

Why is our Strategic NCO so Young?  
EWS Contemporary Issue Paper  
Submitted by Captain C. J. Carbone  
to  
Major P. M. Bragg, CG 4  
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## INTRODUCTION

It is early morning and a Marine squad is patrolling the streets in a small Iraqi town. The squad is tired of fighting an invincible enemy and being blown up by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The sergeant leading the patrol devises a plan to kidnap and kill a local Iraqi man. The squad of eight men, follow through with the plan, and then plant evidence at the scene to make it look like the Iraqi man was emplacing an IED. Although, this is not a real scenario, it is not far from the facts revealed in the Hamandiyah trial that concluded in August 2007.

Today, young, inexperienced Marines are making decisions at the tactical level that have strategic implications for the nation. General Charles Krulak, in a 1999 Gazette Article, coined the term "strategic corporal." Current and future conflicts will be won or lost at the small unit level by the decisions of the "strategic NCO." The current conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan require small unit leaders to operate independently farther away from their battalions, companies and even platoons.

According to General Krulak, "In order to succeed under such demanding conditions, they (small unit leaders) will require unwavering maturity, judgment, and strength of character. More importantly, these missions will require them

(NCOs) to confidently make well-reasoned decisions under extreme stress-decisions that will likely be subject to the harsh scrutiny of both the media and the court of public opinion."<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to expect a nineteen-year-old corporal, with fewer than two years Marine Corps experience, to be successful in the environment described by General Krulak. Yet today Marines are being promoted too fast at the lower ranks because of inflated proficiency and conduct marks. In order to ensure privates through corporal are not promoted prematurely, officers should be required to maintain a bell curve when assigning proficiency and conduct marks.

## **BACKGROUND**

### Promotions

For many military occupational specialties (MOSs), time-in-service no longer carries the weight in promotions as it did in the past. Accelerated promotions are the result of operational tempo and increasing manpower requirements that are expected to continue over the next five years. In fiscal year 2007, the Center of Naval Analysis reported that sixteen out of twenty-eight MOSs had the lowest number of months required for promotion to corporal in eight years. In fiscal year 2007,

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<sup>1</sup> Krulak, Charles C. "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War." Marine Corps Gazette 83.1 (1999): pg 18.  
<<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=38038683&Fmt=7&clientId=65345&RQT=309&VName=PQD>>. Accessed 10 December 2007

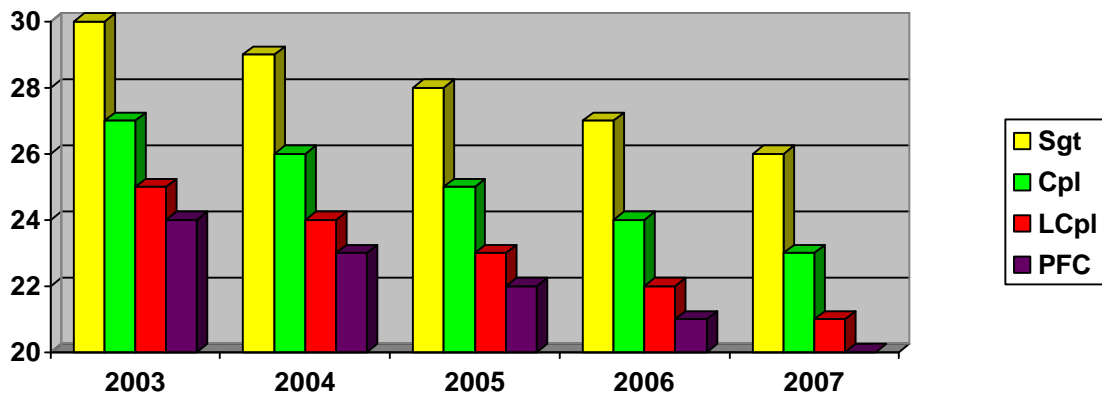
eleven out of twenty-five MOS reported the lowest number of months required for promotion to sergeant in eight years.<sup>2</sup>

