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The Marine Corps is losing good officers who are choosing to leave the service because they do not feel their efforts and hard work are being recognized. The Marine Corps, along with the other services, have used numerous methods in order to retain talent that might be headed for the door. The problem is these methods are not adequately directed at the key population. There is already a means in place to recognized those officers who are above their peer group, it is the ability to promote from the below zone, essentially promoting an officer early. Unlike the other services, the Marine Corps has historically not promoted officers from the below zone. By changing the culture of the Marine Corps to embrace greater use of the below zone, this will have a positive effect on retaining top officers.

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Officer Retention in the Marine Corps: Retaining the Best and Brightest

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Executive Summary

Title: Officer Retention in the Marine Corps: Retaining the Best and Brightest

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Thesis: The Marine Corps is losing some of its best and brightest officers who believe officer promotions are based on seniority and not merit; however, retention of good officers can be achieved through greater use of the below zone.

Discussion: The Marine Corps is losing good officers who are choosing to leave the service because they do not feel their efforts and hard work are being recognized. Over the years, the Marine Corps, along with the other services, have used numerous methods in order to retain talent that might be headed for the door. The problem is these methods are not adequately directed at the key population. There is already a means in place to recognize those officers who are above their peer group, it is the ability to promote from the below zone, essentially promoting an officer early. The Marine Corps is allowed to promote up to 10% from the below zone population; however, historically they have chosen not to. There are a number of reasons why they do not, it takes a quota from the in-zone population, officers in the below zone do not have enough experience, they may miss out on key development time, they will get promoted on the next board. Many of these reasons do not hold merit or are counter to how the Marine Corps views promotions. If the Marine Corps promoted officers from the below zone with greater regularity, like the Army and the Air Force, this would increase retention amongst the officer corps.

Conclusion: By changing the culture of the Marine Corps to embrace greater use of the below zone for officer promotions this will have a positive effect on improving the retention of talent in the officer ranks. At the heart of the argument is that the Marine Corps is not only retaining an officer, but a quality officer, by recognizing them for their talent and hard work. This will have a greater impact in cost savings and morale as well.

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Preface

I chose this topic because it has always intrigued me how the Marine Corps, who puts significant emphasis on performance, chooses to rarely promote officers from the below zone, designed to reward the top performers. Even more it seems to be only the officer ranks in which the Marine Corps seems turned off by the idea of accelerated promotions. For the enlisted ranks, meritorious promotions are very common and promotions from the below zone for Warrant Officers are used quite frequently. So why is the Marine Corps gun-shy from utilizing similar approaches in the officer ranks? By the Marine Corps recognizing those exceptional officers through accelerated promotions, it will have a great impact on the quality of officers in the senior ranks.

I would like to thank my wife and kids for their understanding (whether willingly or not) of my absence over the last months. Your moral support has made the difference in my ability to complete this project. I would also like to thank my mentor, Dr. James Joyner, for his time and patience while providing excellent guidance and edits throughout this entire process. I would also like to thank Command and Staff College for the phenomenal educational experience I have received over this last year. I definitely feel I have grown as an Marine officer through this experience.

Introduction

The Marine Corps puts a significant emphasis on its officer corps, from the precisely directed messaging campaign designed to draw premium candidates in, to the six-month development course every new officer is required to attend, known as The Basic School (TBS).¹ The Marine Corps has gotten really good at recruiting quality men and women and then developing them into the type of leaders necessary to carry the institution into the future. The Marine Corps is not as good in keeping these quality officers once they are in. Great officers, who might have normally stayed, are choosing to depart much too early due to dissatisfaction. Part of the dissatisfaction is the perception the Marine Corps promotes based on time more so than it does on merit. When these individuals choose to leave early, the Marine Corps loses out on reaping the full benefit of their investment.

It is recognized that not every officer who joins will spend 20 or 30 years in uniform. There will be an inherent percentage who will depart early, regardless of the incentive to try and sway them to remain. That still leaves a portion who feel they are not properly recognized for their talent and hard work, who would rather leave the organization early, instead of remaining on the same promotion timeline of their peers. There needs to be a retention strategy aimed directly at this population, one that rewards the efforts to excel above one's peer group.

There is already the means in place to incentivize this group but is currently not being utilized to its full potential. This paper argues for greater use of Below Zone (BZ) promotions in order to improve retention of those quality officers who would otherwise depart before their time.

¹ The Basic School is a 6-month entry-level course designed to develop every officer, regardless of future duty assignment, with the duties, responsibilities, and warfighting skills required of a rifle platoon commander. No other service has such an in-depth and lengthy school like the Marine Corps'.

