

The Problem of Retention in a Downsizing Military:

The Case of the Czech Air Force

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“Military personnel retention and attrition in today’s Czech Air Force is a litmus paper - an indicator of everything that has been happening in the Force in the last ten years...” (Czech Air Force Air Ground Crew Member – senior technician, interviewed 2002)

Introduction¹

In this paper, we present the results of a year-long qualitative study, in which we focused on the problem of officer retention in the Czech Air Force. The research, which lasted from June 2001 through May 2002, was supported by a grant from the Office of Naval Research International Field Office awarded at the spring 2001 international meeting of military psychologists in The Hague. At the meeting, recruitment and retention were identified as key issues for militaries in the 21st century and several grants were given to military researchers in NATO and PfP countries. In choosing the topic for our research, we were guided not only by the growing international interest in the issue of retention, but also by the concrete situation in the Czech Air Force characterized by high attrition of aviators and technical personnel in the last decade and expectations of its continuing rise in the future.² The discussion of aviator and officer attrition, moreover, has become a subject of public concern and discussion frequently reported on in the Czech media.³

The Czech Air Force has undergone a series of extensive transformations in the last ten years, characterized, on the concrete numerical level, by a trend toward massive downsizing in the numbers of military and civilian personnel, air force bases, air craft and equipment (graph 1 and 2). The most recently initiated and most extensive reform of the armed forces introduces a vision of the new Czech military as “young, modern, small and mobile,” stressing the need for further reductions of the officer core. The entire national debate about the military’s need to downsize on the one hand and to retain on the other hand, moreover, has had decisively political overtones – the reduction in the officer core, especially among the members of higher military echelons and among those officers who have been assumed or proved to have had rich political past under the previous regime was seen by many as a necessary step toward depoliticizing the Czech Armed Forces and toward making them compatible with their new role as partners in NATO.⁴ In other words, the downsizing in the officer core has been regarded as a certain break with the past when the Czech Republic was a member of the Warsaw Pact and a step toward fulfilling its present and future role as a new member of NATO.

In the situation of great political, social and military transition, the fundamental problem of military personnel retention was brought to the fore – the critical issue in retention in a modernizing military is not so much a question of quantity as of quality. In our research, therefore, we were trying to understand the contradictory nature of officer retention in a modernizing military by focusing on the qualitative dimension of the problem under consideration. Even though our study is based on specific results collected in the concrete setting of the Czech Air Force, we hope that the phenomena we will be describing will contribute to a better general understanding of retention as well as of general issues of social change within military institutions. In particular, it is our goal to offer an experience from a

new NATO member country to the militaries of the aspiring NATO nations to learn lessons, which may save them costs in the financial sphere as well as the area of human resources in the future.

Methodology

“The methodological problem which the microscopic nature of ethnography presents is both real and critical. But it is not to be resolved by regarding a remote locality as the world in a teacup or as the sociological equivalent of a cloud chamber. It is to be resolved – or, anyway, decently kept at bay – by realizing that social actions are comments on more than themselves; that where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made to.” (Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 23.)

The need to investigate the qualitative dimension of retention in the context of the changing institution of the Czech Air Force determined our choice of research methodology. Our approach was quite different from most studies on retention, which tend to rely on quantitative research methods and experimental procedures. Most retention studies first identify a set of measures, which are assumed to affect military personnel retention and then they draw hypotheses to be tested with the goal of determining which of these measures determine or underlie retention in specific contexts.⁵ The selected measures are then administered in a form of a questionnaire to a target sample of respondents. The results, which either prove or disprove the hypotheses are then often employed in the construction of prediction models used in selection and training.

