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United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**AVIATION CAREER PAY: A NEW APPROACH TO THE RETENTION OF
MARINE AVIATORS IN THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS THROUGH
THE USE OF INCENTIVES.**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAJ GLEN J. REUKEMA

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Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member:

CHRISTOPHER E. STOWE

Approved: [Signature]

Date: 4/20/16

Oral Defense Committee Member: Craig A. Swanson, PhD

Approved: [Signature]

Date: 20 April 2016

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Executive Summary

Title: Aviation Career Pay: A new approach to the retention of Marine aviators in the United States Marine Corps through the use of incentives.

Author: Major Glen J Reukema, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: Aviation Career Pay (ACP) or “the Bonus” is a proven and effective program. With changes, it can be utilized in the future as a powerful tool to retain the best aviators and stabilize impending manpower levels.

Discussion: Aviation Career Pay instituted in FY 2003 to stabilize aviation manpower levels and reduce aviation manpower shortfalls. An examination of the robust manpower levels for field-grade officers in 2015, shows that ACP is successful in ensuring that a sufficient number of pilots decide to stay in the USMC after their initial service commitment. The retention of these pilots is necessary to maintain a stable workforce well into the future. What ACP does not do is provide any benefit beyond that. ACP does little to influence a pilot’s decision whether to remain in the USMC and does not target the most capable and qualified aviators. It also does not try to influence them on how long they remain in the Marine Corps after they have decided to stay on after their initial service commitment. The awarding of ACP needs changing from an application process near the end of an aviator’s initial commitment, to a board process that evaluates all Marine aviators who fall into an earlier eligibility window for ACP. The result of this process is then given to fleet aviators well before they have solidified their decision to leave the Marine Corps. The award of ACP, based on performance evaluation, will influence the most qualified aviators to remain pilots for the USMC.

Conclusion: The process used by the USMC to award ACP needs to be altered. The current system of soliciting applications near the completion of an aviator’s initial commitment does not retain the most qualified aviators’ only acts as an insurance policy to retain pilots to fifteen years’ time in service. A board process that evaluates performance and is held earlier in a pilot’s career will result in ACP strongly influencing the most qualified Marine aviators to remain in the USMC.

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Preface

The purpose of this paper is to find improvements in how the USMC offers bonuses to Marine Naval aviators. While the paper focuses on the aviation career track and discusses influences common to Marine aviators, the direction and theme of this paper can be used in any highly skilled military occupation. The military spends money and time to train personnel to accomplish thousands of interrelated tasks that all combine symbiotically to attain mission accomplishment. Retaining the most qualified personnel must continue to be an enduring line of effort for the Marine Corps and the Department of Defense. The bonuses described in this paper are just one tool in the toolbox to influence the retention of our best and brightest.

I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support. My wife Kristina supplied late night cups of coffee to go along with the infinite patience and understanding. My sons Donald and Benjamin stayed asleep when Daddy yelled at the computer. My mother Dr. Barbara Reukema acted as unofficial mentor, editor, slave driver and cheerleader.

Introduction

The United States Marine Corps (USMC) must retain its most talented junior officers to serve eventually as field-grade officers executing the jobs of Operations Officer, Maintenance Officer, and Executive Officer. Field-grade officers must train younger officers for more technical aviation-based qualifications and develop them into future leaders. Also, the grooming of field-grade officers for increased leadership within their command and as squadron commanding officers is essential. Currently, the USMC has a healthy population of field-grade officers; hidden within the healthy retention numbers are the current attitudes of young officers, there is a looming manpower shortage ahead. With field-grade officers leaving the USMC through retirement and anticipated future low retention rates of junior officers, the USMC will soon have a shortage of field-grade officers to manage squadrons and execute staff duties. Aviation Career Pay (ACP) or “the Bonus” has been effectively used to retain company-grade and field-grade officers. With changes, it can be utilized in the future as a powerful tool to retain the best aviators and stabilize impending manpower levels.

