



Why Fighter Pilots are Leaving the Swedish Armed Forces – and how to Retain them

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ABSTRACT

The number of fighter pilots in Sweden retiring from service, many prematurely, currently exceeds the number of those being trained to replace them. This article examines the factors and circumstances related to the work motivation of pilots and what the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) can do to retain them. It examines the perspectives of fighter pilots serving today and those who have chosen to leave the SAF since 2013, providing descriptions of different ideal professional types and what might provoke them to leave the profession, or motivate them to stay longer. Four ideal types of pilots are identified. These ideal types are (a) the *extrinsically motivated*; (b) the *high-performing*; (c) the *family-oriented*; and (d) the *specialist*. This article supports the idea that there is no single inducement for fighter pilots to leave the SAF. Our recommendations for retaining pilots differ depending on type and experience level. While increased salaries and better retirement agreements are essential, local career opportunities, less time away from family, more administrative support to squadrons, long-term career planning, rewarding challenges, and opportunities to study are also important. Some uniquely positive aspects, such as serving a higher purpose, flying experiences, and squadron community, motivate fighter pilots to remain.

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INTRODUCTION

After decades of downsizing, the Swedish Air Force (SAF) is entering a phase of investment and development. The institution faces an alarming situation, however. Pilots are leaving early; indeed, the retirement rate is higher than the training rate. When the fictional movie *Top Gun* premiered in 1986, 40 fighter pilots were trained each year. Today the number is 12 at most, and the average in recent decades is lower (SAF, FBS, 2021). The age distribution means that the number of fighter pilots will approach critically low levels over the next ten years (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows a forecast of the number of pilots in the SAF in the coming years based on statistics from 2017.

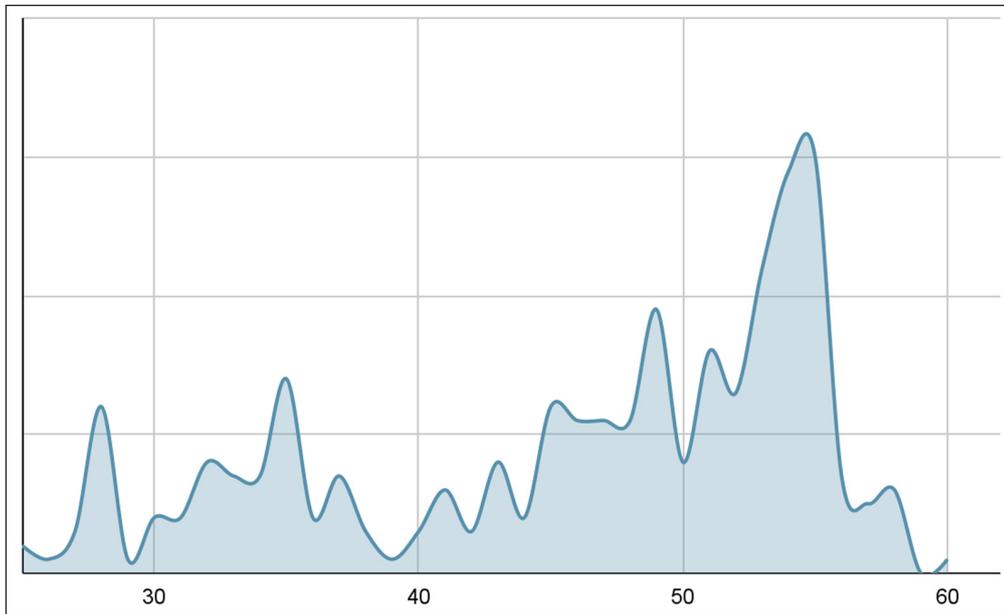


Figure 1 Age distribution of fixed-wing pilots in the SAF in 2021.

(Pilots born in 1987 or earlier can retire at 55; the exact numbers of pilots are redacted due to national classification regulations.)

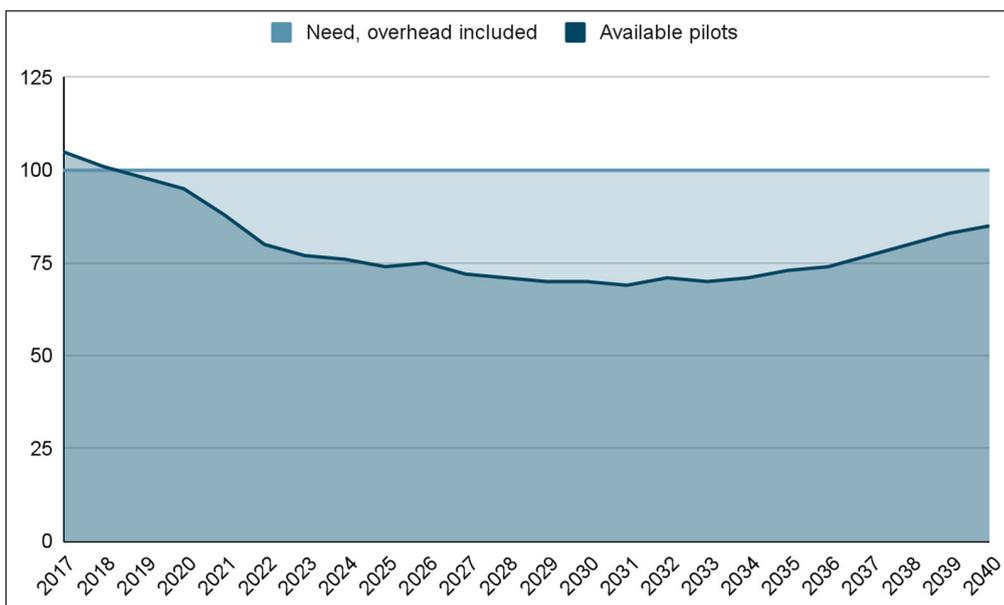


Figure 2 Occupancy rate of fixed-wing pilots in the SAF in the years ahead (SAF, 2021).