In our study we used instead the techniques of qualitative research methodology of cultural anthropology. Anthropologists are required to learn about a problem, which they wish to investigate through the intensive experience of fieldwork – an extended stay in a setting, which provides suitable grounds for learning about the phenomenon under investigation. Following this paradigm, I chose two major Air Force bases to investigate retention as well as larger issues of social and professional change among Czech Air Force personnel.⁶ Throughout the year, I lived on each of the Air Force Bases for three to three-and a half months, conducted in-depth interviews with officers and practiced participant observation by taking part in daily activities. In addition, I also spent about two weeks on two other Air Force Bases in the Czech Republic to clarify some of my preliminary findings. The intensive long-term stay at each of the two bases proved useful in gaining people's trust toward me as a researcher, or in the anthropological jargon, it helped me to establish *rapport* with my subjects. The officer class of the Czech Air Force is a small population, which has been extensively surveyed in the last ten years especially for job-satisfaction levels and attitudes toward the leadership. Understandably, people's attitude toward yet another study had initially been quite negative. In selecting subjects, therefore, I approached people individually and asked them to voluntarily participate in the study and come and talk to me at their convenience. Once the interview was successfully under way, I recorded the respondent's answers to my semi-standardized questions in an electronic form on a computer. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half to two hours, and frequently it was repeated or completed on another occasion. In the processing of data, I analyzed the content of the interviews, virtually reversing the procedure used in the processing of a standard questionnaire. Instead of counting people's preferences for categories, which I would have predetermined, I only learned about the categories – or the various ways of responding to my

questions - from people's accounts. This method was very demanding in terms of time and energy, but it made space for greater openness in approaching retention as a social process. The results show that my questions about people's reasons for leaving or staying in the Air Force lead to answers that portray retention and attrition as final outcomes of a long process in which personal decisions are made in connection with large institutional and social changes which exceed the limits of the military sector.

Results

Altogether, I conducted 101 interviews with Air Force officers. The great majority of these interviews were conducted with pilots (48) and air ground crews (39), fewer with members of the logistics and staff (14). 9 of the interviewed officers were women, 92 men. Our research can be divided into two phases and the differences between them highlight the contradictory nature of retention in a downsizing military.

In the first phase of our research, I conducted interviews with those Air Force personnel who were leaving the Air Force on November 30, 2001 under the stipulations of the new law on professional soldiers (221/1999Sb). This law radically changed the conditions of service for military personnel and instituted a contractual relationship between the soldier and the military, enabling the two parties to sign a time-limited contract for service. Unlike the previous law (76-1959Sb), which did not provide incentives for people to leave the armed forces, the new law determined clear retirement conditions with benefits increasing with years spent in service. The law stipulates military pension, which makes it convenient for military officers to leave the military especially after 20 years of service.

As expected, many officers decided to leave the military on November 30, 2001 when the law came into effect. The characteristics of our sample of respondents who were leaving the military at this time indicate that the benefits offered to those with 20 years of service played an important part in people's decision to attrite. The average age of the sample of retiring personnel we interviewed was 43 years and the average number of years in service was 19. Our findings closely correspond to the overall level of attrition for the whole Czech Air Force at this time. 60% of all officers leaving the Air Force by November 30, 2001 were 41 or older, 84% of them were 36 years or older, 73% having a rank of captain or higher. Graph 3 shows the effects of the new law on attrition of Air Force pilots. The high attrition in 2001 can only be compared to that of 1993 when Czechoslovakia divided into two countries and many Slovak pilots left for the newly established Slovak Air Force. Without further analysis, one could deduce that high attrition of officers at the time of our research was caused by financially convenient conditions for retirement, especially in the case of more senior personnel of higher ranks. Moreover, since these conditions were results of a new law, one could conclude that the problem of retention does not exist – attrition is a wanted trend encouraged by law. In the context of the debate over the renewal of the officer core, attrition of more senior personnel at this time could be seen as a positive trend toward making the Czech Air Force younger, more dynamic and more capable of fulfilling its new tasks within NATO.

The results from interviews we conducted in the second part of our study, however, challenged our initial findings. 70 percent of our respondents, whose mean age was 31 years and who spent on average 11 years in service, reported they were considering leaving the Air Force by 2004, when most contracts signed last year expire. 30 percent of the respondents already had job offers in a civilian sector. The fact that so many young respondents are

considering leaving before they start receiving pension benefits, calls for a more in-depth examinations of the reasons that lead them to their decision.