The Current State of USMC Aviation Manpower

In aggregate, the USMC is currently at a point where personnel manpower levels exceed those needed for field-grade officers within Aviation pilot military occupational specialties.¹ There is some variance in the data because the relatively new community of V-22 pilots is short field-grade majors, but within this new community, the numbers are becoming healthier with the passage of time. What the collective healthy numbers are hiding is the increased time to promotion, seventeen years in grade for LtCol and eleven

years in grade for Major.² Junior Captains see the time extending at their present rank while their peers within aviation MOS' leave the fleet and return from "B billet" assignments. These senior Captains, within two to three, years of promotion await promotion so that they can earn a coveted department-head position, which will advance their careers. The greater time that young officers see themselves continuing without a promotion, the greater the incentive to leave the Marine Corps. Officers newly promoted to O3 will see the promotion process as being more concerned with seniority than merit.³

A solution to accelerate the promotion process is to use the Temporary Early Retirement Authority (TERA).⁴ TERA allows field-grade officers, if qualified, to take early retirement. Officers passed over at fifteen to sixteen years' time in service are incentivized to use TERA to leave the Marine Corps. An officer denied promotion sees his or her as falling behind their peers and will lack the motivation to continue their career path.⁵ TERA can be used to reduce the number of Majors within the aviation pool and shrink the supply in "overstocked" MOSs such as 7566 which is currently at 156% of its staffing goal.⁶

There is another process to reduce the numbers of more senior field-grade officers via the Selective Early Retirement Board (SERB)⁷ that identifies senior officers eligible for immediate retirement. This process would serve to create a greater turnover in officers moving out of the Marine Corps and, therefore, increase the rate of promotion. While the process of SERB can move officers more quickly through the ranks of the Marine Corps, the Headquarters of the Marine Corps (HQMC) has chosen not to use it. By Title 10 order, the SERB allows the USMC to retire up to thirty percent of the officers considered,

but HQMC only recommended 6.6 percent of Colonels and 12.5 percent of Lieutenant Colonels for retirement.⁸ It would seem that HQMC is using the drawn-out promotion process to cull the size of the field-grade officer corps. The Marine OnLine database shows that for CH-53E aviators, the FY 2017 Promotion and Selection Board selected twelve of twenty-one in-zone majors, which equals a fifty-seven percent promotion rate. Mathematically, this process is successful. Decreasing the promotion rate creates reduced inflow and passing over officers further accelerates the reduced inflow. The decrease, coupled with the constant outflow caused by retirement, would, for practical purposes, reduce manpower numbers to levels that would be sustainable through normal attrition.

Factors Driving Young Marine Officers Out Of the Corps

Airline Recruitment

One of the traditional drivers for attrition from the USMC is pilot movement into the commercial airlines. The domestic and international airline industry is expanding hiring after the decade-long downturn after 9/11.⁹ The bulk of commercial aviators are either post-Vietnam military or civilian-trained aviators, and both segments will reach their mandatory retirement age of sixty-five within the next five years. While the military is not the sole source of qualified pilots, hiring is traditionally skewed towards military personnel. The military offers a reliable source of well-trained, standardized, and capable personnel that fit in with current airline-company cultures. To incentivize military pilots to join the air transportation industry, hiring minimums are lower for military aviators,

thereby reducing a potential hurdle to gaining entry into the airline industry as a second career. In 2013, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) legislated that all commercial airline pilots hired by U.S. carriers are required to have at least 1,500 hours of flight time.¹⁰ These flight hours totals required of prospective commercial aviators are levels that any Marine pilot can obtain within their first tour with the Fleet Marine Force.

However, the airlines do not have the same draw on military aviation that they once did. The main reason for this is cost savings in new pilots' salaries. Labor is the greatest controllable expense for an airline. Salaries for new pilots are strikingly low. A new first officer on a comparatively prestigious airline like Southwest makes fifty-seven dollars an hour while flying an average seventy-five hours a month.¹¹ Southwest's salary scale means that a captain with eight years in the Marine Corps, and who made \$5818.00 base pay with an additional BAH of \$2700.00 at MCAS Miramar or \$1185.00 at MCAS New River, including allowances, would receive a reduced monthly income of \$4300.00. This salary represents approximately a forty to fifty percent reduction in pay. While pay does go up with qualification and seniority in the airlines, it would take up to ten years to reach the pay equivalent of what a Captain or Major is making in the USMC if he were to leave at ten years total service. The reduction in pay presumably now makes the airlines attractive only to single officers who are willing to take a substantial decrease in pay in exchange for a non-deployable profession or officers who have reached retirement and have supplemental income to make up the difference in lost salary.

While there has been a continuous crossover to civilian aviation in the past, this movement may now be curtailed, as noted above, especially in the case of regional

airlines. The average pay for a regional airline is very low, ranging anywhere from twenty-eight thousand to thirty-five thousand dollars per year. This salary is a substantial pay cut for any officer and makes little financial sense, especially for a talented aviator. With low entry pay and a seniority-based work culture, discussed in more detail below, work/life balance is notoriously bad for junior pilots with the commercial airlines. It is reasonable to anticipate that, having done the math and weighed the benefits, qualified Marine aviators will stay the course in the face of frequent offers by recruiters from commercial airline companies.