Essential positions in higher-level staff in the SAF are usually filled by retiring pilots. Filling these positions will be difficult in the future because fewer fighter pilots advance in their careers after years in an operational squadron. A mix of experienced and less-experienced pilots is required for a fighter squadron to function optimally. Experience is needed to be able to absorb and train new pilots and maintain operational capability. Therefore, losing experienced pilots prematurely can be very costly for the SAF, both in terms of personnel and hard cash. Fighter pilots who are qualified to lead a four-ship, and have flown 750 hours in Gripen, have cost the SAF approximately SEK 150 million (SAF, 2020).

Some factors and circumstances behind pilots leaving early have been identified. While the starting salary for a fighter pilot has been stagnant since 1999, their expected salary development is steeper today (F21, SAF, 2020). The difference in actual monetary value still means that pilots

who start today earn less in their careers than those who began in 1999. The SAF has saved money by keeping wages down while numbers leaving early have, until recently, been low.

The retirement age for fighter pilots born in 1987 or earlier is 55. They receive a pension corresponding to approximately 70% of their salary between the ages of 55 and 65. Those who consider working after 55 are offered continuance on a regular salary, with 30% extra going towards the pension they receive from the age of 65. If they work for another employer, they receive their full pension plus the new salary (SAF, 2018). The retirement age for fighter pilots born in 1988 or later is 67 (PA16).

However, while factors such as salary and retirement age impact fighter the motivation of fighter pilots, little is known about what motivates them in their profession and why some choose to leave the SAF. Previous research into Swedish fighter pilots is meagre. In Sweden, 235 fighter pilots and flying training instructors were interviewed between 1985 and 1988 to get a clearer picture of the retention problem. The results showed a strong squadron and flying identity, but also a sense of monotony and little personal and professional development among the more experienced pilots. Among the reform proposals were increased flying time for development projects within squadrons and more external contact with various kinds of experts (Weibull, 2003). Since then, more multinational exercises and switching to multi-role aircraft have changed the work environment for fighter pilots in Sweden. Internationally, there are studies, predominantly from the United States, emphasizing that Sweden is not alone in having difficulties retaining pilots.

Taylor and his colleagues (2000) argue that the shortage of U.S. military pilots presents a crisis for the country's operational units. This shortage is primarily due to attractive alternatives in the civilian sector and the negative impact of work pressures and frequent deployments on quality of life. In a recent study, Mattock et al. (2019) say that the traditional way for the United States Air Force (USAF) to regulate the availability of pilots has been either to train or to retain more pilots through bonuses and incentive pay. Their analysis shows that it is more cost-effective to raise salaries and bonuses than to increase the recruitment of new pilots. In addition, it has a quicker effect during subsequent critical years because experienced pilots are in short supply.

Bernthal (2020) and Switzer (2020) list factors that lead to dissatisfaction among pilots and retention problems in the USMC and USAF, respectively. Our conclusion of the most significant factors from these two sources are: difficulty balancing work and private life; uncertainty about future job assignments; workload unrelated to flying; job opportunities in the civilian sector; and pay and benefits. Bernthal also argues that high operational tempo, leadership problems, lack of resources, lack of flight hours, and lack of promotion can lead to lower job satisfaction due to unfulfilled expectations. The research from the United States reveals that retention is mainly about work motivation and that what motivates a pilot to stay or leave involves a complex set of motivational factors and circumstances.

Given the cultural differences between Sweden and the United States, however, conclusions drawn from studies of American pilots may not be entirely valid in Sweden. One difference relates to notions of masculinity –whether one is motivated by being the best and achieving success, or if the quality of life and caring for others are more highly valued by society (Gelade et al., 2008). Being a fighter pilot might be considered a masculine, competitive profession. But, as Heilmann and colleagues (2009) conclude in their study of military officers, family-related experiences have a more significant impact on U.S. officers than job-related experiences when deciding to leave and start a new civilian career. There are both cultural and structural differences in terms of what it means to be a part of the U.S. or Swedish armed forces. The military profession in the United States has a higher status than in Sweden, and military life in the United States has a more significant impact on the whole family's life situation. However, an increasingly egalitarian society demands that employers consider pilots' whole life situation if they want to retain them.

This article investigates factors and circumstances that led fighter pilots to leave their profession and what the SAF can do to get as many as possible to stay. Salary, bonuses, and retirement age are factors that are easy to measure and easy to change. Understanding why fighter pilots leave their profession demands more in-depth studies, highlighting the pilots' perspectives. This article is based on explorative research using a broad theoretical framework related to work motivation to address this knowledge gap. A comprehensive set of survey questions were sent to all SAF pilots at the beginning of 2021, and in the spring of 2021, similar questions were asked in interviews with all fighter pilots who have left the Air Force since 2013 (15 pilots).

The basic definition of work motivation used in this study is “a set of energetic forces that originate both within as well as beyond an individual’s being, to initiate work-related behavior, and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration” (Pinder, 1998, p. 11). Individuals who do an excellent job because they are motivated usually choose to stay longer in their profession (Ramlall, 2004). From previous research into pilots, we assume that individual differences in work motivation will be important in understanding pilot retention. In this article, we rely on established theories of work motivation, expectancy theory, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and equity theory to understand variations in work motivation among Swedish fighter pilots.

Expectancy theory originates from cognitive psychology and concerns individuals’ expectations of their work. Vroom (1995, as cited in Parijat & Bagga, 2014, p. 3) developed a formula to understand the components of motivation.

$$\text{Motivation} = \text{Expectancy} * \text{Instrumentality} * \text{Valence} (* \text{Social Context}).$$

If one of the factors is zero, there will be no motivation.

A person is motivated if they believe that their efforts lead to increased performance and improved results (expectancy), if their performance is rewarded (instrumentality), and if the value of the perceived rewards (valence) is desirable for the individual (De Simone, 2015). Lloyd and Mertens (2018) added a factor of social context to the formula because employees interact with others and influence each other’s attitudes, which in turn can impact motivation. You will become more motivated if your colleagues are highly motivated, and vice versa.

Porter and Steers (1973) emphasize that the difference between an individual’s expectations of their job and how they are met – through actual workplace experiences – determines job satisfaction (Singh & Sinha, 2013). While this is subjective, it can be explained by looking at how much individuals value different aspects of work and the surrounding circumstances (Kumar, 2017).

