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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

***Marine Corps Officer Promotions: Reinforcing Timeless Characteristics and Modifying
Existing Policy and Procedures to Dominate in Complex Environments***

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Executive Summary

Title: Marine Corps Officer Promotions: Reinforcing Timeless Characteristics and Modifying Existing Policy and Procedure to Dominate in Complex Environments

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Thesis: To ensure the Marine Corps retains and promotes those officers prepared for the next challenging environments, we should examine and modify existing employment of officer promotion and retention processes which currently allow little room for non-traditional career paths, and frequently penalize officers who have completed technically specialized or culturally broadening tours at the cost of demonstrating primary MOS proficiency.

Discussion: Current Marine Corps evaluation systems and processes are in need of adjustment in order to ensure the Corps remains able to attract and retain highly-qualified citizens to fulfill positions as officers, especially as the operating environment continues to evolve and increase in complexity. The foundational qualities of a good officer that have endured over time, the recognition of the need for a competent and modern professional officer corps, and the encouragement of educational practices conducive to initiative and flexibility, all provide some historical guidance of the mix of old and new necessary for cultivating talent and encouraging initiative in a military that adapts readily to change. As senior leaders have identified, the current system of evaluations and promotions, though not broken, may be in need of refinement in order to ensure that the Marine Corps remains the flexible and expeditionary force that the nation has relied upon since its inception in 1775.

Conclusion: Existing systems and process are functioning, but leave room for improvement in order to maximize efficiency. At the same time, the classical foundational traits of officers, especially focused on character, must continue to be reinforced in order for the Corps to continue to succeed in winning our nation's battles. By embracing those who have broadened skills beyond their primary occupational specialty and simultaneously reinforcing the timeless qualities essential in an officer, the Marine Corps will posture itself for success in the uncertain but challenging future environment.

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Preface

I would like to thank most importantly Dr. Anne-Louise Antonoff for her tireless assistance and mentorship during the journey of this analysis. Her knowledge of great military leaders mixed with an endless drive for deeper understanding and reflection has allowed this study to reach its current point. I would also like to thank Dr. Nathan Packard and LtCol Kevin Glathar for their expert advice and differing perspectives, requiring a thorough analysis and assessment of the topic.

This examination comes during a revolution in my own personal opinions regarding the development of a Marine Officer. Following an assignment to Manpower and Reserve Affairs and subsequent reflection, I have embraced the need for an Officer Corps of broadened experiences and skills, even if that means less time honing and demonstrating primary military occupational specialty expertise. Only through cultivating and reinforcing a wide range of talents, to include technical and interagency capabilities, will the Corps be able to continue to excel in the complex environments of today and in the future.

Introduction

Leaders with the grade, experience, and technical/tactical qualifications associated with their billets are essential to the Marine Corps as a “fight tonight” force. Qualified leadership is critical to unit proficiency training and maintaining discipline, and ultimately ensures our readiness and potential combat effectiveness.

-Marine Corps Operating Concept, Sept 2016¹

In the recently published 2018 National Defense Strategy, Secretary of Defense James Mattis declares the United States military has “no preordained right to victory on the battlefield,”² and continues that to succeed, the joint force must be lethal, resilient, and rapidly adaptable. To achieve this result, the Secretary emphasizes the importance of managing talent through a variety of means, from education to assignments, which allow officers to “embrace new technologies,” as well as “increase understanding of interagency decision-making processes, as well as alliances and coalitions.”³ Realizing the Secretary’s vision, however, will require more than military or civilian education. It will depend on modifying existing officer accession, promotion, and retention processes which currently allow little room for non-traditional career paths, and frequently penalize officers who have completed technical or broadening tours at the cost of primary MOS proficiency. However, any such modifications must first cope with regulatory and legislative hindrances to change. In accession and promotion practices, moreover, the Corps must accept the potential for tension between recognition of proficiency in the traditional MOS and reward for newer expertise in an increasing range of non-traditional assignments and reserve the flexibility to handle such tradeoffs on a case by case basis. In the

end, whether in traditional or nontraditional billets, leaders must remain true to bedrock leadership traits, espoused by the Corps but articulated over the centuries, which must not be compromised for the sake of proficiency or advancement. On the contrary, they merit explicit recognition in evaluation and promotion and constant reinforcement in education and training. In this way, the Marine Corps can best prepare for future operations through reinforcement of time-proven values as well as refinement of existing procedures.

Training and educating creative, dynamic, and resilient individuals is only one part of the manpower challenge. Accessions, or the process of recruiting potential officers to join the Corps in the first place, is another. Moreover, the Marine Corps must be able not only to identify and recruit entry level officers of this high caliber and then train and educate them according to the highest standards of their MOS, but also to retain them as they advance to mid and senior-levels, all while competing against domestic corporations and agencies looking to fill their own organizations with outstanding young, middle, and senior leaders. For many, there comes a time where the benefits, either tangible or intangible, offered by the civilian world overwhelm the sense of service and camaraderie of the Corps. With relatively fixed pay, and at times dangerous and arduous conditions, likely one of the Marine Corps' best retention tools is the promise of continued advancement and challenging assignments, often in positions and experiences not replicable in the civilian sector. To ensure the Marine Corps retains and promotes those officers prepared for the next challenging environments, we should examine and modify existing employment of officer promotion and retention processes which currently allow little room for non-traditional career paths, and frequently penalize officers who have completed technically specialized or culturally broadening tours at the cost of demonstrating primary MOS proficiency.