Work/Life Balance Concerns

Another driving force for officers to leave the USMC may be the culture that young officers have been born into and adopted. Born in the Eighties, Millennials are now turning thirty, or approaching thirty years old and make up a majority of the USMC's young officers. Technology greatly influences Millennials not just for work and entertainment purposes. Social networks also significantly affect them. These social networks are pervasive and have become a foundation in the communities to which they belong.¹² Once, an officer would have stated that he is a Marine, and Marines comprised his social circle, and his social functions revolved around Marine functions such as the Marine Corps birthday ball. Currently, Millennials have a much larger number of connection points to people outside the Marine Corps and their social identification is much more nuanced. Networking gives them the ability to switch careers without feeling as if they are giving up their sole social support circle. Moving from one career to

another no longer means that there is any real change in someone's involvement in their social group.

In response to increased turnover within their young, educated workforce, Price Waterhouse Cooper studied their Millennial-aged professionals. The study found that the younger the professional, the more that work/life balance was important.¹³ Young professionals do not see a great advantage in making long-term, significant sacrifices for the benefit of the organization if the organization will not in turn provide opportunities for personal growth.¹⁴ Unlike a flexible private workplace, a satisfactory work/life balance is harder to achieve in the military, especially when an officer becomes more senior. The responsibilities of billet and rank become greater than before and the time spent away from the family becomes more protracted than when he held a more-junior position. Generation Y professionals start families around the same time that they become senior officers. Their desire to devote more time to their young children clashes with the increased demands of higher rank.

Association with Civilian Contractors

Civilian contractors have had an enormous influence on the War on Terror. Contractors augmented deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan to the point where the ratio of civilian workers on bases was higher than that of active-duty personnel.¹⁵ A study completed by the *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* showed that there was a significant relationship between how closely military groups work with contractors and the “increased desire to leave the uniformed services.”¹⁶ Contractors like L3

communications, for example, collaborate closely with air-wing units providing maintenance support for most USMC type model and series aircraft. Civilian contractors appear to have a better work/life balance than the military with days off while deployed, unlike the seven-day-per-week Marine schedule. These contractors make at least comparable wages, often their salaries exceed military pay scales. They have set schedules and working conditions free of reactive planning workload changes that come with membership in the operating forces. Civilian contractors can also choose to deploy along with military units for a short period in which they gain both a sense of camaraderie and a sense of accomplishment. Together, the higher pay and perceived less-regimented working conditions serve to create a military mindset that “I can be doing the same thing for much more money.”

Generational Changes

Some generational differences are also clear between officers in the Corps. Younger officers like to harness social media to network with professional colleges outside the USMC. This networking ability creates opportunities to move on from the USMC. Furthermore, there are intangible factors that will affect retention. Generation Y employees value team-oriented jobs that have well-defined goals with a small supportive hierarchy. Younger officers increasingly see the military as micromanaging and having a zero-defect mentality.¹⁷ Young officers feel original thought and problem solving is shunned by risk-adverse superiors and see themselves as squeezed out of the ability to make creative decisions.¹⁸ The best aviators coming from the company-grade ranks are frequently talented, intelligent, and disciplined, which opens up to them a wide variety of

professional options after their initial commitment to the USMC. I have witnessed many young officers become frustrated with the Marine Corps and leave to train as doctors and lawyers or pursue MBAs. The gain to those professions is a loss to the Corps. The increased sense of micromanagement within the USMC is in direct contrast with values of Gen Y professionals.

Gen Y professionals also feel the need to change jobs and possibly embark on career-valuing life experience and travel.¹⁸ While the USMC can present many of these opportunities, younger officers increasingly find that their career paths offer stagnation. They balk at the perceived pervasiveness of spinning their wheels while waiting out the snail-like pace of the promotions process, as opposed to the Corps providing them recognition based on merit. This discontent will lead to increased motivation to leave the service.²⁰

Motivational variables		Public Sector	
		p-value	x² value
1	Sense of belonging to the organisation	0.04	9.91
2	Freedom for innovative thinking	0.00	15.35
3	Provision of health & wellness programmes	0.00	14.18
4	Setting performance target for Subordinates	0.13	7.07
5	Job security	0.04	8.15
6	Training & development opportunities	0.02	11.41
7	Recognition/reward for good performance	0.10	7.76
8	Promotion based on performance	0.28	5.08
9	Work autonomy	0.98	0.41
10	Mentoring	0.42	3.90
11	Challenging/interesting work	0.03	11.09
12	Participation in decision making process	0.08	8.27
13	Flexible work arrangement	0.24	5.46

P<0.05 level of significance

Figure 1.²¹

The table in Figure 1 is the result of a 2009 study on job retention in private industry. It showed the factors that had the greatest effect on workplace motivation. The higher the p-value, the greater the statistical correlation. Work autonomy, promotion based on performance, mentoring, flexible work arrangement, setting performance targets for subordinates, recognition/reward for good performance, and participation in the decision-making process most closely correlated with workplace motivation. The results of this study strongly align with the career goals of today's Generation Y. The table indicates that seeking fulfillment in a labor market that values flexibility and offers fluidity in their occupations, Millennials and junior officers in the Marine Corps will look to other means of earning their livelihood for professional satisfaction.

