

# **The Relationship of the Officer Evaluation Report to Captain Attrition**

**A Monograph  
by  
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Quartermaster Corps**



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This monograph links the current Officer Evaluation Report (OER) system (DA Form 67-9) to Captain attrition being experienced by the US Army at the turn of the century. The Army Research Institute (ARI) conducted a written survey on October of 2000, which identified the OER as one of the top twenty reasons that junior officers were dissatisfied with the US Army. ARI's survey did not examine perceived problems with the OER contributing to attrition. It was useful only as a method of identifying the factors leading to attrition. A focus group survey of US Army Combined Arms and Staff School (CAS3) students was therefore designed to examine the perceived root problems regarding the current OER and its impact on junior officer attrition. The empirical research conducted in the resultant focus group is the centerpiece of evidence presented in determining the linkage of the OER to Captain dissatisfaction. There were a total of 161 officers in thirteen staff groups interviewed. (CAS3 is centered on small group instruction with each staff group consisting of twelve or thirteen officers of varying specialties and backgrounds.) The sample size was specifically chosen to provide statistical significance to the survey report. The findings of the focus group suggest that Captains are very dissatisfied with the current OER system. Two major contributing factors caused discontent and possible attrition among junior officers. The first, the lack of formal counseling from senior officers, has a decidedly negative impact on how junior officers view the US Army. Findings in the CAS3 focus group relating to formal OER counseling are very similar with those in a monograph recently published by Dr Wong from the Strategic Studies Institute. Dr Wong's monograph cites that the differences between Generation X officers and Baby Boom officers are evident with regard to counseling. His study established that Generation X officers require more counseling and mentoring than Baby Boomer generation officers to maintain high morale. Dr Wong's findings were overwhelmingly supported by data supplied by the CAS3 focus group. Changes to the OER counseling requirements proposed by the focus group are included in the monograph. The second is the perception that senior raters pool all Captains in their organization in order to build their rating profile. The Captains' perception is that pooling produces standardized OERs ranking all Captains as center of mass performers during the times that they hold non-branch qualifying jobs. Pooling tends to disregard aptitude and talent according to the results from the focus group survey. Only Captains serving as company commanders are eligible for top ratings and this practice is viewed as grossly unfair. Both factors are cited as contributing to the high rate of job dissatisfaction experienced by Captains in recent years. In order to lessen the attrition of Captains in the US Army, officer morale must improve. One way to improve morale is to improve the OER system. Adopting recommended changes to the OER system along with increased counseling and mentoring should improve morale and lessen attrition.

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## Abstract

The relationship of the Officer Evaluation Report to Captain Attrition by Lieutenant Colonel Marvin W. Williams, XXX-XX-XXXX , 47 pages.

This monograph links the current Officer Evaluation Report (OER) system (DA Form 67-9) to Captain attrition being experienced by the US Army at the turn of the century. The Army Research Institute (ARI) conducted a written survey on October of 2000, which identified the OER as one of the top twenty reasons that junior officers were dissatisfied with the US Army. ARI's survey did not examine perceived problems with the OER contributing to attrition. It was useful only as a method of identifying the factors leading to attrition. A focus group survey of US Army Combined Arms and Staff School (CAS3) students was therefore designed to examine the perceived root problems regarding the current OER and its impact on junior officer attrition.

The empirical research conducted in the resultant focus group is the centerpiece of evidence presented in determining the linkage of the OER to Captain dissatisfaction. There were a total of 161 officers in thirteen staff groups interviewed. (CAS3 is centered on small group instruction with each staff group consisting of twelve or thirteen officers of varying specialties and backgrounds.) The sample size was specifically chosen to provide statistical significance to the survey report.

The findings of the focus group suggest that Captains are very dissatisfied with the current OER system. Two major contributing factors caused discontent and possible attrition among junior officers. The first, the lack of formal counseling from senior officers, has a decidedly negative impact on how junior officers view the US Army. Findings in the CAS3 focus group relating to formal OER counseling are very similar with those in a monograph recently published by Dr Wong from the Strategic Studies Institute. Dr Wong's monograph cites that the differences between Generation X officers and Baby Boom officers are evident with regard to counseling. His study established that Generation X officers require more counseling and mentoring than Baby Boomer generation officers to maintain high morale. Dr Wong's findings were overwhelmingly supported by data supplied by the CAS3 focus group. Changes to the OER counseling requirements proposed by the focus group are included in the monograph.

The second is the perception that senior raters pool all Captains in their organization in order to build their rating profile. The Captains' perception is that pooling produces standardized OERs ranking all Captains as center of mass performers during the times that they hold non-branch qualifying jobs. Pooling tends to disregard aptitude and talent according to the results from the focus group survey. Only Captains serving as company commanders are eligible for top ratings and this practice is viewed as grossly unfair. Both factors are cited as contributing to the high rate of job dissatisfaction experienced by Captains in recent years.

In order to lessen the attrition of Captains in the US Army, officer morale must improve. One way to improve morale is to improve the OER system. Adopting recommended changes to the OER system along with increased counseling and mentoring should improve morale and lessen attrition.

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## INTRODUCTION

The United States Army is a vast organization filled with an ever-changing population. No Army in the world today has to deal with performing on-going missions along with maintaining the delicate balance of training and developing future leaders with the breadth and scale of the United States Army. In the civilian world, a corporation can launch a team of head hunters to find a perfect candidate to fill a job, no matter how specialized that job is and can pay accordingly based on market trends. The US Army utilizes a closed recruitment system, which allows managers and leaders to be trained exclusively within the organization. The ability to retain a motivated and capable officer corps has been key to the past successes of the US Army.<sup>1</sup>

The US Army system of developing mid and high level managers is an excellent training system, for it allows a consistent method of developing leadership skills based on a moral and ethical code that has endured through the ages. Senior officers and non-commissioned officers mentor young soldiers, who are given ever-increasing responsibilities. Indeed, young US Army officers are given responsibilities at a much younger age than they might civilian occupations. Despite the past success of the closed recruitment system in creating an effective group of senior leadership in the US Army, it is not without flaws. The process of evaluating job performance hampers the success of this management system, especially when the enormous size of the organization is taken into account. An essential component of the closed recruitment system is the tool or

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<sup>1</sup> Kroesen, Frederick J., General US Army (Ret), former Vice Chief Speaks Out, <http://www.army.mil/people/default.htm> Internet accessed 05/05/01

method utilized to evaluate job performance. The very nature of this system makes its imperative that the most talented people are selected from among the pool of lower and mid-level managers to advance to the highest levels of leadership in the organization. The current tool being used to evaluate the job performance of officers in the US Army today is the Officer Evaluation Report, which will hereby, be referred to as the OER. The arguments, pro and con, regarding the OER as an effective way to select military leaders have been a topic of concern since it's inception. Recently, the OER has come under even closer scrutiny because a larger number of junior officers than anticipated are separating from military service. Undoubtedly, the advantages of the Army's closed management system may be negated if a high level of job dissatisfaction causes a large group of young officers, to leave the military at mid career in pursuit of a new occupation. Not only does the separation of these young officers impact military readiness in an immediate way, it leaves large holes or gaps in the structure of senior leadership for the future. The additional challenge is to look constantly to the future and to develop strategies to fill essential leadership roles with dynamic, energetic managers with the interpersonal skills to keep the organization strong.

The OER, along with other issues, has been examined in great detail as a possible cause of officer dissatisfaction. The actions of senior army leaders demonstrate that the army is facing a dilemma. A number of factors have contributed to officer attrition.<sup>2</sup> The impact has been felt most strongly in the last few years. Captains and even Majors are separating from military service in record numbers, reporting high levels of job

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<sup>2</sup> Headquarters United States Army, *Message from the Vice Chief of Staff of the United States Army addressing officer attrition.* , February 15, 2000

dissatisfaction.<sup>3</sup> The alarm has been raised at the most senior levels of US Army leadership to discover and explore the factors contributing to this unusual trend.<sup>4</sup> Only by seeking solutions to the issues raised will the US Army retain strong and knowledgeable senior leaders and develop potential in young officers.