Officer Retention in the Marine Corps

Before going further, it is important to understand that the problem being addressed is not officer retention on a grand scale, but rather focusing on a select population group of top performers, and how to affect their decision to stay in the Marine Corps longer. Overall, officer retention in the Marine Corps is not in crisis mode. It has remained relatively steady over the last decade. According to the Defense Manpower Data Center and their September 2016 Status of Forces Survey of Active Duty Members (SOFS-A), retention in the Marine Corps has fluctuated from 45% in 2006 to 52% in 2016, with the highest year being 58% in 2011. The statistics went on to show that, of the Marine Corps officers surveyed, 21% were likely to get out. This number significantly decreased for officers between O-4 and O-6, attributable to the fact these officers have completed at least 10-years of service, and half way to retirement.²

What cannot be seen from these statistics is what percentage of ‘good’ officers are choosing to get out before their time. Data has not been qualitatively collected by the Marine Corps in years past. It is only this year that the Marine Corps has started the execution of the Exit and Milestone Longitudinal Study Program, which specifically asks Marines their reasons for leaving and staying as well as satisfaction with the promotion process.³ There have, however, been independent studies. In 2012, Tim Kane, a former U.S. Air Force officer and research fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, stated the “best and brightest officers [are] bleeding out of the Pentagon’s centrally planned personnel system.”⁴ Kane conducted a survey of

² O-4 through O-6 are known as field grade officers, Major, Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel. It makes sense why this number would increase amongst the field grade officer ranks as all of them are at 10-years or more in service, at least halfway until they are eligible for retirement. Status of Forces Survey of Active Duty Members (SOFS-A), May 2017.

³ Major Hogan, email message to author, February 22, 2018.

⁴ Tim Kane, *Bleeding Talent: How the US Military Mismanages Great Leaders and Why It’s Time for a Revolution*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15.

250 West Point graduates from various classes. Out of that survey, 93% believed that half or more of the best officers leave the military early rather than serving a full career. Among the active duty respondents, 82% believed that half or more of the best officers are leaving and only 7% agreed that the military does a good job of retaining the best leaders.⁵ In two other separate but similar independent surveys conducted on officer retention, 62%⁶ of respondents in one and 80%⁷ in the other, stated they feel the best and brightest junior officers are leaving active service. The problem is not with retaining quantity, but with retaining quality officers. As the Marine Corps continues to adapt to the current and future operating environment, it is critical that the Marine Corps retain the greatest possible number of highly talented officers that it can.

What is causing good officers to leave the service early? It is difficult to hone in on the exact reason due to the lack of quality data (as stated previously) and the myriad of reasons each individual officer getting out could give. One study conducted by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) found that when it came to overall satisfaction of military service, service members were least satisfied with the opportunities for promotion. Only 51% percent stated they were satisfied, with 27% stating they were dissatisfied.⁸ In another study of 242 officers from all branches of service, nearly 50% stated that many of the best officers would stay if the “military promoted the best officers more quickly.”⁹ In the absence of more conclusive data, an inference can still be made that a link exists between officer’s satisfaction with the promotion system and their desire to leave the force early.

⁵ Kane, *Bleeding Talent*, 16.

⁶ Jaron Wharton, “Anecdotal Evidence of a Hollowing Force? A Closer Look at Junior Officer Retention,” (Center for a New American Security, 2008).

⁷ Sayce Falk & Sasha Rogers, “Junior Military Officer Retention: Challenges & Opportunities,” (John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University 2011).

⁸ Status of Forces Survey of Active Duty Members (SOFS-A 2017).

⁹ Falk & Rogers, *Junior Military Officer Retention*, 4.

Finding the Right Retention Strategy

The independent surveys show there is a population of officers who choose to get out early due to dissatisfaction with the slow promotion process and the inability to climb ahead of their peers. The Marine Corps needs to adopt the right retention method that targets this specific audience and not one that is designed for everyone. Retention bonuses have been utilized in the past, very extensively in the Army in fact. These have shown to be of little benefit. The bonus is typically not enough to bridge the wage gap between what an officer is currently making and what they believe they could be making in the civilian sector. Also, a large portion of those officers who accept the bonus were planning on staying in anyway.¹⁰ Retention strategies have to be able to counter the reasons that motivate good officers to leave the Marine Corps early. The Marine Corps has acknowledged this need for better retention. The 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Robert Neller, issued the critical task of “exploring approaches to retention.” Neller further emphasized the need to “explore approaches to *retention* that ensure we gain enduring return on investment from a competent, confident, and *mature* workforce [emphasis added].”¹¹ His reason for this critical task is for the Marine Corps to focus on retaining Marines with unique qualities and experiences in which the Marine Corps has devoted significant amounts of time resources, and funding to train and educate.