Months to Promotion to Corporal					
PMOS	Job Title	04	05	06	07
0431	Logistics/embarkation and combat service support specialist	31	28	27	23
0651	Data network specialist	30	29	29	25
1833	Assault amphibian vehicle crewman	33	29	26	26
3043	Supply administration and operations clerk	33	30	24	21
6672	Aviation supply specialist	31	25	22	22

Months to Promotion to Sergeant					
PMOS	Job Title	04	05	06	07
0311	Rifleman	51	50	51	47
0621	Field Radio Operator	50	47	41	42
3043	Supply administration and operations clerk	54	54	47	40
0651	Data Network Specialist	54	51	45	41

Source: Center for Naval Analysis 2007

In fact the average age of the Marine Corps non-commissioned officer (NCO) has declined dramatically over the last four years. According to Manpower and Reserve Affairs, the average age of a sergeant in 2007 is 26, and a corporal is 23. Conversely, in 2003, the average age of a sergeant was 30 and a corporal was 27.<sup>3</sup>



Source: Manpower & Reserve Affairs

<sup>2</sup> Bretschneider, John, "Growing Pains Is Maturity taking a Backseat in Swelling NCO Ranks?" Marine Corps Times, 26 Nov 2007: p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Data obtained from Manpower and Reserve Affairs, Nasim Mohammad on 13 December 2007

## Methodology

The Marine Corps' guide to assigning proficiency and conduct marks is outlined in Marine Corps Order P1070.12K with Change 1, to the Individual Records Administration Manual (IRAM). When commanders assign proficiency marks, the IRAM states, "The mark should indicate how well a Marine performed the primary duty during the marking period. In addition to technical skills and specialized knowledge, relating to duty proficiency marks, the 'whole Marine concept' must be considered. Such attributes as mission accomplishment, leadership, intellect and wisdom, individual character, physical fitness, personal appearance, and completion of professional military education, Marine Corps Institute courses, and off duty education should also be evaluated and incorporated into the duty proficiency mark."<sup>4</sup> When assigning conduct marks, the IRAM states, "In addition to observance of the letter of law and regulations, conduct includes conformance to accepted usage and custom, and positive contributions to unit and Corps. General bearing, attitude, interest, reliability, courtesy, cooperation, obedience, adaptability, influence on others, moral fitness, physical fitness as effected by clean and temperate habits, and participation in unit activities not related directly to unit

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<sup>4</sup> United States Marine Corps. Marine Corps Order P1070.12K W/CH 1. Marine Corps Individual Records Administration Manual (IRAM). 14 July 2000. <http://www.usmc.mil/directiv.nsf/55fdafde3f044b0585256bd40066708b/8cc4b8f60d653fda852569770048df10?OpenDocument>. Accessed 12 December 2007.

mission, are all factors of conduct and should be considered in evaluating the Marine.”<sup>5</sup>

**IRAM**

Guide to Assigning Conduct Marks

Mark	Corresponding Adjective	Standards of Conducts
0 to 1.9	Unsatisfactory	Habitual offender; Conviction by general, special; or more than one summary court-martial; A mark of "0" shall be given upon declaration of desertion Ordered to confinement pursuant to sentence of court-martial. Two or more punitive reductions in grade.
2.0 to 2.9	Poor	No special court-martial; Not more than one summary court-martial. Not more than two non judicial punishments, punitive reduction in grade.
3.0 to 3.9	Fair	No court-martial, not more than one non-judicial punishment. No unfavorable impressions of the qualities listed in the current edition of MCO P1070.12. Conduct such as not to impair appreciably one's usefulness or the efficiency of the command but conduct not sufficient to merit an honorable discharge.
4.0 to 4.4	Good	No offenses. No unfavorable impressions as to attitude, interest, cooperation, obedience, after effects of intemperance, courtesy and considerations, and observance of regulations.
4.5 to 4.8	Excellent	No offenses. Positive favorable impressions as to the qualities listed in the current edition of MCO P1070.12. Demonstrated reliability good influence, sobriety, obedience, and industry.
4.9 to 5.0	Outstanding	No offenses. Exhibits to an outstanding degree the qualities listed in the current edition of MCO P1070.12. Observes spirit as well as letter of orders and regulations. Demonstrated positive effect on others by example and persuasion.

