and retention strategy; evaluate using alternative personnel populations to be pilots; use feedback from RPA pilots; analyze the effects of being deployed-on-station; and analyze the effect that being an RPA pilot has on promotions. The Air Force concurred with four recommendations and partially concurred with the remaining three recommendations.

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