

Leadership Gap between the Aviation and Infantry Community
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Introduction

The success of a Marine infantry unit relies heavily on its small unit leaders. The Marine Corps has placed a strong emphasis in training its small unit leaders and has stressed the importance of the "strategic corporal" and learning and applying the concept of distributed operations. In the Marine aviation community, small unit leadership is not held to the same high standard due to the nature of aviation billets and the small ratio of non-commissioned officers (NCO's) to non-NCO's. In fact, a leadership gap exists between the aviation community and infantry community. Small unit leadership in the aviation community needs to be developed to the same level as it has been developed in the infantry community to improve force readiness.

Small Unit Leadership in the Infantry Community

Great power is bestowed on an individual Marine when he is promoted to the rank of corporal. It is the first rank in the Marine Corps with a leadership capacity expectation: When a Marine pins on the rank of corporal, he/she is expected to lead.

In an infantry unit, corporals are fireteam leaders and have three other Marines under their charge. The fireteam leader is expected to care for, train, and, most importantly, lead his three Marines. These three Marines look up to the fireteam leader for his guidance. They inform him of their whereabouts as well as their personal, professional, and medical

problems. The three Marines are the fireteam leader's responsibility, and his performance will be measured in how his fireteam performs.

The next step up the rank structure is the Marine squad leader with the rank of sergeant. While a fireteam leader is in charge of three other Marines, the squad leader is in charge of three fireteams equating to twelve other Marines. He is assisted by his three fireteam leaders in caring for, training, and leading his squad. He ensures that his fireteam leaders are performing their duties and are taking care of their respective fireteams.

The following is an example of a Fitness Report Section B (billet description) for a squad leader:

- Maintain accountability of the Marines and gear in first squad.
- Coordinate squads (sic) actions and training with the Marine Officer of the Day while your squad is posted inside Main limited area.
- Develop and implement a physical training program that enables your Marines to accomplish their mission.
- Responsible to ensure the Marines of his squad are technically proficient in all three methods of mortar employment.
- Employ your squad as a Close Quarter Battle team during all security alerts and drills.
- Responsible to conduct section and squad training in preparation for and during CAX and MCCRE.¹

The Strategic Corporal and Distributed Operations

¹ Derrick C. Nielsen, numerous fitness reports as reporting senior.

In the current non-linear, non-contiguous combat environment such as Iraq, non-commissioned officers have been the focus of much unwanted national attention. Due to the nature of irregular warfare, a Marine rifle squad is forced to operate on its own, without an experienced platoon sergeant or a well-trained platoon commander to guide it. The corporals leading these small units are referred to as "strategic corporals" due to the potential impact that their actions and decisions could have on the strategic objective. As General Charles Krulak emphasized the importance of the "strategic corporal" in his *Leatherneck* magazine article:

In many cases, the individual Marine will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and will potentially influence not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well. His actions, therefore, will directly impact the outcome of the larger operation, and he will become, as the title of this article suggests- the Strategic Corporal.²

Understanding the possible consequences of sending a strategic corporal into combat without the proper training, the Marine Corps has a renewed focus on training leaders for such distributed operations. With the proper training, these small unit leaders will have the knowledge, restraint, and judgment that are normally expected from a senior leader and will be able to perform distributed operations without any oversight.

² Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three-Block War," *Leatherneck*, January 1999, 16.

When General Michael Hagee signed the concept paper for distributed operations, he emphasized its importance and how it will help a Marine unit accomplish its mission.

Distributed Operations describes an operating approach that will create an advantage over an adversary through the deliberate use of separation and coordinated, interdependent, tactical actions enabled by increased access to functional support, as well as by enhanced combat capabilities at the small-unit level. The essence of this concept lies in the capacity for coordinated action by dispersed units, throughout the breadth and depth of the battlespace, ordered and connected within an operational design focused on a common aim.³

Small Unit Leadership in the Aviation Community

In contrast, describing a small unit leader in the aviation community is difficult. Unlike infantry battalions, not all squadrons are similar in their table of organization. A rotary-wing squadron structure is quite different from that of a fixed-wing squadron. A fixed-wing squadron, when compared with an air control squadron, is nothing like the other.

Instead, a small unit leader in the aviation community is in charge of a crew of Marines. The crew may run a shop in the maintenance department or may be in charge of a single aircraft and its maintenance. The aviation community relies heavily on the technical expertise of its technicians to ensure aircraft are fully mission capable.

³ Michael W. Hagee, "A Concept for Distributed Operations," Jan 2005, 1.

The following is an example of a Fitness Report Section B for an air traffic control radar chief:

- Serve as the Radar Section Chief; responsible for ensuring the proper performance of planned and corrective maintenance on assigned Air Traffic Control (ATC) Radar systems.
- Manage the section training program; provide training to subordinate and less qualified personnel in the proper embarkation, site survey, set-up, operation and maintenance of all radar systems and equipment. Ensure all technical training is in compliance with established training standards.
- Originate, implement and maintain all section specific maintenance management documentation in accordance with current directives.
- Keep the Maintenance Chief informed of any changes in equipment status or emergent operational requirements.⁴

In comparing and contrasting the common elements between the two types of small unit leaders, a vast difference could be seen in the expectations for a small unit leader in the aviation community compared with a small unit leader in the ground community:

- A squad leader's success relies heavily on the success of the squad in accomplishing the mission. A squad leader is evaluated based on the performance of his squad and the quality of leadership he displays as evident from the following award summary of action for a squad leader in security forces:

His firm yet fair leadership style bread an environment of learning and trust between his subordinates and himself.

