

Marine Security Guard Program at Risk: Can the Marine Corps Continue to Support the Program?

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Marine Security Guard Program at Risk:
Can the Marine Corps Continue to Support the Program?
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Introduction

The United States Marine Corps has been providing the Department of State with a disciplined, well trained, and highly motivated guard force for more than fifty-seven years. However, providing Marines to the Department of State competes with the Corps own internal obligations to have those same highly skilled Marines in other "B" billets and within the operating forces, making it difficult for Marine Security Guard (MSG) Battalion to meet personnel requirement sufficient to adequately staff the MSG Program.

For the better part of fifteen years, MSG Battalion has been understaffed with personnel shortages occasionally reaching critical levels. This shortage puts national security at risk and compromises the safety of U. S. diplomatic personnel and facilities overseas. Because of these shortages and the perceived personnel drain on the rest of the Corps, the use of Marines in this role has undergone several reviews. Each time, it was concluded that the Marine Corps is the best suited and most dependable force to protect U. S. diplomatic missions overseas. Despite front-end costs and recruiting obstacles, the MSG program provides the Marine Corps with a number of individual and organizational benefits to include cultural awareness, individual leadership, and expansion of the Corps'

reputation overseas. Although, MSG Battalion has made considerable strides to overcome their recruiting difficulties more must be done to ensure MSG Battalion has a steady and sufficient supply of qualified Marines to man its detachments and ensure the Corps retains these valuable benefits.

Background

The MSG Battalion webpage best describes the background of the program with the following quote:

From the raising of the United States flag at Derna, Tripoli and the secret mission of Archibald Gillespie in California, to the 55 days at Peking, Marines have served many times on special missions as couriers, guards for embassies and legations, and to protect American citizens in unsettled areas.¹

Following World War II, the Department of State considered changing its practice of hiring of civilians for the protection of its establishments abroad because it had proven to be expensive and produced a guard force that was inadequate and often untrustworthy. In doing so, the military became an obvious choice because it could provide a guard force that was young, alert, well trained, and disciplined.² Because of the Corps' two hundred year old reputation of escorting diplomats,

¹ Marine Security Guard Battalion, *The History of the MSG Battalion*, <https://www.msgbn.usmc.mil/?pg=company/pub/about/abtHist.htm>

² Marine Security Guard Battalion, *Growth and Development of the Marine Security Guard Program: Highlights of the First Ten Years: 1947-1957*, (MSG Bn Historical Archives, Quantico Virginia), 1-3.

safeguarding legations, and protecting classified material it was selected as the premier institution to provide this guard force. Therefore on July 20, 1948, when acting Secretary of the Navy, John N. Brown, authorized the assignment of MSGs under the authority of the Foreign Service Act of 1946,³ the MSG Program took hold and three hundred active duty Marines went "on-loan" to the State Department.

Costs

Monetarily, the MSG Program cost more than \$100 million a year⁴. \$49.8 million is earmarked from Congress to operationally support the program with the remainder being provided by the Marine Corps to cover personnel and administration costs. Many in the Corps believe that this money would be better spent in support of Fleet Marine Forces. However, if the Corps lost this mission it would only recoup a small portion of these funds with the bulk still providing for pay and allowances or shifting to the organization or agency that assumes the mission.

³ Marine Security Guard Battalion, *Growth and Development of the Marine Security Guard Program: Highlights of the First Ten Years: 1947-1957*, (MSG Bn Historical Archives, Quantico Virginia), 2.

⁴ In FY-05 \$49.8 million in funding was earmarked from Congress to USMC to support the Department of State. This funding did not include pay and allowances, transportation costs for personnel and their personal gear, or the cost to process more than 700 security clearances, which added up to more than \$50 million in FY-05.