According to our findings, the reasons for wanting to leave the Air Force are the same in the case of those who left in November last year (first group of respondents) and most of those who are considering leaving in the next two years. The most commonly reported reason for wanting to leave the Czech Air Force is a cluster of complaints indicating the loss of intrinsic job motivators and the lack of career perspective. The respondents named the lack of flight hours, lack of aircraft, unclear future of new aircraft acquisitions, the lack of clear promotion plan, unclear career path and underutilization of people's skills and knowledge as the most important reasons for losing job motivation and for deciding to leave the Air Force.⁷

From the responses, as well as from observations of the work environment and life on the bases, I have gained the impression that people were experiencing a certain “transition fatigue” and a crisis in professional identity. In the last several years, the Czech Air Force personnel, due to the geo-political re-positioning of the country and its membership in NATO have experienced occupational change of dramatic proportions. The most important aspects of this change from the perspective of the Air Force personnel included: transformation from an offensive to a defensive Air Force, the reduction and elimination of Russian aircraft, closure of most Air Force bases, reduction in the number of both flying and ground personnel, change of flight rules to comply with NATO standards and a transition to communication in the English language.⁸ These changes were executed in a series of transformations each of which promised the “final solution.” As our results indicate, however, the transformations have not yet led to positive changes in job conditions and to the increase of work motivation for most Air Force officers. More than a decade after the democratic regime in the country was

established and three years after the Czech Republic gained membership in NATO, the Czech Air Force officers are dissatisfied with insufficient number of aircraft and flight hours, unclearly defined career paths, underutilization of people's skills and they report feeling anxiety about future developments.

Because for 95 percent of our respondents, the reason for joining the Air Force was interest in flying or aviation technology, the loss of job content related to flying and aviation due to transformations of the Air Force in the last decade understandably resulted in the loss of job motivation and ultimately the decision to leave the Air Force. In the following account, a senior pilot who left the Air Force last year indicates how the elimination of Russian supersonic air craft (Su-22), problems with the implementation of new Czech-made subsonic aircraft (L-159), lack of new supersonic air craft and anxiety about future flying prospects in the Air Force determined his decision to attrite:

“I am not at all thrilled with the prospect of flying L-159s. The service time of Su-22s is coming to an end and once they are gone, I no longer see my future in the Air Force. The country is not going to buy another supersonic aircraft, and even if it does, it will not happen in my time. If the Sus stayed in service for two more years and I stayed with them, then what would happen with me once they are gone? I joined the military because of flying, because I am a pilot. I am sorry I am leaving under the current commander, but I'd rather leave now, while I can at least be sure about the retirement benefits. One never knows here what will happen next.” (senior pilot)

The following quote shows how a senior air ground crew member made his decision about leaving due to the changes in the career plan instituted by the new law (221/1999Sb) that

determined different education level requirements per each rank and position. This change combined with the consequences of the elimination of most Russian aircraft and lead to a loss of job motivation. This account typifies the stories I have heard and recorded from many technical air ground personnel who have left or are planning to leave the Air Force:

“I joined the military because I have always been crazy about planes. I loved my job and I never thought about leaving. I thought I would serve till retirement. But then they issued this new law and order and with my high-school technical degree I no longer qualify for the rank of a captain and for my position. There is no place for me here any more and I am not going to stay here as a guard. You know, I love planes and they took those away anyway, so I actually have no reason to stay. I must say that when they were taking away the Su-25s right after an overhaul, I was crying.” (air ground crew – senior technician)

While the reasons for attriting are the same among those senior officers who left last year and most junior officers who are planning to leave the Air Force in the next two years, we have detected a difference between them, which indicates that a process of important change has been occurring. While both senior and junior officers complain about the current state of affairs, their accounts are clearly set in different frameworks. Compare the following two quotes. The first one comes from a member of the senior air ground crew who left last year after 28 years of service, the other one from a young pilot who graduated from a prestigious Western military leadership academy:

“A great change began in 1989. Until then, we were flying and the Air Force came first, there was a lot of money everywhere. We were going to exercises and we were in emergency positions all the time. It was a different time. ... Before, work conditions were awful and

nobody cared about our comfort. We had no overtime paid and there was a classical rigid military discipline here. We were flying on the weekends, all the time. I know that I am nostalgic but I have many good memories. I am glad that the regime has changed, I am glad we are in NATO, but the truth is that from the viewpoint of my job – flying in the Air Force – it is now much worse.” (air ground crew)