Army leader noticed captains separating from the Army in increasing numbers, which resulted in the Commanding General from Ft Benning, Georgia instituting a formal study to investigate the alarming trend.<sup>5</sup> Other general officers, throughout the Army, recognized the same attrition trend for captains and encouraged the commissioning of Army Research Institute (ARI) to conduct a written survey.<sup>6</sup> The resulting ARI survey identified the top twenty factors of officer dissatisfaction. One of the twenty factors is the officer evaluation system and the OER, (DA Form 67-9). The ARI survey limited its findings to identification of the twenty factors and made no attempt to determine underlying reasons.<sup>7</sup> Further study was required to explain why the OER system was identified as one of the twenty reasons for officer dissatisfaction. This monograph reports the results of study of the OER and its impact on attrition.

The other nineteen factors identified in the ARI survey were grouped by ARI into five categories: More with Less, Leadership, Officer Management, Politics and Political Correctness, Army Life and Job Dissatisfaction and Pay.<sup>8</sup> Below are the five categories, and all twenty subordinate factors.

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<sup>3</sup> The Voice, Army "Trying to Retain More Junior Officers," *Army News Service*, Oct 27,2000

<sup>4</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army *Message from Office of Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel*, , July 28, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Matthews, Mike DR., "Captain Attrition At Fort Benning," *Army Research Institute, Infantry Forces Research Unit* Fort Benning GA, 6 December 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Army Research Institute, *Survey Report: Survey on Officer Careers 2000, September 2000*. Report No. 2000-11 Washington D.C.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. ,5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,3.

<b><u>More with Less</u></b>	<b><u>Leadership</u></b>	<b><u>Officer Management</u></b>	<b><u>Politics and Political Correctness</u></b>	<b><u>Job Dissatisfaction and Pay</u></b>	<b><u>Army Life</u></b>
<b>Time away from family</b> <i>(nights per year that soldiers are away from home)</i>	<b>Micromanagement</b> <i>(over supervision or lack of freedom to perform duties in their own way)</i>	<b>Promotion/ Selection System</b> <i>(the Army's system of centralized promotion and selection boards)</i>	<b>Politics</b> <i>(on the job politics such as playing favorites)</i>	<b>Job Dissatisfaction</b> <i>(unhappy with employment)</i>	<b>Frequent Moves</b> <i>(officers are required to move at least every three years)</i>
<b>Long Hours</b> <i>(work hours for a junior officer are often 60 or more hours/week)</i>	<b>Poor Leadership</b> <i>(junior officer opinions of their immediate leaders and supervisors)</i>	<b>Assignment Process</b> <i>(Army system of moving officers periodically to fill vacancies. Officers may have little or no input on their future assignment)</i>	<b>Political Correctness</b> <i>(doing or saying things that are not offensive to anyone)</i>	<b>Pay</b> <i>(military pay normally is below the civilian job equivalent by as much as 15%)</i>	<b>Quality of Life</b> <i>(standard of living to include housing, commissaries, medical care and more)</i>
<b>Doing more with less</b> <i>(operating at full capacity while being short personnel, equipment or funding)</i>	<b>Poor Senior Leadership</b> <i>(junior officer opinions of senior officers normally Colonel and above)</i>	<b>Staff Assignments/ Work</b> <i>(jobs away from soldiers in non-leadership positions)</i>			
<b>OPTEMPO/ PERSTEMPO</b> <i>(pace of work and amount of time away from family)</i>	<b>Zero Defects</b> <i>(junior officers afraid to make mistakes because they will be blamed for all that goes wrong)</i>	<b>OER System</b> <i>(the officer evaluation system discussed in this monograph)</i>			
<b>Deployments</b> <i>(units sent to perform missions such as Kosovo or Bosnia often for six months in duration)</i>	<b>Unethical Behavior</b> <i>(junior officers perception that senior officers do unethical acts and still get promoted)</i>				

The ARI survey had several limitations. The survey was dedicated exclusively to identifying factors related to job dissatisfaction. Yet, ARI did not investigate the factors contributing to these problem areas. Within their survey, ARI also asked what would make the respondents change their mind about separating from the Army. “Fixing the



OER” was one of the top fifteen items identified which seems to make the OER a constant theme relating to low morale.<sup>9</sup> The OER has a significant impact on many other areas listed in the survey, intertwining particularly with the categories of leadership and officer management.

ARI did not break the OER system into its components -- counseling, mentoring, rating and senior rating-- to attempt to determine the underlying flaws of the rating system. Also, there was no data collected during the ARI’s initial survey to determine what modifications must be made to the OER system to satisfy the junior officers. Since the OER system was directly related to several other factors identified by ARI, it was a logical conclusion to conduct further research specifically related to the OER system and its sub-systems. The resultant was a focus group designed to gather the missing data to identify root causes of the OER system.

The focus group survey was carefully crafted to research underlying factors of officer dissatisfaction. The OER was chosen because the OER had not been researched from the prospective of junior officers and its linkage to officer dissatisfaction. Captains were chosen because ARI had targeted captains with its survey. After considering several options, the format chosen was a question and answer personal interview with captains attending the US Army Combined Arms and Services Staff School (CAS3). The focus group was divided into groups of twelve or thirteen officers. CAS3 is taught in this manner and by preserving the existing classroom structure, the existing group dynamics were also preserved. The discussion questions were crafted to allow follow-on questions not addressed by the ARI survey. The questions touched on many other factors intertwining and conjoined with the OER to fully develop the data

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.,5.

identifying underlying problems with the OER system. The respondents in the CAS3 focus group did not understand how the OER worked as an evaluation instrument and in the discussions, they weighed the impact of the OER on the future of their careers.

The importance of the OER to a military officer throughout his/her career cannot be underestimated. It is directly related to promotions and identifies those with potential to reach the highest leadership positions. The OER is often used to discriminate between equally qualified officers for nominative assignments. One of its main functions is as a tool for evaluating those characteristics desired in senior leaders. Based on feedback from the focus group interviews, the way the OER is structured may contribute to morale problems despite its many strengths. Rather than being evaluated on how they perform their duties, officers are measured by comparison to their peer group. The focus group expressed the view that being rated as “center of mass” or “above center of mass” does not adequately describe how well they performed duties or to what degree they were successful in completing assigned tasks. Although this method worked adequately in the past, Generation X officers require a more individual method of rating in order to evaluate how well they have performed. The current OER system cannot be understood without reviewing some of its history. The OER systems before the 1970s are not relevant to the attrition problems experienced today because their format was dramatically different.<sup>10</sup> Attention was limited to three versions of the Officer Evaluation Report Form, DA Form 67-7 and the rating systems used from the early 1970s to the present. Each version of the OER has attempted to improve officer evaluations and each revision has led to inflated reports. Each OER was replaced when it became over-

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<sup>10</sup> Vakhmistrov, V. P., “Social And Spiritual Bases Of Military Corporatism,” *Military Thought*, 2000, Vol. 9 Issue 5 p45.

inflated and useless to selection boards. Both the DA Form 67-7 and 67-8 OERs experienced inflation during periods of personnel reduction. The 67-7 became inflated during the post Viet Nam draw down and the 67-8 during the post Desert Storm force reduction.<sup>11</sup>

During each period of personnel reduction, US Army leadership decided to introduce a new OER to insure the selection of the best officers for promotion, advanced schooling and command. US Army leadership required the new OER to effectively identify officers with the highest demonstrated potential for positions of leadership.<sup>12</sup> When each new OER system was introduced, senior leaders were willing to revise the OER, even if it meant adversely affecting the morale of officers. Historically, officer morale has been sacrificed each time the Army leadership has downsized and adopted a new OER system.<sup>13</sup> The most recent OER revision, the 67-9 was introduced with the same level of lowered morale that has been noted in the past.

