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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**Marine Officer Talent Management:**

*Why the Service Loses its Top Officers and What to do About it.*

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

**Major Stephen J. Boada**

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Marine Officer Talent Management: Why the Service Loses its Top Officers and What to do About it.

**Author:** Major Stephen J Boada, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** The Marine Corps, often unwittingly, creates conditions whereby the service's top performers in these grades prematurely self-select out of military service and into the civilian sector largely as a result of antiquated manpower practices, policies, and procedures. Through a focused approach to how the service promotes, manages, and assigns its officers, the Marine Corps can increase its ability to retain the top ten percent of its Captains, Majors and Lieutenant Colonels.

**Discussion:** On average approximately 225 officers between the ranks of Captain and Lieutenant Colonel depart the service each year representing approximately 2% of the total population of officers in those grades. While these numbers appear relatively small and do not indicate a tremendous talent drain, a closer look at the talent level of that 2% reveals that the service loses more above average officers than below average officers. This finding closely coincides with a 2015 Center for Naval Analysis (CNA) study that empirically measured talent loss during the first ten years of service of service. The study suggests that while, on average, those that stay are more talented than those that leave, the top 10% of officers are more likely to leave. The Marine Corps recruits some of the best and the brightest officers in the Department of Defense and invests tremendous time, money and energy into its officer corps. This investment enables the Marine Corps to develop superbly effective leaders capable of solving complex problems in time-sensitive environments. The Marine Corps' ability to produce top quality leaders, while impressive, will not sustain the service's future leadership needs alone however. The service must better manage and retain these leaders to ensure the Marine Corps remains ready to respond to crisis and solve the increasingly complex problems of the future.

**Conclusion:** The 2019 NDAA sets conditions and the requisite legislative amendments to create an environment for change. The Marine Corps should embrace this change and actively pursue opportunities to better assign, promote and manage its top talent in order to retain the best of the best, as opposed to retaining the best of who's left.

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## *Preface*

I have been fortunate to work with and for some extraordinary officers in my career. I also witnessed many of those very same officers depart the service on their own accord for one reason or another well before, or just following retirement eligibility. All of these officers had tremendous talent and had the potential to rise to the highest ranks, but alas we couldn't keep them. Though their reasons varied, most of them got out to pursue graduate school, to pursue opportunities in the corporate world or to spend more time with family. I began to think about all of the talented officers that I know who are no longer in uniform and was left asking myself what could or should we have done to keep them. How many extraordinary officers leave the service each year? How does this affect the service? These are all questions I began to wrestle with and thus this project was born.

Although this paper does not provide all of the answers to what I view as a talent management problem, hopefully it will shed some light on what gaps currently exist. By illuminating these gaps I hope to add some fuel to a nascent field within the Marine Corps in hopes of furthering the discussion and ultimately driving change. It was evident through my research that the Marine Corps is well behind the talent management efforts of all three sister services. Although the Marine Corps places great value on history and tradition, it must also seek to depart from historical patterns if it will make the service more effective and efficient. I believe this is the case with talent management. The Marine Corps can, and must, adopt new

ways of thinking about how it manages, assigns and promotes its personnel in order to remain relevant and effective in the future.

I would like to say thank you to those that assisted in this effort. First and foremost I'd like to say thank you to Dr. Brad Wineman. As my primary mentor and sounding board he provided tremendous insight and feedback throughout the entirety of this process. I would also like to say thank you to Lieutenant Colonel Patrizia DienhartStabile for her mentorship and feedback along the way. And finally, thank you to all of those who assisted in the research process. A special thanks to Manpower Plans and Policy (MP) particularly the Studies and Analysis section (MPA) as well as those in Manpower Management (MM) including Officer Assignments (MMA). Without your inputs and feedback this would not have been possible.

*Recruiting and retaining quality men and women of character in today's Corps is our friendly center of gravity and our highest priority. To achieve this end, we must continue to recruit and retain the best men and women, across the changing demographic of the Nation, who are ready and willing to step up and accept the challenge of becoming Marines. Among those that earn the title "Marine," we must ensure we recognize, promote and retain those who are the most competent, mature and capable leaders, and who are innovative and willing to implement change. – General Robert Neller, CMC Frago 1-16<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

In CMC FRAGO 1-16 General Robert Neller, 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, emphasizes the importance of retaining the right people, the *talent*<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, General Neller subsequently directed the creation of the Talent Management Executive Council (TMEC) in 2018 in recognition of both how important the management of talent is as well as, perhaps, the fact that the service is not currently optimized to manage and retain its most talented Marines. Fewer populations demonstrate this sub-optimal management and retention better than officers in the grade of Captain through Lieutenant Colonel.

The Marine Corps recruits some of the best and the brightest officers in the Department of Defense and invests tremendous time, money and energy into its officer corps. This investment enables the Marine Corps to develop superbly effective leaders capable of solving complex problems in time-sensitive environments. The Marine Corps' ability to produce top quality leaders, while impressive, will not sustain the service's future leadership needs alone however. The service must also better manage and retain these leaders to ensure the Marine Corps remains ready to respond to crisis and solve the increasingly complex problems of the future. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps, often unwittingly, creates conditions whereby the service's top performers in these grades prematurely self-select out of military service and into the civilian sector largely as a result of antiquated manpower practices, policies, and procedures. Through a focused approach to how the service promotes, manages, and assigns its officers, the

Marine Corps can increase its ability to retain the top ten percent of its Captains, Majors and Lieutenant Colonels.