Legal and Policy Constraints

Today's military is guided by a system of federal, department, and service guidance, ranging from federal law, to organizational visions and best practices. Any major changes to officer promotion and retention will require either a change to service culture and slow adaptation to that change, or modification of existing federal law, a much more time intensive and deliberate process. As the Corps looks to modify existing processes, it must remain within the officer manpower framework established by the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA).

DOMPA guides overall accession, retention, and promotion of military officers, and has recently drawn a lot of scrutiny from Congress, as well as from many disgruntled current and former military officers. Passed by Congress in 1980, DOPMA created standardized officer personnel management across the Department of Defense, directing caps on field grade officer strength, uniform promotion regulations across the department, and the "up or out" advancement system utilized today.⁴ DOMPA was intended to attract and retain needed high caliber officers, and provide a relatively consistent career path at least equal to, if not more expedited than, that found in similar civilian organizations. Overall, the intent of DOPMA remains to retain and promote the most qualified officers within established eligibility parameters. Those who fail promotion twice are processed for separation or retirement, freeing room for others to advance, thus the "up or out" generalization.⁵ It is this "up or out" rule that leads to the downfall of many Marines who, while possessing technical, international, and interagency skills, have not met currently understood promotion metrics. These officers are thus eventually lost to the Corps due to either their failure to gain promotion or their perception of reduced opportunity to do so, which causes them to leave of their own volition.

Further, DOPMA bases promotion eligibility on seniority, and accumulating required time in a given rank before being eligible for promotion to the next rank. This seniority-based approach, intended to afford officers opportunities to mature, learn, and demonstrate performance prior to consideration for advancement, has drawn considerable criticism in recent years as officers perceive competing opportunities from the civilian sector, face repeated deployments, and at times encounter peers or superiors of lesser capacity, but in higher positions due to seniority. In his book, *Bleeding Talent*, Tim Kane points to DOMPA as a reason that many talented officers actually leave the service, the absolute opposite of the intended effect of the Act. Citing the inflexibility of current evaluations, many in the service believe the present system cannot account for non-traditional career paths or identify those officers with unique skills, and therefore depart the service in frustration, taking with them talent, experience, and significant investment.⁶ Kane continues to describe the plight of young officers with non-traditional career paths or those with fitness reports completed in haste or with little thought to content or context. Their career, briefed as a two to seven-minute summary in promotion boards, is subject to the understanding and background of the briefer compiling the summary, as well as the members of the board. The vast majority of these senior officers are products of the traditional career paths of PME, having served in primary MOS billets at every grade, and frequently see those following similar paths as the most suitable for advancement.⁷ In a final emphatic critique of the current process, Kane decries the frequent violations of integrity that the current Fitness Report system imposes on those who complete evaluations. Knowing the importance of these reports for advancement and retention, Kane claims that many make dishonest assessments and distort reality in order to provide a more appealing account of an officer's performance and increase his or her chances for retention and advancement.⁸

For all its impact in dictating general time in grade requirements, DOPMA itself does not shape the formation, character or behavior of the individual officer. It refrains from directing required competencies, service values, or anything beyond basic age limitations, US citizenship, and generic requirements for physical qualification and moral character.⁹ To understand present-day expectations of the individual Marine Corps officer, one must look to internal Department of Defense guidance, in particular the widely-distributed work, *The Armed Forces Officer*, and its historical sources. This publication provides the best example of department-level doctrine and guidance for officers. Covering a myriad of topics and intended to establish a common foundation and understanding, the work focuses on bedrock fundamentals of leadership, dedication, fidelity, selflessness, humility, and life-long learning.¹⁰ In the forward for the 2007 version, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Peter Pace, clearly articulated that the “uncertainties of today’s world and the nature of our adversaries increase the importance of these ideas.”¹¹ From this basic foundational guidance, the services are then left to develop and cultivate their own unique cultures and values, nested within the larger Department of Defense guidance.