It is reasonable to believe that officer morale will improve if the OER system is revised and improved. Information from US Army Personnel Command (PERSCOM) states that selection boards like the format of the current OER<sup>14</sup>, but the satisfaction of selection boards cannot be allowed to undermine the strength of the officer corps today or in the future. Changes are required to make the OER system work effectively for the very people it is designed to serve.

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<sup>11</sup>Unites States Army Personnel Command, *OPMS XXI Study and Briefing* conducted as chain teaching with the introduction of the OER version DA Form 67-9 at Ft Lewis WA, Fall 1997

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. 1-55.

<sup>13</sup> Wong, Leonard PHD, *Generations Apart: Xers And Boomers In The Officer Corps*, October 2000 Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle PA, p.2

<sup>14</sup> Unites States Army Personnel Command, *Senior Rater Notes, A Newsletter Published for US Army Senior Raters*. Undated but received Spring 1998.

This monograph will study a brief history of the US Army's personnel evaluation system in conjunction with new data generated by the focus group of CAS3 students to determine the linkage between officer dissatisfaction and the OER. The perceived problems with the OER must be identified in order to adopt changes to improve morale of junior officers. Last, the monograph will include suggested changes to the OER system resulting from comments gathered in the focus group. If the OER is changed in a manner that improves officer morale, officer retention should also improve.

## HISTORY OF THE OFFICER EVALUATION REPORT

The OER has been in existence in various forms for many years. Army wide selection, commonly referred to as central selection, for promotion as well as battalion command was adopted after Viet Nam. The change in command selection heightened the importance of the written evaluation. Previously, during the Viet Nam War, the commanding general selected battalion commanders in his command. The force reduction after Viet Nam forced the Army to change evaluation procedures to select the best and brightest for senior rank and position. The Army adopted version 7 (DA Form 67-7) of the OER in the early 1970s. The 67-7 used a numerical rating system with 100 points available for both the rater and senior rater. The Army published average scores for each grade. The rating officers could compare their performance with their peers.<sup>15</sup> The 67-7 scores quickly became inflated and the report lost its validity because the average score for captains rose from 117 in January 1973 to 191 out of a maximum score of 200 by May of 1975.<sup>16</sup> Because of the rampant inflation associated with the DA Form 67-7, a new OER, the DA Form 67-8 was adopted in November of 1979.

The US Army attempted to adopt the principles of Management by Objective or MBO through the addition of the OER Support Form (DA Form 67-8-1).<sup>17</sup> MBO was in vogue with civilian industry in the late 1970s adopting the methodology of establishing a

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<sup>15</sup> Gregor, William, *The Leader As A Subordinate The Politics And Performance Of Unit Commanders In The United States Army*, 1980.p.45

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>17</sup> Army Regulation 623-105 *The OER*, Dated 1980

“contract” between worker and supervisor for performance objectives.<sup>18</sup> MBO was considered the way to insure that senior leadership of an organization was in touch with the mid level managers and all the way down to the basic workers and that all were working toward the same organizational goal. The Army attempted to mimic industry by adopting a specific part of MBO and adopted the OER support form.

The reasoning behind the OER Support Form was that early in the rating period the rated officer would submit his goals and objectives to the rater for the rater's approval. The rater and rated officers were expected to negotiate the officers goals and the result would be considered the “contract” for accomplishments during the rating period. At the end of the rating period, the rated officer completed the last portion of the form that described how the goals and objectives had been met. The rater would then consider this information while completing his rating and forward the report to the senior rater for his consideration. The OER Support Form provided the rated officer the ability to influence his own rating for the first time.

A key portion of the OER system, introduced with the DA Form 67-8 was required counseling. Army leadership surmised that counseling was a weakness and the addition of the OER support form was the answer. Young officers join the Army from our college campuses and the Military Academy with certain expectations for coaching, teaching and mentoring by senior officers and the OER support form addressed the need for mentoring junior officers.<sup>19</sup> Counseling was thought to be more effective with rated officers actively participating in the establishment of performance goals

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<sup>18</sup> Webster University Master's Program at Yuma Arizona campus in 1984-1986. These theories were presented in various text books and captured in written notes from lecture/discussion sessions.

<sup>19</sup> Notes from introduction of OER version 67-8 and newsletters from PERSCOM.

The DA Form 67-8 discontinued the use of numerical scores and placed emphasis on narratives written by the rater and senior rater. New to this OER was the senior rater profile block (figure 1 below). A senior rater was defined as an officer two steps up in the chain of command. For example a company commander would be rated by the battalion commander and senior rated by the brigade commander. The purpose of the senior rater block was to give senior raters the ability to discriminate between officers that they senior rated.

Figure 1. Senior Rater Profile block from DA Form 67-8

The people figures in the senior rater block in Figure 1 represent 100 officers senior rated by this senior rater. The top block was reserved for the best officer of 100 officers senior rated. This particular block has a check in the two block and displays that in this example the officer was in the top 3 of 100 officers senior rated. The right column of blocks was filled out by PERSCOM when the OER was received. The previous rating record of the senior rater entered in the blocks demonstrated how this senior rating officer rated this officer in comparison with other captains rated previously. The system was designed to make it easy for selection boards to differentiate between officers.

PERSCOM tracked senior rater performance in an attempt to keep inflation from creeping into the system. Letters were sent to senior raters that had inflated profiles telling them to spread their profile.<sup>20</sup> This OER worked very well until the Army reduced its size from 730,000 personnel to 485,000 personnel in the early 1990s.<sup>21</sup> Senior raters began giving all officers a top block to protect them through the force reduction. The 67-8 became inflated and virtually useless. General Gordon Sullivan, the Chief of Staff of the Army in 1994, stated in a speech that he had made the conscious decision to keep the DA Form 67-8 in existence until after the draw down was completed. He recognized 67-8 the inflation, but he thought introducing a new OER at the same time as the draw down would have been disastrous.<sup>22</sup> Army leadership kept the 67-8 in service until October of 1997 when the DA Form 67-9 was introduced.

The DA Form 67-9 was placed into service concurrently with the adoption of Officer Professional Management System XXI (OPMS XXI). The Army finished reducing active duty end strength from 730,000 people before the Gulf War to 485,000 people by the mid 1990's.<sup>23</sup> Officers, as well as, enlisted soldiers were offered incentives to take early retirement or separate. Officer year groups 1991-94 were intentionally kept smaller than normal which has caused shortages in officer end strengths that are apparent today.<sup>24</sup> In the haste to meet the congressionally mandated personnel caps, the Army leadership

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<sup>20</sup> Letter from United States Total Army Personnel Agency to LTC John Thomson concerning his senior rater profile. Shown to officers of the 407<sup>th</sup> S&S Battalion 82d Airborne Division in the Summer of 1980.

<sup>21</sup> Wong, Leonard PHD, *Generations Apart: Xers And Boomers In The Officer Corps*, October 2000 Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle PA, p.2

<sup>22</sup> Sullivan, Gordon General 1994, Speech to US Army Command and General Staff College, Ft Leavenworth KS

<sup>23</sup> Wong, Leonard PHD, *Generations Apart: Xers And Boomers In The Officer Corps*, October 2000 Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle PA, p.3

<sup>24</sup> Data includes Army Competitive Category officers only. Source: Officer Master File, September 1999



determined that year groups 91-94 would be short throughout their career life cycle.<sup>25</sup>

The leadership also expressed the belief that the Army could retain higher than normal percentages of officers in shortage year groups to make up the difference. That prediction by Army leaders has already proven to be a grave miscalculation. Retention of officers has been lower than expected<sup>26</sup> and now the Army leadership is attempting to determine the cause and identify possible solutions to be applied to other year groups.