“I am an Air Force pilot, and I do not want to be a bus driver for the Airlines, but I must say that I have been thinking about leaving since I returned from abroad. 90 percent of Czech officers who were in the course with me have already left the military because they were not offered prospects of adequate job placements. Nobody asked me about my experiences when I returned, nobody wanted to implement here what I have learned. From my own initiative I have been writing reports, but nobody has ever gotten back to me. I should have been placed in a position where I could utilize my contacts and skills. My trip abroad was a free vacation. The state paid for it and I should have been exhausted for information and work. Instead, I feel exhausted because nobody wants anything from me. (pilot)

When complaining about the dissatisfactory state of today’s Air Force, senior officers use the pre-1989 past as their reference point, while for young officers, whom we interviewed in the second phase of our study, NATO is the framework to which they compare their own situation. While some lament the lack of change in the attitudes of Czech military officers in the new political/military situation, our research conducted on the bases of the Czech Air Force does not validate this criticism. Clearly, the new young generation of Air Force officers who are currently dominating the officer population in the Czech Air Force on the level of individual Air Force bases, are people who are of the new age. These people consider themselves an integral part of NATO and when talking about the dissatisfactory situation of

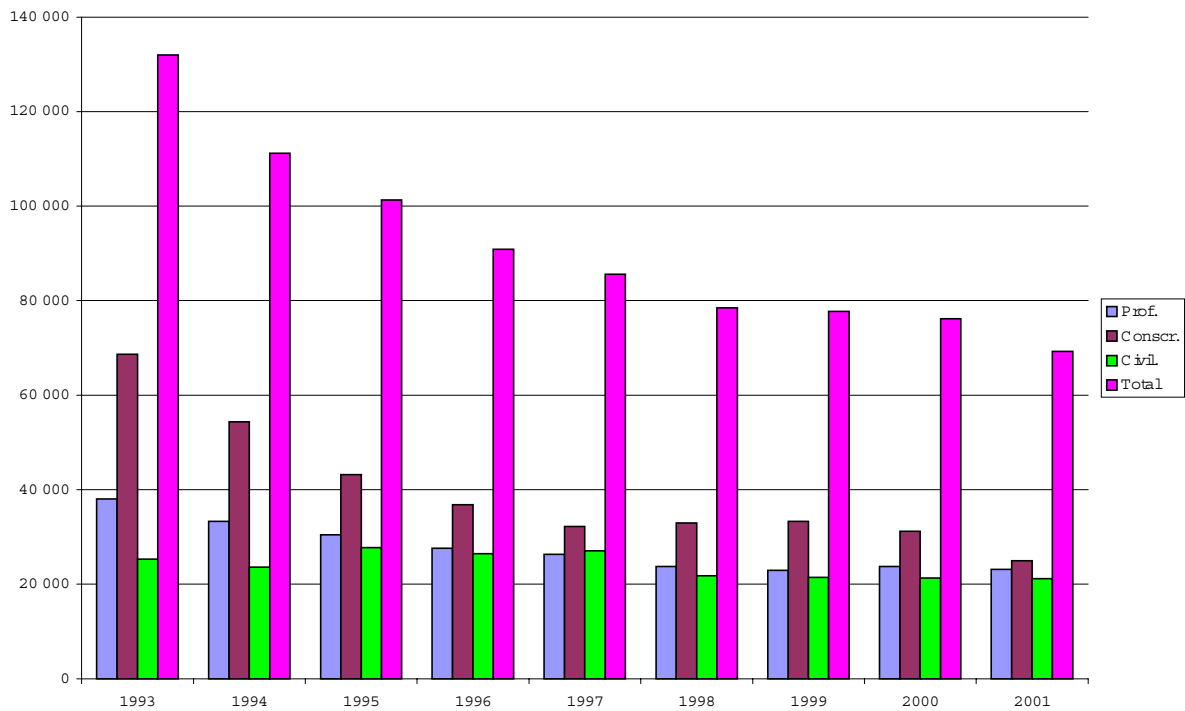
the Czech Air Force, they use their experiences from joint NATO exercises and foreign military training as their reference point. They do not look in the past, but toward the future. The problem, however, is that currently, it is these young officers, in whose training and education much has been invested by the Czech state as well as by the Allies, are leaving the Czech Air Force. Their dissatisfaction with the situation in the Air Force and plans to leave in the next two years can no longer be interpreted as a positive trend from a the viewpoint of allied defense and strategy.

