

Officer Staffing in Reserve Infantry Battalions
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INTRODUCTION

"Companies were great, battalions were marginal, and regiments were useless"¹ declared Lieutenant General Boomer, Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) Commander during Operation Desert Storm, on his evaluation of the Selected Marine Corps Reserve's (SMCR) performance. The SMCR infantry is modeled after an active duty infantry division in its table of organization. Successes at company and below levels and marginal performances at battalion and higher levels indicate a problem that continues to haunt the Marine Corps today. SMCR infantry units are not properly staffed at the officer level but need to be if they are expected to perform the same missions as active duty units.

BACKGROUND

"From a training perspective, the current Reserve Structure is neither effective nor efficient.... current Reserve structure is not ensuring combat ready units at the battalion and above level. This begs the question of why reserve infantry structure should mirror active infantry structure?"² In theory SMCR infantry companies and battalions are to be staffed by officers coming off active duty with a minimum of three to four years service. Officers will normally hold reserve billets one rank

¹ Cancian, Mark Col (USMC), Marine Forces Reserve in Operation OIF Lesson Learned by Reserve Combat Assessment team. VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Center, 2003. Pg 53.

² Smicock, R.L. Maj (USMC), "Selected Marine Corps Reserve Infantry Restructure: Battalion versus Company". Command and Staff College thesis paper: 1996. pg 17

lower than their actual rank, compared with active duty units. Because of their active duty time and normal promotions reserve platoon commanders are usually captains and company commanders usually majors.

Billets are intended to be filled by the appropriate military occupational specialty (MOS). If an officer joins a reserve battalion and does not have the appropriate MOS, he is supposed to attend the Infantry Officer's Course (IOC).

In reality senior first lieutenants or junior captains leaving active duty and attempting to establish themselves in civilian life usually opt not to join the active reserve initially. They have most likely deployed two to three times and are not interested in joining the active reserves. Some eventually join the reserves after some time focusing on their family and civilian careers. However, since their promotions are not on hold they come to the reserves as senior captains or majors, effectively flooding the reserve infantry battalions with officers of these ranks.

The officers who are non-infantry who join a reserve infantry battalion and attend IOC have a basic infantry unit employment understanding as any second lieutenant would. What they do not have is the peer guidance of fellow platoon commanders, seasoned staff noncommissioned officers and time to practice their trade. The transition from IOC to the infantry

battalion for the active duty second lieutenant works because of the established support structure inside an active duty infantry company and his being immersed in his trade on a daily basis, and not limited to just one weekend a month and two weeks a year.³

CURRENT STAFFING

In support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), reserve infantry battalions have been deployed and continue to deploy in support of the active duty MEF. During this almost five year period of war these reserve battalions have begun to be augmented by active duty officers. Some of this Individual augmentation is due to the number of deployments being made and a lack of reserve officers volunteering to deploy multiple times. Some of this is also a reflection of lessons learned from costly mistakes on the battlefield. To fill these SMCR gaps with qualified officers the Marine Corps has sought volunteers from active duty infantry officers on their supporting establishment tour. This was a successful short term fix for 1st Battalion, 25 Marines and 1st battalion 24th Marines in their successive deployments in 2006 and 2007. Gaps were filled by volunteers who typically had deployed previously for OIF I and then moved on to their supporting establishment tour or had missed a deployment to OIF completely. The Marine Corps had a

³ Osterman, Col (USMC). Personal interview conducted 28 November 2007

group of infantry officers in the supporting establishment who felt they had missed a portion or all of the fight and wanted to share the burden with the officers in the fleet. This solution was short term however, because the officers replacing these individual augments on their supporting establishment tours were now officers coming off at least two to three combat tours and not as eager to volunteer for another deployment.

The Marine Corps then began to ask for volunteers and in some cases "voluntold" lieutenants in the fleet by directing infantry and Light Armored Infantry battalions to provide deploying reserve battalions with platoon commanders. Essentially the Marine Corps robbed Peter to pay Paul, adversely affecting the cohesiveness of active duty battalions and providing the reserve units only a short term boost. Although such an assignment could be thought of as a broadening opportunity for a young infantry officer it becomes another stressor for his family and requires even more time away from home depending on that officer's unit location and where the reserve battalion will conduct its workups.