Today, as the military re-examines current accessions programs to adapt to the changing operating environment, at least one innovative but controversial concept has been introduced at the Department of the Navy to increase opportunities for those with technical and leadership skills. In order to reduce capability shortfalls and to provide cyber warfare capability, each service faces a requirement to build capacity immediately. The services are unable to endure the multi-year development horizon that comes with entry-level training, on the job training, and learned proficiency. To provide this immediate capability, the Navy has proposed a program allowing those with certain cyber skill sets to attend boot camp and, upon its completion, join the service at the rank of Captain or below as an officer, and up to Chief as an enlisted sailor. Under

current law, services can enlist or commission those filling law or medical capacities as lieutenant commanders/majors or below, but this advanced rank and responsibility areas meant to provide competition to lucrative Silicon Valley, medical, and legal positions that recruit the same talented individuals.¹²

While this proposed program may quickly fill a void in technical capacity, it also contains a significant shortfall in that those entering at advanced ranks would not have the similar organizational and leadership experience as those who advanced through the ranks via normal accession paths. These fast-tracked individuals would likely also face significant friction, and at least an initial lack of credibility from those within the service who earned their way through the ranks over the course of their careers. Under this program, evaluations would require a significant revision. These service members would undoubtedly have a higher level of technical proficiency than their peers, but may lag behind in the twelve traits of character, leadership, professionalism, and organizational knowledge that the current Marine Corps Fitness Reporting system utilizes.

Finally, the Marine Corps must consider the chief operational concern of impact to the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF). A similar alternative accessions program would be a failure if it succeeded in adding Marines with more technical skills, but those added skills fail to increase the capability of the MAGTF. Interpersonal friction and more importantly, lack of organizational culture would be the biggest friction points of this program, and unless addressed, the program would not succeed in increasing organizational capability.

Marine Corps internalization of DOD guidance provides an important guideline for any alteration or refinement of service practices in recruiting, retaining, and promoting officers. The desired traits, among the few stipulated requirements of Marine Corps officers, may be amply embodied in candidates who fail to achieve promotions for reasons due to externalities such as

time in grade and non-traditional MOS billets. It is to these officer corps values and qualities, therefore, that we must now turn.

Existing USMC Service Processes and Values

In many ways, the Marine Corps has stolen a march on the Department of Defense as a whole, and is already examining ways to improve PME and attract and develop more creative and dynamic leaders. Through the Marine Operating Concept (MOC) and tasks to Deputy Commandants, General Neller has directed an assessment of current Marine Corps evaluation and promotion systems to determine whether they enable the Corps to retain and promote those needed to fight and win our nation's battles in the most difficult situations.

Throughout its history, the Marine Corps has prided itself on being a service of "generalists," with a few select Marines fulfilling specialized capacities. However, as the operational environment evolves, the Corps is facing more of a demand for specialized skills including the requirement for cyber specialists, cultural experts, and Marines capable of dominating the information environment. Additionally, the importance of strong interoperability with international and governmental partners is growing at a rapid rate. As the Corps anticipates the changing operational environment, senior leaders are forcing the Corps to examine changes to current systems, intending to increase overall technical and interagency knowledge within the Corps, retain those with exceptional leadership abilities, and better evaluate potential for advanced leadership and command opportunities.¹³ While understandably met with some internal resistance, this examination provides an opportunity to potentially refine procedures, update values, and identify skills needed for future conflict.

The Marine Corps' foundational document, MCDP-1, *Warfighting*, discusses the need for Marines to excel in uncertain, friction-filled, and dynamic environments. Further, leaders must

exercise boldness, intelligence, and initiative in order to succeed.¹⁴ Educationally, MCDP-1 states that officers must understand tactics and operations, to include specifically combined arms, amphibious operations, and expeditionary warfare.

In addition to doctrinal publications like MCDP-1, Marine Corps leadership frequently utilizes documents such as the MOC, Commandant's Planning Guidance, and published tasks to subordinates both to reaffirm values and to direct changes to current systems and values. The MOC places a premium on attracting and retaining individuals of high intelligence and aptitude, and cultivating their talents through specific training and professional military education, but avoids specifying specific skills or technical abilities, focusing instead on traditional bedrock character traits.¹⁵

To identify the best Marine Officers for retention and advancement, the Marine Corps uses the Marine Corps Fitness Reporting System, initiated in 1999.¹⁶ It consists of evaluations amongst 14 varying criteria, as graded by the first two superiors in an officer's chain of command. These evaluated criteria are based on "accepted" traits and qualities of mission accomplishment, character, leadership, intellect and wisdom, and fulfillment of evaluation responsibilities.¹⁷ This system was installed in 1999 in order to replace a previous system, widely seen as ineffective, over-inflated, and unable to aid the leadership of the Corps in retaining and promoting the best and brightest for current and future conflict.¹⁸

Under the current promotion and advancement process, Marines are widely, but unofficially, expected to follow an understood career path of PME and key developmental billets in their primary military occupational specialty (PMOS) in order to demonstrate their suitability for further advancement and command opportunities. With roughly only four to five years spent as a major, most Marines are only able to complete a year in resident PME and a three-year assignment, with luck in a "key" billet such as an executive officer or operations officer capacity.

For those unable to fill a “key” developmental billet, including those selected by the Marine Corps for technical education and follow on assignment, foreign PME, or international service, demonstrating this primary MOS proficiency becomes difficult due to limited available time, and these Marines are frequently passed over for promotion or, worse, perceive they will be and depart the service either prior to the non-traditional assignment, or at the first opportunity to do so afterward, taking an immense level of talent, education and experience out of the Corps.