The largest cost incurred by the Marine Corps in support of the State Department MSG Program is personnel. The sensitive nature of MSG duties and the high profile of these assignments require that only the most qualified Marines be selected for this duty, all of whom must volunteer to be considered. MSG Battalion's current T/O is 1,274 enlisted and 45 officers with the T/O expected to climb to nearly 1,500 total personnel by 2010.^{5 & 6} Because Marines serving on MSG duty generally cannot be recalled or reassigned to duties with combatant commands there is a general belief that the MSG Program simply siphons off quality Marines from operational units to support a non DoD function creating a personnel drain on the operating forces. Several times over the course of the program's history the option of using civilians or personnel from another military branch to conduct embassy security has been considered. In 1977, when the Joint Armed Services Conference described MSG Duty as "draining 'quality' away from the ground combat force"⁷, in 1987 following Clayton Lonetree incident in Moscow⁸, and most recently, in 2003, when a review of the MSG Program by the

⁵ Marine Security Guard Battalion, *Command Brief*, 27 September 2005 (MSG Bn, Quantico, Virginia), slide 3

⁶ Marine Security Guard Battalion, *Strategic Plan 2006-2011 (draft)*, (Correspondence Files, MSG Bn, Quantico, Virginia), 7.

⁷ A report to the Senate and House Committees on Armed Services, *The Use of Personnel for Various Guard Functions in the Navy and United States Embassies Abroad*, circa 1977. pg 1

⁸ Rodney Baker, *Dancing with the Devil* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 148.

Principal Under Secretary of Defense for Programs and Resources determined that non-military members could perform some MSG functions.⁹ Ultimately, even though it is feasible for non-military personnel to perform the MSG mission, in every instance it was concluded that the Marine Corps was the most economical, professional, and best-suited force for the job.

As for the argument that the MSG Program is nothing more than a personnel drain on the Marine Corps, this argument is short-sighted and born from a lack of understanding about the MSG Program and the benefits it provides. The program boasts a reenlistment rate higher than the Marine Corps average¹⁰ and retains Marines with a broader range of experience and higher levels of tactical training than the average Marine. The leadership experience gained and the diverse professional and cultural development attained on MSG duty cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the Corps. And because MSG duty is open to all MOSs these benefits are experienced Corps wide.

Obstacles

⁹ Marine Security Guard Battalion, Position Paper: *The Marine Security Guard (MSG) Program*, 08 Jun 04 (Correspondence Files, MSG Bn, Quantico, Virginia), 2.

¹⁰ Marine Security Guard Battalion. *Command Brief*, 27 September 2005. MSG Bn, Quantico, Virginia, slide 27.

Because of the independent detachment structure of the MSG Program, MSG Battalion is considered an excepted command and is one of the few Marine Corps units authorized a one hundred percent staffing goal. Over half of all MSG Detachments have only five MSG watch standers to guard one stationary guard post manned twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. Within a fully staffed detachment, each individual guard will work 50 to 60 hour a week standing post, executing required training, and performing assigned collateral duties.¹¹ While the loss of just one guard will hardly affect the staffing percentage of MSG Battalion as a whole, it will reduce the staffing of the affected detachment by twenty percent. When performing a twenty-four hour a day, 365 day a year mission, the loss of even one guard is significant. Therefore it is essential that MSG Battalion and detachments are fully staffed at all times.

Unfortunately, MSG Battalion has only been at T/O, with respect to MSGs, for three months over the course of the last twelve years.¹² For the other eleven years and nine months, the battalion was at near critical shortages. These shortages severely degraded the capabilities of many MSG detachments, as Marines were required to work more shifts and cover more collateral duties. The program's shortage of MSGs can be

¹¹ Marine Security Guard Battalion. *Command Brief*, 27 September 2005. MSG Bn, Quantico, Virginia, slide 19

¹² Statistics as of November 2005

expected to continue or even worsen over the next several years as the program is scheduled to expand by seventeen detachments and 150 Marines. Recent requests by the intelligence community for even further expansion due to the Global War on Terrorism will place additional burdens on the MSG Program and current operations and other special duties all vying for the same limited personnel resources exacerbate the problem even further.

Historically, the MSG Program has been advertised by word-of-mouth. If one did not know someone who served in the program, it was unlikely that one would ever hear about the program. Even when the Marine Corps made an effort to get the word out by sending an MSG Screening Team to major bases and stations to brief those interested and screen volunteers, the briefs were not widely advertised and attendance was poor. Additionally, because these briefs were voluntary and because most commanders view MSG duty as a drain on their units, many commands would conveniently make their Marines unavailable when the MSG Screening Team was in town, or they would talk them out of pursuing the program. This was a particular problem during the build up for OIF because no unit wanted to go to war without all of its best Marines.