Before introduction, several versions of the 67-9 were considered. “Recent initiatives have pushed the Army to examine itself more closely with the intention of developing more effective leaders. One method of improving leadership is the concept of multi-rater assessment.”<sup>27</sup> Peer ratings were discussed and even a 360 degree rating system with ratings completed by superiors, peers and subordinates was discussed. These ideas were quickly discarded because they did not fit into the military model of leadership and personnel management. PERSCOM believed that an OER using peer ratings would not support the requirement for military discipline, especially in combat. Instead the new OER was designed with the primary purpose of being able to differentiate between officers for selection purposes. The Army Chief of Staff chose to retain the concept of rate and senior rater because it supported the up or out promotion system better than any of the alternatives.<sup>28</sup>

Army leadership adopted the current OER, the DA Form 67-9 for use in October of 1997. Major portions of the 67-9 are: the duty description, the rater’s narrative, the senior rater’s narrative and senior rater block check. The senior block check is the main

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> The Voice, Army trying to Retain More Junior Officers, Army News Service, Oct 27,2000

<sup>27</sup> Rovero, John L.; Bullis, R. Craig, “Assessing Self-Development,” *Military Review*, Jan/Feb 98, Vol. 78 Issue 1, p35.

difference in the 67-9 (see figure 2). The new categories were limited to: Above Center of Mass, Center of Mass, Below Center of Mass-Retain, and Below Center of Mass-Do Not Retain. A quota system was also emplaced for senior raters. The senior rater portion of the OER remains the most important part of the evaluation. Figure 2 is an example of the senior rater portion of the DA Form 67-9.

PART VII - SENIOR RATER	
a. EVALUATE THE RATED OFFICER'S PROMOTION POTENTIAL TO THE NEXT HIGHER GRADE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BEST QUALIFIED <input type="checkbox"/> FULLY QUALIFIED <input type="checkbox"/> DO NOT PROMOTE <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (Explain below)	
i currently senior rate <u>47</u> officer(s) in this grade <small>A completed DA Form 67-9-1 was received with this report and considered in my evaluation and review</small> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO (Explain in d)	
b. POTENTIAL COMPARED WITH OFFICERS SENIOR RATED IN SAME  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ABOVE CENTER OF MASS <small>(Less than 50% in top box; Center of</small>  <input type="checkbox"/> CENTER OF MASS  <input type="checkbox"/> BELOW CENTER OF MASS  <input type="checkbox"/> BELOW CENTER OF MASS	c. COMMENT ON PERFORMANCE/POTENTIAL          d. LIST 3 FUTURE ASSIGNMENTS FOR WHICH THIS OFFICER IS BEST SUITED. FOR ARMY COMPETITIVE CATEGORY CPT THROUGH LTC.

DA FORM 67-9, OCT 97 (Reverse)

USAF

Figure 2. Senior Rater portion of DA Form 67-9.

The 67-9 is the first OER that assigns quotas to the senior rater limiting the number of officers senior raters can rate in the top or ACOM block. The regulation says no more than 49% may be rated as above center of mass while guidance from PERSCOM states that senior raters have a goal of about one third or 33% or less ACOM reports.<sup>29</sup> The quotas were designed to discipline senior raters to identify the most talented for the more

<sup>28</sup> Swisher, David LTC, US Army Personnel Command, Phone Conversation. Feb 01.  
<sup>29</sup> US Army Personnel Command Senior Rater Newsletter. Undated but received Spring 1998.

demanding future assignments and early promotion to the next rank. The center of mass report was set as the norm for a successful officer.<sup>30</sup>

Some changes have occurred with the introduction of the 67-9. }The 67-9 not only makes it easy for selection boards to identify officers for promotion and command, but allows the junior officer to predict his or her own future competitiveness. Assignment officers at PERSCOM are now giving officers very frank assessments of their OER file and predicting their competitiveness for promotion, command, and military schools. Assignment officers know exactly what criteria selection boards require and since the introduction of the 67-9 have been willing to share this information. They advise captains that they must receive at least one Above Center of Mass (ACOM)<sup>31</sup> report while in company command to be considered successful. At some point early in an officer's career, they may receive career counseling with PERSCOM. Based on the information they receive, officers may have to decide whether a career that peaks at major or lieutenant colonel will satisfy their personal goals.

According to OPMS XXI, selection rates to major, lieutenant colonel and colonel will either stay the same or improve slightly from when the 67-9 was first adopted.<sup>32</sup> The difference is that the 67-9 enables officers to more accurately predict their own potential for success. A captain can now determine with a high degree of accuracy, what his or her future competitiveness following completion of company command. There is a glass ceiling in the Army and officers at all levels realize that at some point they will reach that ceiling.

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<sup>30</sup> OPMS XXI Briefing at Ft Lewis Wa Fall 1997.

<sup>31</sup> The top block in the senior rater profile on the back of the DA Form 67-9 is referred to as an Above Center of Mass (ACOM) report. An ACOM report is considered to be the best possible rating and through regulatory guidance is limited to 49% or less of those officers senior rated in that rank.

. One CAS3 student clearly described a successful officer's OER file. "An officer's file must show a heartbeat like the needle or line on an EKG or heart monitor. There must be occasional spikes to let the reader know that there is life in that officer and these spikes must correspond with the key jobs that an officer must fill in order to be successful."<sup>33</sup> Officers may feel enormous pressure to determine whether they remain competitive and make career decisions based on future competitiveness. When officers are convinced that they are not competitive, based on OERs in their personnel file, they normally opt to separate from the military. Many junior officers do not have the patience to remain in the Army and diligently seek assignments that will overcome the perception that they are not competitive. This may in part explain the recent phenomena of captains leaving the US Army in record numbers.<sup>34</sup>

After discussing competitiveness with their assignment officer, captains normally will attempt to receive counseling from their immediate supervisors. According to the captains in the CAS3 survey, the availability of this counseling varies greatly. In fact, captains report in great numbers that senior raters do not counsel.<sup>35</sup> Captains expect senior raters to take time to counsel them individually and to be very honest with them about their performance and potential. The ARI survey reflected a lack of confidence in leadership and senior leadership,<sup>36</sup> which directly correlates to a lack of counseling, especially at OER time.

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<sup>32</sup> OPMS XXI Briefing at Ft Lewis Wa Fall 1997.

<sup>33</sup> CAS3 Focus Group Survey, February-March 2001 Ft Leavenworth KS

<sup>34</sup> Headquarters United States Army *Message from the Vice Chief of Staff of the United States Army addressing officer attrition.* , February 15, 2000

<sup>35</sup> CAS3 Focus Group Survey, February-March 2001 Ft Leavenworth KS

<sup>36</sup> Army Research Institute, *Survey Report: Survey on Officer Careers 2000, September 2000.* Report No. 2000-11 Washington D.C.

The counseling requirements established for the DA Form 67-9 OER system are not significantly greater than those for the 67-8 that it replaced. Counseling requirements remain true to the theory of Management by Objective<sup>37</sup> and were designed to allow for some of the shortcomings of the OER system. Initially, the OER system required officers to receive counseling at the beginning of the rating period and as necessary throughout the rating period. The Junior Officer Development Support Form (JODSF) was introduced with the 67-9 as an additional counseling and mentoring tool for junior officers. The JODSF was designed to correct shortfalls in the existing counseling system pertaining to junior officers. Counseling was to be the centerpiece of developing and mentoring junior officers. Ideally, junior officers must quickly consider themselves an integral part of the “Army team” to reach their goals and achieve career satisfaction. Unfortunately, the counseling component of the OER system has not been as stringently enforced as the senior rater profile.<sup>38</sup> Many raters and especially senior raters conduct counseling only when necessary to preclude an OER appeal. The studies and interviews indicate that many junior officers believe that senior raters counsel by exception and only officers that are performing below standard.

Although rater counseling is required by Army Regulation, counseling by senior raters is not. Senior rater counseling is not even required when completing the OER,<sup>39</sup> but senior rater counseling is what officers desire most.<sup>40</sup> Only senior raters tend to have enough experience to provide the level of counseling desired by junior officers. This

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<sup>37</sup> Management By Objective was a theory of management in vogue in the late 1970s. The theories were extensively taught during the Masters Program by Webster University.

