

A More Manageable Communications Occupational Field

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A More Manageable Communications Occupational Field

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I. Dividing the Communications Field.

Due to the variety of assignments, rapid changes in the field, and associated training challenges, the current scope of the communications field is too broad for a single regular officer's MOS to manage. Issues that further complicate the field are poorly written individual training standards (ITSs), subsequent training issues and chiefs who have faced the same challenges. Subdividing the current occupational field into transmission systems and switched systems would result in officers who are more technically competent.

II. Duty Assignment Comparisons.

The difficulty in maintaining proficiency within the field is complicated by the range of assignments available to 0602s, the current state of ITSs and the training challenges these present.

Company Grade 0302s while working within their MOS are likely to serve as platoon commanders, company executive officers, company commanders and battalion staff officers within one of the infantry regiments of the ground combat element (GCE). Marine Corps Orders clearly spell out what tasks are

common across these assignments and then break down the specific tasks for the various duty areas.¹

Company grade 0602s can be assigned communications duties at any element or level of the MAGTF as well as base and station. Within the GCE alone assignments include command of various platoons in the headquarters element, communication company executive officer or operations officer, infantry battalion S-6 or regimental S-6A, artillery battalion S-6 or regimental S-6A and positions on the division staff itself. Once again, these are only the billets within the Marine Division. A multitude of other billets exist throughout the Marine Corps. Additionally, where the 0302 ITSS are duty specific and well written, the 0602 ITSS include such items for 2nd Lieutenants as "Write a Plan for C2S [Command and Control Systems] support of a MAGTF Element."² Captains are expected to "Write a Plan for C2S support of a MAGTF/MARFOR Component of a JTF." Based on the language of these orders, one could reasonably expect 2nd Lieutenants straight out of Communication Information Systems Officer Course (CISOC) to function as the Division, Wing or Group G6. Following this line of reasoning, these Lieutenants should develop into Captains able to serve as MEF G6s without the benefit of any further formal schooling.

¹ Individual Training Standards System for INFANTRY OFFICER OCCUPATIONAL FIELD, MCO 1510.85A

² Individual Training Standards System for COMMAND AND CONTROL SYSTEMS OFFICER OCCFLD 06, MCO 1510.117

Following this logic further, field grade officers, it would seem, are unnecessary unless a plan for support of a Joint Task Force must be drafted. Presumably, a junior Major will be able to handle this on his own. Once again this Major may have had no formal MOS training since his initial training as a Lieutenant.

It is obvious to those within the Marine Corps that the above scenarios are not what happens in practice but that is what is written in the order and forms basis for training 0602s. Further, these tasks are categorized as "Core" and are tasks that "make a Marine and qualify that Marine for the appropriate MOS." Most 0602s will pin on Captain at the end of their first tour or very early in their second tour. Many will proceed to a "B-billet" which is unrelated to the 06 field, returning to the fleet as a mid-grade or senior Captain. The training standards expect far too much of junior officers. Consequently, the training program attempts to make the officers masters of all aspects of their field, which simply is not possible. This training coupled with on the job training focusing on only one area often followed by time completely out of the field results in officers struggling to maintain a minimum level of competency.

III. Rapid Changes/Training Challenges.

Further complications arise from the rapid changes within the field. In the last four years the Communications field has seen significant progress from a perspective of new systems fielding.³ The Enhanced Position Locating and Reporting System has seen tremendous change in software and firmware. The MRC-142 that provides broadband connectivity via radio has evolved into two new variants, bringing significant new capabilities but also new planning challenges. Also these assets have been pushed down to the regimental level. A completely new satellite ground terminal has been fielded, the "Secure, Mobile, Anti-Jam, Reliable Tactical Terminal" or SMART-T. Tactical Data Network Equipment is now fielded down to the battalion level. The MEFs and their major subordinate commands have been fielded with new voice switching and technical control centers, the Digital Technical Control (DTC). Single-channel radio systems will also see significant changes in the future as plans exist to field the Joint Tactical Radio System over the next fifteen years.⁴

While these changes are necessary and good and they make the Marine Corps a more capable force, transmission systems, voice switching systems and data systems are undergoing significant and frequent changes, upgrades or replacements. As

³ *Marine Corps Systems Command*,
<<http://www.marcorsyscom.usmc.mil/sites/pmcomm/index.asp>> (3 January 2005)

⁴ *Marine Corps Systems Command JTRS*
<http://www.marcorsyscom.usmc.mil/sites/pmcomm/jtrs_gv.asp> (3 January 2005)

such the Captain who leaves the fleet for a B-billet not only faces the daunting task of resuming his role in an increasingly technical field, but he is also now faced with equipment he has never seen and is likely working in an element of the MAGTF with whom he has never served. In a sense, he is as outdated as the equipment and systems he once knew.