## **Defining Talent**

Before discussing how the Marine Corps can improve its talent management practices, it is important to understand how the service defines talent. While the service has a variety of methods to evaluate talent, from fitness reports to who it chooses to promote, at present, the Marine Corps does not have an institutionally agreed upon definition of talent. However, one can arrive at a logical definition largely based on the carefully selected attributes that the service relies upon to evaluate officers. Additionally, it is useful to look outside of the service both to other services within the Department of Defense and more broadly into the civilian sector to assist in refining this definition.

Broadly one can define talent as the people that will provide the highest likelihood of mission success in the future. Dr. Tomas Chamorra-Premuzik, Chief Talent Scientist at ManpowerGroup and professor of Business Psychology at University College London and Columbia University, offers a talent model that characterizes talent as the “vital few.” Premuzik refers to a variation of Pareto Principle which states roughly that 80% of the output is produced by 20% of individuals in any collective group or organization. He puts forth that identifying talent is a matter of: “identifying the vital few.”<sup>3</sup>

Another model in determining which officers the Marine Corps considers the number of opportunities given to officers. The Matthews Principle, also known as the positive feedback loop, is a derivation of a biblical verse that states the “For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”<sup>4</sup>

Practically the principle results in successful individuals being presented with more opportunities, creating conditions for further success. This exponential growth results in radical acceleration successes compound over time. While the principle has its roots in scientific study, many disciplines have found applicability.

In recognition of the Matthews Principle, it would stand to reason that talented officers are those that are afforded maximum opportunities to excel. While the term “opportunity” is not quite universal and would need further refinement, one could consider that “opportunities” would be those instances that assisted officers in being competitive for career-enhancing boards, for example. Institutionally, it is fair to say that command, resident PME and promotion are all universally agreed upon “opportunities” are fairly MOS agnostic, and would be one component of identifying talent. In other words, officers that are selected for promotion, resident PME and other non-statutory competitive boards would be considered talented.

As one of the services that leads the effort in talent management for the Department of Defense to date, the United States Army’s Talent Management Task Force defines talent as “the unique intersection of knowledge, skills, and behaviors in every person.”<sup>5</sup> This closely resembles the well-known human resources paradigm of Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA) model. The Task Force goes on to define knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Knowledge is defined as “the facts, information, and skills acquired by a person through experience, education, or training; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject”<sup>6</sup> while skills are defined by “the ability to do something well, and behaviors are the way in which one acts or conducts oneself, especially toward others.”<sup>7</sup> This definition demonstrates a holistic approach and provides a sound framework from which to begin managing talent, assuming that methods exist within the service to measure these attributes in a meaningful way.

Presently, the Marine Corps' primary assessment tool to measure talent is its current Performance Evaluation System. MCO P1610.7F, the Performance Evaluation System (PES), states that: "the fitness report provides the primary means for evaluating a Marine's performance to support the Commandant's efforts to select the best-qualified personnel for promotion, augmentation, retention, resident schooling, command, and duty assignments."<sup>8</sup> While an institutional definition of "talent" does not yet exist, one can infer that a "talented officer" might be an officer that most closely emulates the values of the organization from how the Marine Corps assesses and evaluates its officers. That is, an officer observed to demonstrate above average performance along the thirteen metrics evaluated on the Fitness Report would thus be considered talented. For the purposes of this paper, talent will be defined by above average career cumulative relative value (RV) fitness report profiles as indicated on officers' Master Brief Sheet. Although, admittedly this is not a holistic definition of talent, given the lack of institutional tools to measure talent beyond this, the RV method of evaluating talent is institutionally consistent, quantifiable and representative of organizational values.

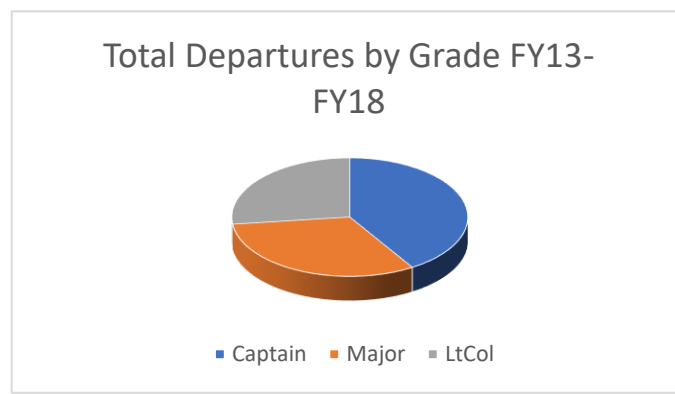
### **Quantifying Talent Loss**

On average approximately 225 officers between the ranks of Captain and Lieutenant Colonel depart the service each year representing approximately 2% of the total population of officers in those grades.<sup>9</sup> While these numbers are not striking, in fact they are fairly underwhelming, the problem lay not in the numbers of officers departing each year as these are already accounted for in the manpower models by Marine Corps Manpower, but in who departs and why. The point here is not that the Marine Corps should not lose officers each year but that the service should be extremely interested in who those officers are, how talented they are, and why and under what conditions they depart the service.