<sup>38</sup> CAS3 Focus Group Survey, February-March 2001 Ft Leavenworth KS

<sup>39</sup> Army Regulation 635-105, *Officer Evaluation Reports*

<sup>40</sup> CAS3 Focus Group Survey, February-March 2001 Ft Leavenworth KS

opinion was very prevalent during the CAS3 survey and must be addressed to reduce dissatisfaction.

To understand the importance of the OER to an officer's career, knowledge of officer personnel files is required. Officer personnel files are made up of three critical components: a color photograph, an Officer Record Brief (ORB) and a microfiche of all OERs that the officer has received<sup>41</sup>. The officer's photograph is evaluated to see if the officer presents a professional appearance. The ORB chronicles past assignments, schools, qualifications and awards and serves as a military version of a resume. The OER microfiche measures performance. Board members scrutinize OER file to determine whether or not to select the officer for promotion, school, or command. OERs from key assignments are weighed more heavily than others and for Captains the most important job is company commander. Success or failure as a company commander is key to future school selections and promotions. OERs received while in company command may directly impact promotion to major, selection for Command and General Staff College and ultimately, battalion command.

It is often said that selection boards promote files and not officers. This is true in that selection boards only have files to review. Officers do not interview or appear personally in front of boards when they are eligible for selection. The quality of the officer is measured only by the information available through the personnel file, which may not always reflect the strengths and capabilities of the person being evaluated.

Personnel files and the information they furnish are just a component of evaluating the successful progression of an officer's career. There is a tiered system that relies on an officer attaining certain milestones before progressing to the next level or tier. The

commonly used term is branch qualification. Branch qualification means that an officer has met all career goals for a certain rank and is qualified for promotion to the next level. If the officer receives an average or below average OER while serving in a branch qualifying job, they are vulnerable to separation or career stagnation.

There are other times in an officer's career when they are vulnerable to separation. The timing for these separation points is rather vague but will be described as a series of milestones. The milestones are defined as: immediately after satisfying initial obligation, after attending advanced course but not yet commanding, immediately after company command and after promotion to Major but not selected for resident Command and General Staff College.

Officers frequently choose to leave the Army after completing their initial service obligation. Many of the officers that separate at this point have entered the service with only education benefits in mind, whether it is paying back a scholarship, West Point commitment or repaying student loans. They never had any intention of making the Army a career. Most of these officers decline orders to their advanced course and start looking for a civilian job opportunity during the last year of commitment. Civilian firms have "head hunters" or military recruiters actively seeking young officers to place into entry-level management positions across corporate America. Civilian firms are looking for the discipline, work ethic and personal ethics of former military officers with leadership experience to become long-term employees. It is expected at this career stage that a percentage of junior officers will choose to leave the military service to pursue a civilian career

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<sup>41</sup> Army Regulation on *Officer Promotion System*

Officers also consider separation approximately a year after completion of the advanced course but before company command. Many officers are eager to remain for a second assignment in order to have the opportunity to command. Nearly 85% of the CAS3 officers surveyed stayed for the second assignment citing that their drive to experience company command was strong. If, however, the wait to assume command of a company is more than eighteen months, the officers grow impatient and start considering separation. Opportunities for command positions may entail a lengthy wait that exacerbates impatience. The perception among the officers interviewed was that command of a headquarters company is less attractive than command of a line company but the wait for a line company is often longer. Captains in the focus group did not internalize the widely held belief that all commands are equal as far as “punching the ticket” to move on to the next level of promotion. Captains interviewed had the perception that command of the wrong type of company negatively impacts career opportunities and they did not understand that the type of unit commanded did not affect the OER as much as how well they guided their unit. Leadership and mentoring are the only tools to correct this perception. According to PERSCOM, and personnel regulations, successful command means branch qualification as a captain regardless the type of company. The role of the senior leadership is to teach patience and prepare officers for their role as company commanders. Many installations have an active order of merit list for captains waiting to go into command. It is important for battalion and brigade commanders to mentor officers during this critical time in order to retain junior officers that will excel in future leadership roles.



The third vulnerable period for separation is immediately following company command. Branch managers as well as senior leaders advise, captains, that they must attain at least one above center of mass command OER in order to remain competitive. This information is firmly entrenched by PERSCOM and senior leaders and is even posted on the Signal Corps homepage<sup>42</sup>. The natural reaction, by the officer receiving all center of mass OERs from company command, is to look for a new career. Leaders and branches are very frank with officers and tell them their chances for promotion and other selections based on their past OERs and ORB. The search for a new career may begin if the captain considers himself/herself “at risk” for promotion. Realization of a limited Army career often presents itself when the officer has less than 10 years of service and many times before 30 years of age. Since the officer has a relatively low investment towards retirement, the decision is often made to separate. The perception throughout the US Army is that a successful Army career is based on command opportunities. Senior rater comments cause this perception to be propagated by specific wording. The OER system ignores the need to make the officer a valuable part of the organization. According to the theories of Total Quality Management, the officer needs positive feedback to remain a contented and loyal employee.<sup>43</sup>

The fourth and last separation milestone is after selection for promotion to major but prior to selection for resident Command and General Staff College. The officer normally has more than ten years of service and is still in the early to mid thirties. The officer may still be competitive for promotion to lieutenant colonel and may attain full retirement benefits at twenty years of service. This milestone requires a careful decision

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<sup>42</sup> Signal Corps Home Page <http://perscom.army.mil>. accessed 05/05/01.

whether to remain in the Army. It is troubling that there has been a recent surge of mid level managers that have chose to separate from the US Army.<sup>44</sup>

Other factors are constant through all four vulnerable periods of separation. The economy has been very strong for the last eight years and corporations are motivated to hire young military officers. Officers have a great track record for trustworthiness as well as excellent performance and an outstanding work ethic. Officers with special qualifications command top wages in the civilian sector. Especially lucrative are officers that attended West Point or have special skills such as computer networking and especially, Microsoft licensing.

The OER plays a significant role in each of these stages, determining or predicting an officer's potential for career success. The Army must find a way to transition officers through these separation milestones in order to meet end strength requirements. Officers must be confident in their promotion potential and improvements must be made to promote family stability. This perception that only selection for battalion command equals success needs to shift to accommodate the need for qualified and technically astute mid-level managers. They are essential to the US Army and should be valued even if they are not competitive for command. OERs need to reflect the value of officers with great technical expertise, even if their command opportunities are limited. Officer morale remains highly dependent on the OER system, which is related to at least eight of the twenty factors, cited in the ARI survey. With morale being tied directly to attrition, improving the OER system is paramount. Army leadership must make the rating system

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<sup>43</sup> <sup>43</sup> Rovero, John L.; Bullis, R. Craig, "Assessing Self-Development," *Military Review*, Jan/Feb 98, Vol. 78 Issue 1, p35.

more palatable to maintain a highly motivated work force

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<sup>44</sup> The surge in officer attrition was documented from several different sources including the FtBenning study of Captain attrition, the Commanding General of US Perscom's message and the Vice Chief of Staff of the US Army's messages just to name a few.

## RESULTS OF THE COMBINED ARMS AND SERVICES STAFF SCHOOL (CAS3) SURVEY

In March of 1970 a US Army War College student, LTC Robert H. Nevins, Jr. published a paper entitled “The Retention Of Quality Junior Officers—A Challenge For The Seventies”. This paper could have easily been written in 2001, the evidence gathered during the survey of CAS3 students tells the same story. LTC Nevins wrote his paper just as the US was exiting the Viet Nam War and going through a force reduction, much the same as the draw down the Army went through in the 1990s. LTC Nevins concluded specifically that junior officers don’t understand the OER and the up or out personnel management system, that they get little or no training during their officer basic branch courses, and they receive little if any counseling from their first commander.<sup>45</sup> The problems that LTC Nevins wrote about in 1970 were found to be true in 2001.

