# First-Term Data Marines:

## Operating Forces or Supporting Establishment

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## Introduction

Since the arrival of the Navy and Marine Corps Intranet (NMCI) on 6 October 2000, [1] data communication Marines have experienced a loss of responsibility with regard to daily computer network operations activities.  The civilianization of the Marine Corps' garrison computer networks has relieved data communication Marines of the day-to-day responsibilities of computer network operations and administration to the extent that their skills are atrophying.  Skills such as router configuration, domain controller configuration, and Internet Protocol (IP) addressing are perishable skills that are suffering in the supporting establishment.

Consequently, assignment to a supporting establishment command, post-NMCI, will degrade their technical proficiency and tactical development.  Marines assigned to the associated occupational specialties (MOS) should begin their careers with a unit in the operating forces.

## Background

Throughout the Marine Corps, the arrival of the NMCI has resulted in data communication Marine responsibilities being limited to basic help-desk support functions; initiating

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[1] MARADMIN 504/00

trouble-tickets for customer support, entering "new-joins" into a central database for the NMCI technicians, and collecting unit computer asset information for future transition and technology refresh.

Before NMCI

Before the NMCI project began, data communication Marines were responsible for all networks, tactical *and* garrison; supporting establishment *and* operating forces.  Their tasks included domain administration, router and switch configuration and troubleshooting, end-user desktop support, network design, and communication center operations involving classified message handling.  Consequently, the way the Marine Corps operated its network domains before NMCI resulted in many domains across the Corps, which provided data communication Marines abundant opportunities for skill development and progression.  In fact, Marines handled the day-to-day management of the entire network and felt an enormous sense of responsibility, accomplishment and job satisfaction.  Marines were doing the jobs they enlisted to do, and they were good at it.

However, data communication Marines were separating from the Marine Corps after their initial enlistment in order to pursue more lucrative opportunities as civilian network administrators.  For example, the estimated total compensation

package for a Network Administrator III in Raleigh, North Carolina is $96,456.00.[2] Since this was a drain on the non-commissioned officer corps, the amount of knowledge and experience they possessed was lost to the Corps. This problem was mitigated, however, by Marines proficient and eager to fill the void left by the sergeants and corporals.

<u>Post NMCI</u>

The outsourcing of Marine Corps network management has resulted in the loss of data network management skills in the data communication field. Highly skilled, motivated, and capable data communication Marines have been relegated to performing help-desk functions such as trouble-ticket submissions. Marines no longer have domain administrator rights or access to network hardware. They are no longer able to provide timely response to the end-user, specifically the commanding officer, at his/her workstation, as they no longer have administrative rights to the computer itself. Understandably this is a source of extreme frustration for both the customer and the Marines that once performed these tasks.

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[2] Network Administrator III
Sets up, configures, and supports internal and/or external networks. Develops and maintains all systems, applications, security, and network configurations. Troubleshoots network performance issues and creates and maintains a disaster recovery plan. Recommends upgrades, patches, and new applications and equipment. Provides technical support and guidance to users. May require a bachelor's degree in area of specialty and 4-6 years of experience in the field or in a related area. *Salary.com, HR Report February 2009*

The only place data communications Marines can now receive any

hands-on experience is in the Local Control Center (LCC),

formerly known as the Communications Center, aboard

installations in the supporting establishment.  While the main

role of the LCC is to handle classified message traffic, it is

also the hub for the Secure Internet Protocol Router (SIPR)

Network.  Installation communication department heads have to

assign data Marines to the LCC in order to ensure they receive

some hands-on work with data network assets such as switches,

routers, and end-user workstations.  The SIPRNet has not, and

will not, transition to NMCI control.[3]

While the Marines are able to maintain some sense of

proficiency, the duties performed on the limited SIPRNet assets

pale in comparison to the Non-Secure Internet Protocol Router

(NIPR) Network.  For example, three percent of Marine Corps Air

Station Beaufort's computer assets actually reside on the

SIPRNet.[4]  To compound the problem, many of these assets are

technologically obsolete, resulting in outdated skill sets, the

reality of which will be readily apparent in a tactical

environment.