GUIDE TO ASSIGNING PROFICIENCY MARKS

Mark	Corresponding Adjective	Standards of Conducts
0 to 1.9	Unsatisfactory	Does unacceptable work in most of duties, generally undependable, needs considerable assistance and close supervision on even the simplest assignment
2.0 to 2.9	Poor	Does acceptable work in some duties, but cannot be depended upon. Needs assistance and close supervision on all but the simplest assignments.
3.0 to 3.9	Fair	Handles routine matters acceptably but needs close supervision performing duties not of a routine nature.
4.0 to 4.4	Good	Can be depended upon to discharge regular duties thoroughly and competently but usually needs assistance in dealing with problems not of a routine nature.
4.5 to 4.8	Excellent	Does excellent work in all regular duties, but needs assistance in dealing with extremely difficult or unusual assignments.
4.9 to 5.0	Outstanding	Does superior work in all duties. Even extremely difficult or unusual assignments can be given with full confidence that they will be handled in a thoroughly competent manner.

Source: IRAM 2000

<sup>5</sup> Marine Corps Order P1070.12K W/CH 1.

## Reality

Unfortunately, many company-grade officers do not understand how to assign proficiency and conduct marks properly. Platoon commanders and company commanders often do not read the IRAM prior to assigning proficiency and conduct marks; they just agree with the recommendation of their platoon sergeant or first sergeant. Furthermore, some commanders believe the majority of their Marines are excellent. However, according to IRAM standards, the majority of Marines are between a 4.0 and 4.4 in both proficiency and conduct. Obviously, commanders need to read and understand the standards set forth in the IRAM to prevent inflated marks and accelerated promotions.

Accelerated promotions could have devastating effects on the Marine Corps' success in the twenty-first century battle. Young, inexperienced NCOs will not have the maturity and/or experience to operate independently in today's complex environments. Moreover, without appropriate leadership training, the Marine Corps is setting its fire team and squad leaders up for failure.

## **PROPOSED PRACTICES**

### Bell Curve

When assigning proficiency and conduct marks, officers should be required to maintain a bell curve. Using this



methodology, commanders will be able to mark only 25% of their Marines above 4.4.

Mark	Corresponding Adjective	Percentage of Marines Reported On
4.5 to 4.8	Excellent	20%
4.9 to 5.0	Outstanding	5%

Further, commanders would not be required to meet the percentage allotted. For example, a company commander of one-hundred may have only 15 Marines in the "excellent" category even though he or she is authorized to rank 20 Marines as "excellent." However, he/she would not be allowed to exceed the prescribed allotment: On the contrary, the same commander would not be allowed to have more than five Marines in the outstanding category.

### COUNTERARGUMENTS

#### Small Units

Opponents would argue that requiring officers to maintain a bell curve when assigning proficiency and conduct marks will not work for small and/or specialized units. For example, the average proficiency and conduct marks for Marines who are part of the Marine Security Detachment at Camp David may be 4.8 proficiency and 4.8 conduct. Why should these outstanding Marines, serving in a prestigious unit, be penalized because the commander is required to maintain a bell curve? These Marines

will not be penalized. As with anything in the Marine Corps, exceptions are made. Commanders in any unit are authorized to deviate from the bell curve as long as they receive approval from his or her battalion/squadron commander.

### Retention

In the wars of the twenty-first century, the Marine Corps must retain quality Marines. The experience of these young Marines is irreplaceable as the United States continues with the Global War on Terrorism. As was once said, "The wars of the future are not going to be the son of Desert Storm, but the stepchild of Chechnya." Young Marines, particularly NCOs, are going to play a critical role in the success of future conflicts.