As discussed in the introduction, Army Research Institute conducted a survey in 2000 that identified the OER as one of the top twenty things that officers were dissatisfied with.<sup>46</sup> The purpose of that survey was to find out why officers were separating from the Army at such a high rate. The written survey, however, failed to describe the problems that junior officers were experiencing with the OER system. (To determine perceived weak areas of the OER system, a focus group survey was designed.

Dr. David Bitters and Mr. George Fithen, both faculty members at the US Army Command and General Staff College assisted in the design of the focus group.

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<sup>45</sup> Nevins, Robert H. LTC (Ret), US Army War College Student, *The Retention Of Quality Junior Officers—A Challenge For The Seventies*, 1970P34-37

Subsequently, COL Tim Heineman, Dean of Academics approved the focus group survey.. Twelve discussion questions were presented to them along with a suggested sample size to gather data that would be statistically significant.<sup>47</sup>

The focus group was formulated to gather evidence linking the OER to captain attrition. The survey questions were designed to interview a CAS3 staff group consisting of twelve or thirteen officers at a time. The intimate small group setting was optimum in allowing opportunities for a free flow of information within each group. Thirteen staff groups were interviewed to satisfy the requirement to create results that were statistically significant with an error rate below five percent. The survey was completed in February and March of 2001 at Ft Leavenworth Kansas. The author personally interviewed all thirteen staff groups. Due to the nature of the interviews and discussion of issues, numerical conclusions are not as clear as in a written survey. The dialogue between the interviewer and the staff groups tended to be dynamic and flexible. As a result, the report of findings is in narrative format.

The demographics of the officers interviewed: 161 total officers, 14 Female, 10 Reserve Component, 119 Married, 15 Divorced (3 multiple times), and 46 completed 6 month rotations to the Balkans, several with more than one. The CAS3 faculty slates their staff groups to have a diversity of race and branches so diversification was not tracked. Years in service varied greatly with approximately 65% of the officers coming directly from their advanced course. Special branch officers tend to come later in their career and some regular officers had finished their advanced course well in advance of

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<sup>46</sup> Army Research Institute, Survey Report: Survey on Officer Careers 2000, September 2000. Report No. 2000-11, Washington D.C.

<sup>47</sup> The actual discussion questions used in the focus group are included at Appendix 1. Since the research conducted in the focus group was empirical, original research, no other footnotes documenting the focus

CAS3. Each staff group tended to have one or two former company commanders with the remainder attempting to command during their upcoming assignment.

A common trait of the officers interviewed was that nearly all had decided to remain in the US Army beyond their initial commitment. Those still serving initial commitments were so few that the numbers were insignificant. Most were aviators who had an extra obligation from flight school or lawyers from law school. In other words, no attempt was made to contact officers that had previously separated to gather their responses. When asked to identify the factors that compelled officers to stay beyond their initial obligation, the respondents most frequently responded they enjoyed Army experience and that they were highly motivated to command. They especially wanted to command before they made the final decision about whether to remain in the Army. They also felt that they were having an impact on young soldiers lives and were gratified to play this leadership role. Nearly 90% of army competitive category officers responded in this manner. They enjoyed the responsibilities they held as lieutenants and were looking forward to more demanding and rewarding assignments. Overall, most of the officers surveyed related that their experiences had been positive enough that they had not ruled out making the Army a career.

Although several factors relating to job satisfaction were discussed, most of the interview was devoted to the central issue, the OER. When asked whether the OER was a factor in their decision to stay in the Army after their first obligation, the respondents gave a unanimous no. At the same time, the CAS3 students related instances of peers who had received substandard performance reports during the first assignment and

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group will be used. The condition of non-attribution of respondents was put into effect to gather the most accurate and honest data possible.

reported that most of these individuals had separated from the US Army. Officers revealed that there is a misconception about the second lieutenant OER masking. With long school times and decreased time as a second lieutenant, many officers don't receive their first OER until after promotion to first lieutenant. The case of an infantry lieutenant was cited as an example. Infantry lieutenants attend their officer basic course, airborne school and ranger school before arriving at their first unit. They will be promoted before having time for a rating. The group as a whole was much more supportive of the first one or two OERs being masked regardless of rank.

A prevalent observation was that officers did not understand the OER process until after attendance at the advanced course. Officers expressed surprise after their initial contact with PERSCOM, when it becomes apparent that their ratings may be lag below their peer group. As a result, nearly all officers recommended that an OER block of classes should be added to the officer basic course. Currently the OBC curriculum contains instruction on writing non-commissioned officer evaluation reports, however, students receive very little information or guidance on how to read and understand their own rating system. The respondents also expressed concern that they may have to rate warrant officers during their first assignment without the proper tools and knowledge to do an effective job. By adding a complete OER block of instruction, junior officers will be better prepared to both interpret their own OER's and serve as raters for their subordinates.

[A key area of concern among CAS3 respondents was the counseling aspect of the OER system. The DA Form 67-9 introduced a new counseling tool, the junior officer development support form (JODSF). The form was designed to be an instrument for

junior warrant officers and lieutenants to use to assist with the counseling process. When asked about the JODSF in conjunction with the OER, the respondents were divided regarding its effectiveness. About 1/3 of the officers surveyed said that they thought the form was used correctly by their raters and senior raters. Another third of the officers were convinced that the raters went through the motions but did not have an adequate understanding of the theory behind the form. The remaining third stated that the form was not filled out at all. Many officers reported that in their experience the JODSF and the OER support form were both filled out at the end of the rating period, but also expressed, if used as intended, the JODSF had merit as a tool to assist in accurate OER information being relayed to the raters. They generally felt that the JODSF is a good self-assessment tool and of value to officers being evaluated. Just as with the employment of the JODSF, quality and quantity of rater counseling varied among those interviewed. Officers completing support forms at either the end of the rating period or not at all stated that their raters seldom or never counseled them. Nearly all officers revealed that they got an initial counseling when they first arrived at the unit. The officers all expressed a desire for counseling to monitor job performance, to gain knowledge on improving performance and to receive guidance from raters on career decisions. The respondents overwhelmingly conveyed the conviction that prior to assuming command, they should receive more training on using the JODSF as a counseling tool for the lieutenants serving under them. The officers interviewed feel that more effective mentoring and counseling, especially regarding the OER would result in lower attrition. Interaction and counseling with the senior rater also varied dramatically among the captains surveyed. (The 67-9 does not specifically require senior rater



counseling but it is highly recommended.) Approximately a third said that they had good mentoring and counseling from the senior rater regarding job performance and career guidance. Another third said that they received counseling only at OER time and only in context of the OER. The remaining third received no counseling from their senior rater, not even at OER time. Many officers related experiences of reporting to the adjutant to sign the OER while others received their completed OER in the mail with no oral or written comment. Some respondents related troubling incidents in which all lieutenants were asked to report to the battalion classroom to sign their OERs in mass with the adjutant. The comments volunteered by the focus group accented the obvious conclusion that lieutenants expected mentorship and counseling from their chain of command. Respondents overwhelmingly desired personal contact from the senior rater. The groups, as a whole, held the perception that leaders seem to be forgetting that the personnel business is personal. The groups expressed disappointment in the way they had been mentored throughout their career in the US Army. Surveyed captains were also disappointed in senior leaders that seemed to be masters of e-mail and commanded from computer terminals in their headquarters. The same officers made these observations that previously revealed many of their contemporaries separating after initial obligation. "E-mail commanders" were reported by the captains surveyed to have the lowest retention rates of junior officers serving under them. During the interview process, the captains' knowledge of the OER system, especially pertaining to branch qualification was reviewed. Nearly 85% had been advised by their branch assignment officer, that future career success depended on completing company command with at least one above center of mass (ACOM) report. The respondents knew that some center of mass reports were

inevitable, but they were advised by PERSCOM that it was essential to peak while in company command. Only 15% of the officers interviewed thought that they could remain competitive with all center of mass command reports.