Figure 1 depicts the total number of officers departing the service by grade over a six-year period, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018. The table lists both numbers of officers departing as well as the corresponding percentage, as a percentage of the total population of that grade for that year

Grade	Total Pop	Total Dep	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18
Capt	38359	553 (1.4%)	105 (1.5%)	101 (1.5%)	147 (2.3%)	97 (1.6%)	47 (0.8%)	56 (0.9%)
Maj	23064	430 (1.8%)	78 (2%)	86 (2.2%)	133 (3.5%)	59 (1.5%)	34 (0.8%)	40 (1.0%)
LtCol	11346	363 (3.2%)	63 (3.3%)	41 (2.1%)	87 (4.6%)	61 (3.3%)	61 (3.2%)	50 (2.6%)

**Table 1: Total number of officers that departed the service by grade (percentage of population)**



**Figure 1: Total number of officers that departed the service by grade (percentage of population)**

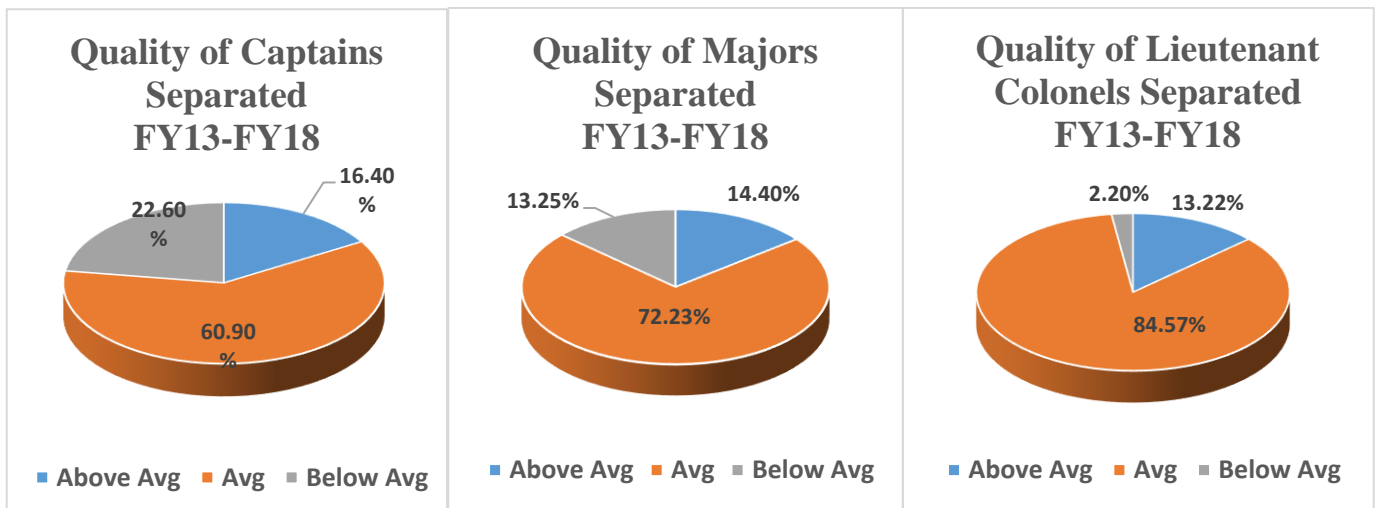
Up to this point, it is clear that while the Marine Corps must lose some officers each year between the grade of Captain and Lieutenant Colonel, 225 per year on average, what is less clear is the talent level of those officers that depart. Using the PES as the baseline for establishing an officer’s level of talent, one can evaluate the cohorts of departing officers and observe how well the Marine Corps retains its best. Given the relative value scale for fitness reports of 80 – 100, a relative value of 90 is the mathematical average (mean). MMRP further breaks this down by creating above average, average and below average ranges or thirds. Below average reports range from 80 to 86.66, while average reports are those within the 86.67 and 93.33 range and above average reports are those with a score range between 93.34 and 100.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 2 depicts the career average cumulative RV for all of those officers by grade that departed the service over the six-year period(FY13-FY18)

Grade	Total Dep	Avg RV
Capt	553	90.4
Maj	430	90.2
LtCol	363	91

**Table 2: Career Average Cumulative RV of departing officer (FY13-FY18)<sup>1</sup>**

It is apparent from the above data that the Marine Corps, in the aggregate, loses average officers or those within the 86.67 to 93.33 range. While there is variance between grades, with departing lieutenant colonels having a higher average, overall the average career cumulative relative value of all officers departing the service in fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2018 falls well within average range. The chart below gives a more detailed look at the quality distribution of those officers getting out.



<sup>1</sup> Career Average Cumulative Relative Value (RV) was obtained by finding the average (arithmetic mean) of the RV of every fitness report that each officer of the respective grade received while an active duty officer. Enlisted fitness reports for prior enlisted officers were stripped out and thus not included in the data set.

**Figure 2: Quality Distribution of Separating Officers (as a function of Career Average Cumulative RV)**

The data above provides insight into who, by measure of talent, is leaving the service. Viewed another way, this data illustrates which officers the service intentionally or unintentionally compels to leave. The first observation is that the vast majority (72%) of Captains through Lieutenant Colonels that depart service are average performers by fitness report measurements, which does not indicate a significant drain of talent.

However, looking at the data one layer deeper reveals a different story. Although it is true that the average RV of departing officers in these grades falls within the average value range (86.67-93.33) one can also observe that for all ranks except Captain, the service loses more above average officers than below average officers. So, while the preponderance of those officers that depart the service is average, more above average officers depart the service than below average<sup>2</sup>. This finding closely coincides with a 2015 Center for Naval Analysis (CNA) study titled “Are the Top Officers Getting Out?” that empirically measured talent loss during the first ten years of service. The study found that while officers staying beyond the ten-year mark on average have higher relative values than those getting out, the subset data on the most talented officers was not consistent with this finding. In fact, the study suggests that while, on average, those that stay are more talented than those that leave, the top 10% of officers are more likely to leave.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, the study found that even though the Average Cumulative Relative Values of officers with ten years in service who decided to stay were higher (90.58 on average) than those that chose to leave (89.68 on average) those officers with Average Cumulative Relative

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<sup>2</sup> Average Cumulative Relative Value was used to give a more holistic view of an officer’s talent over time while mitigating the impacts of any lower valued reports that an officer may receive at the end of his or her career recognizing the small possibility that Reporting Seniors may be more inclined to give lower value reports for those officers departing the service.

Values that approached 100, representing the top 10% of the population, were disproportionately inclined to leave.