Fitness Reports have the largest influence in the Marine Corps promotion and retention process, but the interpretation of those reports by the men and women who make up the promotion, command, and education boards have a significant impact as well. While promotion boards exist for all ranks from captain to major general, the most important to long-term retention are the boards for lieutenant colonel and colonel. Beyond promotions, boards exist for many topics including Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC) duty, staff positions at the Naval Academy, and recruiting positions. This analysis will mainly be focused on the education boards, specifically the Commandant’s Career Level Education Board (CCLEB) and the Commandant’s Professional Intermediate-Level Education Board (CPIB) as these boards select captains and majors for the vast majority of educational, fellowship, and foreign affairs positions. Additional boards exist for assignments including assignments to Marine Corps Recruiting Command, Marine Barracks 8th and I, and the United States Naval Academy, but in each case, the respective board has specialized additional criteria required for consideration. For example, in the case of 8th and I, this includes a height requirement to meet appearance standards in parades.

The officers that make up these boards are typically lieutenant colonels or above for the school boards, and colonels to lieutenant generals for the senior field grade promotion boards. These Marines have, by nature of their rank and position, demonstrated superior performance of

their duties in service to their nation. They have excelled in a Marine Corps enduring seventeen years of combat and, through that experience, developed an institutional understanding of what type of individuals the organization needs to succeed. One downfall of this experience has been the development of the unofficial standardized career path and “key billets” mentioned above. Almost all of the senior officers serving on the boards have held these billets, performed well in them, and earned continued promotion, command, and education opportunities. For this reason, senior board members tend to believe that the path they have collectively lived is the correct path that they should replicate among more junior officers. Additionally, these technical education and foreign affairs positions first appeared as voluntary programs, roughly around the time senior colonels today were young captains and majors. With unknown long-term effects on prospects for advancement, many shied away from the programs, and remained on the traditional path that got them to their current standing. Further, most senior officers believe those who volunteered for the non-traditional programs understood the risks to their career progression by not demonstrating continued proficiency in their primary MOS.

What many senior officers today still do not understand is that, as of 2012, all technical education and foreign affairs positions such as Foreign Area Officers (FAO) and Regional Affairs Officers (RAO) are now board-selected and directed assignments by Headquarters, Marine Corps. This development came about in response to both the growing importance of these positions and need for such experience in today’s complex environment, as well as the significant increase in positions to be filled to meet this requirement. These trends have resulted in many veterans of these programs being seen as less competitive for advancement and command opportunities, simply for executing the assignments made by Headquarters, Marine Corps, and for many, missing opportunities to serve in their primary specialty in a “key” billet.

Finally, several of the most senior officers in the Marine Corps, to include the current Commandant, General Neller, and the Commanding General, Marine Forces Command, LtGen Brilakis, never served in “key” billets as majors, and they have demonstrated continued excellence and viability despite not following this unofficial standard path.¹⁹ While these gentlemen represent part of the extremely small percentage of officer who have performed exceptionally well and rose to the most senior positions as general officers, history is replete with those who did not fulfill a “key billet” and thus were not seen as competitive. To many, including LtGen Brilakis, the Marine Corps is unofficially mirroring the United States Army’s official promotion and advancement program of “branch qualification,” where an officer demonstrates continued potential for advancement through performance in their primary specialty, and when compared greatly to officers of the same specialty. For a service that prides itself on producing “generalists” and “MAGTF officers,” while also having roughly one fifth of the officer end strength of the Army, the Marine Corps is potentially painting itself into a restrictive box and directly or indirectly sidelining highly talented officers that do not fit a preconceived mold.²⁰

While internal Marine Corps regulations do not generate the self-imposed, unofficial constraints on promotion, conversely the service does articulate aspirations for officer capabilities and behavior, primarily through professional military education (PME.) To understand better how the Corps seeks to shape its current and future officers, it is necessary to consider the opportunities that arise and the expectations that accompany them.

Opportunities for Improvement

Growing talented officers from within is the best method for the Corps to both maintain and increase warfighting capability as it plans for an evolving and uncertain environment.

Through the Commandant's Professional Intermediate-Level Education Board (CPIB), the Marine Corps selects highly qualified officers for special technical education, regional and foreign affairs officers, resident foreign PME, resident PME, and corporate fellowships with innovative and industry-leading partners. Through the Attaché and foreign exchange officer programs, the Corps selects talented officers for service as part of Department of State country teams, and as exchange officers on the staffs of NATO and other allied militaries. Capitalizing on these opportunities, both by sending our brightest Marines, and then by utilizing their gained skills and expertise in a follow-on tour, is vital to the sustainability of the program and arming our units and staffs with technical, operational, and cultural experts needed to excel in complex environments today and tomorrow.

