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## Introduction

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Operational fighter units must provide the training necessary to turn inexperienced pilots beginning their initial operational assignment in a new weapon system into experienced pilots who can perform the unit's specific combat mission. This training must also prepare pilots to continue to acquire the skills required to fill rated supervisory and staff positions at the wing level and above.<sup>1</sup> The process of turning pilots new to a weapon system into experienced pilots is called *absorption*.

The Air Force must manage pilot absorption to achieve two goals. First, it must ensure that pilots new to a unit are able to meet the experience criterion within the time available in their initial operational flying opportunity. Second, it must ensure that units have enough qualified pilots to perform the unit's mission and to provide adequate in-flight supervision and instruction to the pilots in the unit with less experience and fewer qualifications. The latter requirement relates directly to helping officers acquire the additional operational skills and qualifications they need to fill the supervisory and staff positions that the Air Force has identified as requiring rated officers.

For several decades, the Air Force has used a pilot's flying hours as a measure of experience to manage both tasks through the Rated Distribution and Training Management (RDTM) system, which, as described in more detail in Chapter Two, defines an experienced pilot as one having 500 hours in the unit's primary mission aircraft. But the

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<sup>1</sup> The unit conducts training to help maintain currency in perishable skills, to provide opportunities to increase proficiency and operate in a wider range of mission contexts, and to help sustain unit combat capability.

developmental process clearly includes exposure to contexts beyond, and substantially different from, the experiences and situations encountered in a pilot's initial 500 hours of flying.

Chapter Two describes the operational training environment and changes in the *quality* and *quantity* of flying training since the 1970s that may undermine some of the original assumptions that made the RDTM system valid. In particular, the chapter discusses the importance of monitoring the relationship between the problems of absorbing individual pilots and of the unit's training and development.

Chapter Three describes the MTC training facilities and high-fidelity simulator systems that are now available in some fighter units and outlines how they can be used efficiently to provide certain types of training. Chapter Four describes the surveys we conducted between October 2002 and October 2003 to understand training experts' views of what constitutes experience in different contexts for pilots. Chapter Five discusses the implications of the survey results and addresses the aircrew management policy changes that these results suggest will be required.