## **Why Officers Leave (Promotions, Management, Assignments)**

### ***Promotions***

Following World War II the Department of Defense and concerned members in Congress recognized the need to stabilize officer manpower in the department. The cycle of increasing the size of the Department during periods of conflict and drastic cuts immediately had detrimental effects on the service's pool of talented officers. The services wanted stability as well as a more formalized system that would govern officer manning across all services. This stability would ensure that each service had its equitable share of officers and a stable core of experienced mid-grade officers to provide continuity beyond the inevitable post-war contraction as well as consistency for promotions and command. General Eisenhower provided the following testimony to Congress in 1947: "I think that no great argument would have to be presented to show that our promotion system has been unsatisfactory. Until we got to the grade of general officer, it was absolutely a lock step promotion; and short of almost crime being committed by an officer, there were ineffectual ways of eliminating a man."<sup>12</sup>

The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) is one document that governs officer manpower policies. Rooted in the 1947 post World War II legislation entitled the Officer Personnel Act (OPA) DOPMA is the product of the 96th Congress and signed by the President in December 1980. DOPMA was a law that implemented sweeping changes to how the Department of Defense (DoD) managed its officers.

In November 1980, Congress amended Title 10, United States Code, to make uniform the provisions of law relating to appointment, promotion, separation, and retirement of regular commissioned officers of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. The purpose of the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA), Public Law 96-513, was to maintain a high-quality, numerically sufficient officer corps that provided career opportunity that would attract and retain the numbers of high-caliber officers needed to provide reasonably consistent career opportunity among the services.<sup>13</sup>

The most well-known and most contentious policy that DOPMA perpetuated is the “Up or Out” rule. This policy, a carry-over from OPA, sought to formalize a promotion and retention system in which officers are promoted in cohorts, generally based date of commissioning and move up based on seniority (years of service). Additionally, the policy sought to formalize the separation process for those officers twice passed for promotion, either separating or retiring if eligible.

While the policy does prevent officers repeatedly failing to get promoted from being retained, theoretically making room for those with greater upward mobility potential, it has serious adverse side effects. By creating date of commissioning-based cohorts and sticking to a rigidly timed promotion schedule, the system does not allow talented officers to promote sooner, potentially reducing the incentive to overachieve. It is not difficult to imagine then, that a top tiered officer who has tremendous ambition and desires to progress quickly in the service would find it disheartening to know that despite all of his or her ambition and initiative, he or she will be promoted at the same time as an average, or even below average, performer.

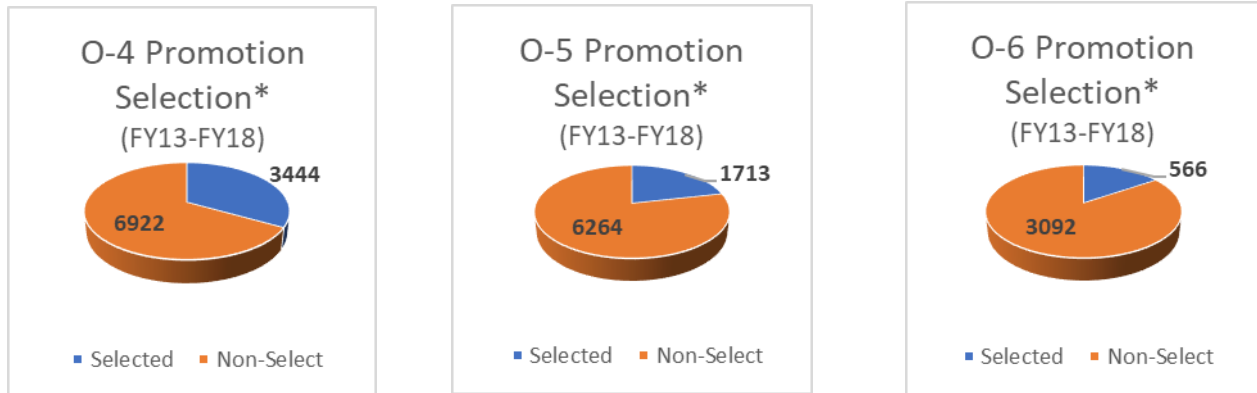
In addition to not incentivizing high performance through promotion potential, the Up or Out system also constrains the service’s ability to retain officers that are passed for promotion twice in critically short MOS’s. In some cases, Up or Out forces out an officer whom the Marine Corps invested millions of dollars in and potentially from a community which the Marine

Corps is critically short. In their book *Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability*, Michael Colarusso and David Lyle remark: “Unfortunately, a rigid, time-based, up-or-out system, while fairly simple from a management perspective, engenders talent flight and is devoid of the dynamic talent management which must be implemented across the entire officer corps.”<sup>14</sup> Despite officers being granted at least two opportunities for promotion under normal circumstances before being forced out, even one pass can lead officers to depart the service, even though they are not forced out. A study conducted by a student at Naval Post Graduate School cites that from 2003-2012 nearly 70% of Marines that left service as a major after 20 years were passed over for promotion at least once. Although lieutenant colonels are immune from the adverse effects of Up or Out as they can remain in service until service limitations, they are not immune from the impacts of being passed for promotion. In fact, the same study also finds that 40% of retirement-eligible lieutenant colonels that leave service were passed for O6 inferring that even being passed for promotion once can weigh strongly on a Marine’s decision on whether to stay in uniform or seek alternatives.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 4 depicts the total number of officers selected for promotion over six years, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018. This gives a general idea of the size of the population of officers that were eligible for promotion (Total Population) as well as those selected for the next rank. For example, the *Total Selected* column indicates how many of those currently in grade, were selected for the next grade.