Herzberg (1966) chose to divide motivational factors into two categories. The first are factors that satisfy the individual’s inner needs, making them thrive and strive for more of the same thing: recognition, the task itself, and development opportunities, for example. The second consists of “hygiene” factors that, while they do not create additional motivation once they are met, can avoid the development of dissatisfaction in the same way that hygiene keeps diseases away. This includes salary and security, working conditions, and a good work-life balance.

Ryan and Deci (2017) build on Herzberg’s theory (1966) when discussing extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from the human need for competence and self-determination and often creates feelings of interest, joy, and excitement. Extrinsic factors come from the outside in the form of salary, punishment, and social norms. It can be difficult to distinguish between these factors however; it can be challenging, for example, to categorize social needs as intrinsic or extrinsic (Ahl, 2004). Employees with high intrinsic motivation would be more willing to help colleagues with their tasks and have a lower probability of leaving their job (Kaufmann and Kaufmann, 2010, p. 146). Extrinsic motivation is similar to Herzberg’s hygiene factors, which still have explanatory value (Bassett et al., 2005). Higher pay does not always lead to better performance. If a higher salary is bestowed with restrictions to a person’s freedom to control their time and what they do, the work is perceived as less satisfying. Extrinsic rewards take precedence over intrinsic ones, leading to poor motivation. But it is crucial to have a balance here; too much intrinsic motivation can make the employees work towards their own goals instead of the organization’s (Herzberg, 2003).

Following equity theory, individuals care not only about absolute amounts, but also about what they get in relation to others. When people experience an imbalance between input and output in relation to others, tension is created that individuals strive to equalize. The employee can react to this imbalance in several ways, such as fighting for a pay rise or other assignments, reducing their work effort, transferring more work to others, or simply withdrawing from the situation and seeking employment elsewhere (Ramlall, 2004). Kollmann et al. (2020) have shown that older and younger employees react differently to injustices. Being overpaid (more output than input) reduced older people’s satisfaction with their job, but not that of the younger. Being underpaid (more input than output) reduced young people’s satisfaction with the job, but

not that of the older. Therefore, Kollmann et al. (2020) suggest that older people are more motivated by doing a good job, while younger people are more motivated by the perceived rewards that the work provides. The theories inform the study of how unmet expectations, intrinsic and extrinsic factors, perceived injustices, and age differences generally affect fighter pilots' motivation and the likelihood of retaining them.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical material for this study is primarily based on qualitative interviews with pilots who have left the SAF. These have been complemented with a survey targeting active pilots and documents from the SAF. The survey was distributed at the beginning of 2021 to all pilots currently in the SAF. The initiative was taken by a wing commander flying in conjunction with the local union organization. The survey aimed to identify the magnitude and causes of the problem of pilots leaving the SAF. The initiators of the survey wanted to show the Armed Forces Headquarters how pilots perceive the situation, and to stimulate necessary changes before too many pilots leave. Another aim was to identify measures that could be taken at a lower level. There was never any plan for how the survey results should be analyzed, and they have not been described or reported by anyone else. On our initiative, for our study, we took on the task of compiling and analyzing the answers. The questions in the survey focused on ranking the factors that cause pilots to consider leaving and what would be needed to make them stay. A total of 233 questionnaire responses were received, a response rate of over 80%. Of these, 128 were fighter pilots (our target group); 42 of the fighter pilots were younger, born in 1988 or later, with a retirement age of 67.

The survey led us to try and gain a deeper understanding of why some fighter pilots choose to leave the profession and address the absence from the survey of pilots who have left the SAF. Through qualitative interviews with pilots no longer serving, we sought to get closer to the nuances and interplay between factors that might be difficult to measure quantitatively, such as perceived injustice and work-life balance. We interviewed 15 pilots who have left, not for medical reasons or another job within the SAF or the Swedish defense industry, but to do something else outside the SAF. We contacted four Swedish fighter squadrons out of six, and with those criteria, these 15 pilots were the only ones who left an active flying position between 2013 and 2021.

For the interviewee to be able to present his story, the interview was semi-structured. We used prepared questions where we sought answers regarding expectations and experiences when choosing the profession, the training, working as a fighter pilot, and leaving the profession. All participants were asked these questions, but we sought an open conversation about the topics that the questions touched upon. The interviews were open and personal, and we must treat all information as sensitive, both from an individual and an organizational viewpoint. The interviewees are anonymous to everyone except the authors. The authors have translated the answers presented in this article.

We compared the results of the interviews with the answers given by the survey to better understand the factors behind the decision to leave. We wanted to remain open to our empirical material so as not to determine a particular theoretical interpretation at too early a stage. The important thing was to listen to the stories while examining previous research and established work motivation theories to understand the pilots' experiences. It became clear that individual pilots had their own set of reasons for deciding to leave the SAF. However, when analyzing the answers, patterns emerged in how certain motivational factors were connected and repeated. These patterns enabled us to identify different ideal types, representing different logic behind their motivation and what makes them decide to leave the profession. These types both reveal and simplify the diversity in what motivates pilots to leave.

The desire to categorize people based on their personality types and differences between generations has long existed in social science. Our aim is not to analyze personalities; for us, this is not a question of personality types but, rather, of sets of driving forces and circumstances clustered into different ideal types to provide the language and analytical tools to better understand why pilots are leaving. An ideal type is a concept in sociological theory and methodology intended to describe a conceptual or analytical model, or type, that can be used as a tool to understand the world. Ideal refers to "pure" in this context, and does not denote any kind of valuation (Pstathas, 2005). This article divides Swedish fighter pilots into ideal types based on their motivation to continue or leave their profession.

RESULTS

SURVEY OF ACTIVE PILOTS

The answers from fighter pilots do not differ significantly from those given by other pilots in the SAF. However, when the younger pilots are separated from the older, a picture emerges whereby the SAF risks having even more significant problems retaining fighter pilots in the future.

Figure 3.1 shows the answers to the question “How long do you think you will continue to work in the SAF?” Only half of those surveyed stated that they will stay until or after retirement, indicating a high proportion who intend to leave the SAF before retirement. The age distribution also reveals that a small proportion of the younger people surveyed believe they will continue to work for 15 years or more.