Top performers have what is called “movement capital,” in that they have a greater capacity to act on dissatisfaction with workplace elements than low performers because they can leverage their superior skills in the labor market to secure another position with greater

¹⁰ Casey Wardynski, D.S. Lyle, & M.J. Colarusso, “Towards a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: Retaining Talent,” (Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 26.

¹¹ Headquarters US Marine Corps, “Marine Corps Operating Concept 2025,” (Headquarters Marine Corps, September 2016), 17.

rewards.¹² A study done by researchers from Cornell University, found that “high performers were more likely to report staying [with their current company] because of advancement opportunities, as opposed to reasons cited by the lowest performers.”¹³ Top performers want to be rewarded for their hard work. Promoting officers from the BZ goes directly to this target population, because it rewards exceptionalism.

It is important to note, that there is no definitive evidence that proves increasing BZ promotions will in fact improve retention. This inference is made based on the feedback gained from the limited independent surveys that have been conducted on officers who have chosen to leave the service before retirement. It is also based on the premise that BZ promotions are designed for the specific purpose of identifying those officers who are ahead of their peers and exemplify the attributes of what is expected of officers in the next higher rank. The Army in their Army Regulation 600-8-29, Officer Promotions, defines BZ promotions as “an essential part of the promotion system.” Adding, “they are intended to provide officers of exceptional ability an opportunity to advance quickly to more responsible positions, help retain high quality officers, and give officers an incentive to perform at their highest potential.”¹⁴

¹² John Hausknecht, J.M. Rodda, & M.J. Howard, *Targeted Employee Retention: Performance-Based and Job-Related Differences in Reported Reasons for Staying*, (Cornell University, 2009) ,10.

¹³ Hausknecht, Rodda, & Howard, *Targeted Employee Retention*, 20.

¹⁴ Army Regulation 600-8-29, “Officer Promotions,” (Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington DC, 2005), 19, 1-34b.

The Officer Promotion Process

When officers come in to the U.S. armed forces, they are put into a cohort, or peer grouping based on all of the other officers that came in around the same time frame. As this cohort moves along the promotion path they will reach certain promotion timelines (see Table 1.1). For their first promotion to O-2, it is two years from the time they were commissioned as a Second Lieutenant.¹⁵ Everyone within that cohort will be promoted to O-2 at the two-year mark (as long as they did not get into trouble, preventing them from being eligible for promotion). Their next promotion is to O-3 and is again around two-years from when they were last promoted, or four years since they were commissioned.¹⁶ Major (O-4), their fourth rank, will be their first truly competitive look for promotion, as the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA)¹⁷ outlined that only 80% can be selected to Major. Further, DOPMA set “numerical constraints on the number of field-grade officers (O-4 through O-6) that each service might have as a percentage of its officer corps.”¹⁸ Table 1.1 below shows how the Up-or-Out Promotion System works under DOPMA.

¹⁵ For Second Lieutenant it is 100% selection to First Lieutenant, if fully qualified.

¹⁶ There is a 95% selection rate to Captain. Not 100% but close to it when factoring in those who are ineligible due to disciplinary issues.

¹⁷ The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) is a United States federal law passed in 1980 that for the first-time standardized officer personnel management across the United States Armed Forces. While DOPMA standardized officer management, it still allows some flexibility in the promotion process to the individual services.

¹⁸ Bernard Rostker et al., *The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment* (RAND Corporation), 14.

DOPMA Up-or-Out Promotion System for "Due-Course" Officer¹⁹

Officer Pay Grade	Promotion Opportunity (percentage promoted from surviving cohort)	Promotion Timing (primary zone years of service)	Career Expectation	Career Pattern (cumulative probability to grade from original cohort less attrition)
O-2	100% if fully qualified	2	2X non-select & separation	96%
O-3	95%	3.5/4	2X non-select & separation or may be allowed to stay on active duty until retirement at 20 YOS	82%
O-4	80%	10±1	2X non-select & separation or may be allowed to stay until 24 YOS; normal retirement at 20 YOS	66%
O-5	70%	16±1	30% of 2X non-selectees can be retired before normal (28 YOS) retirement	41%
O-6	50%	22±1	Normal retirement at 30 YOS, but 30% early retirement possible after 4 years in grade	18%

Table 1.1

As the table shows, officers move up through the ranks at a relatively standard pace. This was one of the goals of DOPMA. That being said, there may be periods where the promotion timing has to be adjusted to account for significant changes in the force, such as changes to authorization levels, force shaping needs like too many officers staying, or the inverse, of too many getting out, hence the plus or minus one year. For this system to work, the promotion opportunity percentages have to decrease as the ranks increase. This is designed to keep officers moving up and out.