Prom Board	Total Pop*	Total Sel*	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18
Maj	10366	3444	1848/679	1156/281	1292/404	1935/661	2084/704	2051/715
LtCol	7977	1713	1571/362	1257/233	1296/263	1160/211	1366/323	1327/321
Col	3658	566	710/130	622/98	553/83	538/69	603/91	632/95

**Table 3: Officer Promotions: Eligible vs. Selected officers (FY13-FY18)**



**Figure 3: Officer Promotions: Eligible vs. Selected officers (FY13-FY18)**

The data in Figure 4 illustrates both those officers that were eligible for promotion each year as well as those selected. For the purposes of this analysis “eligible” includes those officers Above Zone, In Zone and Below Zone for promotion. Although the standard selection percentages that Manpower Promotions Branch (MMPR) uses to calculate promotion rates only include those in zone and above zone, looking at the entire eligible population, to include below zone, gives better insight into how the service decides who to promote and who not to promote. While DOPMA legislation regulates how many the service can promote there is latitude to take a more holistic view of the eligible population than current business practices dictate.

The most recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) enacted fairly substantial changes to how the Department of Defense manages its personnel. In recognition that the original DOPMA legislation is overly constrictive, the 2019 NDAA made significant changes to, among other things, restrictive legislation that governs the military promotion system. These policy updates enable the services more freedom to manage manpower policy and practices.

Section 504 of the bill, for example, addresses creating a more merit-based system of affecting promotions. Specifically, the language states: “In selecting the officers to be recommended for promotion, a selection board may, when authorized by the Secretary of the military department concerned, recommend officers of particular merit, from among those officers selected for promotion, to be placed higher on the promotion list.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the new NDAA also gives service chiefs more flexibility to conduct and manage promotions.

Section 505 of the bill enables officers to opt out of promotion consideration “to allow an officer to complete a broadening assignment, advanced education, another assignment of significant value to the Department.”<sup>17</sup> This new policy would allow officers to progress along non-traditional assignments or career paths without penalty and is in stark contrast to the Up or Out policy of the past.

In Section 507 the new NDAA also gives the service chief much more flexibility to promote officers while also increasing the number of opportunities for promotion. Under the old DOPMA legislation, officers were subject to only two promotion opportunities before being subject to either dismissal, retirement or a continuation board. Section 507 now specifies that officers may be afforded up to five promotion opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

However, while this legislation does give the services much more latitude, the changes only provide the services the opportunity to implement change. Presently there is nothing written into the legislation that mandates or otherwise compels the services to make policy and procedural changes to how the services manage and affect promotions. The services still must make the requisite changes to its manpower policies and procedures to realize these benefits.

## *Management*

The Marine Corps MAGTF officer model is very effective in creating well rounded Marine officers with a wealth of diverse experiences. However, this model when coupled with a relatively inflexible DOPMA promotion schedule, can create a distinct “box checking” system. This system creates two adverse effects. First, it rewards officers with more breadth than depth and creates conditions whereby mediocre talent can get promoted over more talented officers simply because the less talented officer was able to serve in all of the required key billets or otherwise check all of the boxes. While there can be little doubt that diversity of experience is beneficial in many circumstances, the current Marine Corps MAGTF officer model is overly proscriptive and can penalize talented officers who, often through no fault of their own, were not able to check the boxes before a promotion board.

The second negative consequence of the MAGTF Officer model, when combined with Up-or-Out is that it dissuades talented officers from specializing in career fields, despite the service desperately needing their talent. For example, pilots who desire to remain in the cockpit and cyber officers who desire to remain in their MOS beyond their standard tour length, risk future career progression and promotion potential. This deviation from the MAGTF officer career track may preclude these officers from serving in any one of the predetermined “key billets” at each grade and irreparably alter their career timing. Well-respected scholar and former military officer, Tim Kane spent years studying the military personnel problem in the DoD and is a strong advocate for change. In his book *Bleeding Talent* Tim Kane says this about the careerism that this system encourages:

The values that the military espouse are integrity, teamwork, and selflessness, Service above self is a constant refrain, and one in which people in uniform believe, but if one looks closely at what then Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling described as the ‘structural influences that produce our general officer corps’ one will not see those values rewarded. A system that rewards selfless virtue would not punish officers for specializing in a skill that is mission critical while instead reward rigid careerism.<sup>19</sup>

As the character of war changes demanding more information and knowledge related specialties, the need for technical specialists will surely increase. Rigid MAGTF Officer career mapping forces officers to rotate between billets every two or three years, often into fields unrelated to their specialty, which hampers the mastery of one’s technical field. In a 2015 meeting of the Senate Armed Service Committee, Committee Chairman Senator John McCain offers his thoughts on the state of the current military personnel system:

Too often, our military is losing and misusing talent because of an archaic military personnel system. Promotions are handed out according to predictable schedules with only secondary consideration of merit. That is why even after more than a decade of service, there is essentially no difference in rank among officers of the same age...We should ask whether we should give commanders greater discretion to build a staff with the specialists and experts they need in the right positions. Commanders are likely better able to assess their needs than bureaucrats in the personnel system.<sup>20</sup>

Having experienced firsthand the military bureaucracy during both the draft period and following the transition to the all-volunteer force, combined with his decades of public service, Senator McCain is a particularly credible source on the subject. While current policies and procedures provide well-rounded officers to the service, its policies do not allow the services to optimize talent management.