⁴ Johnathan M. Brewer, fitness report as reporting senior.

[He] exceeded the standards of the Marine Corps and ensured his Squad followed suit. [He] demonstrated his leadership by volunteering for many different missions. [He] was head and shoulders above his fellow Squad Leaders in the area of CQB tactical proficiency. [He] was capable of making instantaneous tactical decisions and then acted aggressively to employ his Squad (sic) in such a manner to be successful.⁵

- In the aviation community, however, the success of small unit leadership is quantified by safety results and workload numbers. The following is an excerpt of an award summary of action for a CH-46 crew chief:

During his tenure as an Avionics supervisor and Collateral Duty Inspector (CDI) he coordinated, repaired, supervised, and inspected the maintenance of 1,002 maintenance actions of 8 Avionics technicians during 11,305 maintenance hours. Additionally, [he] employed superb Avionics' technical ability contributing 3,390 maintenance hours as an Avionics technician toward the expeditious repair and upkeep of White Knight aircraft. This is an outstanding 35% of the Avionics Division's workload that [he] performed, contributing significantly to the Squadron's ability to perform in excess of 1500 flight hours and 732 sorties during OIF.⁶

Proposed Changes

The quality of small unit leadership differs greatly between the two communities. From the billet descriptions of small unit leaders, the aviation community expects its leaders to be technically proficient while the infantry community relies on them to have the intangible leadership traits that are

⁵ Derrick C. Nielsen, awards write up for a squad leader.

⁶ Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps Awards Processing System, 14 September 2007, <<https://kuwait.manpower.usmc.mil/manpower/mm/mmml/awards.nsf>> (14 December 2007).

difficult to quantify. The aviation community recognizes small unit leadership success in numbers, quantified by the number of maintenance hours or other maintenance and safety results. On the other hand, the infantry community does not have maintenance hours to quantify small unit leadership success and would rather evaluate a small unit leader based on the quality of his leadership.

In order to diminish the gap between quality of small unit leadership between the aviation and infantry community, the following changes are recommended:

1. Reporting seniors in the aviation community must include leadership quality expectations in the Section B of fitness reports. This will let Marines know, if formally counseled per the Performance Evaluation System Manual, that they are being evaluated as a technician, but also as a leader.
2. Review tables of organization for over ranking of billets. Over ranking means that a billet really does not require a gunnery sergeant, but a sergeant.
3. Commands must empower non-commissioned officers. A great example is the Marine Aircraft Group 11's Team Leader

Program⁷ in which NCO's are deeply involved and are held accountable for their Marines behavior off duty.

General Krulak's Leatherneck article did not distinguish between Marines in the aviation community and Marines in the infantry community.

Most importantly, we must aggressively empower our NCOs, hold them strictly accountable for their actions, and allow the leadership potential within each of them to flourish... Every opportunity must be seized to contribute to the growth of character and leadership within every Marine.⁸

The 31st Commandant refers to all small unit leaders in the Marine Corps whether they are in the wing or division, and reaches out to all staff NCO's and commissioned officers in any military occupational specialty to answer the challenge to hold their small unit leaders accountable and to develop them.

Some small unit leaders in the aviation community could possibly be a Company First Sergeant for a rifle company. Without understanding the true concept of small unit leadership in the infantry community, the Marine Corps could be sending unqualified individuals from the aviation community to the infantry community to lead future "strategic corporals" conducting distributed operations.

Opposing View

⁷ Staff MAG-11, "The Marine Aircraft Group 11 Team Leader Program: Making NCOs responsible for their Marines," *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 2005, 44.

⁸ Krulak, 17.

Some would argue that the gap in small unit leadership between the aviation and infantry community is caused by the differing natures of the two communities. The infantry community relies heavily on the intangible qualities of a leader which are difficult to quantify. The aviation community, on the other hand, relies on small unit leaders for their technical expertise which can be quantified by fully mission capability (FMC) percentages.

An infantryman without a rifle and an aviation mechanic without a wrench look similar and are held to the same high standard because they are both Marines.

Conclusion

Despite the requirement to be a technical expert in the aviation community, commanders must emphasize to their small unit leaders the leadership traits required to be a successful leader. Small unit leadership in the aviation community needs to be developed to the same level as it has been developed in the infantry community to improve force readiness.

As a former battalion commander puts it, "The NCO will be the backbone of this battalion- a unit lives and dies on the leadership of its NCOs."⁹

⁹ Dale Alford, "Leadership Development Keynote Speaker" (Expeditionary Warfare School), 14 December 2007.

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