

Revitalizing the Air Force Squadron

In his recent letter to Airmen, the Chief of Staff (CSAF) of the Air Force identified a need to revitalize the squadron and once again make it the warfighting core of the Air Force. Large-scale online crowdsourcing techniques and a survey of 267 Squadron Officer School and Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy students yielded two key findings regarding what needs to be done to revitalize the Air Force squadron and accomplish CSAF's goal. In order for squadrons to again be the "beating heart" of the Air Force, we must empower squadron leadership and increase the amount of time Airmen actually spend with their squadrons. This essay will briefly note an issue that was identified in the collected data but is already being addressed by Air Force leadership. It will then cover the first and second key findings and discuss the data indicating those underlying issues as prime starting points for reviving the primacy of the Air Force squadron.

In sifting through our collected data, we first identified the issue of additional duties. Our data indicated additional duties are overwhelmingly detrimental to the strength of a squadron, with 75% of respondents identifying them as major obstacles to a squadron's overall health. However, as the Secretary of the Air Force and CSAF are already addressing this issue, we determined that further analysis of this line of reasoning would not be productive.

Moving on to other findings, our first is that the Air Force should emphasize the squadron while deemphasizing the role played by upper command echelons. Simply put, the squadron commander and work done at the squadron level should be the primary determinants of the progression of an Airman's career. Our survey data showed only 57% of Airmen felt their squadron commanders had the most influence over their careers. One comment in particular highlighted the way in which some CGOs view their squadron commanders: "Wing/Group leadership micromanage my Squadron commander's efforts. It is almost as if he is a staff officer rather than commander." Viewpoints such as this are troubling because our analysis shows a direct correlation between a higher degree of unit cohesion and the perception that a member's squadron commander has the most influence over their career. In order to build a stronger squadron, the Air Force must empower squadron commanders such that their Airmen look to them as actual leaders, rather than middle-management.

Along those same lines, an increase in the daily presence of groups and wings (and their involvement in squadron management) has weakened squadron influence. Of those Airmen surveyed, 69% stated they believed working in either a group or wing position was required in order for a member to be competitive for promotion. Furthermore, there was an inverse correlation between the degree of this perception in Airmen's minds and those same Airmen's perceptions of their unit's cohesion. This particular link demonstrates a shift in the focus of most Airmen, who are no longer concentrating on squadron leadership, but rather on more-senior positions. According to the data, this shift is occurring because there is a strong perception that, in order to get promoted, Airmen will have to work at the group or wing level. This deemphasizes the squadron commander and work done at the squadron level. If we want to revitalize the squadron, we should find a way to return Airmen's focus to the squadron level.

Our second key finding is that Airmen in an Air Force squadron should spend more time together as a unit in order to reassert the squadron as the warfighting core of the Air Force. Our data suggests a strong correlation between time spent together as a squadron and unit cohesion. This is a logical concept taught throughout the Air Force; the more time you spend with your team, the stronger that team becomes. The data indicated Airmen are not spending nearly enough time with their squadrons. Of the Airmen surveyed, 67% reported spending less than 70% of their careers with their squadron members together as a whole unit, 43% spent less than half, and 29% spent less than a third. Beyond the numbers, a comment in this particular section of the survey stated, "...other members of the Sq [sic] can't believe I've been there so long because they rarely see me." The data indicates many Airmen share in this viewpoint, demonstrating another reason why squadrons are unable to bond and form a cohesive unit. As another example, many Airmen no longer deploy as part of a full unit. The importance of a "whole unit" deployment was summarized in the following survey comment: "We really bond when we deploy as a Squadron for 6 months." This statement is consistent with our data. Time spent together increases unit cohesion; conversely, individual TDYs, a departure from group training, and email in lieu of face-to-face interactions are all detrimental to the health and vitality of the Air Force squadron. Overall, in order to address this issue, the Air Force should investigate ways to increase the amount of time Airmen are physically present with the members of their units, especially in the early years of their careers.

General Goldfein's letter to Airmen ended with a reminder that, bottom line, if we are going to sustain warfighting excellence and build our Air Force properly, we must begin with the squadron. Based on the crowdsourcing and survey data collected by the Eagles Think Tank, the Air Force should prioritize the amount of time Airmen are spending with their squadron-mates and shift power and influence from the upper echelons of leadership back to the squadron level. Any solution must address at least these root causes if we are to once again establish the squadron as the beating heart of the Air Force. Beyond these specific recommendations, we also recommend the Air Force dedicate additional research to validating and expanding upon these findings due to the time and resource limitations under which this preliminary study has been conducted. With these key concepts as a starting point, further polling and analysis should reveal additional root causes that leadership can address in order to return the squadron to its rightful place as the beating heart of the Air Force.