In addition to outdated and overly restrictive personnel policies, the modernization of today’s Marine Corps to match the efforts of the nation’s pacing threats creates well trained and experienced officers that also have an increasingly translatable skill set that employers want. From pilots to Cyber Network Operations Officers, Marine officers acquire highly technical, and

marketable skills when combined with combat leadership experience increase the officer's options to cross into the civilian sector. These options coupled with All Volunteer Force (AVF) affords service members the option to "vote with their feet." The latest Bureau of Labor statistics on Employment Situation for Veterans would seem, at least tangentially, to confirm the increased marketability of service members. Based on its 2017 report veterans have a significantly lower unemployment rate when compared to the rest of the civilian labor force. For 2017 out of the 3.3 million recent veterans only 3.7 percent were unemployed compared to 4.2 of the remaining civilian labor force.<sup>21</sup>

### *Assignments*

Another contributing factor to the Marine Corps losing talented officers is that increasingly officers want to have agency in their careers. Outdated promotion policies along with personnel assignment practices leave talented officer considering transitioning to civilian employment where there is a market for the skills and where they can have more agency in the careers. The current assignment processes does not maximize either the employment of the most talented officers or the desires of these officers. While Marine Officer Assignment (MMA) attempts to manage officers' careers, it is not resourced to expertly manage its talent. For example, one monitor may have up to 1,700 officers that he or she is charged with managing.<sup>22</sup> This one officer should have intimate knowledge of the officer's career, capabilities, strengths, weaknesses desires, family situation, education and restrictions/limitations to most effectively match the officer with a future position. Unfortunately, based on the sheer number of officers that each monitor must manage, the process more often disproportionally weights the needs of the service with less regard for the officer's background, talents, and desires.

Additionally, a culture that places a premium on geographic diversity also contributes to policies and procedures that often do not maximize the use of talented officers. A geographically diverse officer is one who has not spent a majority of his or her career in one particular duty station or even Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), but rather one who served in multiple locations with multiple commands. Again, much like the MAGTF officer model, there is wisdom in a geographically diverse officer corps. Given that each MEF has a distinct culture, different training requirements, and unique geography officers who serve in multiple locations stand to expand their diversity of thought and their understanding of how to train, fight and win in a variety of environments.

However, the premium on geographic diversity also has a downside. By forcing officers to move, units lose resident expertise that brings with it knowledge and efficiency. The demand for broad geographic diversity may often trump both the desires of the officer as well as the best and most effective use of the officer's talents. By forcing an officer who desires to remain and whose skills would be best utilized in his or her current position due to an overly rigid policy emphasizing geographic diversity risks both compelling the officer to leave the service and hinder the service's ability to capitalize on organic talent.

### **Effects of Talent Drain**

The loss of talented people impacts every organization, particularly in organizations that operate in complex environments. The loss of talent can prevent an organization from realizing its maximum potential at best, at worst, this talent loss leads to organizational failure. This proves especially true if the talent consists of management or leadership which are more difficult to replace. The data illustrates that on average the service does not successfully retain the top

10% of talented officers. What is not so obvious is what the cost associated with losing the best officers.

*The Harvard Business Review* article “What Science Say about Identifying High Potential Employees,” provides some insight into the costs of losing the most talented officers. Citing well-researched studies, the article puts forth that “the top 1% of employees accounts for 10% of organizational output, the top 5% of employees accounts for 25% of organizational output and the top 20% of employees accounts for 80% of organizational output.”<sup>23</sup> However, these numbers, while concerning are overly simplified. The term “employee” for example, assumes all employees contribute to the organization equally. While all Marines make meaningful contributions, those in leadership positions are both positioned to make wider organizational impacts and are more difficult to replace.

To more precisely convey the impact differences associated with the varying levels seniority the article goes to say:

For less complex jobs top employees outperform average employees by a median margin of about 50%. However, for medium complexity jobs, such as trainers or first line sales managers, that difference grows to 85-100%, and for highly complex jobs, such as senior leadership roles, the contribution of top performers is more than double that of the average performer.<sup>24</sup>

Given that the target population in consideration is mid-level and senior managers (Captain through Lieutenant Colonels) the Marine Corps currently loses leaders capable of nearly twice the output of those that choose to remain. While quantifying output is more challenging given the complexity and diversity of the responsibilities of the Marine Officer when applied to just about any community, from budgeting and planning to training and combat the losses associated with not retaining the top 10% become more profound.

Unfortunately, the Marine Corps does not currently possess much in the way of data to objectively measure the loss of talent that would inform an effort to quantify its effects. However, one should be cautious not to fall victim to the Argumentum Ad Ignorantium fallacy, as the absence of quantifiable data does not equate to evidence to the contrary. David Barno, a retired lieutenant general of the United States Army and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, states in his co-authored article entitled “Can the U.S. Military Halt Its Brain Drain?” that: “It is rare to hear [current general and flag officers] say that the military was at all hurt by the loss of many of their young contemporaries during the previous years and decades. The generals who led the war in Iraq in 2003 cannot be measured against their missing alter egos who might have left the service as majors in 1975.”<sup>25</sup>

As one of the most powerful instruments of national power, the United States military plays a key role in managing and deterring violence and more recently interim diplomacy. Given the extraordinary reach and impact of the Department of Defense, it would stand to reason that the senior officers leading the services should be the absolute best and brightest that society has to offer. While the nation has competent senior military leadership, it is impossible to know if there existed better and more qualified officers who decided to self-select out for the myriad of reasons already mentioned.

## **Recommendations**

Current problems hindering the Marine Corps’ ability to effectively manage its officer talent are deeply rooted in manpower management policies and largely influenced by legislation (OPA, DOPMA, Goldwater Nichols, etc.) and thus will require significant institutional

momentum to effect. However, the most recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA 2019) laid the legislative groundwork for positive change.