As an example, through its special education program, the Marine Corps is currently able to train and educate officers for duty in technical fields ranging from space operations to electrical engineering, and modeling/simulations.²¹ Unfortunately, the lengthy education requirements of two to three years at times precludes Marines from fulfilling traditional command and operational billets. The same is true for foreign area officers, and those selected for non-English speaking foreign PME opportunities. The length of the required language training, when coupled with the follow-on school or assignment, makes completing traditional primary MOS assignments as a major nearly impossible. This creates a problem for advancement as the Marine Corps stresses both service and performance in command billets to assess potential for future senior level performance. The current execution of the evaluation and promotion systems not only penalizes those talented officers assigned by the Marine Corps to these opportunities, but deters scores more from even considering them as advantageous opportunities due to the widely-known perception and negative impact.

In recent years, roughly 80-85% of Marines with a combat arms or combat service support primary military occupational specialty (PMOS) selected to the rank of lieutenant colonel had completed a command or specific MOS-related billet at the rank of major. Those who had not completed a comparable billet experienced miniscule opportunities for advancement.²² When selecting officers for command at the lieutenant colonel level, the importance of these command and PMOS-related billets is further solidified. During four years of selections from 2014-2017, over 90% of Marines selected for command at the lieutenant colonel level had completed one of these “key” billets.²³ Those that had not been able fill one of these precursor positions, including those unable to do so due to alternative assignments made by the Marine Corps, had little to no chance at selection for command.

As Marines are considered for selection to colonel, experience in command and MOS-related billets are vital. In the same four-year window from 2014-2017, 100% of Marines selected for colonel had served as a unit-level commander at the lieutenant colonel level.²⁴ This is despite official direction from the Secretary of the Navy that “the board’s evaluation of officers whose careers may have been affected by assignment policies and practices made in the best interest of the Marine Corps must afford them fair and equitable consideration.”²⁵ This unofficial but widely recognized pre-requisite for selection for advancement essentially eliminates those without command opportunities from advancing beyond the rank of lieutenant colonel, and even makes attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel extremely difficult for those not fulfilling a widely-understood, but unofficial career path.

The Marines selected for advanced education and follow on assignments in technical fields are amongst the best of the Corps, and with an ability to thrive in technical fields as demonstrated by undergraduate degrees in similar subjects, or superior performance in Department of Defense standardized testing.²⁶ For those selected, completing the education and

utilization tours while also having time to serve in their primary MOS in their current grade becomes a significant hurdle. Manpower Management, specifically Officer Assignments, has gone to great lengths to ensure the proper individuals are identified as eligible for programs, and where possible, officers are rotated early out of special education assignment assignments in order to afford opportunities to service in primary MOS billets, and remain competitive within current understood guidelines.

This expedited turnover in technical billets and limited pool of officers with flexibility in their career timing to support the assignment creates a significant problem for both the Marine Corps, and the individual officer. For the Corps, units frequently face a higher rate of turnover in technical billets in order to ensure Marines can maintain their competitiveness in their MOS. For the individual, many are confronted with stories from peers and superiors selected in the initial years of the program, most of which were unable to maintain “normal” career trajectories. This fear, coupled with for many, a lack of desire to fill the technical position, leads qualified officers to depart the service and take their skills elsewhere. In turn, the Corps is forced to look for alternative sourcing solutions, vice educating, growing, and challenging the highly-qualified group of officers already resident in the organization.

Beyond the technical programs, foreign PME, Attaché, and positions requiring foreign language training also suffer due to the extended time. Instead of competing for these vital and exciting opportunities, Marines will frequently seek to diminish the competitiveness, or worse yet, end their service in an effort to avoid what is generally accepted as an assignment which has serious hazards to long-term competitiveness.

The solution to this specific problem is simple in identification, but difficult in execution. The solution requires no modification to existing evaluation policies or procedures, but does require re-educating the existing senior officers of the Marine Corps who serve on promotion and

command selection boards and, equally as important, who advise and mentor young officers. These senior leaders, often the benefactors of Marines with special skills, must be willing not only to permit, but also to embrace a widened range of career paths in order to maintain highly competitive, technically skilled officers in whose education the Marine Corps has invested a significant amount of time and money throughout their careers. Official guidance in written instructions to boards is not sufficient. To get the message across, the Commandant, Assistant Commandant, and Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs must share an active and common message that is personally communicated and enforced with each of the field grade-level boards. This approach requires face-to-face engagement and sustained awareness of the actions of the board, within the scope allowed by law or policy. In addition, gatherings like the Executive Offsite (EOS) and General Officer Offsite (GOS), where the most senior leaders gather to discuss issues and ideas for the future, are great opportunities to continue the message and to work to reduce the friction and limitations placed on quality officers who have faithfully executed orders as directed.