Under DOPMA there is a provision which allows officers to be promoted before reaching the primary zone. This is known as the below zone (BZ). Each service is allowed to select up to

¹⁹ Rostker et al., *The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980*, 14.

10% of overall allocations from the BZ. Officers who are selected from the below zone are considered to have demonstrated outstanding potential ahead of their peers. Based on this exceptional performance, they can be pulled from their cohort and promoted with the cohort ahead. The problem is the Marine Corps historically does not select officers from the BZ.

Use of the Below Zone

Charts 1 and 2 show the comparison between the services and their historical use of the BZ:

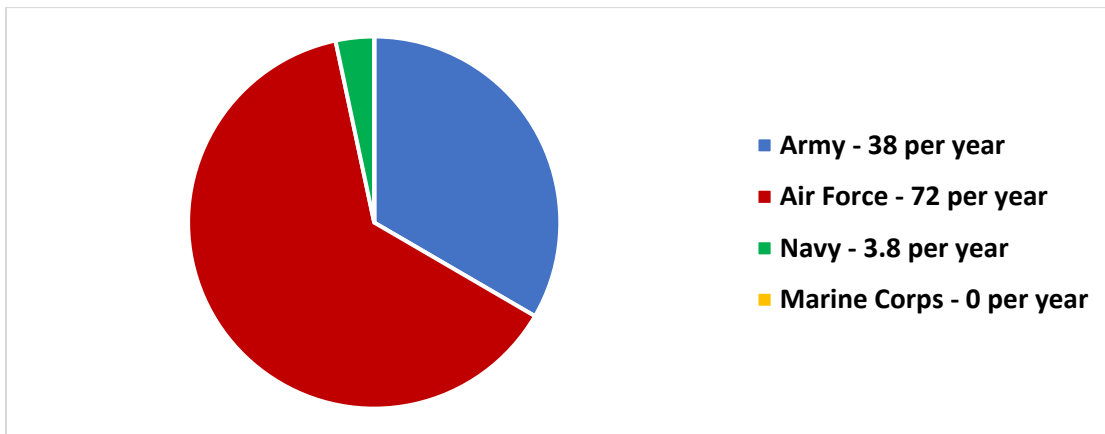


CHART 1. Colonels and Navy Captains Selected from the Below Zone for Promotion, FY04-FY13

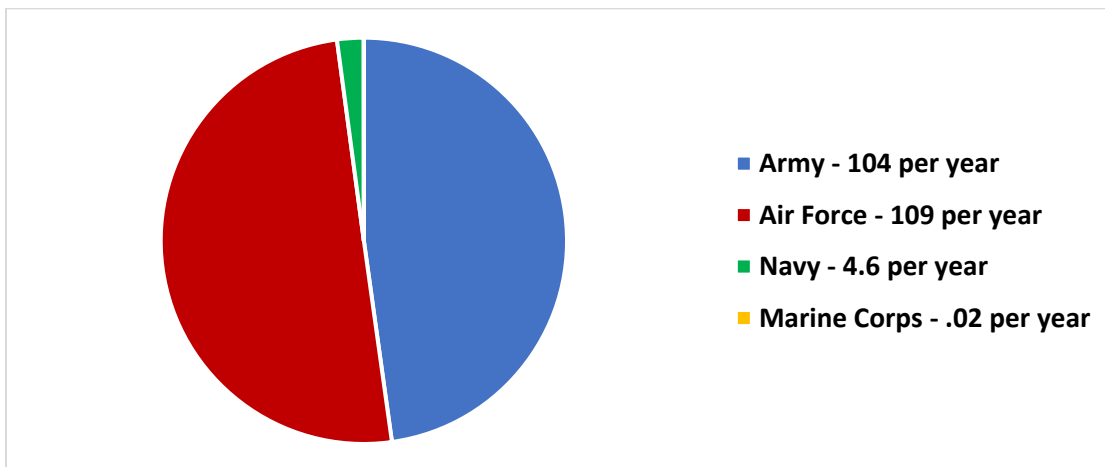


CHART 2. Lieutenant Colonels and Navy Commanders Selected from the Below Zone for Promotion, FY04-FY13

The charts show the Army and Air Force promote from the BZ very aggressively. These statistics cover a ten-year period, establishing that selection from the BZ for the Army and Air Force is not merely a trend but rather the norm. It is worth mentioning that the Air Force does not solely use the below zone as a retention strategy, but predominately to identify and then groom future general officers. In fact, the Air Force looks at officers two years prior to their in-zone year, or primary zone as they call it.