What Does the Future of Marine Field-grade Manpower Currently Look Like?

The future is one of scarcity for the field-grade officers within the USMC aviation branch. This forecast bases itself on an interpretation of the historical data and the current conditions under which pilots must work. There have been historical examples of previous deficiencies in qualified aviation manpower. Before 9/11, the military had an exodus of aviators. The factors that contributed to past shortages in experienced aviation manpower are occurring today. Flight hours for all levels of pilots are reducing while the technical demands of the job are increasing with the addition of sensor and digital interoperability upgrades.²³ ACP can bolster the number of pilots committed to staying in the USMC, but the goal should be to ensure the highest skilled and most qualified aviators remain to assure the future health of their respective communities.

Tools That the USMC Can Use To Retain the Best Officers.

Other industries have similar problems to the Marine Corps in that they need to keep skilled workers who are in a competitive marketplace. Bonuses can be looked at as a tool that uses the psychological drive of aviators who are making a choice whether to remain in the Corps. A business-sector perspective can refine the process of how and when monetary bonuses are used to retain the most qualified human capital. While the abilities and experiences of USMC aviators are unique, they can still be classified as highly skilled labor, and the USMC can look to other career fields dependent upon experienced and highly qualified labor as models for employee retention.

McKinsey and Company, a medical consulting firm, looked into risks associated with personnel during mergers. McKinsey found it is important to get ahead of the coming change. When companies merge McKinsey found that it is a best practice to identify key employees and confirm or contract key position via monetary payment. McKinsey found that before the merger was signed, if incoming management offered retention bonuses, the most skilled employees did not leave in periods of change and risk.²² This study illustrates that incentives for highly skilled workers have been used successfully with civilian employees. It is reasonable to conclude that targeting bonuses would increase the retention of highly skilled workers and create a reward for work performed in the military profession as well.

How Financial Incentives, Such As ACP, Work To Motivate A Marine To Stay In The Corps.

Incentives are a psychological “pull” as opposed to a “push,” which is an internal motivator.²⁴ The USMC tries to pull the aviator into a decision to stay in the operating forces as opposed to using the push of internal motivators such as feelings of duty or camaraderie. However, the psychological pull triggered by an offer of ACP is an incentive mechanism that works in two ways. Humans are driven not only by the prospect of gain, but also are significantly motivated by guarding against or avoiding loss.²⁵ ACP can use this aversion to loss as a force-shaping measure. Aviators not awarded ACP, or offered lower rates of ACP, will have a psychological pull to leave the Marine Corps. When a Marine fails to win an ACP bonus, this is a form of negative recognition. It shows that he has fallen behind his peers and that his performance is substandard. The lack of a reward will motivate the Marine to guard against future loss either by improving or, more likely, pull that Marine towards leaving the Marine Corps. In other words, he has to shape up or ship out. Yet, although the offer of ACP is a psychological pull, its use by the USMC can have an effect on a critical internal workplace motivator, and that is recognition for good performance.

The way to achieve increased motivation through monetary incentive is to tie ACP directly to qualifications earned and Performance Evaluation Systems scores. Marines who have attained a higher level of flight credentials are the most valuable to the USMC. The premier qualification of Weapons and Tactics Instructor (WTI) is an investment made by a Squadron in its most outstanding young officers. The training enables them to become technical experts in their respective airframes and also the primary executor of the Weapons and Tactics Training Program. Creating a WTI requires

a substantial investment in manning and flight time to get a prospective student ready for the increased responsibilities. It also entails an investment in squadron man-hours and material to support that student through the bi-annual WTI exercises. Following WTI, Night Systems Instructor (NSI) is a qualification assigned to the most capable junior officers, and this enables them to train squadron pilots in the most challenging skill of night-vision goggle flight as well as advanced tactics and weapons employment. Aviators in whom the Marine Corps have invested the most time in terms of individual flight training and squadron support man-hours should be the primary target for retention.

The Previous Process for ACP Awards.