Conclusion

The future of the Czech Air Force is unclear. The most important outcome of our findings, however, may be a lesson to the militaries of the aspiring NATO countries, especially those with oversized militaries. The challenges posed by the need of former Soviet allies to adapt to NATO standards are tremendous and this change cannot be expected to take place over several years – both because of costs of technological change, but primarily, because of the educational and retraining challenges required of military personnel. Downsizing – both in technology, infrastructure and manpower, even though necessary, should be well and strategically planned, respectful of human resources that are ultimately being affected by the changes and on whose quality and work the success of the future military force depends. Careful long-term strategic planning may avoid the danger of “permanent transitioning,” which negatively affects personnel retention. The experience of the Czech Air Force indicates, that unless people are provided with job motivators and intrinsic incentives to remain in their positions before launching far reaching institutional changes, they will continue attriting even after the military wants to keep them. It seems that a certain momentum of attrition develops, which lasts beyond the desired point, leading to great

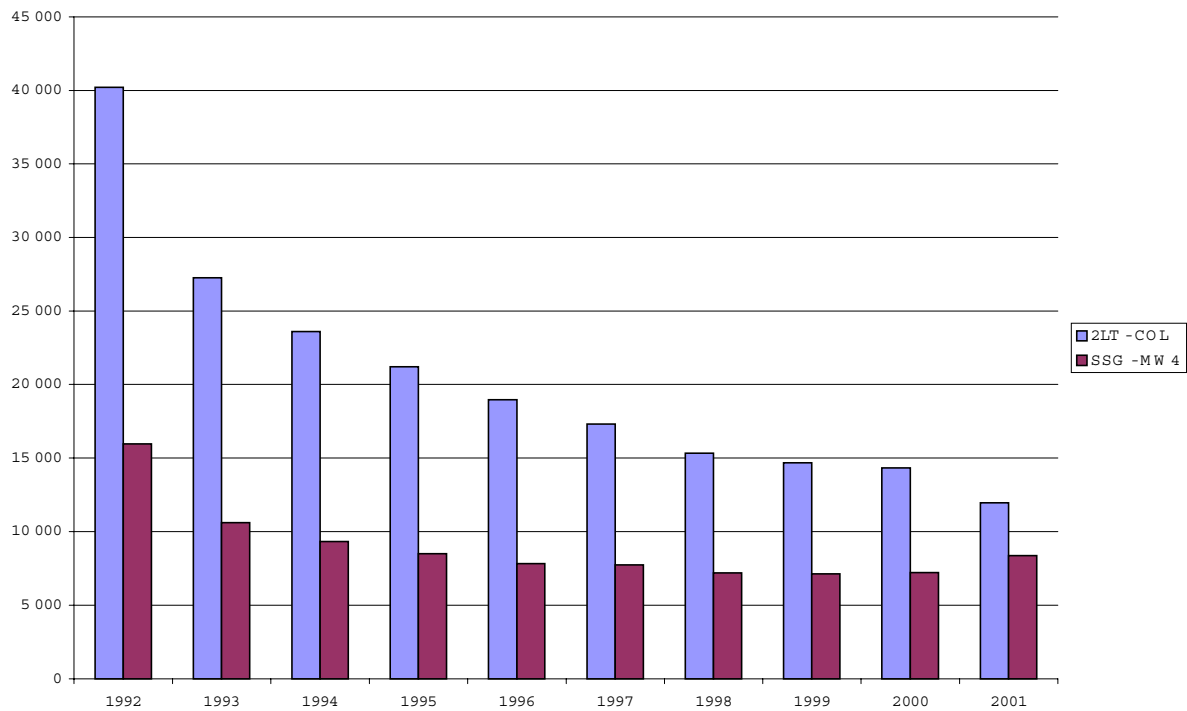
financial and manpower losses for the militaries. As the example of the Czech Air Force tells us, in the turmoil of transitioning systems, individual human resources in which much has been invested, may frequently not be sufficiently utilized, getting lost in places where their influence over decision-making and important changes is limited. Resulting frustration and lack of job satisfaction frequently leads to their attrition from the military. Yet, successful military transition can only be completed through the work of quality military personnel. Therefore, not only downsizing, but also and especially retention should become the subject of critical concern for the leadership of modernizing militaries, calling for a qualitative assessment and utilization of human assets.