In an attempt to entice officers to stay in, the Army actually increased the percentage of BZ selections from the historical 5% to 10% in 2007. Then in 2008, after a request to the Secretary of Defense, were allowed to increase to 15%.²⁰ This is an example of how the Army has used BZ selections for retention. The Marine Corps on the other hand, makes very little use of the BZ. The FY17 active board for Marine Corps O-4 through O-6, there were 1,681 officers in the BZ with zero selected.²¹ It is difficult to comprehend that from a sheer statistical probability standpoint, that no officer from that pool would be found to be competitive amongst the in-zone population. This is only one year. If taken over a ten-year period, that would equate to around 15,000 eligible BZ officers in which less than one percent were selected from the BZ. These statistics beg the question as to why the Marine Corps does not promote from the BZ like the Army and Air Force. This further enforces the assumption that the promotion process in the Marine Corps places a greater emphasis on time without acknowledging the exceptional.

An Officer from Promotions Branch (MMPR) for the Marine Corps, who agreed to be interviewed for this project on the condition of anonymity, gave several reasons for the Corps' policy. First, members of the board know BZ selections count against the overall number that

²⁰ Jaron Wharton, "Anecdotal Evidence of a Hollowing Force? A Closer Look at Junior Officer Retention," (Center for a New American Security 2008).

²¹ Manpower & Reserve Affairs, Officer Promotion statistics FY17 Active.

can be selected, taking an allocation away from an otherwise competitive in-zone prospect.²² The Marine Corps Promotion Manual for officer promotions states that “each selection board is authorized to select to the next higher grade a specific number of officers...Any Above and Below-Zone selections count against the number authorized to select...Under no circumstance is the board authorized to exceed the “authorized to select” numbers identified within the precept.”²³ A similar argument was presented by another officer who stated there are definitely competitive officers in the BZ, but those same officers will be promoted the following year, so why promote them early.²⁴ Another officer stated they did not think the Marine Corps saw it as necessary to pull from the BZ, that the in-zone population is competitive enough.²⁵

The purpose of promotion boards is to select the top qualified individuals who meet the Marine Corps’ need for the next rank. Greater utilization of the BZ would expand the board members’ aperture, allowing them to see a greater diversity of potential selectees in order to truly choose the most qualified. This would not only create the opportunity for top officers to be recognized for their hard work but also make the promotion process more competitive. Those who are in-zone cannot remain comfortable with being a part of the top 80% (for O-4) or 70% (for O-5); those near those margins would need to increase their competitiveness. The benefit of promoting someone from the BZ, the Marine Corps gains an extra year out of the BZ selection. Instead of a major getting promoted at the 16-year mark to lieutenant colonel, if selected from the BZ, they would be selected at the 15-year mark and have five years remaining on active duty until they are eligible for retirement vice four years if they were not selected from the BZ. The

²² Interview with an officer from Officer Promotions Branch, Marine Corps, March 31, 2018.

²³ Commandant of the Marine Corps. *Marine Corps Promotion Manual, Volume 1, Officer Promotions*, MCO P1400.31C, August 9, 2006, 1-13.

²⁴ Interview with an officer from Officer Promotions Branch, Marine Corps, March 31, 2018.

²⁵ Interview with a senior Marine Corps Officer, February 1, 2018.

Marine Corps has now gained an extra year out of an officer that shows much more potential than the average candidate from the in-zone population.

Another reason the Marine Corps does not historically select from the BZ is the potential for officers who are fast-tracked through the ranks to miss out on key developmental billets (or time in those key billets is significantly shortened) that will matter when they are competing against their peers on future boards.²⁶ A senior officer who has been on a promotion board argued that those looked at from the BZ have not acquired the necessary knowledge and experience the next rank demands and therefore would be at a disadvantage at the next rank.²⁷

These seem like valid arguments when taken at face value but they are shallow once one delves into how promotion allocations are established and how promotion zones shift from year to year. According to the Marine Corps Promotion Manual for Officers, there are several planning factors that are taken into consideration when developing the promotion plan. These include:

- (1) The number of requirements needed to meet the projected vacancies by grade,
- (2) The estimated number of officers needed to fill vacancies during the period in which it is anticipated that the officers selected for promotion will be promoted and the number of officers authorized by the Secretary of the Navy to serve in the grade and competitive category under consideration,
- (3) The impact of zone size and promotion opportunity on time-in-service promotion flow points to the next higher grade,
- (4) Critically short MOSs requiring guidance in the precept,

²⁶ Interview with an officer from Officer Promotions Branch, Marine Corps, March 31, 2018.

²⁷ Interview with a senior Marine Corps Officer, February 1, 2018.

