

Promotions to Fill Vacancies and Last Minute Fills

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**Abstract**

I believe we face two dilemmas in the Army today, which if not handled properly, will lead to issues that could take years to resolve. First, are we promoting Soldiers to the NCO ranks before they are ready in order to meet shortages in our NCO Corps. Second, we are failing to fill our deploying units to their required strength with enough time to fully integrate and train the Soldiers who will be responsible for fighting and winning on today's battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### **Promotions Just to Fill Vacancies**

I believe we are promoting some Soldiers before they are ready to lead troops in combat due to the necessity to fill our units with NCOs in preparation for combat operations. When we do this, we accept risk, a great deal of risk. Having our young NCOs learn to make decisions and lead troops during field training and in a garrison environment will mold them and prepare them for their role in combat. That's when they need to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. That's when learning the hard way does not cost lives. If we promote our young Soldiers to Sergeant without the necessary training and professional development, we risk the lives of the Soldiers we entrust the young NCOs with.

From the top down, there is a significant amount of pressure to promote eligible Soldiers as soon as possible. When a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) stays on the STAR MOS list for more than a couple months, the word comes from the top through Command Sergeant Majors to First Sergeants to get Soldiers to the promotion board as soon as they are eligible. But are they really ready? On a regular basis, I receive emails from senior leaders discussing the state of particular MOS's and the amount of Soldiers in the primary zone of consideration for promotion to Sergeant and Staff Sergeant. Our senior leaders are requesting that we look hard at the reasons for not sending these Soldiers to the promotion board and ensure that we don't hold the Soldiers back. I will argue that we aren't holding these Soldiers back. I contend that we know these Soldiers better than anyone else and we have the responsibility and duty to train and prepare them for promotion. We know these Soldiers will deploy to combat and be responsible for a team or squad. If they are not ready to lead their Soldiers in garrison, what makes us believe they will do better in combat? We must ensure the Soldiers get proper counseling and the mentorship necessary to for promotion, but we cannot in good conscience, make a decision to

send these Soldiers to the promotion board until they are ready to lead in combat. After all, we are an Army at war.

One of my responsibilities while working on a staff was to work with the Forces Command (FORSCOM) and the Human Resources Command (HRC) to identify low density MOS shortages and cross level from units that were not deploying. As I worked these issues, I came to realize there is a tremendous amount of pressure to promote from within to fill vacancies rather than move NCOs around. Unit leaders were questioned repeatedly as to why they haven't promoted eligible Soldiers to fill vacancies. When inquiring about shortages and possible fills, I received answers from FORSCOM and HRC that the aggregate totals of a unit didn't support receiving any new NCOs to fill critical vacancies. I wholeheartedly disagree with this logic. Just because a unit is filled above ninety percent aggregate total does not mean they have the right skill sets. If your NCO strengths are less than fifty percent, you need the experienced NCOs to round out your formation, not the young Soldiers fresh out of Advance Individual Training. Our leaders preparing for deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan shouldn't be required to place junior Soldiers in critical leadership positions just because their aggregate totals don't support requisitioning more senior Soldiers. Fortunately, we were able to work with the Brigade level CSMs and cross-level within the installation to meet the needs of deploying units. If it wasn't for senior NCOs working together to help each other out, we would not have been successful. I challenge everyone involved in this process to look past the numbers and understand the second and third order effects before making decisions that may cost lives. Numbers are not the solution. The right skill sets make all the difference. It is our responsibility to do what is right, every time, whether it is easy or not. We have to make a stand and do what is right for our units heading to combat.

### **Last Minute Fills**

The Army is required to fill units at a minimum of ninety percent strength no later than ninety days prior to the unit's deployment date. The process of filling a unit prior to deployment has been called, "fill to fight" and I argue that this does not equal "fit to fight". I will concede that filling a skill level one slot probably impacts a unit less than filling a critical mid-grade or senior NCO position. However, I don't believe this approach should be the only thing we do for our deploying units.

Let's break down what happens in that last ninety days before a unit deploys. They take block leave that will last anywhere from fourteen to thirty days. The unit will conduct a deployment ceremony, process through the Soldier Readiness Processing (SRP) Center for one or two days, and attend a variety of classes ranging from the rules of engagement to operational security. For arguments sake, we will say that is five days of classroom training. Within a ninety day period, there will be twenty-six to twenty-eight weekend days that commanders will try to protect to ensure the unit has time with their family and friends before deployment. Totaling all this up leaves us with somewhere between fifty and sixty-six days that we will not be able to train. Having twenty-four days to train and integrate new leaders into a unit that will go to combat is not much time.

Having critical positions such as Squad Leader, Platoon Sergeant, Operations Sergeant, or Sergeant Major vacant is also causing turbulence in deploying units. When these critical positions are filled at ninety days out, they create a tremendous amount of turbulence within the unit. This turbulence has a ripple down effect throughout the entire unit. Leaders and Soldiers may perceive the unit is not prepared to deploy. Even if it's only a perception, Soldiers may not have the confidence they need to deploy to combat and do their mission effectively. Having the

confidence to deploy to combat and do your mission under all possible conditions is essential for all Soldiers. They can't go into any mission guessing if they are ready; they have to know they are ready.

The Army has the responsibility to fill critical NCO vacancies as soon as they are identified. When we do this, we ensure the Soldiers in the unit can adapt to their new leadership. This will lead to cohesive teams that have the confidence in the unit, their team, squad, or platoon to accomplish any mission in the face the any enemy.

This doesn't always happen. Units are not being filled until the last moment. Critical skill levels still go unfilled in some units until after the unit deploys. Commanders and Command Sergeants Major brief these critical vacancies regularly and work tirelessly to get the right fills to round-out their units. They constantly voice their concerns about deploying without key positions being filled before they deploy and, fortunately, with the help of other senior leaders on their installations, within their divisions, they get the necessary fills.

These problems have long term effects on the young Soldier who witnesses' turbulence in their unit first hand because of last minute fills. Our young Soldier's volunteered to join the Army during a time of war and expect the best leadership in the world, simply because our Army has the best NCO Corps in the world, hands down.

### **Conclusion**

If last minute fills, promoting Soldiers before they are ready, and sending Soldiers to the fight with inexperienced leadership becomes the norm, we will have a struggle maintaining the high morale and professional excellence of our esteemed NCO Corps. Our current operational environment demands strong leadership at the squad and platoon level because the war on terror has dictated that. Our Squad Leaders and Platoon Sergeants make the difference on the streets of

Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan every day. We must develop them to be leaders today that will maintain the high standards of the professionals that have come before them. Promote them when they are ready to train, lead, and win in combat. Fill our units with competent NCOs that will bring honor to our Corps and uphold the high standards set by their predecessors through years of hard work and discipline.