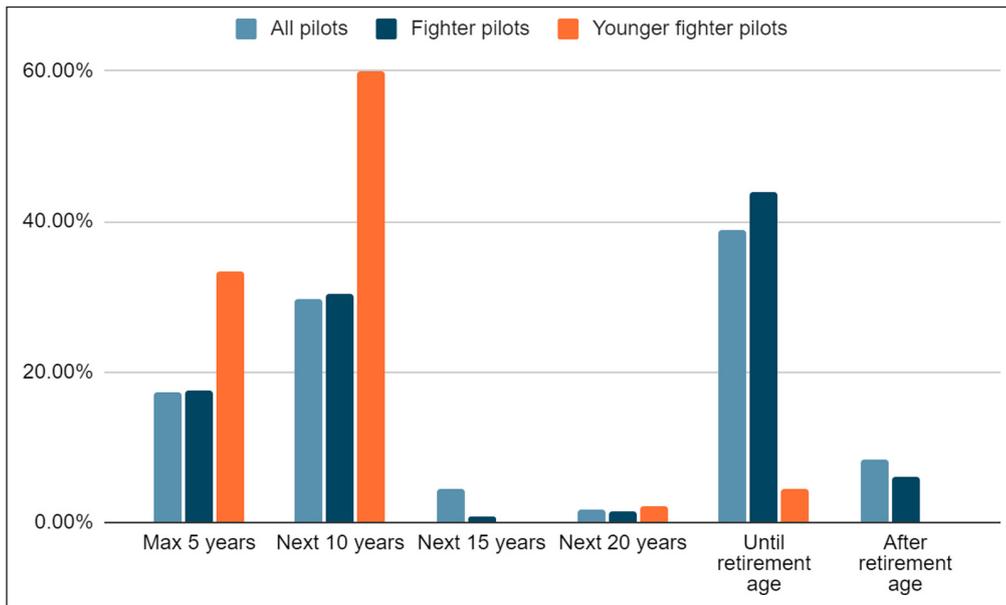


Figure 3.1 Percentage distribution of how long pilots intend to stay in the SAF.

Therefore, one challenge for the SAF is to produce individuals with a pilot background for leading positions in the future, given that so few younger pilots envision a long career. In the answers to the question “Are you interested in applying for the Higher Command and Staff Programme (HOP)?” we see the distribution in Figure 3.2, where only three of the 42 younger fighter pilots are interested in applying for HOP under current conditions.

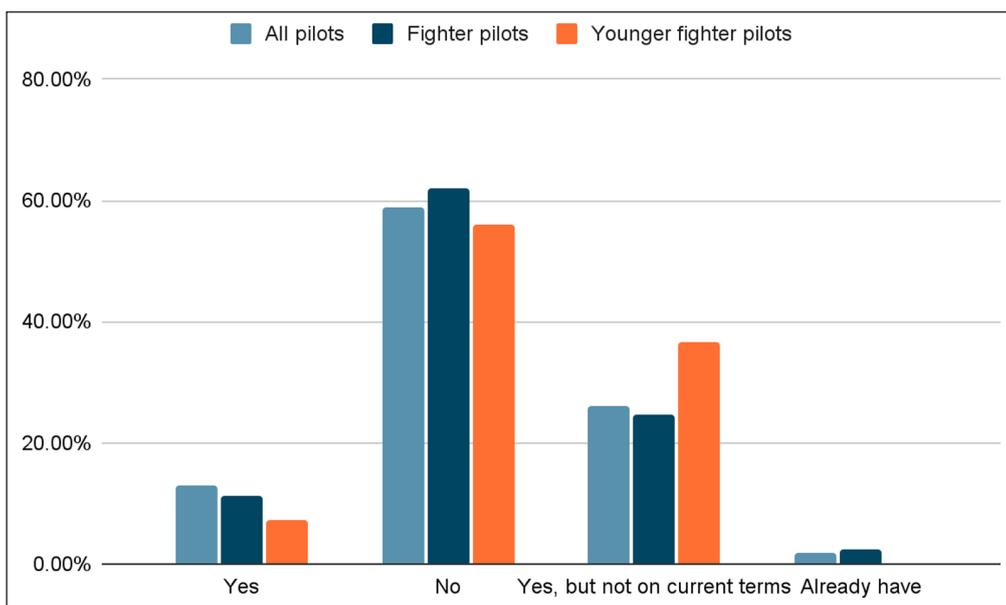


Figure 3.2 Percentage distribution of pilots' interest in applying for HOP.

Regardless of age, those who say they will leave within five years (shown by the light blue bars in Figure 3.3) state salary as the most important factor, followed by retirement age and the attraction of another career outside the SAF. The dark blue columns show the answer to the

same question from all the younger fighter pilots, where retirement age and salary are twice as significant as other factors.

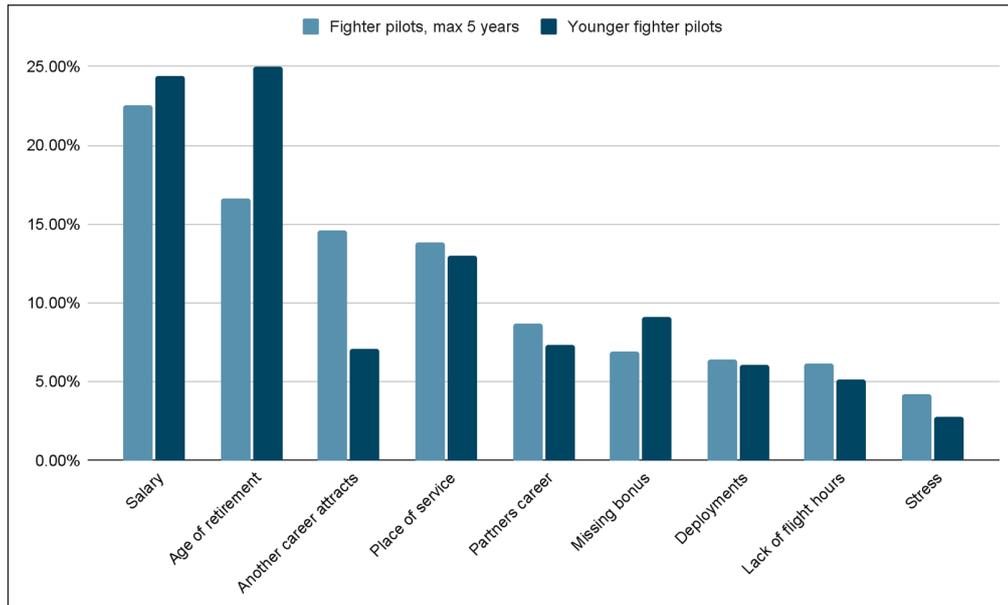


Figure 3.3 Percentage distribution, 'What is it that makes you want to leave the SAF?'