(5) The forecasted attrition data based on an estimated loss projection by grade, to meet a specified target determined two fiscal years out.²⁸

The importance of this is to understand that promotion zones within the Marine Corps change from year to year. The number of officers each selection board is authorized to select to the next higher grade is influenced by officer accessions, attrition, requirements, congressional and secretarial authorizations, and budgetary constraints. This constant shifting of the promotion zones from year to year skews the notion that someone who is in the BZ has less experience than those in-zone. Because there are so many variables in play, accurate forecasting is impossible. The in-zone parameters might need to be extended by another month to include a larger population of potential selections. Suddenly, the officer who would have been below zone and not 'possessed' the requisite experience is now part of the in-zone.

Taking this argument a step further, even the promotion flow as outlined by DOPMA has a variance of plus or minus one year for O-4 through O-6. Due to the ever-changing needs of the Marine Corps and the changes in retention and vacancies from year to year, this results in different promotion flow points from year group to year group. For example, prior to the fiscal year 2016 O-4 promotion board, captains had an average time in grade (TIG) of five years and an average time in service (TIS) of just under 11 years. During the 2016 Major board, of the population selected from in-zone, the average was two and a half years TIG and eight years TIS. That year the Marine Corps selected 661 Captains to Major with an average TIG that was half of the average of previous year groups.²⁹ The Marine Corps had its reasons for doing this, but this shows it is not uncommon. Selecting from the BZ accelerates an officer by one year, in the 2016 Major board, officers selected from in-zone were essentially accelerated by two and a half years.

²⁸ Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Promotion Manual*, 1-12.

²⁹ Manpower & Reserve Affairs, MMPR, FY16 Active Major Statistics.

That officers who are promoted from the BZ lose out on additional development time in that junior rank is undeniable. This should not be a showstopper in choosing from the BZ. The idea behind selecting an officer out of the BZ is they are being selected because they are the caliber of Marine officer that can succeed now at the next rank. As the promotion order states, “officers are selected for promotion for their potential to carry out the duties and responsibilities of the next higher grade based upon past performance.”³⁰ The argument can be made that Marines in the BZ have less past performance for the board to evaluate. This is true, but the argument is not brought up when the promotion zones are lengthened to include a greater number of officers than the historical norm. The argument for greater use of the BZ is not to use it illogically, but to select those officers who show exceptional performance above their peers. Many officers have had to hold billets that are required for a more senior officer. It is not uncommon for junior ranking officers to full the billet one if not two ranks above them. This happens very frequently given the constant turnover and deployment tempo. Good Marines are able and expected to adapt to greater challenges and responsibilities. The officer that can excel in these situations are the type of officers the Marine Corps wants and needs to retain.

In this argument as to the TIG or TIS necessary to qualify as “ready for the next rank,” is one that needs a closer look. One of the provisions of DOPMA, and essentially at the heart, is the up-or-out promotion system. This aspect of DOPMA established common promotion, separation, and retirement rules across the services. The judgment of Congress at the time was to “meet requirements for officers in the various grades at ages and levels of experience conducive to effective performance, provide career opportunities that will attract and retain the number of

³⁰ Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Promotion Manual*, 2.

high-caliber officers needed.”³¹ This shows how TIG and TIS parameters as outlined by DOPMA are not solely based on the necessary time needed for officers to gain proper experience to be effective. This ideal career profile also has to compete with the need to move officers up and out of the system at a rate that prevents stagnation. This idea is understandable; however, it is trying to be a one size fits all model. As stated previously, the Marine Corps is not always able to meet the grade tables or meet the norm for promotion. These prescribed TIG and TIS should not be viewed as a decisively indicative test, but more as a reference. The point of this paper is not to argue whether the promotion opportunity timelines are wrong as set forth under DOPMA. Though this would be a very relevant topic for further study. The promotion opportunity timelines are parameters in which the services work within to meet vacancies, attrition, and congressional mandates. The parameters should not be viewed as the absolute authority as to whether an officer is ready for the next rank or not.

Changing the Culture

For the Marine Corps to increase the retention of top performers, who are dissatisfied with a time-based promotion system, it needs to embrace the use of the BZ. The difficulty with implementing this will be the cultural perspective in the Marine Corps that selections from the BZ are not necessary. This is a bias that is entrenched in the Marine Corps promotion process and is further enforced by how promotion boards prepares officer’s records. The Marine Corps Order governing officer promotions is very explicit in how case preparation takes place, this is how the board members are to review and prepare each eligible officer’s record. Board members prepare in zone officer cases first, this provides the board member an idea of the overall

³¹ Headquarters Department of the Army, “DOPMA: An Initial Review,” (Department of the Army Pamphlet 27-50-100, April 1981).

competitiveness of the in-zone population. Next, members prepare above zone cases followed by below zone cases. BZ cases are reviewed quicker (10-20 minutes) and is meant to look for any stand-outs amongst the BZ population. Once all cases have been prepared the first executive session takes place. During the executive session the order states that all above zone cases must be briefed. The BZ population is done via a roll call or by exception. If one member of the board votes to add a BZ officer based on superior performance, that BZ officer is made a ‘premier’ case and will be added to the in-zone population.³² Because of this, it would be easy for members to fall back on their bias of not seeing the necessity of selecting from the BZ, and judge that the in-zone population is too competitive or the BZ population does not have any standouts.