PROPOSED STAFFING

One answer to this problem would be sending active duty second lieutenants directly to reserve companies for 12 to 18 month tours depending on that unit's deployment cycle. This would provide a reserve company with the appropriate number of

qualified officers. However, staffing with second lieutenants would provide for little, if any, continuity post deployment. In addition no senior lieutenant peer leadership would be available from inside the battalion. Such actions would not follow the recipe for success that the Marine Corps has used with its newly minted infantry officers. Where there is a support structure with a seasoned company commander at least one, if not two, senior first lieutenants and several staff noncommissioned officers to guide the young officers. Another factor is the additional cost to the Marine Corps with an added permanent change of station (PCS) move.⁴

Another solution would be to limit the scope of operations for SMCR infantry battalions. Realizing their inherent training and staffing limitations, their mission essential task list could be tailored, taking better advantage of limited training time by focusing efforts. This could also relieve some of the need for officers with training and expertise in all aspects of the spectrum of warfare. However, this solution does not really fit with the intent of the SMCR, with their mission to "augment and reinforce active duty units when and where required"⁵. This would, in fact, limit flexibility and would not reflect how the SMCR has been employed historically.

⁴ Osterman, Col (USMC). Personal interview conducted 28 November 2007

⁵ Smicoek, R.L. Maj (USMC), "Selected Marine Corps Reserve Infantry Restructure: Battalion versus Company". Command and Staff College thesis paper: 1996. pg 1

An increase in the inspector and instructor staff and more integration of these active duty officers for each SMCR infantry unit is another answer. Requiring each battalion to have command screened or appropriate career-level schooling billet holders to include an active duty commanding officer, operations officer and supply officer. With each reserve infantry company having an active duty company commander and executive officer. All of these officers would train with and deploy with the battalion and serve two to three tours in these billets.

In order to fill all nine battalions in the three reserve regiments this increase of the inspector instructor staff would require approximately 63 more active duty officers. With the 202k buildup of Marine forces in progress and new units to include Ninth Marine Regiment being staffed this is not a feasible solution at this time. This solution would also take command positions away from reservists and would likely decrease the number of reserve officers who would volunteer to stick around given no hope of command.

Another solution, suggested by Colonel Simcock II, would be to integrate the SMCR into the active force at the company level, thereby promoting habitual relationships at both the command level and support level.⁶ SMCR battalion and regimental

⁶ Smicock, R.L. Maj (USMC), "Selected Marine Corps Reserve Infantry Restructure: Battalion versus Company". Command and Staff College thesis paper: 1996. pg 41

staffs would be disbanded, freeing up valuable manpower to serve elsewhere. Marine Forces Reserve would retain administrative control over the SMCR companies; however tactical employment would be controlled by the acquiring active duty battalion and regiment giving each active duty battalion a fourth maneuver unit.

On the negative side, this could have some fairly serious second and third order effects. In the current operating environment this solution would give each battalion added Marines on the deck in the form of a fourth rifle company, but it would take away a battalion size maneuver element for the MEF and increase the frequency of deployments for active duty battalions. Weapons company and headquarters and support company Marines would be required to be folded into the rifle companies and become provisional riflemen. This would mean a serious lack of heavy weapons fire power in the reserves and would also mean reserve infantry units could not operate truly independently on a conventional battlefield. Similar to the previous solution, this could also hurt the retention of reserve officers who would have little to no chance of higher command.

CONCLUSION

The Marine Corps has a problem on their hands that has been documented for some time. Lieutenant General Boomer's comments in the introduction date this issue back to at least the Gulf

War. This lack of qualified infantry officers in each reserve infantry battalion has cost lives in Iraq and the Marine Corps has merely plugged the hole in the dyke with its finger. The current solution has worked to the extent of providing qualified active duty officers to deploy with SMCR battalions and has helped reduce casualties. However, the long term effects of pulling officers from their active duty units on the individual officers, active duty units, and reserve units is not clearly known. A long term solution is needed that ensures that reserve infantry battalions will be ready to augment the active duty forces, without having to scramble for leadership prior to deployment.

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