In answer to the question "If you left the SAF, what would you do instead?" we see that other aviation-related work is no longer of most interest. Among the younger fighter pilots, study or other non-aviation-related work are the main alternatives, as seen in Figure 3.4.

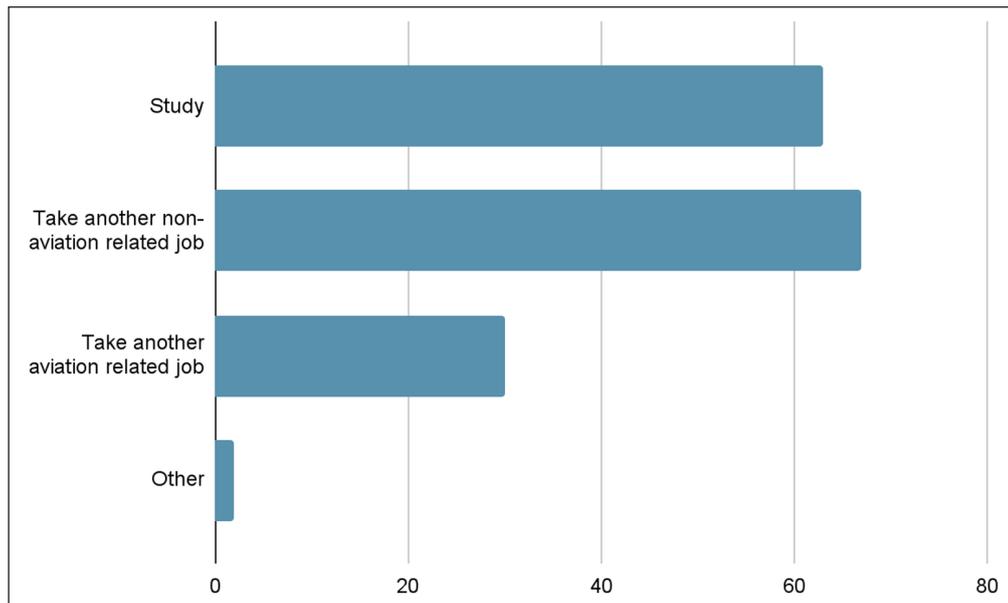


Figure 3.4 Younger fighter pilots' answer to the question "If you left, what would you do instead?"

In the survey's open questions, the respondents indicate that the salary does not seem to reflect the responsibility that comes with the position; when compared to similar professions, such as pilots in the Coast Guard, it is perceived to be unfair. There is disappointment in how personnel is treated and how resources are distributed. It is challenging to combine your career in the SAF with that of your partner, which is a common reason why individuals consider leaving. Younger pilots are hit hardest by the change in retirement age, reduced salaries, and the removal of bonuses. One pilot stated:

Compared to other government-employed pilots, our agreements are bad. That leads to dissatisfaction. Many are forced to move to smaller towns because of work. In the current situation with our lousy salary versus the risk and responsibility at work, the partner often earns more and becomes decisive when deciding where to live, which means difficulties in making private life work. Being born in '88 and later, you felt cheated by the employer when the retirement age was raised by 12 years, and they snatched away about SEK 6 million and the opportunity to do things with your life between 55 and 65.

One factor mentioned several times in answers to the survey, but less so in the interviews, is that people want a better work environment in the form of team building, free time, and more exercises. The survey confirms the problem and indicates that salary and retirement age are the most crucial issues that should be addressed. Long-term planning, local career opportunities, and more flight hours per pilot are also seen as necessary.

INTERVIEWS WITH FORMER SAF PILOTS

Our material shows that being a pilot was a dream for some – but not all. Once the idea was born and the selection process began, however, everyone found it challenging and motivating. The word “euphoria” occurs in response to the question about how it felt to be accepted. All describe the flight school in positive terms; they describe good fellowship, flying, and rapid development through well-thought-out pedagogics.

The first years in the profession are perceived as positive. Factors such as continuing challenges, and community, create a pleasant workplace. The SAF is hierarchical by nature, but within the squadrons, the participants talk of an open climate where their immediate commanders are responsive and accessible. After describing this positive start, stories drifted toward what finally made them leave the SAF. The differences in peoples’ stories and what motivated them to leave led to our creation of the four ideal types.

The four ideal types are: (a) the extrinsically motivated, (b) the high-performing, (c) the family-oriented, and (d) the specialist. In naming and describing the ideal types, we used *Top Gun* characters to provide a certain recognition factor and promote understanding of the ideal types. It also helps emphasize the fictional nature of each ideal type (if, of course, the reader is familiar with the film *Top Gun*.) But the descriptions also stand for themselves and will be understood by readers unfamiliar with the movie. Each ideal type simplifies reality; real pilots are more complex than the ideal. While the use of characters makes the types easier for the reader to relate to, it requires some flexibility of thought to see the ideal type described in a Swedish context, especially in cases where reality differs from the film.

ICEMAN – THE EXTRINSICALLY MOTIVATED

Pilots in this category think that the community and the team are important. But they also express a will to compete and perform, either as a team or individually. It is important to be treated fairly and to receive appreciation for what you are doing. One can perceive a certain vanity: salary and status are essential. To some extent, life is seen as a competition, where salary and appreciation from others become a measure of how well you have succeeded. This group talks about the desire to leave the profession because they do not feel appreciated.

Characteristic motivational factors are development, challenge, achievement, leadership, salary, pension, and self-realization; the self is in focus.

They are still highly motivated when they have finished their education. Despite some hubris and statements about becoming a general, many of this type have no further plans for their future in the SAF. They are disappointed that the flight hours are significantly less than expected.