The foundation for ACP is TITLE 37 U.S.C. SEC 301B, signed in 2003. It is a law that allows the services to use incentive pay to retain aviators, and the USMC uses this law as their primary reference in awarding ACP. From 2003 to 2011, ACP was offered via a Marine Administrative Message (MARADMIN) and was allotted on a “first come, first served” basis.²⁶ If applications for ACP exceeded the assigned ACP contract allocations, then a board would be convened to select the best applicants and award the ACP.²⁷ MARADMIN 117/11 states that aviators whose service commitment ends within the current fiscal year of the MARADMIN release are able to apply for ACP. The annual dollar amount varied by MOS proportionally to the health of the staffing goals of the various aviation communities. Payments for ACP would be allotted yearly until the aviator reached 15 years of service. For a rotary-wing aviator, it would be six payments from the aviator’s ninth year of service to his fifteenth. For a fixed wing aviator with a

longer initial commitment, the duration of ACP is shorter, and would last from approximately the FW aviator's eleventh year of service to his fifteenth.

The award of ACP via the process of MARADMIN 117/11 is efficient in that it casts the widest net possible by allowing all pilots to apply for the bonus. In this way, it creates the largest pool of committed aviators for the future and keeps succeeding manpower levels predictable. However, while awarding ACP through a blanket process allows MMOA to solidify manpower levels for FW and RW MOS with a psychological pull, this system has only a small motivational push. (See Figure 1.) It is reasonable to assume that, in the past, the Marine Corps paid bonuses to officers who were likely to stay in the Marine Corps regardless of whether or not they received an ACP award.

Problems with ACP Awards.

Timing

The timing of ACP awards does not act as an effective incentive to retain the most qualified aviators. On the dates the MARADMINs are issued, the orders for ACP applications only reward Marines who have already committed to staying in the USMC. According to MARADMIN 117/11, the USMC make an offer of ACP to those aviators who will complete or have completed their initial service obligation within the current fiscal year, which ends each 31 October. Additionally, all requests for ACP are reviewed on 1 June. If applications for ACP are greater than allotments, then a board is convened to select the most qualified applicants to receive ACP. Therefore, the ACP is awarded shortly before the pilot's service obligation ends; but months, if not years, before that

time, the aviator will decide if he wishes to remain in the Corps. The timing of this award does little to ensure that ACP acts as an incentive to retain the best pilots. Because the results of the ACP award process come out in the third quarter of the fiscal years when an aviator's service commitments are over, it is too late to influence the decision to stay or go. The tardiness of the decision makes the ACP an award for aviators who have already decided to remain the Marine Corps.

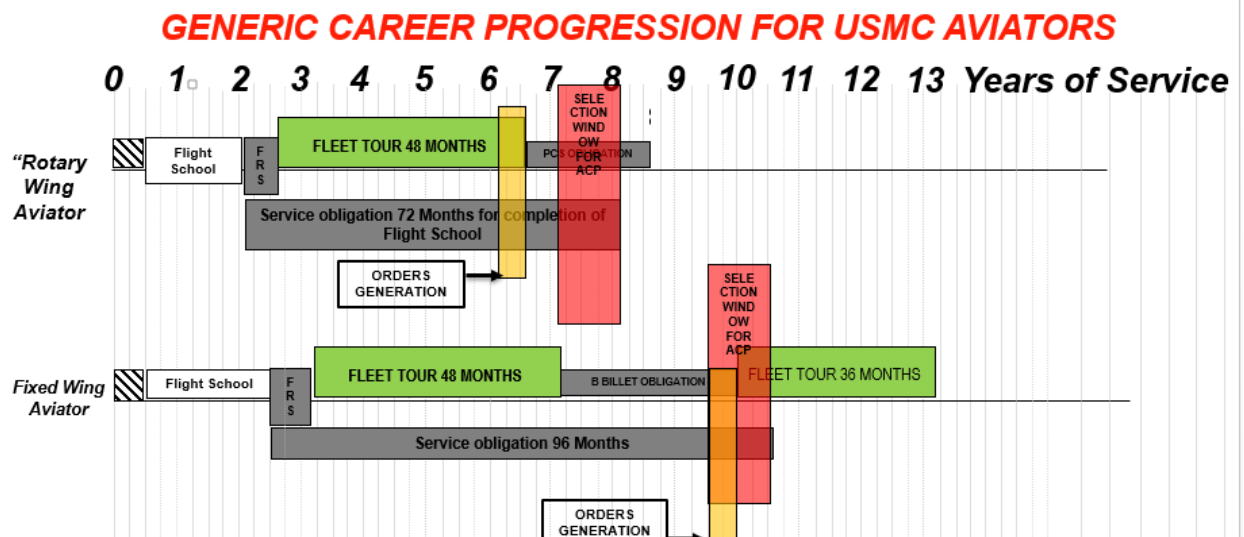


Figure 2. [Figure 2, a block diagram of H-1²⁸, CH-53²⁹, V-22³⁰ Rotary-wing (RW) and AV-8B³¹, F/A-18³² KC-130³³, Fixed Wing (FW) aviator service commitments³⁴]

