

Marine Security Guard Fitness Reports: Credibility Undermined

Subject Area Training

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*Marine Security Guard Fitness Reports:
Credibility Undermined*

Contemporary Issues

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to
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The existing requirement that commissioned officers act as the reporting seniors (RS) for Marine Security Guard (MSG) fitness reports creates a contrived reporting chain and undermines the credibility of the fitness report process and the authority of the detachment commander. The PES manual states that the RS should be "the officer/supervisor closest to the [Marine, and] directly responsible for the Marine's daily taskings [sic] and supervision. [Additionally, t]he RS is in the best position to observe the Marine's performance and character."¹ However, inspecting officers (IO), by billet a lieutenant or a captain, currently complete MSG fitness reports even though they are located in different countries and have limited, if any, observation of the Marine reported on (MRO).

Contrived Reporting Chain

As the senior Marine at each detachment, detachment commanders are intimately involved in the supervision of their Marines, working with them on a daily basis. This interaction with the MSGs allows the detachment commander to observe specific examples of performance for the areas detailed on the fitness report. In contrast, the IOs, who work from a company headquarters located in a different

country, have little to no interaction with the Marines. Detachment commanders then are the only ones in a position to observe the MSG on a continual basis, and no accurate MSG fitness report can be completed without their input. However, while detachment commanders actually write MSG fitness reports, they are not recognized as reporting seniors for their Marines because they are not commissioned officers. For that reason, detachment commanders complete the MSG fitness report in accordance with battalion and company guidance, forwarding it to the IOs for approval and signature.

The IO reviews the fitness reports submitted by detachment commanders to ensure quality control. If necessary, adjustments are made to comply with the standard bullets and phrases for sections B, C, and I dictated in battalion and company policies.² Inspecting officers can add additional information if space becomes available but must speak directly to the detachment commander to provide amplification of accomplishments, etc. In fact, the IO review serves less as a knowledgeable appraisal of an MSG's performance and more as a tacit assessment of the detachment commander's evaluation.

Consequently, the portrayal of the IO as a credible RS is a gross misrepresentation since, at the very best, the

IO has observed the Marine for only twelve days in conjunction with semi-annual inspections.³ All too often, the IO may never have met the MRO. Even in the most ideal situation, such as when a company headquarters and MSG detachment are collocated, the IO does not meet the RS-requirements stated in the PES manual.⁴ Although as officers IOs may be more familiar with the role of an RS than some detachment commanders, the current procedures for MSG fitness reports foster inaccuracy and result in misleading reports because of the manner in which RS profiles are used.

Fitness Report Credibility

The inaccuracy of existing MSG fitness reports procedures results from the subjective nature of existing procedures. The RS can either accept the proposed markings submitted by the detachment commander or attempt to convert them to his or her profile. However, the RS who accepts the submitted grades without attempting to convert them, fails to ensure an accurate fitness report consistent with his or her RS profile. Yet, the RS that does attempt to convert the grades is no closer to an accurate product. These conversions are simply educated guesses based on the inspecting officer's assessment of the detachment

commander's judgment and the IO's personal—if any—knowledge of the Marine. An additional complication occurs regularly, that is, when the IO has never met the detachment commander. Therefore, either option fails to create a fitness report reflective of the true performance of MSGs as it relates to the RS's profile.

Detachment Commander Authority

More importantly, the current practice undermines the status and authority of the detachment commander. Detachment commanders command from five to twenty-four Marines depending on the detachment. They are not staff noncommissioned officers in charge; detachment commanders are appointed as commanders and have all the authority that this entails.⁵ This title of detachment commander is only conferred on enlisted staff noncommissioned officers on the MSG program. Although not commissioned officers, detachment commanders are exactly what the title infers—"commanders." The title reflects the exceptional responsibility inherent in the position; however, it does not yet confer the authority necessary to act as an RS.

Counter-arguments

Commissioning

The prevalent thought regarding MSG fitness reports seems to be that only officers should act as RSs. However, since detachment commanders are the only Marines that consistently observe an MSG's performance, they are the only ones that can rate that performance accurately. Since the PES manual does allow that "[i]n unique situations, senior enlisted Marines may serve as RSs with an approved policy waiver,"⁶ logic would dictate that the Commandant should provide a waiver for detachment commanders to act as the RS for MSGs.

Time and Training

To designate detachment commanders as RSs without providing them with the knowledge to be effective and competent in their duties would be irresponsible. However, this could be easily remedied: The Marine Corps could provide the detachment commanders with training necessary to ensure competency and adherence to PES guidelines. The professional development of the detachment commander would build upon the foundation of personal experience and the initial training received in the resident/non-resident staff non-commissioned officer course. Additionally, refresher training could be provided on a regular basis.

It could also be argued that there is no time to train detachment commanders, as time is a valuable commodity at MSG school. The current MSG school curriculum requires 1072.50 hours of instruction within an eight-week period.⁷ To accommodate all the course requirements, 135 hours are scheduled during after-hours (including Saturdays) training.⁸ Therefore, the only way to add a new class for the detachment commanders would be to eliminate an existing class. However, to accomplish the necessary instruction, the current counseling and fitness report classes and practical application can be modified slightly to include introductory information on the role of an RS. MSG School can also combine this initial training with a self-paced text. Detachment commanders would apply the lessons learned by completing fitness reports for sergeants in the student MSG detachment assigned to them.⁹ An appropriate MSG school instructor would then evaluate them and provide guidance.