Most pilots in this group are slightly younger and affected by the new retirement age, which, along with salary, is often raised as a problem. They also feel that they have not received confirmation through increased pay when they have taken on more responsibilities or been given new positions. A feeling of being mistreated emerges. This causes them, perhaps earlier than they had thought, to start thinking about what to do instead. For Pilot Seven: “I didn’t feel good about that time; you are taken for granted. You think it’s fun to fly, but do you want to stay in an organization that treats its personnel that way? You want to be treated as a valuable resource.”

CHARLIE – THE HIGH PERFORMER

For the high-performing pilot, the focus is not on salary but on personal development. They appreciate the motivated and competent colleagues that they meet in the workplace. The continuous learning process in the fighter pilot profession is essential, and they want to avoid stagnation and tasks that do not feel challenging. Neither the workload nor the work-family life balance is perceived as a significant problem. These individuals do not leave something they dislike; rather, they find something new that offers excitement and challenge when the SAF no longer does.

Characteristic motivating factors are development, challenge, community, and flexibility. The focus is on their own development and challenge in a broad perspective, not only related to flying.

Becoming a fighter pilot is often described as a coincidence for these pilots. The profession is seen more as one possible choice among several alternatives. Personal development is essential, and when they feel that they are not progressing, they start thinking about doing other things. They have often studied something else at university level, and the current profession is compared with what might have been.

These individuals often perceive their leaders to be good, and are given opportunities to develop themselves to attain higher positions. However, they still seem to think it takes too long to make a career in the SAF. The educational steps are too lengthy and not sufficiently flexible. Charlies often have an alternative career in mind and would like to see more flexible career paths within the profession so that the SAF could fully utilize their talent. For Pilot Ten:

Development opportunities. I have a hard time identifying with the old captains. To become good at something and then do it for 25 years and be happy with it. The box you are supposed to stay in is too small for what you can become and what you can dream of. [P10]

Once they have left the SAF, they may miss the purpose and structure they experienced as fighter pilots. These individuals would have liked stronger links to the SAF after they left and may consider returning to a new role, or combining jobs in the SAF with a civilian career.

GOOSE – THE FAMILY-ORIENTED

Pilots in this group reflect on the organization's goals and resources and on their own and their family's situations. The family-oriented type is a team player who wants to contribute, both at home and at work. When the possibility of delivering fully in both roles disappears, they choose a path where this is possible, which often means leaving the SAF. Community is highlighted as important. They are perceived as loyal, both to the profession and to the family.

Characteristic motivational factors are balance, flexibility, community, and purpose. The pilot's role in relation to others and in regard to work objectives is important.

The Goose types often based their application on a strong interest in aviation. Most of all, however, they appreciate the community and describe the squadron as a team. Like the Iceman type, this group talks about disappointment. The idea of leaving arose not because they did not enjoy the job, but because they experienced a certain rigidity within the organization regarding solutions that allow them to combine professional life and private life. There has been great understanding about parental leave and other needs of daily life, but the work involves absence from home. After a few years, the work will most likely include assignments to different places, which affect family life. For Pilot One:

It worked as long as we didn't have children, but when we did, and because I have a wife who is ambitious, talented, and has her own career, then we were both working a lot, and the structure of the SAF isn't suited to that. [P1]

In the conversation about the lack of flexibility, the feeling of security also emerges. If you do not make serious mistakes, there will always be a place for you in the SAF. However, some feel they have to accept something other than what they really want. Salary is not a significant factor in this group, and the majority of pilots belonging to this type are not affected by the new retirement age. Some of them now have jobs with lower salaries.

For many of these, there is a desire to return to the SAF should the family situation permit. There are, however, difficulties with much absence from home and changing locations if assigned to the flight school or staff positions. Here, other solutions are proposed that require flexibility from the employer – for example, the opportunity to share postings or for flight school students to go to where the instructors are instead of the other way around.

VIPER – THE SPECIALIST

This group is represented by the experienced and aviation-loving captain who sits at the back of the briefing room and tells younger pilots how flying should be done. Community and being

a part of the team are essential. They are satisfied with their flying-focused service and want to be able to continue for many years without the requirement to transfer to staff or other positions.

Characteristic motivational factors are the work itself, workload, community, focus on the core business, resources in the form of flight time, administrative support, and exercises.

These individuals have no ambitions to pursue a higher career in the SAF, but value a quieter life where they have time to become accomplished in what they do and then use their knowledge to help the squadron and younger pilots develop.

The primary issue for this category is that when fighter pilots become experienced, they become uncertain about what will happen in the future. They enjoy their job as it is, but since they are not interested in continuing their studies for higher positions and do not want involuntary assignments elsewhere involving weekly commuting, they start thinking about what they can do instead. The pressure to move up in the organization is perceived as strong because nowadays, not many suitable individuals are available to fill positions in squadron command or instructor posts at the flight school. Pilot Five stated:

The road leads to something else; you must think tactically; what should I do to stay in the squadron? It took away some of the joy. ... Before, there were people to replenish the system, the clique that wanted to move up was enough. Now that clique has to include everyone. [P5]

Unlike Charlie, Viper fully appreciates daily life in a squadron, happily focusing on what might be called the core business. There may not always be the same drive to take on extra work on top of flying. There is also disappointment with the organization because of a perception that several individuals have received involuntary deployments at short notice. The ambition of giving employees a credible five-year plan was not considered to be working. "Unstructured short-term planning made me start working on my exit plan," explained Pilot Twelve.

ABOUT LEAVING

Being a pilot is for many a dream come true. It has become a major part of their identity for all. Therefore, the decision to leave was arrived at after a long and challenging thought process. Loyalty, to their professional role, to colleagues, and to the SAF, is something mentioned by almost everyone we interviewed. Pilot Six: "It was hard to leave because I felt the SAF had invested so much in me. And it was hard to leave my colleagues."

The greater task, to be an essential part of Sweden's defense, creates a context. A new professional role working to increase the profits of some company is not as motivating. For most of those we spoke to, our interview was the first time anyone from the SAF had contacted them after they left, and had been curious about why. We asked all respondents if anything could make them return to the SAF. For some, significant changes would be required by the SAF, and their current housing and job situations in other cities make it unlikely that they would return as fighter pilots. Some may consider returning if or when their family situation changes. Some are interested in returning to the SAF in a new role, such as flight surgeon. For some, it would take very little to get them back. "Never say never," said Pilot Six. "I have thought about it. Nobody has called."