An examination of Figure 2 illustrates the timeline that governs the decision as to whether or not an aviator will stay in the Marines and, as a consequence, that the orders process becomes a key decision element. The PWC study showed that Millennials are looking for a better work/life balance. But the inability to receive desired orders, or the uncertainty experienced over what assignment comes next, creates a sense that continued

service is not sufficiently rewarding, and an aviator will begin looking at leaving the Corps. As seen in Figure 2, by the time the USMC awards ACP, an aviator has already contacted the monitor and is preparing for his next PCS move. At this point, he has already committed to no less than two more years of obligated service. It is evident that aviators who are in the window for ACP have already made the decision to remain in the USMC based on variables other than financial rewards, and that using a monetary incentive to extend their service commitment does little to win over hearts and minds.

ACP Does Not Reward Competence

ACP awards do not examine in detail the investment the Marine Corps has already put into an aviator regarding training and experience. Neither do they consider the value of investing more money in an individual pilot in order to retain him. The only mention of performance is in the ACP MARADMIN 117/11, which refers to performance when it states that “If there are more applicants than contract spots for a specific community, a board will convene to select the best and most qualified to receive the ACP contracts.” The ACP order makes qualifications, to all intents and purpose, an afterthought.

The Training and Readiness (T&R) orders from all Type Model Series summarized by Figure 2 show that aviation communities follow roughly the same career progression model. An aviator is allotted four years in the fleet to build the foundational training and earn instructor-level qualifications. When a pilot has completed his fleet tour he has, in most cases, achieved the highest level of flight qualification and proficiency.

While there are professional rewards for excelling in the fleet Marine forces and attaining the highest qualifications possible, the USMC does not give any financial rewards for excelling at aviation qualifications.

Using ACP To Reward The Most Talented Aviators And Incentivize Them To Remain In The USMC.

ACP is currently an insurance policy for the USMC. Aviators are paid money to retain them for 15 years of active service. This payment ensures that there will be an ample workforce to fly the Marine Corps aviation platforms and also to staff headquarters and provide manpower for training commands to instruct new pilots. It would make sense that the USMC would want to attach greater emphasis on quality in the retention of aviators; better people will provide better training and produce better staff. Retaining officers for fifteen years of active service puts them at three-quarters complete on a twenty-year benchmark for retirement. At this point in his career, an officer is unlikely to resign from the Marine Corps and will continue to stay until twenty years, or until he receives an incentive to leave through programs like the voluntary early release program.³⁵ By contrast, tying a variable award of ACP to higher levels of qualification would incentivize those younger Marine aviators, who have achieved extremely technical and prestigious qualifications, to stay in the Corps.

ACP Can Recognize The Most Qualified Aviators.

As opposed to a primarily application-based process that is passive and relies on the participation of Marines to apply for ACP, the USMC should adopt a “push”

mentality directly assessing individual aviators who will be eligible for ACP and offering them a monetary retention payment based on their recent performance reviews. In Figure 2, aviators, both fixed wing and rotary-wing, have both completed their first fleet tours by the time they are eligible for consideration for ACP. During the first fleet tours, aviators will distinguish themselves from their peers. The top pilots will be selected by their commanding officers to become instructors within their squadrons, Weapons and Tactics Instructors and Night Systems Instructors, as well as tactical instructors teaching profiles specific to their aircraft, for example low-altitude tactics. These are the aviators that the USMC should strive the hardest to retain. By keeping these pilots in the Marine Corps for as long as possible, investments in flight time and training are protected.

The Marine Corps can directly affect motivation and influence retention of the most qualified aviators by using Aviation Career Pay coupled with explicit and targeted apportionments. This approach will successfully target the most capable and well-trained pilots for retention and, in turn, motivate low performers to leave the Marine Corps. However, the USMC must select and assess Marines for investment in their retention through ACP. The most effective way to do this is through a board process.

How an ACP Board Process Would Work

The goal of the ACP board is first to assess all Marine aviators that fall within the eligibility window for ACP. Marines will be ranked based on their leadership and abilities as an officer via their Master Brief Sheet and their technical proficiency, or qualifications earned. Secondly, the Marine Corps can offer financial incentives to the

most qualified Marine Corps pilots to maintain the future health of the aviator community.

