

It's A Life Style Change: Officer Selection Officers And Their Involvement In Candidate Preparation

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It's a life style change: Officer Selection Officers and their involvement in candidate preparation

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Because Marines are the centerpiece of the Corps, how we recruit, train them, instill in them our core values and a sense of integrity and accountability, equip them to do their jobs and treat them with dignity and care and concern must be our principle interest.

General Charles. C. Krulak
31st Marine Corps Commandant ⁱ

Introduction

For Marines, accomplishing the mission is the most important task. The events of September 11, 2001, and the current war on terrorism have fundamentally changed the minds of our nation's young men and women and their outlook on military service. Recruiting undergraduates to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS) and then serve as company grade officers has remained a difficult challenge that Officer Selection Officers (OSO) must meet annually. Each year, OSOs are given a mission to fill OCS Platoon Leaders Course (PLC) slots. As a result of PLC attrition, this annual mission is steadily increasing. OCS attrition usually is a result of candidates dropping on request (DOR), because of poor physical fitness skills, from a loss of interest in the program,ⁱⁱ irresolvable medical issues, or poor leadership skills. For the Marine Corps to achieve their desired graduation rate and maintain a steady PLC mission, Officer Selection officers must be more involved in

candidate preparation and make more of an effort to screen candidates prior to shipping them off to OCS.

The problem and causes

For the Marine Corps, the Officer Selection Officer (OSO) is the primary means of achieving the desired officer accessions mission. Year after year, OSOs face a grueling challenge of finding qualified men and women to attend and undergo the rigorous screening process at OCS. Year after year, Marine Corps OSOs are successful amidst the steep competition of corporate America and the other uniformed services. However, because the OSOs focus is on recruitment, he is narrowly focused on candidate preparation and candidates are dropping from OCS before they have a chance to be properly trained, screened and evaluated. For example, in the first half of 2004, forty-seven of 575 PLC candidates were dropped for poor physical fitness or for a lack of interest in the program.ⁱⁱⁱ The second PLC increment in 2004 witnessed thirty-five candidate drops out of 673 candidates in just the first week of training for the same reasons.^{iv} In the fourth week of the second increment, another twenty-two candidates dropped out. Candidates who drop out of OCS for physical fitness reasons do so because they do not have the

necessary endurance, upper body strength or stamina to carry out physical training requirements.^v Candidates, who left OCS claiming a lack of interest in the program, complained that OCS was not what they expected it to be. As a result of PLC attrition, the Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) increases the OSO's mission the following year to meet accession requirements.

The result is a ferocious cycle as OSOs then feel additional pressure to recruit candidates. Although some of the PLC attrition rates can be attributed to injury, injuries make up a small percentage of the candidates who drop out of OCS. Although injuries are unpreventable and cannot be controlled by OSOs, OSOs can take action to reduce attrition due to lack of physical fitness preparedness and disinterest in the program by better preparing their candidates for the rigors of OCS and fully disclosing its challenging nature. While successful candidates will possess the maturity to physically and mentally prepare themselves for OCS, the OSOs should be coaching, motivating and evaluating them as they prepare to attend OCS.

MCRC's Pool Order

Although OSOs are under extreme pressure to reach their recruiting mission, this pressure is only intensified when candidates drop out of OCS for relatively simple issues that could be alleviated prior to acceptance to OCS. Once an OSO sends a candidate to OCS and the candidate passes the initial PFT, the OSO receives a check in the box towards accomplishing his recruiting mission. As a result, for many OSOs, their goal is set at getting the candidate through the initial PFT. The 2003 revised MCRC Pool order, is vague, and does not provide guidance on candidate preparation.^{vi} According to MCRC, "the intent of the pool program is designed to promote enlisted referrals and officer prospects (positively affecting productivity) reducing delayed entry program (DEP) attrition (positively affecting both production and shipping) amplify and reinforce the pool concept and complement procedures".

While there are some OSOs that have organized programs that allow them to send candidates to OCS prepared to succeed, the attrition rate at OCS makes it clear that the majority of OSOs focus only on the initial OCS PFT rather than preparing their candidates for the rigors of OCS. In order to ensure that all candidates checking into OCS will

be adequately prepared to attend the school, the Marine Corps should implement a set standard (similar to the individual training standards) by which OSOs can evaluate candidates.

A life style change

Most individuals who contact OSOs have seen the commercials, read the pamphlets and heard the stories from others who have experienced the training. They expected to be taken out of their comfort zones and are prepared to make a lifestyle change. Therefore, the OSO and his Officer Selection Assistant (OSA) really only need to play an active role in preparing the candidate for success at OCS by establishing schedules for PT, periods of instruction, and formal and informal counseling with each candidate in the program. By running PT sessions that model the format of daily PT at OCS, for example basic warm-ups, stretches and exercise combined with a formation run around campus followed by stair work, OSOs will be doing their part to not only recruit OCS candidates, but also to ensure their success at OCS.

Corrective action

The MCRC Pool order needs a little overhauling and a lot of reinforcing. The mission of the current MCRC Pool order is to reduce OCS attrition. Based on the high PLC attrition rates, this is clearly not happening. In order to satisfy the mission, OSOs must be willing to dedicate time to developing the candidates they are recommending to the program. Attending OCS is an experience unlike any other and military service is a serious lifestyle change. The start of that change begins with the OSO prior to attending OCS.

Conclusion

Raising our graduation rates in the PLC program to a more desired percentage is not solely an OCS responsibility. OCS has made a clear effort to reduce not physically qualified (NPQ) attrition and its fair to say those results are being seen each summer.^{vii} They have also implemented new measures to motivate candidates while in training. That is still not enough. It's also not enough for OSOs to tell a student to run daily and eat a balance meal. The OSOs have to show them, coach them and evaluate them through

observation. OSOs must provide informal and formal instruction on character development, such as building mental and physical toughness; which starts in the Pool OSOs have to genuinely care and have a hand in the candidates over all preparedness prior to attending OCS. To start this MCRC must get on board and revised the Pool order so it clearly outlines how OSOs should prepare candidates. They also need to provide finances that will support the OSOs pool program so those programs can be more productive and motivating for the student.

¹ General Charles C. Krulak, Commandant's Planning Guidance, headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C., 1 July 1995,

² Weekly Officer Candidate Status Reports, Officer Candidate School, Quantico Va., 4 June 2004- 20 August 2004

³ Weekly Officer Candidate Status Reports, Officer Candidate School, Quantico Va., 31 May 2004- 09 July 2004

⁴ Weekly Officer Candidate Status Report, Officer Candidate School, Quantico Va., 16 July 2004

⁵ Gunnery Sergeant Angel Menendez, MCRC Liaison Officer, Officer Candidate School, Quantico, Va., interviewed by author, 9 December 2004

⁶ Marine Corps Recruiting Command Order 1133.1A, National Pool Program, Marine Corps Recruiting Command, Quantico, Va., 1 March 2003

⁷ Colonel Louis N. Rachal, Commanding Officer, Officer Candidate School, Quantico, Va., interviewed by author, 13 December 2004.

Biography

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⁶ Marine Corps Recruiting Command Order 1133.1A, National Pool Program, Marine Corps Recruiting Command, Quantico, Va., 1 March 2003

^{vii} Colonel Louis N. Rachal, Commanding Officer, Officer Candidate School, Quantico, Va., interviewed by author, 13 December 2004.