Changing the Process

This cultural shift can be overcome with a few changes, starting with the precept. The precept is the legal document that orders a selection board to convene and provides instructions governing the proceedings of the board. It is in the precept where the board is told how many officers they are authorized to select as well as any restrictions on use of the BZ. Future precepts could add comments to the President of the board and its members stating they are to look with greater scrutiny at the population in the BZ as to their competitiveness with the in-zone population. This is not outside of what is already done in the precept. For example, it is authorized and regularly done where the precept highlights certain Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) as critically short of requirements. The precept will issue guidance to the board members as stated in the following manner;

³² Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Promotion Manual*.

*Within this board's charter to select for promotion those officers who are "best and fully qualified," the board shall give due consideration to the needs of the Marine Corps for officers with particular skills. At this time, the needs of the Marine Corps reflect a critical shortage of officers in the grade of [Major, Lieutenant Colonel] in the following skill area: [designated Military Occupational Specialty]. Because the Marine Corps promotes unrestricted officers within a single competitive category and not by military occupational specialty, there are no quota established for the selection of officers in these military occupational specialties; however, the board will make every effort to consider the expressly identified need of the Marine Corps for officers with these particular skills when determining those officers who are best and fully qualified for promotion."*³³

This same approach could be used when issuing guidance for the review of BZ cases. The precept could mandate the board look at the top 5 or 10% from the below zone to be reviewed just like the in-zone population. It could go as far as mandating the selection of up to 5% of authorized promotions from the BZ.

Another way in which the Marine Corps could change the promotion process in order to override voting member biases, similar to the precept, is to automatically add a percentage (5-10%) of BZ officers to the in-zone population. This could be done directly by Manpower Management Promotion Branch (MMPR), by reviewing BZ candidates to assess who would be competitive with the in-zone population. Or it could be an additional part of the officer fitness report, where the Reporting Senior and Reviewing Officer³⁴ could select an officer for

³³ Precept Convening of the Fiscal Year 2016 U.S. Marine Corps Major Promotion Selection Board, 3.

³⁴ Reporting Senior and Reviewing Officer have the responsibility of reporting an official assessment on every officer that works under them. These reports are done yearly, or in the case of second and first lieutenants, twice a year. They are then maintained in an officer's performance record to be reviewed during the promotion process.

accelerated promotion and this would automatically put them as part of the in-zone population if they would have originally been in the BZ. Essentially this would remove the responsibility of the board members to review BZ candidates to see if they are competitive or not. Utilizing this method ensures that each BZ officer receives a full review and a brief to all voting members. This method gives the ability for BZ officers to be assessed solely on past performance and their potential to carry out the responsibilities of the next rank. This is in line with what each promotion board precept outlines, “the board shall carefully consider, without prejudice or partiality, the record of every eligible officer. The officers selected will be those officers whom a majority of the members of the board consider best qualified for promotions to meet the needs of the Marine Corps.”³⁵

The Army has a unique way that they look at below zone candidates. The promotion board will review all below zone candidates and collectively select those officers who show a “potential” for BZ selection based on past performance and overall merit. The board will then compare the “potential” below zone selects against the officers in the in-zone and above zone populations. This is done by taking the lowest ranking below zone select and comparing them with highest scoring in and above zone candidate. This is done in a side by side manner so all board members can compare the two candidates. If the below zone select does not out score the highest in or above zone candidate, the board moves to the next lowest below zone select and the next in or above zone candidate. This is done until the board has either exhausted all below zone selects or finds a below zone select that out-scores an in-zone candidate. If the below zone select out performs the in-zone candidate, then the remaining below zone selects will replace the

³⁵ Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2019 U.S. Marine Corps Major Promotion Selection Board, 3.

remaining in-zone candidates. This is how the Army comes up with their BZ selection list.³⁶ This method ensures full participation by all board members and a thorough review of every eligible officer's record.

These recommendations are relatively easy fixes that would allow the Marine Corps to make better use of the BZ promotions in order to affect the retention of good officers. The goal of the Marine Corps is to always retain the best and brightest, however, changes need to be made to have greater results.