The board should consist of senior aviators, including an O-6 as president and a mixture of O-5s and senior O-4s representing the operating forces. The board is briefed on all qualified Marines who meet the minimum criteria for retention and these Marines are then evaluated based on performance. The president of the board will decide on the desired metrics for assessment. Briefers are selected from the operating forces and will present the packages to the board, which will rank all officers on a scale from one to five. The distribution within the ranks should be even.

Aviators with rare and highly sought-after specialized skills, such as WTI, would place in the “One” category. Other time-intensive and vital qualifications would qualify for the “Two” category. Pilots that are average regarding performance and qualifications would be a “Three.” Aviators that are below average would be a “Four” and those pilots who rate well below average, but meet all minimum qualifications for retention, would be a “Five.” In a community that has been selected to receive ACP, all aviators in the “One” or “Two” categories should be notified immediately of their selection as the top of their peer group and be offered a guarantee of ACP for the next fiscal year according to a tiered scale. Aviators selected in the top tier are awarded the highest level of ACP, and ACP is prorated downward for tiers two, three, four and five.

Example of Tiered ACP Awards

Tier 1: Exemplary Aviator, WTI, Acting Department Head: \$15,000.00

Tier 2: Above Average Aviator, NSI, Leader of his Peers: \$12,500.00

Tier 3: Average Aviator: \$10,000.00

Tier 4: Below Average Aviator: \$7,500.00

Tier 5: Well Below Average Aviator: \$0.00

A tiered system of awards recognizes and reinforces that these aviators are important to the USMC and that their continued service is not only desired by the Marine Corps, but the USMC is willing to make a monetary investment in them to ensure their continued service. Once this evaluation is complete, the application process can award additional ACP to MOSs that need commitments of supplementary manpower.

The Most Effective Time to Award ACP

Using MARADMIN 117/11 as the current guideline, an aviator makes an ACP application during the fiscal year in which his obligated service is complete. This date is too late to exert any real influence on a skilled pilot who has to decide whether to leave the Marine Corps or continue with service. In the case of rotary-wing aviators, the orders process after the completion of his first fleet tour has already begun. These Marines have to commit to PCS orders and the two-year commitment they incur or make their intention known that they wish to leave the USMC. Offering ACP according to the current guideline misses the window of opportunity if the Marine Corps wants to pull Marines into making the decision to remain. Awarding ACP prior to the orders process is the key. Aviators wishing to stay in the USMC will look for follow-on tours that will advance

their careers. Pilots who are moving out of the Marine Corps will try to remain at their home stations in staff billets and spend their remaining time on their service contracts in their local areas or look for a billet that will allow them to transition out more easily, such as flight school.

The first fleet tour is strenuous and demands multiple deployments that take their toll on relationships³⁶. Offering ACP will reinforce the feeling that the Marine Corps values the sacrifices made and the extra effort the most well-qualified aviators have given. The monetary incentive allows households to have more future disposable income, and this creates a psychological pull, not just for the targeted Marine, but also for his family members.

There is a balance that must be struck between awarding ACP early to ensure that targets for retention are met as soon as possible, and allowing pilots with potential to mature and separate themselves from their peers to make certain that the most qualified aviators receive ACP. It would be a highly desirable process improvement if a board convened to evaluate all FW and RW aviators that fall one year out from the end of their first fleet tour, and then immediately publish the results of that board. This new approach would get inside the decision cycle of those Marines who are sitting on the fence as to whether to leave the Marine Corps or to continue with their service.

Unfortunately, awarding guaranteed amounts of ACP as early as described above is not feasible. The release of the ACP allotment for contracts is per the fiscal year and covers only one fiscal year in total. Thus, awarding ACP before the issue of allotments in

any given fiscal year, is putting the cart before the horse. What the Marine Corps can do is execute the board one fiscal year before the aviator completes his service contract. The board informs the Marines of its assessment and the tier into which they fall. While this will not give an exact dollar amount to his possible ACP award, it will give an aviator a close approximation, based on past awards, of what the USMC is willing to invest to keep him in the service. This approach ties into Figure 1, above, which showed that public-service employees want recognition for their hard work. With the recognition provided for them by the ACP Board tiering process, aviators who fall into the Tier 1 or Tier 2 levels would have a strong incentive to remain in the USMC.

An Example of How ACP Could Work In The Future.

Goal: To retain the most qualified aviators in the USMC.