Graph 1:



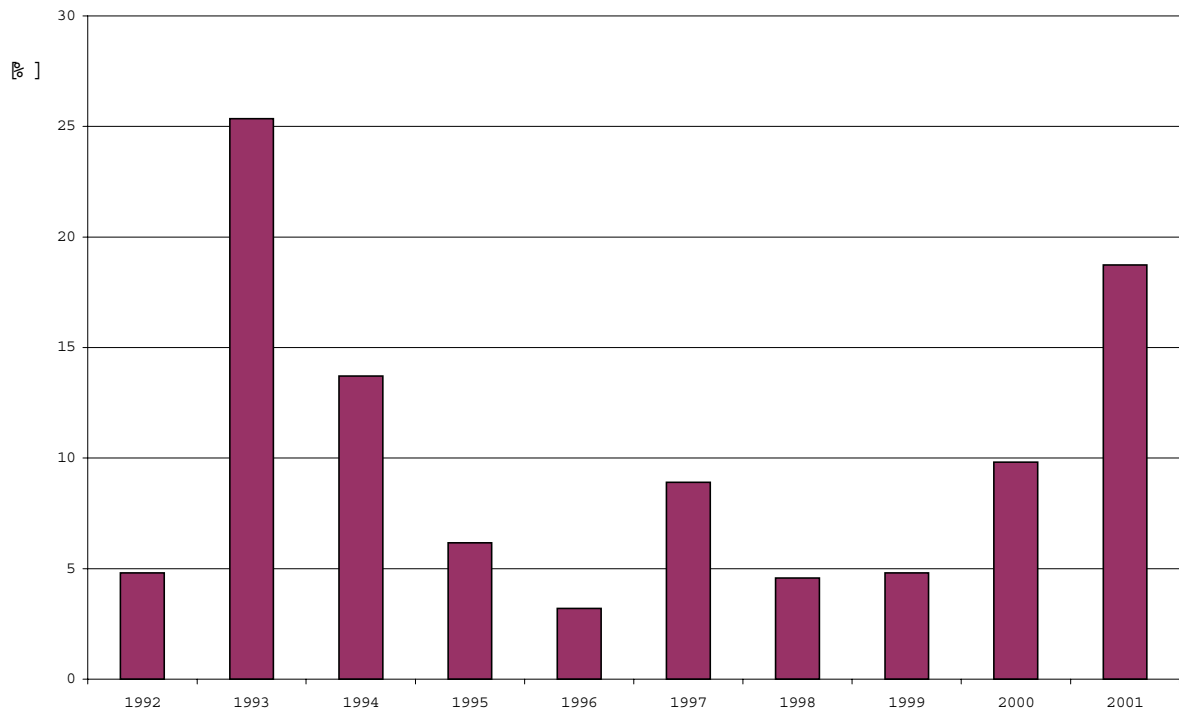
Development in the number of personnel in the Czech Armed Forces 1993-2001. (Source: Ministry of Defense of the Czech Republic. 2001. *Reform of the Armed Forces of the Czech Republic*. Prague: AVIS)

Graph 2:



Number of officers 1992-2001. (Source: Felix Černoš and Karel Královec. 2001, unpublished manuscript. *Personální vývoj v resortu obrany (2000-2001)*. Praha: SPSP MO)

Graph 3:



Attrition of pilots in the Czech Air Force 1992-2001

NOTES:

¹This paper summarizes the results of a research project, entitled, *The Problems of Retention in the Czech Air Force*, which was generously supported by a grant from the Office of Naval Research of the US Navy. The execution of this research was authorized by the Chief of the General Staff of the Czech Armed Forces and its results were presented at the 38th annual IAMPS meeting in Amsterdam, May 20-24, 2002. The author would like to express her gratitude to the Office of Naval Research for financial assistance, to the leadership of the Czech Armed Forces for supporting this effort, to my colleagues at the Stress Research Center for their help and guidance and to all military personnel who have participated in the study for their contribution to this research.