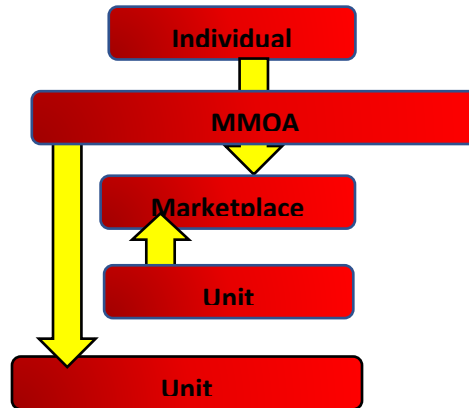
### More Flexible Promotion Policies

The first recommended change is a pivot from the rigid DOPMA Up-or-Out promotion policy to a more flexible system designed to take advantage of the new opportunities contained in the 2019 NDAA. This flexibility allows services to influence promotion timelines based on the needs of the service while still retaining top talent. The current proscriptive timetables directed by DOPMA are overly constrictive, do not afford the service to identify and promote talent and in some cases force services to push out highly capable officers. This will prove increasingly important as more and more technical fields emerge requiring officers with detailed expertise.

However, this is not to say that the intent that underwrites the Up or Out policy does not have its merit. The service should reduce the number of officers that do not meet service standards and maximize the number of supremely talented officer it retains. However the current inflexible system does not afford those charges with talent management the opportunity to make merit based exceptions and instead perpetuates the careerist mentality. The conventional box checking associated with the current promotion system is counterproductive in a system that increasingly demands technical specialists. Of note, the Merit Based Promotion Re-order recently announced by Lieutenant General Rocco, Deputy Commandant, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (MARADMIN 245/19) increases the merit based nature of the promotions process and is certainly a step the right direction.

## Marine Corps Talent Assignment Module MCTAM

The second recommendation to improve the Marine Corps' ability involves leveraging technology to improve officer assignments. Similar to how the private sector leverages platforms like Careerbuilder and LinkedIn to identify talent and hire prospects, the Marine Corps should approach officer assignments from more of a regulated free-market perspective. Giving O-5 Commanders and above "hiring" authority would significantly improve the matching of talent to requirements. Additionally, the individual officer would be able to apply for jobs posted in the digital "marketplace" where commanders post job listings. Marine Officer Assignments (MMA) would still have oversight and would be responsible for filling a certain number of officer assignments in the battalion to alleviate any "good old boy" networks or nepotism as well as to fill billets that the commander has not identified officers to fill, however, the commander would fill key billets. Commanders would also have the authority to refuse an officer attempting to come to the battalion. This would have the added effect of reducing the number of officers that the Officer Assignment monitors would need to directly manage, thus allowing them to spend more time on the assignments for which they are responsible. Ultimately, the commander is responsible for the performance of his unit and accepts the greatest risk in all personnel assignments. It is in his or her best interest to make the best possible use of the talent to which he has access.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 4: Marine Corps Talent Assignment Module (MCTAM)**

The Army implemented a similar system called Assignment Interactive Module (AIM) this year. The marketplace allows “both officers and units to advertise themselves, express their preferences, and interact with one another in order to shape both parties' interests to increase satisfaction and meet requirements”. The program is still in its infancy though it appears to be well received by the force thus far.<sup>27</sup>

Most opponents to a more free-market labor model would argue that putting too much power in the hands of the individual officer might prove detrimental to the service. For example, one might conclude that while commanders can advertise jobs and officer or “applicants” can apply for jobs, demand for all jobs is not equal. Some jobs will likely have a higher number of applicants depending on the specific job and geographic location. While it is true that the supply-demand curves are different for different jobs and location, jobs or billets that remain vacant for a predetermined time can be incentivized with bonuses. Tim Kane introduces this concept in his Total Volunteer Force (TVF) model: “The armed forces currently use bonus pay as compensation for certain hazardous, remote, and otherwise challenging jobs. This should be expanded to enable decentralized job-matching. Jobs that remain unfilled after a given time

should be paid more.”<sup>28</sup> By monetarily incentivizing jobs that remain vacant the service can both positively contribute to a sense of agency by officers by allowing them to make the choice, albeit incentivized, while filling relatively undesirable jobs and locations.

Incentives need not only be monetary, however. The service can accomplish similar objectives by incentivizing assignments or locations that are traditionally more difficult to fill on a voluntary basis by incentivizing volunteers with guarantees of future duty assignments. There are countless ways in which the service can incentivize officers to “choose” less desirable assignments. The main point here, is that the desirability of billets and geographic preferences will likely vary year to year and the service should be equipped and willing to respond to “market preference” by incentivizing less desirable assignments. A few thousand dollars, or guaranteed choice billets in a follow on tour on a case by case basis would be , effort well spent while allowing officers to have a greater sense of control in their careers.

#### Rethinking the MAGTF Officer Model

The current Officer Manpower Management policies and practices seek to create well rounded MAGTF officers by prioritizing breadth of experience over depth of knowledge in any one particular area. There is tremendous wisdom in this model as it creates senior leaders with the widest possible array of experiences, and exposure to as many components of the service, and DoD. However, by forcing every officer to embrace the generalist model, the service excludes opportunities for the specialist. The generalist model is increasingly beneficial for more senior officers and those with a strong desire to pursue a general officer career track. Yet, not every officer has the desire, or aptitude, to become a general officer. With less than one percent of the officer corps serving as a general officer, (currently 86 of 21,296 total officers) the

current MAGTF officer model appears to force a model on 99% of the officer population who will never serve as a general officer.<sup>29</sup>

The MAGTF officer model does have merit beyond just the assignment of general officers. By developing “well-rounded officers” the service creates officers with a diversity of MAGTF experiences which, theoretically, are better equipped to operate in a variety of environments. However, this model should not be one size fits all as it does not allow for specialization or deviation from the MAGTF path without risking competitiveness for promotion or other career enhancing opportunities. The Marine Corps should allow more diverse officer career mapping beyond the MAGTF officer model.