This solution will take time. In the meanwhile, the Officer Assignments section within the Manpower Division can continue to communicate progress in yearly visits to commands and individuals on the “Road Show,” intended to afford Marines and commands direct engagement with the organization and individuals responsible for personnel assignments. In addition to this, board results, personal stories, and reports from senior leaders who participate in these boards can continue the information flow. This solution will not solve the immediate capability gap, but the likely increased retention of majors and senior captains will greatly close the gap within 12-24 months as more Marines enter the education pipeline, and then remain beyond their required 24-month obligation upon its completion.

Removing unofficial but widely-recognized limitations in terms of career paths and required experiences as precursors to advancement would greatly increase the Marine Corps' ability to educate and retain Marines with technical and leadership skills. Demonstrated primary MOS proficiency and leadership credibility as a lieutenant and captain should afford Marines flexibility as majors. If a Marine is selected for special education based on technical aptitude and demonstrated performance, he or she should not be punished for missing an additional primary MOS position as a major. The further skill and education attained by the officer is more valuable to the Marine Corps than re-demonstrating already established primary MOS proficiency.

Improvements to the Evaluation Process

A second area of improvement concerns changes in utilization of the current evaluation system, not wholesale changes to the system itself. In previous years, the Marine Corps has commissioned numerous studies by organizations including RAND and the Center for Naval Analyses to examine methods to improve the system. The vast majority report that the system itself is not broken, but it is not well understood and its utilization needs improvement.²⁷ One recent CNA report identifies the requirement for more training for evaluators, minor adjustments to reviewing officer input, and finally a stricter compliance with the Performance Evaluation Manual, the guiding document for evaluations. Additionally, one recent report has recommended an introductory education on the board process for all Marines who receive fitness reports.²⁸

No observed report examining the Marine Corps fitness report evaluation system recommends a wholesale overhaul of the system. Notably, most state that the system is working well, with room for improvement. Frequently, overhauling the existing system does not result in the significant improvement desired. The United States Army recently redesigned its non-

commissioned officer evaluation system, but many valid criticisms have followed since its inception in January of 2016. Criticism ranges from lack of peer input, to susceptibility to limitations of the evaluator's ability to communicate and articulate points, and finally the lack of clear standards.²⁹ These are the identical problems which led to the desire for an overhaul of the old system.

One portion examined for improvement is the reviewing officer. Typically, this portion of an evaluation is completed by the officer or civilian equivalent who is "responsible for the primary tasking, supervision, and evaluation" of the reporting senior.³⁰ Due to the relative seniority of those who fulfill this responsibility, little time is spent at the Basic School educating young officers on how to complete a reviewing officer portion of a fitness report.³¹ Educating lieutenants in further detail on the significance of the Reviewing Officer portion, types of subjective comments to make, and how to establish a worthwhile comparative profile of rankings would be beneficial, and reduce both the uncertainty and the severity of on the job training in the years ahead. For senior officers already completing reviewing officer portions, highlighting and stressing the importance of utilizing the entire range of comparative assessment rankings is vital to improvement. Too often, a Marine evaluator's ranking profile consists of a large group of evaluated Marines within two to three blocks such as the commonly referred to "six and seven blocks" or those labelled "One of the Few Exceptionally Qualified Marines." When an evaluator groups a large number of Marines in a small pool such as this, it is nearly impossible for a promotion or selection board member to identify who is truly the best and most capable of the group. Conversely, it also makes identifying those who should not be selected for advancement or special assignments a difficult process. Refocusing on the importance of a spread of rankings across the comparative scale, and the importance of subjective comments discussing future

potential for service, command, and value to the Corps would greatly benefit promotion and selection boards in selecting the correct Marines.

The Marine Corps has already taken a step towards this goal, issuing MARADMIN 493/17 in September 2017, focused on refinements to subjective comments for colonel, chief warrant officer-5, and master gunnery sergeant/sergeant major fitness reports. Reviewing officers are directed to comment on the Marine's suitability to serve at the next rank, operational competence in complex environments, ability to issue and manage commander's intent, manage time, mentor subordinates, and manage time/resources.³² Expanding this requirement to all officer reports would provide a standard expectation for all involved, minimize the current comments frequently redundant to the reporting senior portion, and require reviewing officers to know more about the Marines they evaluate. Too frequently, a reviewing officer has little to no direct observation of an officer due to dispersed locations and offset departure/arrival for both parties from a command. Allowing reviewing officers to specify whether their comments were from direct or indirect observation would enable selection board members to further qualify remarks made in a report.³³

Better educating both those subject to fitness reports and those completing them on the codified requirements for, and the effects of, their comments and rankings would very likely lead to more effective reports, enabling the Corps to identify and retain the best and most fully qualified. This improvement may also build confidence in Marines receiving reports, engendering a belief that they received an accurate evaluation, and one that will be widely understood by selection board members. This change, too, is not an overnight process. Both training and education must be completed, and a confidence must be established amongst all involved. With demonstrated improvement, the Corps may be able to reduce the small but significant number of Marines whose confidence in the Corps is shaken by what they perceive as

a flawed system. It will not eliminate the problem, but educating the force will reduce many of the frustrations of the unknown, and inspire some to continue the challenge of service in the Corps.