Most officers interviewed did not comprehend the senior rater information placed on the OER when it is received by PERSCOM. They did not know that senior rater statistics are not included on this OER as was the case using the 67-8. Since the senior rater profile (how a senior rater ranks his officers) is critical to those being rated, the respondents felt that this information would be valuable to promotion boards. This is especially true when senior raters have a high degree of variance in the percentages of above center of mass reports. While some raters are quite generous in awarding ACOM OER's, others stay within the stringent guidelines suggested by PERSCOM. The respondents overwhelmingly viewed the differences of the senior rater profile as being significant to their OER rating and advocated that senior rater information be added to the current OER. It was their belief that including this information in a visible way would allow boards to compare differences in the percentage points of senior rater profiles from rater to rater.

The captains surveyed were convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that all jobs are not equal. They fully understood that promotion boards put the most weight on OERs received while performing key and essential jobs. Captains fully recognize that for junior officers, company command is the most momentous period of time in their career. A successful company command greatly raises expectations for continued career success. Those that have a positive command experience with at least one above center of mass OER are far more likely to remain in the US Army.

A majority of respondents strongly held the view that senior raters are "gaming" their senior rater profiles as it pertains to company commanders. The 67-9 and PERSCOM philosophy regarding senior rater profile management, encourage brigade level commanders to lump all captains into a single rating pool. Nearly all of the captains, well over 90%, said that brigade level commanders had adopted the practice of "pooling" in order to award the maximum number of above center of mass OER's to company commanders. . Experience has demonstrated that staff officers rarely receive an above center of mass rating in order for senior raters to carefully guard the available ACOM reports for company commanders. The affected group includes captains serving on battalion staffs and often first lieutenants after they are selected for captain. The respondents resented this practice by senior leaders and felt that it leads to inflation of the current OER. Captains in the survey groups expressed disappointment that no matter how diligently they performed their duties, they are most likely guaranteed center of mass ratings when not in command. The result is that junior officers with special abilities and talents may be rated in the same manner as those whose performance is merely average until the command opportunity appears. There was growing certainty among the respondents that the practice of senior raters placing at least one ACOM rating in each company commander's OER will inevitably lead to selection boards being unable to discriminate between company commanders considered for promotion and schooling opportunities. The message that was conveyed by the officers throughout this line of questioning was that pooling captains (for senior rating) seems to have a decided negative impact on morale and therefore, attrition.

A common thread, throughout the discussions, revealed the desire of junior officers to excel. They want to compete for early promotions and they do not desire jobs with a guaranteed center of mass rating. There is an understanding among the respondents that staff positions must be filled while waiting for their turn at company command, but they don't want to be "punished" with center of mass OERs for performing in these less than desirable jobs.

The survey of thirteen staff groups allowed accurate representation of the concerns of junior officers regarding the OER system and its role in career progression. The OER is not the overriding factor for a very junior officer making the decision of whether to remain in the US Army or separate, especially in the very beginning stages of a military career. It does gain significance the longer an officer remains on active duty. If an officer is progressing extremely well and is confident of promotions and command selections, the officer has a tendency to remain on active duty. If the officer considers himself /her at risk for promotions they are much more likely to separate.

The officers surveyed overwhelmingly feel that senior raters need to improve counseling and mentoring skills. They crave feedback, guidance and mentoring from senior leaders. Those interviewed expressed that they value opinions from senior leaders on future career fields as well career progression. A modest amount of counseling would be adequate for most officers. Unfortunately, the focus group indicated that the mentoring and counseling role of senior leaders is being largely ignored. Based on the

findings and research, this lack of counseling is having a negative impact on junior officer retention.

The thirteen staff groups interviewed provided honest and open opinions in an effort to help the Army fight the trend of increased captain attrition. The focus group painted a realistic picture of the views of the junior members of the officer corps and provided a unique opportunity to examine the pros and cons of the OER system and its impact on the future of the US Army.

## **RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO THE OFFICER EVALUATION REPORTING SYSTEM**

Changes must be made to the OER system in order to make it more appealing to junior officers. Most changes are relatively easy to implement, while others present a more difficult challenge. An immediate and pressing need will be to improve how raters and senior raters counsel, mentor and manage their people. Leaders must put the personal touches back into personnel management to stem the tide of attrition among junior officers that is currently in evidence.

Relevancy of the senior rater profile must also be addressed. Inflation is creeping into the DA Form 67-9 just as it has in past systems and company commander OERs are starting to appear remarkably similar in nature. The time has come to create a new system for evaluating Captains and Majors while they are performing in their branch qualifying jobs.

A relatively easy revision to the OER system involves adding the senior rater profile on the rated officer's OER when it is received by PERSCOM. This practice was utilized under the DA Form 67-8 OER and should be restored. Senior rater profiles continue to be tracked by PERSCOM and the information is readily available. Both selection boards and the rated officer should be able to glean the senior rater's intentions on each OER he or she writes. All center of mass ratings (COM) are not equal. A COM rating means different things from senior raters with a 30% ACOM rate versus a senior rater with a 49% ACOM rate. If the senior rater awards very few ACOM ratings, then a COM rating with strong narrative needs to be considered a strong report by all parties

concerned including PERSCOM, selection boards, and the officer being rated. With the enormous amount of files to be considered when each selection board meets, this practice of a COM rating with an ACOM narrative may be ignored. Steps should be taken to allow discriminators in the narrative portion of the OER. Board members normally have approximately 90 seconds to spend on an officer's file to decide whether or not to select the officer. Board members do not have time to track down senior rater performance data. PERSCOM can make it easy for the board, by putting the information right on the OER. Senior rater statistics will also convey to the rated officer a realistic picture of how well they have performed. More accurate information for the rated officer will assist in making more informed career decisions.

A second required adjustment, is to put OER training and instruction into the Officer Basic Courses (OBC). Junior officers need to gain knowledge about deciphering the information contained in their own OER during their initial ratings. Some second lieutenants will rate warrant officers, therefore they must be effectively trained in order to write a satisfactory report. Currently the OBCs spend a great amount of time on writing NCOERs but completely ignore the OER. An adjustment in this educational philosophy would equip the young leader with the tools to be successful. The initial OER ratings can very easily make the difference between retaining a successful career officer and an officer that separates to a civilian career.

Masking of the second lieutenant OERs was a good idea but it needs to be expanded. Masking of the first one or two reports would allow time for the officer to assimilate into the Army on equal footing without regard for source of commission and schooling required in addition to the basic course.

Counseling of junior officers must be enhanced if the US Army is to continue breeding strong leaders for the future. This is the most pressing need if morale is to improve among junior officers. Counseling has a positive effect on every officer. If raters and senior raters take the time to coach and teach, newly commissioned officers assigned to their units adjust rapidly to becoming part of the team and retain a sense of importance with their role in the success of the organization. Junior officers want to learn from those senior to them. The platoon sergeant's responsibility is to conduct some training of the new lieutenants, but training to be an effective officer and leader must come from more senior officers, not only by example but by mentoring.

Mandatory senior rater counseling should be considered while Captains and Majors are performing in their branch qualifying position. Performance in branch qualifying positions will determine the officer's suitability for selection to command a battalion and senior raters need to spend the time with officers they rate to insure the best candidates are selected. With the large amount of paperwork required of those in leadership positions, senior raters can easily fall into the trap of spending all their time in the office instead of connecting with their subordinates. Senior raters must also filter and control the use of e-mail. Company commanders and Majors need to spend time planning and conducting training, relying on essential one on one time with staff and soldiers. The mentoring and counseling role should be emphasized in all pre-command courses and additional exploration of OER counseling should be included.