ANALYSIS

Identification of these ideal types of fighter pilot reveals that all exist in the SAF, and all types are leaving. The pilot shortage facing the SAF cannot, therefore, be seen as a problem with a particular category such as Iceman or Charlie but as something more widespread and complicated. With the survey in mind, analysis of the ideal types gives rise to a more nuanced understanding of pilots' work motivation and raises new questions about how the SAF should respond.

In the analysis, we focus on the most salient factors in the survey and interviews, such as salary and work tasks. To highlight some of the interplays between them, we have categorized them into *time*, *extrinsic*, and *intrinsic* factors.

The fighter pilot profession changes over time, from a strong focus on flying during the early part of the career to more emphasis on staff or command positions later. Combined with a changing life situation over the years, this implies changes over time whereby the balance shifts from the perceived positive aspects of the profession to more focus on the family, where to live, hygiene factors (in Herzberg's sense), and changes in work tasks. Over time, the same pilot can come to less resemble one ideal (Iceman, say) and more another (Viper, say, or Goose). Deficiencies in hygiene factors become more influential over time. Iceman and Charlie talk about things that their profession lacks, which make them want to move on to something else. Viper and Goose emphasize the balance between work and their private lives. This difference coincides with a distinction between generations.

We can see that motivation decreases over time for some individuals. This may be caused by a feeling that you have fulfilled your flying dreams and achieved most of the things that can be done in a fighter aircraft. Working conditions are accepted at the beginning of a career when the individual is wholly engrossed in learning the profession. After several years, other factors may take over when the excitement of new experiences decreases. When leaving a squadron, the need to fill instructor and staff positions creates uncertainty about location and can become a concern that affects the whole family.

Another aspect of time is the work itself. There is a perception that a career in the SAF will eventually lead to more desk work and non-flying tasks. When the flying stops, the work tasks and matters of identity alter more for a fighter pilot than for people in most other professions. According to the Porter and Steers (1973) model, the difference between the individual's expectations and actual work experiences is crucial for job satisfaction. We see that a perceived lack of resources and too little flying time can contribute to fighter pilots choosing to leave their profession, especially if they expect constant development and more flying.

Pilots, particularly Vipers, often have a negative perception of non-flying tasks, similar to previous research into USMC pilots (Bernthal, 2020). According to the respondents, while there is a pilot shortage, reduced flying time should be avoided. It is suggested that there be more staff to deal with administrative tasks, allowing more flying time for pilots and for what they perceive as the core business.

The survey shows that most of those who intend to leave within 10 years will do so when they are in the middle of their career. At that point, the SAF have invested a lot to achieve a high level of expertise. It is more efficient, both in terms of time and cost, to *retain* pilots than to train new ones. Many testify that relatively low funding would be required for them to stay. It is not just about numbers but about showing appreciation.

It is felt that the organization has expectations about a fighter pilot's career path, but our interviewees explain that they have other needs. Iceman needs salary and appreciation, Charlie requires new challenges, Goose needs more time with the family, and Viper wants to continue flying without involuntary assignments to staff duty.

EXTRINSIC FACTORS

Salary is a hygiene factor that needs to be in place to keep "illness" away (Herzberg, 2003). All types, but especially Iceman, feel unfairly treated compared to other state-employed pilots, in terms of their responsibilities and tasks. It has become a symbol of the employer's ignorance that the starting salary has been stagnant for 22 years. It irritates fighter pilots that nothing is being done to improve conditions. Most respondents think the sudden increase in retirement age, without transitional rules, based on year of birth, is unfair. The actual salary and the retirement age are perceived as problems. The greatest concern, however, according to the pilots, is the employer's indifference and perceived injustices.

For the Iceman types, salary is the decisive factor that made them leave the profession. For other ideal types, while the salary is not the most important thing, a salary perceived to be low or unfair can still lower the threshold and make the decision to leave easier. The salary question upsets our respondents and will likely aggravate the problem of people leaving early in the future. Expectations that pilots should take more responsibility without a salary increase arouses negative feelings and has become a critical factor contributing to people leaving.

Following expectancy theory, we observe a lack of connection between performance and the external reward (instrumentality) needed to maintain motivation (De Simone, 2015). Here it is possible to see a difference between the types. Iceman types – and to some extent Charlies – see themselves as the asset they have become for the SAF because of the investment in them. For others, this investment instead creates loyalty to the organization; the SAF has invested so much in me that I want to give back.

There is a difference between generations, but this could also be a question of types rather than simply categorizing by age. The findings that Icemen, more than Geese and Vipers, feel they are underpaid – and that this affects job satisfaction and the probability of leaving for a better-paid job – align with previous research into differences between generations (Kollmann et al., 2020). Icemen and Charlies feel that the organization does not value their competence and acts as if pilots should be happy to fly. At the same time, the comparison is not entirely fair to the younger pilots as they have lower remuneration levels than their older colleagues. The SAF can adjust both salary and retirement age. It does seem that this is not just about numbers, but about the message sent by these benefits (or the lack of them.)

Society and the view of working life are constantly evolving, and new generations have a different attitude from previous ones. The fighter pilot profession is currently male-dominated. In an increasingly equal society, where both partners in a relationship work full time and where the partner often has a higher salary, service in another location or extended absences from home for exercises or deployments become more difficult. The SAF can be considered a greedy organization that demands a lot of its employees in the form of loyalty, availability, and commitment. The greed of the SAF as an organization is being challenged by changes in society with a more vibrant labor market where people change jobs more often (Holmberg and Alvinus, 2019).

INTRINSIC FACTORS

Like Ryan and Deci (2017), our interviews suggest that intrinsic motivation is often more important than extrinsic motivation, such as salary and benefits. There are examples of Geese and Vipers taking another job with a similar or lower salary after leaving the SAF.

Similar to studies of American officers (Heilmann et al., 2009) and pilots in the USAF (Switzer, 2020), the family situation and balance between work and private life are of great importance. The flexibility and opportunities to take parental leave or leave early to pick up children at preschool are considered good. However, such things still affect job satisfaction if loyalty to both the family and the profession is strong. To perform at the highest level, contributing to the squadron satisfactorily, the pilot needs to participate in exercises, debriefs at the end of the day, and be away from the family. The dilemma of having to “disappoint” either the family or the job is demotivating for the Goose type.