An officer with enhanced skill sets who wants to remain in a particular field is generally forced to move or risk adverse career impacts later for deviating from the path. While this model may benefit some command track officers, those with neither the desire or in some cases the opportunity to command in the future should be allowed to remain in their specialty if both the command wants to keep them and they desire to stay. This benefits the Marine by increasing stability while pursuing his or her talents as well as the unit and Marine Corps writ-large by retaining and maximizing the employment of talent. The 2019 NDAA makes this possible by allowing service secretaries the freedom to provide officers up to five promotion opportunities (Section 507) while also allowing officers the opportunity to opt out of promotion boards without penalty (Section 505).

#### Service Permeability: Flexible Re-Accessions

Another method to ensure that the Marine Corps has access to talented officers is to make the process of returning to active duty much easier. Each year approximately 225 Marine

Captains, Majors and Lieutenant Colonels separate from the service, nearly all of which are highly trained, well-educated and capable of future service, but have decided for a myriad of reasons to pursue other options such as graduate school, corporate experience, to grow a family or travel. If a talented officer wants to come back into the service, he or she faces two major obstacles.

The first obstacle limiting the successful reintegration of talented officers back onto active duty is the aforementioned discriminatory nature of promotion and other non-statutory boards that are charged with identifying the most competitive officers. Although, in practice, these processes often disproportionately select those that were able to check all of the correct boxes along a very prescriptive timeline. For example, if a field grade officer wants to take a sabbatical to attend graduate school for two years and return to the service, he will then be two years “behind” his peers. Since the promotion timeline is prescriptive and based on a Year of Service cohort, the officer will be at far greater risk of not getting selected for promotion relative to his peers who remained in active service and able to serve in key billets, attend PME or pursue other career enhancing opportunities.

The second obstacle is the actual Return to Active Duty process, which is cumbersome, inflexible and is difficult to navigate. Unlike the reserve component which has Prior Service Recruiters assigned to recruit prior active duty officers into the Marine Corps Selective Reserves, no such force exists in the active component. The process is entirely left up to the individual officer to obtain the necessary paperwork, recommendations and endorsements in order to submit to the Return to Active Duty (RAD) board that will consider the officer’s record when the board convenes.

The fact that officers are “punished” for exiting the service to gain a wider breadth of experience and diversity of thought coupled with the challenges associated with navigating the RAD process makes the prospect of reentering the service unappealing to all but the most persistent officers. A more flexible promotion system would, in part, make this process less risky as it would permit officers to deviate from the career path without sacrificing promotion competitiveness.

The service would also benefit from dedicating a recruiting force similar to the Prior Service Recruiting (PSR) model to actively seek talented prior service officers in the civilian workforce. Similar to civilian headhunters, recruiting previously separated officers, with a keen eye toward high levels of talent, enables the service to maximize its return on investment and attract highly qualified officers with broadened career experience. This would also have the added tangential benefit of creating an organization within the service with an enhanced sense of ownership of the RAD process which would likely make the process more streamlined, more organized, and thus easier to navigate.

## **Conclusion**

The character of war continues to evolve as technology revolutionizes military weapons, tactics and training. This change, coupled with an all-volunteer force that enables service members to vote with their feet demands the service to adapt its manpower management processes in order to maintain the requisite level of agility that the future operating environment will demand. As stated in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the Secretary of Defense states:

Recruiting, developing, and retaining a high-quality military and civilian workforce is essential for warfighting success. Cultivating a lethal, agile force requires more than just new technologies and posture changes; it depends on the ability of our warfighters and the Department workforce to integrate new capabilities, adapt warfighting approaches,

and change business practices to achieve mission success. The creativity and talent of the American warfighter is our greatest enduring strength, and one we do not take for granted.<sup>30</sup>

The talent management problems outlined in this paper presents challenges to the modernization of the Marine Corps that pose significant risks to its future warfighting capability.

The recommendations contained in herein require significant changes, some in policy and process, and others in culture. These changes will not be easy, nor will they occur overnight. The good news is that the 2019 NDAA legislation lays the groundwork for much of this change. The Marine Corps must increasingly leverage technology to exploit the talent already resident in the service as well as give officers a stronger sense of agency in their careers by using *MCTAMS*. Additionally, more flexible compensation and re-accession practices will both incentivize selfless service while allowing more flexible career and life opportunities without sacrificing future career enhancing prospects. The issue of talent management impacts readiness and future lethality. As the nation's elite force in readiness, the Marine Corps must seek every possible competitive advantage. In the 2018 NDS, Secretary Mattis says:

Recruiting, developing, and retaining a high-quality military and civilian workforce is essential for warfighting success. Cultivating a lethal, agile force requires more than just new technologies and posture changes; it depends on the ability of our warfighters and the Department workforce to integrate new capabilities, adapt warfighting approaches, and change business practices to achieve mission success. The creativity and talent of the American warfighter is our greatest enduring strength, and one we do not take for granted.<sup>31</sup>

Given the Secretary's guidance coupled with the number of talented officers that depart the service every year and the proven contribution potential of the top ten percent that depart, talent management must be a priority for the Marine Corps. The 2019 NDAA sets conditions and the requisite legislative amendments to create an environment for change. The Marine Corps should

embrace this change and actively pursue opportunities to better assign, promote and manage its top talent in order to retain the best of the best, as opposed to retaining the best of who's left.

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- <sup>4</sup> Matthew 13:11–12, (Revised Standard Version).
- <sup>5</sup> Kristin Baker, Colonel United States Army. *United States Army, Talent Management*. PowerPoint presentation. Marsh Center, Quantico, VA 22 February 2019
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- <sup>7</sup> Ibid
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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid
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