The training challenge to keep pace with these changes is daunting and it is difficult to supervise training on equipment that the supervisors are untrained on themselves. Many fielding programs offer training in small "train the trainer" settings that reach only a small section of the communication field. The Marines attending the course are now expected to return to their units and train the rest of the operators. These crash courses result in mixed success at best. Technically proficient Marines who may be the best candidates to learn new equipment may or may not be well suited to serve as instructors. Additionally, Marines change duty stations on a regular basis. Higher headquarters often dictates that Marines attending the training meet certain time remaining on station requirements without regard to the Marines' technical or teaching abilities. Also, other commitments do not stop for the fielding of new equipment. In short, circumstances dictate which Marines will receive "train the trainer" instruction and already full training and

deployment schedules leave little time for training the rest of the unit.

IV. Technical education.

The approach to educating 0602s also presents its own challenges given that the sheer volume of information presented to 0602s in their basic MOS instruction requires a six-month course. In 1998 the Communication Information Systems Officer Course presented students with 1259 hours of academic instruction.⁵ By contrast, a typical course load for a technical major in college is about 270 hours of instruction assuming eighteen credit hours over about a fifteen-week semester. The Marine Corps provides enough hours of instruction in six months to get an engineering student into his junior year of college. As a result of this intensive instruction over a short period of time, the young officer is swamped with information that he may or may not need at his first assignment and that, regardless of whether or not he needs to know it for that assignment, he may or may not retain. Commissioning means many things but it does not impart a photographic memory or the ability to learn at five times the rate of a college student making good progress toward his degree.

⁵ Transcript attached to student CISOC Diploma

V. Chief's Career Paths.

The 0602s should be able to rely on their Chiefs to make up for any shortcoming in their technical knowledge.

Unfortunately, however, because the Chiefs spend much their career in a particular area such as radio or switching, their technical knowledge is too focused to fill in all the gaps of the officer's education. Because of the rapidly changing equipment and a requirement to perform B-billet tours in order to continue getting promoted, chiefs face the same challenges as officers in staying current in their MOS. For instance, they too are faced with the challenges of learning the new SOPs and special needs of new units throughout the MAGTF and supporting establishment. The new C4 Planner's Course does much to prepare chiefs for their new role as "Comm. Chief" but there is a good chance that he will have no more knowledge or skills in a specific communication specialty than the junior officer he is supporting. The technical expert in the shop becomes the Staff Noncommissioned Officer (SNCO) who has recently reentered the fleet from a B-billet to work with gear that he has never seen before. That SNCO relies heavily on the junior NCOs who may not have even completed a single tour yet but has some experience with the new equipment.

The problems that exist with this situation are clear and, as the modern battlefield becomes more technically complex, the

Marine Corps needs leaders who are technical masters of their field, not mangers who have dabbled in various aspects of communications perhaps mastering none.

VI. Solutions.

The communication field should be divided into two distinct areas with one area managing transmission systems and the other managing switched systems. The switched systems field would handle voice and data systems including, voice switchboards, routers, and servers. The transmissions field would focus on systems that transmit information "over the air", including single channel radio, terrestrial multi-channel radios and satellite systems. This arrangement would present a more manageable set of skills to teach and maintain within each field and would allow communicators in each field to maintain their skills and build on them from one assignment to the next. Because the communication field requires constant training to stay proficient, B-billet assignments that are not directly related to communications should not be available to communications officers or should be available in extremely limited numbers.

VII. Divide and Conquer.

The Communications Occupational Field is far too broad to be effectively led by a single unrestricted officer occupational specialty. The education process for 0602s is a six-month fire hose of information based on vague, over-generalized or outright misleading training standards. Their Chiefs have in depth knowledge in their feeder MOS but may not be proficient in all areas or able to see the network of systems as a whole. Because all Marines in the communication field face challenges in staying current with continuously changing technology, subdividing the communications field presents a more manageable set of skills and gives communications officers the opportunity to become much more technically proficient and effective in their MOS.

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