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[3] ASN RDA memo to ACMC 30 Oct 07 USMC NMCI SIPRNET 006
[4] Author served MCAS Beaufort, SC S-6 Department Head, October 2005 –
June 2008

According to Mary Broad and John Newstrom in their book *Transfer of Training*, "the most significant barrier in the eyes of trainers is the lack of reinforcement on the job to support trainees in applying training to their jobs".[5] Upon reporting to their first duty station, these new Marines are only basically trained, and as such they need continuous real-world application of what they were taught in MOS school.  With the centralization and civilianization of the Marine Corps Enterprise Network, these new data Marines are receiving very little to no on the job reinforcement of the knowledge gained at Twenty Nine Palms.

## Assignment to the Operating Force

General Conway directed Marine Corps leadership to, "…initiate policies to ensure all Marine, first-termers and career Marines alike, are provide the opportunity to deploy to a combat zone."[6]  By assigning first-term Marines to the supporting establishment, whether to a base, post, station, or school, the Commandant's intent is not being met.

An example of this can be seen in the direct support platoon at the Marine Corps Basic Communication Officer Course in Qauntico.  Over an 18-month period, approximately thirty percent of the table of organization of the sixty-Marine platoon

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[5] Society for Human Resource Management. 1997.  *The SHRM Learning System: An Educational Resource for Today's HR Professional,* 86.
[6] ALMAR 002/07

was filled by first-term Marines.[7]  Most of the data

communication Marines were directly from entry-level MOS

training in Twenty Nine Palms, CA.  Several problems exist with

this arrangement.  First, these new Marines assist in the

training of brand new second lieutenants being trained as basic

communication officers.  The new data Marines, while no doubt

intelligent, have very little practical knowledge of the

equipment they are "teaching".  Because the entry-level data

communication Marine curriculum is approximately ninety-five

percent commercial,[8] exposure to tactical data networking

equipment is minimal.

In 2007, while serving as MCAS Beaufort S-6 department

head, this author nominated two NCOs to fill individual augment

(IA) billets in Kosovo and Djibouti.  These assignments occurred

several months apart.  Although the department would be short-

handed, it was more important to provide these Marines with the

opportunity to apply their knowledge in an operational

environment.  Due in large part to their experiences overseas,

both NCOs have re-enlisted.

In another example one second-term Marine sergeant who had

been assigned to the air station for 6 years, had never

deployed.  A senior sergeant, who was promoted to staff sergeant

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[7] DS Platoon T/O
[8] B Co, MCCESS Curriculum

near the end of this tour, was also on his second contract and had yet to deploy. His two assignments to date had been to installation commands. In both cases, the sergeant and staff sergeant had been in the Marine Corps six and eight years respectively, and had no practical knowledge of a tactical network. Yet upon transfer to the operating forces, they would immediately be expected to assume leadership responsibilities at their new commands. Their assignments to the supporting establishment in their first *and* second terms placed them at a significant disadvantage once they were transferred to the operating forces. As a Marine Corps at war, the Commandant has made dwell time a priority. Supporting establishment tours should be mainly reserved for those that have made multiple deployments to the combat zone.

<div align="center">Counterargument</div>

Opponents to this recommendation would likely assert that it would be neither possible nor practical to only assign second-term NCOs to the supporting establishment. First, it would require a massive, Corps-wide overhaul of the Table of Organization (T/O) at each command. The Table of Organization and Equipment Change Request (TOECR) process is generally considered a "painful" process that could take years to resolve for a single line number change.

This fact alone is enough of a deterrent for most to simply leave the T/Os as they are.

The other primary argument against such a drastic T/O change would be that if only second-term Marines are assigned to the supporting establishment, then only NCOs would receive these assignments. This arrangement would only serve to hinder the personal development of each NCO, as they would be "leading" their peers. Senior NCOs would likely have fewer leadership challenges to deal with. Without E-3s and below, sergeants and corporals would be missing out on a critical phase in their development as leaders of Marines. Without the presence of Privates, Privates First Class, and Lance Corporals, these NCOs will no doubt become more and more inwardly-focused, and they will lose whatever leadership skills they have learned to date.

## Conclusion

All first-term Marines, particularly 065x Marines, should be assigned to the operating forces as a first duty station, particularly if NMCI or other outsourced networks exist. While responsibilities will likely still be limited in the fleet, these Marines will at least receive hands-on sustainment training during communications exercises, and/or real-world

application in Iraq, Afghanistan, or the Horn of Africa.

Marines are going to learn the most about the Marine Corps at their first duty station.  By assigning first-term data Marines to the supporting establishment, the Corps is setting them up for failure as NCOs as they finally rotate into the operating forces.  The first duty station is where the first-term Marines must be able to immediately apply what they have learned in occupational specialty school.

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