A final suggestion for improvement of the current evaluation system centers around who evaluates Marines. In the current system, the Marine's immediate superior and next level superior are the only individuals responsible for evaluating a Marine's performance, and the only ones allowed to do so. Given that the vast majority of evaluating officers are senior to those they evaluate and have likely filled the same or similar positions, evaluators should be familiar with the responsibilities of their subordinates. Frequently, however, superiors are afforded a limited time and scope of observation prior to completing evaluations critical to a Marine's future. Due to disparate locations, busy operational and garrison requirements, and competing events, evaluators are limited in actual direct observation. To fill some of this void, many reporting officials collect *unofficial* comments and observations from a subject Marine's peers, adjacent units, senior enlisted leaders, and even subordinates. Given the span of this untapped resource, the Marine Corps stands to benefit from expanding *official* input to evaluations by individuals beyond simply superior officials.

The United States Navy has experimented with a multi-rater or "360-degree" evaluation for several years. In 2005, James Williams explored the merits of a planned pilot program intended for use in Navy's surface warfare community from 2004 -2007.³⁴ Williams identifies at the time that nearly 20% of American firms were using some kind of 360-degree feedback, and that the main point of these multi-perspective ratings was to provide the recipient with more unique and meaningful feedback on their performance.³⁵ Through extensive research, Williams concluded in 2005 that while much evidence points to significantly beneficial results, there was a growing trend of concern in 2005, enough to warrant further study and examination.³⁶ He

continued with an examination of the Navy's pilot program which consisted of two 360-degree evaluations, one roughly at the mid-point of their yearly evaluation cycle, and the other timed near the end point of their evaluation period. Those who had been assigned to the command for more than 120-days participated, and were subject to extensive questionnaires covering twenty-five competency areas regarding their performance. There was only one version of the questionnaire, which led to some friction as junior sailors were required to consider the attributes and scope as more senior and seasoned members of the command. In the opposite manner, senior leaders were expected to comment on actions and attributes typically unseen and not evaluated in their scope.³⁷

Williams concluded that the 360-evaluation system did have merit, but it required significant refinement and education prior to a wider distribution. Chief was a recommendation for the use of multiple survey instrument versions, scoped and targeted to specific ranks within the organizational structure. In addition, education on the execution and merits of the program would be vital to ensure it achieved the desired improvements to the evaluation process. Finally, Williams believed a re-affirmation of Navy core competencies with continued education on their importance to the service would benefit sailors and the organization. This coupled with detailed coaching and counseling on evaluation reports could greatly improve the performance of the individual sailor and the commands of the pilot program.³⁸

Many within and outside the Marine Corps have called for implementation of 360-degree evaluations, or at least an experimentation similar to the Navy's in 2005. In Sept 2014, Maj Chis Niedziocha wrote of "upward focused" officers, intending to please their superiors above all else, understanding the potential impact to their evaluation. In addition, he echoed the concern of limited observation opportunities, and especially for the reviewing officer, many comments and evaluations being formed based on input from the reporting senior, and not their own

independent observations.³⁹ He states multiple benefits to a 360-degree evaluation, including safety valves for those who have enduring conflicts with reporting officials and inspiring leaders to spend more dedicated time in engagements with their subordinates, focused on both professional and personal development. He continues that multi-rater would foster more teamwork as officers would be praised or condemned based on interactions with adjacent and supporting leaders within the unit. Finally, a consolidated evaluation from superiors, peers, and subordinates would help to reaffirm, or force leaders to reevaluate their own perceptions of their performance. This would likely lead to redoubled efforts to embody the desired teacher/mentor relationship that General Lejeune saw as a requirement for the Marine Corps to excel.⁴⁰

Many of the critiques of 360-degree evaluations focus on the inability of junior Marines to appropriately evaluate their superiors. Lack of maturity and experience are the most common beliefs, but both can be minimized with deliberate education and training on the values expected, and the process to be utilized. An additional reservation that leaders would hesitate to make unpopular but correct decisions under 360-degree evaluations is also common. Maj Niedziocha counters this as the current system skews officers to make decisions to appease their superior, and with a peer and subordinate evaluation, these actions could be identified.⁴¹ Further, entrusting Marines at all levels with participating in the evaluation of their peers and subordinates would increase camaraderie, teamwork, and the sense of family that the Marine Corps thrives on.

A hybrid solution of superior and adjacent/peer evaluations may appease both sides of the argument, but more importantly, better inform promotion and selection boards concerning the best Marines for retention and advancement. Continuing the current reporting senior and reviewing officer retains the continuity of evaluations from a senior and more experienced pair of officers. Adding limited perspectives from peers and adjacent leaders would fill voids in

existing evaluations and inform boards and panels on the characteristics/abilities of a Marine concerning cooperation, unselfishness, perseverance, taking care of Marines and equipment, and finally, operating within the commander's intent. This system would help identify to a board the highly proficient pilot, widely respected by his commander, but not trusted by peers, or who is notoriously hard on equipment and damaging to overall readiness levels. Additionally, the infantry officer who does not see eye to eye on several issues with his boss, but ensures his company consistently aids other units with training and resources for the betterment of the battalion would be greatly supported by this system.