Furthermore, MSG Battalion would provide continuous instruction once the detachment commander arrived at post to ensure continued proficiency as an RS. To accomplish this training effectively, MSG Battalion could provide RS guidance in its administrative standard operating procedures (SOP). MSG Battalion could simply consolidate

all existing company fitness report SOPs, modifying them as necessary. This will establish one policy for the completion of MSG fitness reports and guarantee proper standards are disseminated to all detachment commanders.

Additionally, MSG Battalion's SOP for completing fitness reports would provide the foundation for unit-based training within the companies. Each company would reference the MSG Battalion SOP to provide classes and one-on-one development sessions during semi-annual inspections, command visits, and company conferences. Even more importantly, reviewing officer (RO) supervision and guidance would provide quality control. The review would ensure detachment commander development as RSs and provide "the experienced leadership, supervision, and detached point of view necessary to ensure consistent, accurate, and unbiased evaluations."¹⁰

RS Profiles

An additional argument against allowing detachment commanders to act as RSs relates to establishing an RS profile: Will the detachment commander supervise a large enough group to establish the requisite profile? Presently, the smallest detachments on the MSG program include five Marines, typically with two or more sergeants who rotate annually. With detachment commanders rotating

every fifteen months they will have at least four opportunities to write fitness reports—one for each sergeant at post and one for each replacement. A detachment commander then will complete at least eight fitness reports during two postings on MSG duty.

However, with promotion rates and the MSG rotation cycle, the more likely scenario would include more than eight fitness reports. Company and battalion supervision of the assignment process, which already occurs, will also ensure the assignment of sergeants to appropriate posts, and guarantee detachment commanders establish an adequate profile. This additional consideration in assigning MSGs would be relatively minor given that the process is already in place. Therefore, detachment commanders will quickly establish a profile that will provide a relevant history for evaluation purposes.

Same Rank RS and MRO

Still others may argue against allowing detachment commanders to act as RSs based on the infrequent instance in which the detachment commander and the MRO hold the same rank. Preventing this occurrence becomes much more problematic than ensuring an adequate number of sergeants are assigned to a specific post. However, the PES manual allows for this (in the case of officers) with the

authorization of the RO.¹¹ This precedent could be extended to detachment commanders based on the extensive fitness report training received and the responsibility inherent in their duties.

Conclusion

Detachment commanders should be the RSs for MSGs because only they meet the Commandant's definition of an RS described in the PES Manual. With dedicated training, MSG Battalion would provide the necessary expertise to ensure detachment commanders understand and effectively accomplish their duties as an RS. This change in the reporting chain would also address the disparity between responsibility and authority that is currently associated with the detachment commander's billet. In this way, the Marine Corps will ensure MSG fitness reports become an accurate evaluation and finally reflect the true performance of an MSG.

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Footnotes

¹ U.S. Marine Corps, *Performance Evaluation System*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 23 July 1998), 2-3. Cited hereafter as U.S. Marine Corps PES Manual.

² Billet descriptions are the same for all MSGs and are dictated by MSG Battalion and published in U.S. Marine Corps, Message to Battalion-wide, Subject: "Billet Descriptions for FITREPs," No. 9205-015-99 010142Z Feb 99. The only variation in Section B results from editing for space to accommodate additional duties held by the MSG. Furthermore, billet accomplishments are generally uniform, resulting in companies providing standard phrases for Section C. Exceptions are rare. Companies or IOs also dictate minimum information to include in section I. Examples of Section C and I bullets are shown in U.S. Marine Corps, Marine Security Guard Battalion, Company D, Order P5000.1, *Administrative Standard Operating Procedures*, Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Company D, 15 September 2004.

³ IOs visit detachments approximately every six months to conduct semi-annual inspections (SAI). An SAI usually takes about four days to complete. If a Marine arrives at post in conjunction with an SAI, the IO could potentially see that Marine during two more SAIs before the Marine rotates to another post following a year tour. However, the likelihood of this occurring is very rare.

⁴ As of 7 February 2006, this only applies to four of 137 detachments worldwide. The four headquarters are B Company in Dubai, C Company in Bangkok, E Company in Frankfurt, and F Company in Johannesburg.

⁵ Since detachment commanders are not commissioned officers, they do not possess authority to conduct non-judicial punishment, promotions, and the like. As commanders, then, they theoretically possess all the authority not prohibited by law (to enlisted Marines).

⁶ U.S. Marine Corps PES Manual, 2-3.

⁷ Marine Security Guard Battalion, *Detachment Commander Program of Instruction, Section II-Summary of Hours*, 27 September 2005.

⁸ Gunnery Sergeant William T. Mahoney, USMC, Marine Security Guard School Instructor Advisor, e-mail message to author, subject: "After Hours Training: MSG School," 28 September 2005.

⁹ Current performance evaluation training requires detachment commanders to complete a modified version of the Marine Corps fitness report form, NAVMC 10835A-E, for all Marines within their student MSG detachment. The form covers characteristics such as bearing, moral courage, integrity, judgment, and initiative as well as others. See U.S. Marine Corps, Marine Security Guard Battalion, *MSG School Marine Security Guard Performance Evaluation*, Quantico, VA: MSG Battalion, October 2004.

¹⁰ U.S. Marine Corps PES Manual, 2-3.

¹¹ U.S. Marine Corps PES Manual, 2-7.

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