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Highlights

AIR FORCE TRAINING

Actions Needed to Better Manage and Determine Costs of Virtual Training Efforts

Why GAO Did This Study

Over the last 20 years, the Air Force has sought ways to expand its approaches to meeting aircrew training requirements, including the increased use of virtual training. In 2012, the Air Force reduced live flying hours, which it estimates will save $1.7 billion in fiscal years 2012 through 2016, as part of its response to the Secretary of Defense's efficiency initiatives. GAO conducted this study in response to House Report 112-78, accompanying a bill for the Fiscal Year 2012 National Defense Authorization Act, which directed GAO to review the status of the military services' virtual training programs. Specifically, GAO assessed (1) how the Air Force determines the mix of live and virtual training to meet training requirements; (2) the extent to which the Air Force has an overarching organizational framework to guide, oversee, and integrate its virtual training efforts; and (3) the extent to which the Air Force considered costs related to virtual training in estimating potential savings from its training efficiency initiative. To do so, GAO analyzed guidance and other documents, visited virtual training facilities, and interviewed officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the Air Force.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Air Force designate an entity to integrate its virtual training efforts, develop a strategy to align virtual training initiatives and goals, and develop a methodology to collect virtual training cost data. DOD concurred with GAO's recommendations and identified planned actions.

What GAO Found

The three lead Air Force major commands—Air Mobility Command, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Combat Command—all utilize training requirements review boards composed of subject-matter experts to determine training requirements for specific aircraft. These boards determine which training requirements can be completed in live or virtual environments based upon factors such as specific combatant command mission requirements and the capabilities of fielded simulators and networks. All three commands use a combination of live and virtual approaches, but the mix varies by aircraft. For example, Air Combat Command specifies that approximately 25 percent of its training requirements could be met virtually. The other two commands conduct approximately 50 percent of their training virtually.

The Air Force has taken steps to manage its virtual training efforts, but its approach lacks some key elements of an overarching organizational framework needed to fully integrate efforts and address challenges. It has reorganized offices and undertaken various initiatives intended to enhance existing virtual training capabilities, but has not designated an entity to integrate these efforts or developed an overarching strategy to define goals, align efforts, and establish investment priorities. As a result, major commands have developed their own investment plans and standards for acquiring and fielding virtual training systems, which are often not interoperable and require costly, time-consuming work-arounds to allow personnel to train together and with joint and coalition partners. GAO's prior work has found that a designated entity with the necessary authority and resources and an overarching strategy are critical elements of managing organizational transformations and meeting long-term goals and agency missions. In the absence of an approach that establishes clear accountability and a strategy to guide its planning and investment decisions, the Air Force will continue to be challenged to guide the efforts of its commands in planning for and investing in virtual training, ensure these efforts meet the highest priority needs and are synchronized to avoid gaps or future interoperability issues, and maximize available resources.

The Air Force estimated it could save about $1.7 billion in its training program by reducing live flying hours and taking other steps, such as increasing the use of virtual training, but it lacks a methodology for determining the costs of virtual training and therefore did not consider these costs in its estimate. The Air Force estimated savings based solely on reductions in live flying hours without considering expenses such as those incurred for aircrew to travel to simulators, contractor personnel to schedule and operate simulators, and purchase of additional simulators. GAO has found that decision makers need visibility over financial data to meet agency goals and effectively use resources. Identifying virtual training costs is challenging because data is spread across multiple program elements in the Air Force's accounting structure. The Air Force completed an initial study in September 2011 that identified some costs related to virtual training, but it concluded these data might not be complete. In the absence of taking further steps to determine the universe of costs and a means to collect and track data, the Air Force will be limited in its ability to make fully informed investment decisions about the mix of live and virtual training in the future.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**