² Jiří Hendrych, „Předpokládaná odchodovost vojenských profesionálů z armády po přijetí zákona o vojácích z povolání (221/1999 Sb),“ *Informace z výzkumu č. 84*, (Oddělení výzkumů Centrum personálního marketingu HPÚ MO ČR), September 7, 2000; Jiří Hendrych, „Předpokládaná odchodovost VZP z armády.“ *Informace z výzkumu č. 74*, (Oddělení výzkumů Centrum personálního marketingu HPÚ MO ČR), July 13, 1999.

³ See for example, Jan Gazdík, „Šedivý: Čekají nás mimořádné potíže: Krize armády, důstojníci chtějí do civilu,“ *Mladá fronta DNES*, March 22, 2001: 3; Jan Gazdík, „Armáda se vylidňuje kvůli fámám a nejistotě,“ *Mladá fronta DNES*, March 24, 2001: 4; Jan Gazdík, „Generál Šedivý: Nejvíc jsme se provinili na lidech,“ *Mladá fronta DNES*: 6.

⁴ See for example Jan Gazdík, „Agenti odcházejí, vojsko si oddechne,“ *Mladá fronta DNES*, June 7, 2001: 4; J. Gazdík, „Elitního rangera zlomily poměry v české armádě,“ *Mladá fronta DNES*, November 29, 2000: 6

⁵ The measures, which the results of the studies most frequently identify as affecting military personnel retention include, the family factor, pay and bonus, job opportunities in the civilian sector, job content satisfaction, peer recognition, as well as different sets of psychological dispositions, which are likely to determine a person's retention probability. See for example: L.N.Rosen and D. Briley Durand. 1995, „The Family Factor and Retention Among Married Soldiers Deployed in Operation Desert Storm,“ *Military Psychology* 7, 4 (1995): 221-234; Penny F. Pierce, “Retention of Air Force Women Serving During Desert Shield and Desert Storm,” *Military Psychology* 10, 3 (1998): 195-213; Hyder Lakhani and Stephen S. Fugita, “Reserve/Guard Retention:

Moonlighting or Patriotism?,” *Military Psychology* 5, 2 (1993): 113-125; Brice Stone, Vince Wiggins, Kathryn Turner-Holland, Larry T. Looper, “Air Force Pilot Retention: Evaluating the Results of Alternative Models.” *Armed Forces and Society* (Fall 1998): 121-135; Gerald D. Gibb, Tatree Nontasak and Daniel Dolgin, “Factors Affecting Career Retention Among Naval Aviators.” *Journal of Business and Psychology* 2, 4 (Summer 1988): 321-325.

⁶ Further results from the research will be used in the writing of a dissertation, which the author is completing at the Anthropology Department of New School for Social Research in New York.

⁷ The Czech Armed Forces have undergone several major transformations and some authors have attempted to divide the post-socialist development in personnel and human resources into periods. In her master’s thesis, Renata Leflerová for example identifies 3 periods: 1) 1993-1996 – Transformation of AČR, 2) 1996-1999 – Preparations for NATO Accession, 3) 1999 – present – Membership in NATO. Renata Leflerová, *Personalistika v resortu obrany České republiky* (Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Katedra veřejné a sociální politiky, May 2000). In their exhaustive statistical overview of the human resources development in the Czech Armed Forces, Felix Černoš and Karel Královec offer the same periodization, albeit with very detailed description of individual measures taken during this time. Felix Černoš and Karel Královec, *Personální vývoj v resortu obrany 2000-2001* (Praha: SPSP MO, unpublished manuscript).

⁸ Useful overview of the general development trends in the Air Forces of the new NATO member countries from the perspective of the aspiring nations’ militaries, see Thomas S. Szayna, *NATO Enlargement 2000-2015: Determinants and Implications for Defense Planning and Shaping* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), especially Chapter 5.