The detailed construction, education, and implementation of this system could fill volumes of orders, directions, and classroom hours and are the topics of other works. Numerous studies and examinations of the existing system have all concluded that its working as intended, but significant room for improvement exists. With the rapidly changing operational environment and expected continued competition for top-quality individuals, the Marine Corps must innovate and find methods to inspire and retain its best and brightest. Giving Marine leaders further opportunities to contribute to the evaluations and shaping of the Officer Corps will increase both camaraderie and the quality of officers within our Corps. A hybrid superior/peer system would reduce evaluation blind spots, and potentially alleviate some personality conflicts amongst superior/subordinate evaluation teams. Adding peer input is not without vulnerability to personality conflict or bias, but these potential hazards pale in comparison to the boost of inclusion and interdependence that comes with a shared feedback system. Marines will be able to further influence the future of the Corps, creating a stronger bond with the organization, and exploiting the Corps' most valuable characteristic, a feeling of purpose or belonging. For many, knowing their contributions matter, that they are members of a team, and that they will be fairly

considered for advancement and retention is more than sufficient to continue to endure the trials of life in the Corps.

Conclusion

As the Marine Corps looks to adapt to a rapidly changing and complex operating environment, changes must be made to retain and attract the personnel vital to the Corps' success. Our benefit to the nation does not come from excellence in cyber, foreign relations, or space operations. Our strength remains the ability to answer the nation's call in a variety of situations, but fundamentally to win battles and set conditions for follow on operations or policy direction. A wider spectrum of skills is needed to truly succeed on the modern battlefield, but these skills alone cannot win a battle. Winning battles relies on leaders who are decisive in absence of direction and in uncertain situations. In leaders who are dedicated to their Marines, to the mission, and possess the highest moral character, able to lead in difficult and dynamic situations. Marine leaders must share the same burdens and experiences as their Marines. They must endure the same training and battle conditions and demonstrate an ability to not only endure physically and mentally, but to excel.

Technology continues to pervade and further penetrate the battlefield. To succeed, the Marine Corps must maintain an Officer Corps capable of innovation, integration of technology, and distillation of information. The Corps has existing programs in place to identify and develop these Marines, to meet current and future operational requirements. In addition, the Corps is already widely filled with the talented officers needed to fill these technical, foreign affairs, and interagency position. While current recruiting efforts must continue in order to attract follow on groups of quality officer, by merely improving our organizational processes we can increase our retention of quality officers, both before, and after these formidable education opportunities. To

better manage and retain this population of highly qualified officers, the Marine Corps must re-examine an existing bias to “accepted” but unofficial career paths and recognize the performance and potential of these Marines when compared to their contemporaries who have followed more traditional paths. Affording these Marines a fairer opportunity for retention and advancement will greatly reduce retention shortfalls, and also increase the quality of officer accessing in to the technical education programs.

Adjusting the current Fitness Report evaluation system could potentially better inform promotion and selection boards as they look to promote and retain those with the best potential for future service. For the individual Marine, ensuring that their input on peers matters, and that their own evaluation is not limited to the perspective of one official would be a significant benefit to the Corps. These efforts to increase the quality of officer not only help the Corps directly, but provide an indirect benefit of an increased feeling of family and camaraderie. In no way will this system stem the departure of talented officers who have done their obligated time and have well-intentioned plans for life beyond the Corps. This system would however potentially greatly reduce the number of quality officers who for one reason or another become disenchanted with policy, advancement opportunities, or prospects for command.

In the early 1990s, the Marine Corps showed a willingness to drastically overhaul evaluation systems in the hopes of improving the quality of Marine retained and promoted in the Corps. Today, the Commandant and several Deputy Commandants are not shy about the potential requirement for a further adjustment in order to ensure continued success in a dynamic environment. Due to the efforts of recruiting command, the quality of Marine joining the Marine Corps remains at an all-time high. It is up to the Corps to retain, educate, and promote the best and brightest in order to remain the expeditionary middle weight force needed for anticipated, and unanticipated conflict. Through a continued maintenance of enduring values and character

traits, coupled with minor to moderate changes to existing evaluation processes, the Corps can continue to win the nation's battles with the best the nation has to offer.

While the range of solutions suggested above encompasses many different technical and organizational changes in the accession and retention of officers today, the Marine Corps must not lose sight of certain general but fundamental principles gleaned initially from history and easily reinforced by reference to historical cases. Similarly, it must take into account not only the timeless nature of war, but also the evolving character of warfare as conflicts, parties, and means change and evolve over time. Marine Corps internalization of this critical consideration includes seeking a diverse range of skills and experiences in its officer corps, including educational diversity and initiative. These are not new, experimental steps but rather principles grounded in military history.

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