Marines are not retained in the Marine Corps because of salary, or the amount of time they can spend with their families. Although gaps between military and civilian wages have decreased during the Bush Administration, a significant difference exists in terms of salary. At the same time, the number of deployments an infantry Marine makes in one enlistment has tripled since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Marines stay in the Marine Corps because they love being a Marine and believe in protecting the rights and freedoms of this country.

Increased pay and leadership responsibilities are benefits for Marines who progress through the ranks. However, promotions

are not the only way to reward Marines for their quality performance. Billet assignments, special duty assignment pay, and re-enlistment bonuses are ways to increase the pay and responsibility of Marines, without promoting them to the next rank.

### War

Marines adhere to the belief that premature promotions are to be expected at a "time of war." They claim young, inexperienced Marines have experienced accelerated promotions and have been forced into leadership billets during times of war. However, accelerated promotions during wartime were necessary due to combat losses. Although the military is suffering casualties on a daily basis around the world, it is small in comparison to the wars of the past. The total number of personnel killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom totals 3,893 as of 17 December 2007. In contrast, during the World War II battle for Iwo Jima, United States forces suffered 26,000 casualties of which 6,800 Americans were deaths.

### Precedent

Finally, some opponents refer to newly appointed lieutenants as a precedent. However, newly commissioned Marine officers receive a minimum of thirty-two weeks of specialized training at both Officer Candidate School, and The Basic School

before they are assigned to lead Marines. At The Basic School, officers receive 932.6 hours of classroom instruction and 632.5 field hours.<sup>6</sup> After successfully completing The Basic School, each lieutenant is required to attend additional training focused on their military occupational specialty (MOS) in order to prepare him or her for future command. MOS schools range anywhere from three months to two years.

No similarities exist between officer promotions and promotions based on time in service. The average number of months in service required for a supply administration and operations clerk to reach the rank of corporal is twenty-one months. The average number of months in service for that same Marine to reach the rank of sergeant is 40 months.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, in 2007 the average number of months for an officer to advance four ranks was 134 months.<sup>8</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Junior Marines are being promoted too fast. The Marine Corps Order P1070.12K W/CH 1, along with the Commandant's guidance,

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<sup>6</sup>The Basic School. TBS Command Brief.

<<http://www.tecom.usmc.mil/tbs/pages/Command%20Brief/CB.ppt>>. Accessed 12 December 2007

<sup>7</sup>Bretschneider, John

<sup>8</sup> United States Marine Corps. Manpower and Reserve Affairs. FY07 USMC Major Selection Board.

<[https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/M\\_RA\\_HOME/MM/PR/MMPRI/MMPRI\\_PROMOTION\\_BOARDS/FY07\\_MMPRI\\_PROMOTION\\_BOARDS/ACTIVE\\_FY07\\_MMPRI\\_PROMOTION\\_BOARDS/FY07%20-%20ACTIVE%20-%20MAJOR/FY07%20USMC%20MAJOR%20STATS.PDF](https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/M_RA_HOME/MM/PR/MMPRI/MMPRI_PROMOTION_BOARDS/FY07_MMPRI_PROMOTION_BOARDS/ACTIVE_FY07_MMPRI_PROMOTION_BOARDS/FY07%20-%20ACTIVE%20-%20MAJOR/FY07%20USMC%20MAJOR%20STATS.PDF)> Accessed 17 December 2007.

provides officers the necessary information to assign proficiency and conduct marks accurately to his or her Marines. However, due to a lack of training and understanding, officers are inadvertently inflating proficiency and conduct marks resulting in accelerated promotions. As a consequence, the Corps is forcing young Marines who do not have the maturity, experience, or leadership training to make split-second decisions on the battlefield that have strategic implications. More importantly, the decisions these young Marines make often result in life or death. The Marine Corps prides itself on small unit leadership and decentralized control. However, Marines require training, education, and experience to be prepared for the difficulties of leadership. Because of inflated proficiency and conduct marks, unprepared Marines are being promoted and forced into leadership billets. In order to ensure Marines are not promoted prematurely, officers should be required to maintain a bell curve when assigning proficiency and conduct marks. After all, the strategic NCO will ultimately determine America's success in conflicts around the world.

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