It is worth noting that almost everyone is positive about the leadership of their immediate commanders. The commanders are seen as present, perceptive, and have a well-balanced focus on personnel and tasks. On the other hand, leadership at higher levels in the organization is perceived to some extent as careless and old-fashioned. There is a perception that opinions, mainly about hygiene factors but also about motivational factors, are not acknowledged (Herzberg, 2003).

For Charlie, the choice of profession is mainly about personal development. The sense of monotony found in Weibull’s (2003) study remains within this category. There can be great potential in driven individuals if their creativity is utilized. Having a plan for the future, where the individual can fulfill their needs for self-realization and stimulation, can lead to these individuals retaining their interest and staying in the SAF. One proposal by the respondents, linked to intrinsic motivation, is to offer opportunities to study, for example, psychology, medicine, or science, or become a test pilot with a stronger connection to the SAF, thereby encouraging individuals to stay longer.

As an organization, the SAF needs competent personnel with the right experience to fill positions at a higher level. The fact that so few in the survey say they want to apply for higher education in the SAF could be problematic. The challenge is to create the feeling of a life-long profession for those who are in the organization. Few mentioned their role as an officer; they see their identity primarily as pilots. Changes to recruitment, focusing on the role of an officer, and not only as a fighter pilot, could be a solution to the problem in the long term.

Lloyd and Mertens (2018) emphasize that employees’ interaction with others influences their attitudes, which can impact motivation. Our interviews have shown that fighter pilots who leave the SAF can awaken thoughts among other fighter pilots about their own future in the profession.

In the survey, the respondents gave reasons why they consider leaving the SAF. The distribution of active pilots to ideal types would be as in Table 1; this is based on answers coming from ideal types as follows:

- Iceman – answers about salary, retirement age, and bonus.
- Charlie – answers about another career being attractive.
- Goose – answers about partner’s career, deployments, and stress.
- Viper – answers about lack of flight hours and place of service.

	JUNIOR-TO-MID	MID-TO-SENIOR
Iceman	38	29
Charlie	6	9
Goose	9	14
Viper	11	12
Total number	64	64

Table 1 Our ideal types applied to the 128 active fighter pilots in the survey.

In the survey, the extrinsically motivated (Iceman) shine through, and it may seem that the solution is higher salaries and lower retirement age. It is easy for the respondents in the survey to complain about pay. Nevertheless, following equity theory, it could also be an expression of dissatisfaction with the leadership or perceived injustices in relation to others. In the interviews with fighter pilots that have already left, reasons other than salary are more prevalent, and the ideal types are more evenly distributed. This is a difference between the survey and the interviews.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis shows that pilots’ reasons for leaving the SAF differ significantly. Therefore, the best way to retain fighter pilots will be different for the different ideal types. Table 2 shows some recommendations about what could be done to retain more pilots of different ideal types and with varying levels of experience.

	JUNIOR-TO-MID	MID-TO-SENIOR
Iceman	Increase salaries Lower retirement age	Increase salaries A better deal for work after 55
Charlie	Civilian study opportunities Rewarding challenges within the SAF	Flexible HOP with remote studies
Goose	Local career possibilities Less time away from family	Flexible HOP with remote studies Less time away from family
Viper	Increase flight hours per pilot More administrative support	Local career opportunities Instructor flying until retirement

Table 2 Retention recommendations for different ideal types of varying experience levels.

The interviews show that the reasons why pilots leave are diverse and complex. The SAF needs to look at several solutions based on the current needs and opportunities to solve the problem. Issues that could be addressed include everything from marketing, recruitment, salaries, and pension systems, to flexibility, training opportunities, teleworking, the opportunity for studies, and increased administrative support to the squadrons. New attitudes toward working life mean that the SAF needs to change its view of the employee. Every fighter pilot who stays in the profession is valuable, both economically and in terms of maintaining operational capability. Even without fighter pilots leaving prematurely, there will be a lack of pilots due to large numbers retiring and insufficient capacity to train new ones.

If the SAF can create a climate where individuals feel that their needs are accommodated, this could increase the motivation to stay. This can be done by demonstrating flexibility and

a long-term perspective regarding service and appointments, in dialogue with the individual. Discussion about future plans can provide stability, challenges, and a longer planning horizon that pilots need, all of which can positively affect retention.

By its very nature, the SAF is not an organization designed to deal with the wishes and needs of every individual. However, a flexible defense may not only involve how we meet threats and challenges, but also how we manage personnel and shape our staffing. Individuals with different characteristics are needed to create a good workplace and meet constant changes. Is the SAF ready for the flexibility required to retain these individuals?

The SAF has unique tools other than paying higher salaries. All interviewees mentioned the positive feeling of a good flying session and the squadron community, which goes far beyond what they experience in other workplaces. To retain personnel, the SAF could work to improve these intrinsic factors that are difficult or impossible to find in other organizations. The experience of a unique community is something that should be built on. Salaries must not make employees feel overly disappointed or unfairly treated because that will override the unique positive feelings of being a fighter pilot.

Our theoretical contribution concerns providing descriptions that identify and divide fighter pilots into different ideal types based on the logic that can motivate them to leave or remain in the profession. In our view, analysis of the empirical data, based on ideal types, gives greater accuracy and depth than talking in general terms, because each influence factor is only valid for some fighter pilots. In other respects, our findings align with previous research and reinforce the explanatory power of equity theory, expectancy theory, and extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. The article suggests that more than one theoretical perspective is needed to capture why pilots leave.

For further research, we recommend conducting similar in-depth interviews with the younger fighter pilots currently serving in the SAF. This would increase understanding of how the younger generation of fighter pilots view their profession and their future in the SAF, and would have the additional benefit of making individuals feel seen and appreciated.

AUTHORS' REMARK

In 2022, after this text was written, the SAF increased pilot salaries by approximately 10% and increased pension provisions for pilots born in 1988 and later. The younger pilots seem to think it is too little, too late, and many have applied for a leave of absence to study. Retaining pilots continues to be a pressing issue for the SAF.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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