Better counseling is the hardest portion of the OER system to affect. As the survey revealed, there is great disparity in both the amount and quality of counseling afforded junior officers. The 67-9 was implemented with mandatory counseling to coincide with



key dates during the rating period, but the CAS3 survey revealed that at least 40% of the junior officers did not receive counseling of any kind. All junior officers interviewed indicated a desire for an active feedback loop to insure the OER system is effective. The junior officers interviewed were aggressive in pursuing goals and very idealistic. They demonstrated a desire to ascertain whether they are meeting or exceeding expectations and fear that they may discover at OER time that they failed to accomplish a certain expectation desired by the senior rater without the ability to correct the problem until it is too late. Lunches, PT runs, ranges and exercises with the senior rater are very important and should be stressed, but they do not substitute for individual performance and career counseling. This is especially true at the end of the rating period when it is time to complete the OER. Senior raters must have the fortitude to meet with those they rate and clarify how their performance compares to their peer group. This counseling must become the norm and not the exception.

Dr Leonard Wong recently identified counseling as a key factor in dealing with today's junior officers. He recently published a monograph entitled "Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps."<sup>48</sup> He studied the differences with officers that are considered to be part of Generation X and more senior officers considered to be part of the Baby Boomer generation. One of his findings was that Generation X officers are more confident; however, they demand more counseling and face-to-face interaction with senior leaders. Dr Wong's monograph was not read by the author of this monograph until the CAS3 focus group was completed but it is interesting to note that the findings were almost exactly the same.

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<sup>48</sup> Wong, Leonard Dr., Strategic Studies Institute, "Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps," US Army War College, Carlisle PA

Junior officers are too reserved ask for counseling and expect the senior rater to take the initiative. A positive control measure is to counsel before the senior rater signs the OER. Currently the rated officer only verifies personal data on the OER. Change the regulation for the rated officer to sign only after senior rater counseling is completed. This will ensure that counseling is completed when evaluating job performance, thus satisfying the need of Generation X officers.

Counseling is also training for future senior leaders. The senior officers must effectively convey counseling methods to the junior officers. Just reviewing OER support forms and JODSFs is not adequate, personal contact is required. Performance counseling is a good subject for officer professional development classes.

Another area for consideration includes revamping the senior rater profile completely. The morale problems caused by across the board center of mass reports for all junior officers not in command must be addressed. One solution is to include officers in the senior rater profile only when performing in a branch qualifying position with use of a narrative report for other positions not essential for selection for promotion or command. Another idea is to discontinue OERs for non-branch qualifying positions and at the same time discontinue the use of Academic Efficiency Reports. They have little value and the information is already captured on the Officer Record Brief. Completing an OER only if in a branch qualifying position reducing the paperwork workload on senior leaders and allow more free time to conduct additional counseling and mentoring of junior officers. A system of reduced OERs would be feasible through selection for lieutenant colonel.

Changes to the OER system must be instigated to have a positive impact on officer morale. Adjustments in counseling, mentoring, and the method for senior rating officers need to be addressed and enhanced. The examination of the flaws of the OER system entailed in this research project indicates that the US Army has taken a report system designed in the late 1970s and has retained it with little change even though the needs of the US Army have been dramatically transformed in the twenty-first century. Just as the Army leadership is studying transformation of combat forces, the same needs to be accomplished with the personnel evaluation system.

## CONCLUSION

Some recent studies just released by LTG Maude, the Commanding General of PERSCOM, argue that captain attrition is no longer a problem.<sup>49</sup> The new studies cite that attrition is just one percentage point above normal. PERSCOM also puts forth the claim that the OER is an effective instrument of evaluation and does not attribute junior officer frustration with the OER to attrition. The evidence gathered in the survey with CAS3 students demonstrates variance with the PERSCOM position and a need for further objective study on this issue. Research conflicting with the PERSCOM studies suggests there are primary or underlying issues with the current OER system. These issues have resulted in increased rates of separation at certain stages of an officer's career. Without certain revisions, the OER system issues will remain along with low officer morale.

Based on the research findings, officers understand the necessity for a tool to identify ideal soldiers for promotion and command. Officers also comprehend the need for a personnel evaluation system based on an up or out promotion system. In addition, they realize that commands at the battalion and brigade level are not an all inclusive possibility. There is a recognition that center of mass ratings in certain jobs like company command, battalion S3 and Battalion XO will place officers at risk for selection to more challenging duties. Junior officers indicated a desire to have more senior rater mentoring and counseling, especially in relation to OERs.

Junior officers have sent the message to Army leadership, through surveys and interviews, that the OER system is flawed. The OER is now in the top twenty factors

most often cited for officer dissatisfaction. It is also in the top fifteen factors that if changed, would result in more officers opting to make the Army a career. The focus group conducted with CAS3 students had the same result. Junior officers believe that the OER system damages officer morale and must be corrected to maintain a quality officer corps.

Certain changes are warranted to enhance the OER system and make it a more effective tool for evaluating job performance and potential. Most changes are minor and relatively easy to enact. The research suggests that there are several revisions that would have a positive effect. The focus group suggested a key change to the OER, which was to add a block of classes during the officer basic course that focuses exclusively on the OER. This course of study should include components on how to write an OER as a rater. Second Lieutenants may be required to write OER's for a warrant officer so they must know how. Junior officers also indicated a desire to learn how to interpret the information contained in an OER. It is essential that they understand how to evaluate their own job performance after receiving their OER. The focus group also suggested placing senior rater profile data on the officer's OER when it is received by PERSCOM. This will enable the rater and the rated officer to easily track officer performance and senior rater profiles. Finally, the focus group advocated mandatory mentoring and career counseling from rater/senior raters to their subordinates, especially when the OER's are received and before those being rated sign them. This mandatory counseling should be utilized in conjunction with an improved OER support form to enhance communication regarding job performance. Using the OER support form effectively, along with counseling by

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<sup>49</sup> Burlas, Joe, "Junior Officers Not Leaving The Army In Doves," *Army News Service*, February 14, 2001

senior leadership, will promote a better understanding of the standards used in evaluating job performance in the OER. These three enhancements to the OER are fairly elementary, but implementing them will result in long-term success in retaining junior officers in the US Army.

The most difficult transition in the OER system will be to discontinue rating officers in non-branch qualifying positions. The Army has rated all officers annually since implementation of the OER system but research indicates it may not be necessary in the twenty first century. If the focus group is to be believed, the current OER system has become cumbersome and redundant because of the practice of pool rating Lts and Captains in non-branch qualifying jobs. It would be more efficient to rate only those in branch qualifying jobs. The reduced workload would allow a more effective use of time for training and mentoring. The CAS3 survey group was extremely concerned about OERs received in branch qualifying jobs. The Captains interviewed held the view that if all Captains in branch qualifying jobs received an ACOM report, that the value of the OER would be lessened. They overwhelmingly responded that brigade level commanders should not pool all Captains into a single rating pool in order to award ACOM reports to company commanders.

Captains that participated in the CAS3 survey overwhelmingly viewed the OER as a flawed evaluation system, with a negative impact on officer morale. ARI directly linked morale to attrition with their survey. Taking all research into consideration, the natural logical conclusion is that addressing shortfalls in the OER system will have a positive impact on morale and thus lower Captain attrition.

Raters and senior raters need to become the mentors and counselors that the junior officers want them to be. Improving communication skills among senior leaders, especially at OER time, is an essential component of the OER that will insure its success as an instrument of evaluating job performance and career potential.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Focus Group Interview**

1. What was the deciding factor that made you decide to stay after your initial obligation?
2. Has location of follow on assignment impacted on that decision?
3. What are your spouses thoughts of staying in the military, especially if you have to take a 6 month rotation to the balkans?
4. Did your OERs as a lieutenant have any role in your deciding to remain in the military?
5. Did your rater use the JODSF and how often did your rater counsel you on performance and future assignments?
6. How often did you interact with your senior rater. Did the senior rater counsel you? Did the senior rater go over your OER with you when it was complete?
7. When you are a company commander, what is your understanding of what the OER must say for you to remain competitive?
8. To you, what is the definition of a successful career?
9. Are all jobs rated equally by selection boards? Which jobs can you afford COM ratings and which need to be ACOM?
10. What are your likely assignments after company command?



11. What are the good and bad things you see about being a field grade officer?

12. Were the majors in your unit effective in giving career advice especially when you wanted the opinion of someone not in your rating chain?

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