Action: Headquarters Marine Corps releases MARADMIN in October, notifying all aviators who will complete their initial service contract in the next fiscal year, of the convening of an ACP board. The board will rate all aviators eligible for receipt of ACP awards the following fiscal year. The board will consist of a Colonel as president and a selection of Lieutenant Colonels and senior Majors. All aviators will be rated in evenly distributed tiers. Tier One will represent the most qualified aviators, and Tier Five will represent the least qualified or below average aviators.

Expected Result: The USMC will retain a higher percentage of top-tier candidates who accept the ACP bonus for the following fiscal year. HOMC can track this change by reviewing the retention rates of aviators within each tier following the

decisions of the ACP eligibility board compared to the retention rates of submitted requests for ACP from all aviators. Marines rated below average in Tier 4 or 5 will have a higher pace of separation from the USMC, thus raising the average quality of field-grade officers in the future, and allowing for accelerated rates of promotion. If acceptances of ACP are greater than allotments in the following fiscal year, the ACP eligibility board results will serve as the framework for which Marines will receive ACP. For example, all Tier 1 and Tier 2 Marines would receive ACP and the shortfall is subtracted from the Tier 4 and, if necessary, Tier 3 ACP awards.

CONCLUSION

The Marine Corps has used Aviation Career Pay (ACP), or “the bonus” since 2003, to stabilize aviation manpower levels and to reduce potential aviation manpower shortages. It has been successful in the past in ensuring that a sufficient number of field-grade officers extend their service commitment and remain with the Corps to manage squadrons and execute staff duties. But a manpower shortage is looming on the horizon due to airline recruitment, the influence of civilian contractors, and changes in the goals and work/life concerns of the so-called Generation Y or Millennials. ACP can continue to be utilized to address this impending shortage, but if the Corps wishes to retain its best aviators from amongst the latest generation of Marine aviators, the system of awarding ACP must be changed.

Under the current guideline, ACP awards are made to aviators shortly before the pilot’s initial service obligation ends. But, since a Marine aviator decides on whether or not to remain in the Corps months, if not years, before that point, the current timing of the

awards misses the window of opportunity to sway his decision to extend his service contract. Consequently, ACP awards end up in the hands of pilots who have already decided to continue with the service. A new approach would be to convene a board to evaluate all aviators that fall one year out from the end of their first fleet tour, and immediately publish the results of that board. This approach would allow the award of ACP to influence a Marine aviator's thinking when he is considering his future.

Another significant benefit of this new approach is that the board will evaluate and rank all Marines that fall within the eligibility window based on their Master Brief Sheet and their technical proficiency or qualifications earned. Once that process is complete, the Marine Corps is in a position to offer financial incentives on a scale, for example, with five equal tiers. The most qualified Tier One pilots will receive the largest financial offers and the least qualified Tier Five will not receive the offer of a bonus. In other words, the size of an ACP award is linked to an aviator's level of competence. The Corps would then stand a much better chance of retaining its most talented aviators while, at the same time, encouraging those aviators ranked below average, to leave.

Because the release of ACP allotments for contracts is per the fiscal year and covers only one fiscal year in total, awarding ACP before the issue of allotments for that fiscal year appears to be putting the cart before the horse. In spite of this, the Marine Corps can inform eligible Marines of their assessment and the tier into which they fall. Although this method will not give an exact dollar amount to the future reward, it gives an approximation, based on past awards, and informs the aviator that he is being rewarded for his hard work. If acceptances of ACP prove to be greater than the allotments

in the following fiscal year, the ACP eligibility board serves as a framework for which Marines will receive ACP, and any shortfall reduces Tier Four and, if necessary, Tier Three awards.

ACP creates a psychological “pull” that the USMC wants to harness to encourage aviators to agree to a longer service commitment. The financial reward also satisfies the motivational “push” associated with recognition for good performance. But offering the most talented aviators the largest ACP awards is not a magic bullet that will ensure the future health of Marine Aviation. Studies have shown that there are other motivators for workplace retention. For example, young officers who have just started a family, want flexible work arrangements, and junior officers in general, who represent Generation Y, want a better work/life balance that includes less micro-managing and more participation in the decision-making process. In order to retain the most talented Marine aviators in the Corps and motivate them throughout their careers, attention must be focused on factors other than monetary rewards.

Recommended Areas of Further Study

With many specialties depending on highly skilled personnel, all military services use monetary awards to contract critical personnel fields for extended service commitments, thus stabilizing critical manpower. The conclusions of this paper may serve as a template for the targeted awarding of “Bonuses” for other military occupations, from Network Administrator to Special Operators, to increase the chances of retaining the most qualified personnel.

Notes

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