A Focus on Performance

The striking thing about the Marine Corps is that everything an officer does in their career is evaluated and some type of metric is applied in the form of performance assessment. When an officer completes The Basic School, their class ranking will organize them amongst their cohort through the assigning of a lineal number. This lineal number, or cohort standing, will follow them throughout their career. Rifle and pistol scores are measured based on expert, sharpshooter, and marksman. The Marine Corps physical fitness test (PFT) and combat fitness test (CFT) is measured on a 300-point scale, with 300 being perfect, and then further broken down into first-class, second-class, or failing score. The formal evaluation system, known as the fitness report, assigns a relative value to the Marine based on how their Reporting Senior (RS) and Reviewing Officer (RO) assesses said officer. The Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP), has a belt ranking system. All the performance statistics that are put into awards or fitness reports are all based on quantitative data; how many Marines did they lead, how many pounds of logistical support they provided, how many exercises they supported, and the list goes

³⁶ Vylius M. Leskys, "Below-The-Zone and Command Selection," *Military Review* (November-December 2009), 110.

on. These metrics can be likened to performance standards. Everything an officer does is assigned a value to be used by the promotion board to evaluate that officer's merit for promotion. At least that is the intent.

When it comes down to it the greatest emphasis is placed on how that officer is rated by his/her RS or RO. These performance standards are subjective, in that it is based on either the evaluator or the board member as to how much weight is given to this set of standards. A recommendation would be to assign a point system to each metric that would be used, coupled with the RS/RO evaluation, to give an unbiased and very distinct assessment on each officer up for promotion. This would provide for a greater "whole Marine concept" when determining promotion potential, especially when assessing their potential for BZ selection and how competitive that selectee is with the in-zone population.

Alternative Recommendation

Another initiative that could be used, either alongside BZ promotions, or in lieu of, is to change the lineal standing of officers based on merit. This recommendation is one that has actually been emphasized by the Chief of Naval Personnel.³⁷ All officers that come into the Marine Corps have to go through The Basic School (TBS). Based on their performance at TBS, they are placed on the lineal list in order of their standing within the TBS class. This standing then follows them through their career. The proposed change would allow for an officer's lineal number to change each time they were selected for promotion because the board, at the conclusion of the promotion board, would highlight the top 10% as being exceptional. Those officers would then move up to the top of the lineal standing from their previous placement. This

³⁷ Jared Serbu., "Navy Presses Congress to Authorize Speedier Promotions for Officers," (Federal News Radio).

would allow those select officers to get looked at for the next rank ahead of their peers. This is another example, similar to BZ selection, of rewarding exceptional officers with a means to move ahead of their peers in rank. The whole premise here is to allow top-performers to break out earlier in their career and be acknowledged for their performance.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps is allowing talented officers to leave the Marine Corps before their time. There are officers who are dissatisfied with the ability to break free of their cohort before reaching the rank of lieutenant colonel, or in some cases even colonel, and the Marine Corps is not doing all it can to retain these officers. Increasing the number of promotions from the below zone is a strategy that not only focuses on exemplary officers, it targets this dissatisfied population group specifically. This is an effective means to counter the retention problem and it also aligns directly with what high-caliber officers want, to be recognized for their exceptional effort based on merit. The Marine Corps does not have a retention problem in the officer ranks, but it does have a significant number of officers who choose to leave before they should. The independent surveys done on Marine officers who choose to get out show this dissatisfaction in promotion timelines and how many feel the Marine Corps does a poor job of promoting on merit. Greater research is necessary by the Marine Corps to see how large this population is. Regardless, each talented officer that chooses to leave due to dissatisfaction with promotions, is another officer the Marine Corps needs to replace, which takes time and money and no guarantee they are replacing with an equally talented officer.

Although DOPMA already allows for promotions from the below zone, the change will not come easy for the Marine Corps. It is going to take a cultural change which will take time.

Future promotion board Presidents, along with board members, need to see the utility in greater selections from the below zone. To change the culture, it may be necessary to force the change through making adjustments to the promotion process in how each candidate is screened and how they are selected from the below zone. This would effectively remove any biases that may exist in the interim and over time change the culture to see below zone selections as the norm.

Along with cultural changes, there will need to be changes in processes. The Marine Corps will need to look closely at how the promotion board evaluates potential below zone selects so they are getting a fair and unbiased assessment. Several ways this can be done is by having Marine Corps Manpower division to screen candidates outside of the board and including them directly into the in-zone and above zone population. Or the alternative would be to adopt the Army's model of having the board go through each below zone select and match them against the above and in-zone population. In the end, the Marine Corps needs to take a more concerted effort in retaining talent that is choosing to leave too early.

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