Benefits

From the Corps perspective, it is difficult to quantify the benefits gained by having Marines performing such a prestigious and demanding duty. Because of the MSG Program the Marine Corps is truly a global organization protecting national interests at the "edges of the empire", 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This allows the Marine Corps to introduce itself to foreign cultures and promote international goodwill through MSG Detachment's support for Toys for Tots programs, sponsoring Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops overseas, and through their involvement with local schools and orphanages.¹³ Additionally, with MSGs serving in 127 different countries around the world, this duty provides the Marine Corps a unique opportunity to expand its cultural awareness by tapping into the resources gained from the program.

Next, this duty provides Marines of all military occupational specialties (MOSs) an opportunity to gain unique leadership and operational experiences outside of their specialty which they can bring back to their occupational field to be drawn upon.¹⁴ This type of independent duty affords Marines of all ranks to exercise leadership and to develop professionally by performing a myriad of duties and functions

¹³ Marine Security Guard Battalion. *Command Brief*, 27 September 2005. MSG Bn, Quantico, Virginia, slide 26.

¹⁴ Marine Security Guard Battalion, Position Paper: *The Marine Security Guard (MSG) Program*, 08 Jun 04 (Correspondence Files, MSG Bn, Quantico, Virginia), 2.

outside of their MOS. MSG detachments, ranging in size from one SNCO and five MSGs to two SNCOs and twenty-four MSGs, perform every major administrative and operational function normally performed by a Headquarters Company. They do this under sometimes austere conditions and while geographically separated from their parent command. Every MSG regardless of rank can expect to learn and perform several collateral duties over the course of his tour, ranging from training management to the administration of the detachment's supply, mess, and MWR accounts. These collateral duties are rotated on a regular basis to provide each Marine a wide range of experience.

This is also the only program in the Marine Corps where Staff Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCOs) are given command responsibilities. Detachment Commanders perform a range of administrative tasks from drafting orders and maintaining correspondences to coordinating and developing all detachment training to include "live fire" ranges. The Detachment Commander manages the detachment's budget averaging \$267K¹⁵ and will typically become a very effective communicator having to interact with high level diplomats on a daily basis.

The Solution

¹⁵ Captain Colon Taylor, USMC, MSG Bn Comptroller, interview with author, 14 Dec 2005.

With the publication of the MSG program's Recruiting and Advertising Plan, and the addition of a full time MSG recruiter, MSG Battalion has made tremendous progress in advertising the program to potential MSGs. However, the main deficiency is education and awareness about the program beyond those being recruited. Much of the Marine Corps' leadership, particularly its officer corps, is unfamiliar with the program. They know it exists but simply do not understand the MSG Program, the qualities and qualifications needed to be an MSGs, and the benefits realized by the Corps as a result of this program. By giving commanders a better understanding of all aspects of the program, they will be better positioned to support it.

Therefore, the MSG Battalion Commander or his direct representative should be afforded the opportunity to brief the students of Marine Corps University, specifically the Commanders Course and Command and Staff College, as well as the enlisted academies. This will not only serve to educate senior leadership on the MSG Program but also make them willful accomplices. If they understand and support the program they will be better able to spread the MSG message.

Finally, MSG Battalion must accurately advertise the true benefits of MSG Duty and acknowledge that in a post 9/11 world, long gone is the lavish lifestyle once experienced by MSGs.

Increased security precautions have moved many "Marine Houses" from their lush mansions to apartment-style housing located within the embassy compounds. Marines that have come to the program with elevated expectations have left somewhat disappointed resulting in negative word-of-mouth advertising for the program. Because word-of-mouth advertising by a former MSG is still the programs best tool, MSG Battalion should be sending MSGs to discuss the unique leadership opportunity provided by this independent duty, the ability to gain quality experience outside of a particular MOS, and the exposure to cultural experiences that can only be gained while living in a foreign country.

Conclusion.

The Marine Corps has a historical reputation for service in expeditionary environments and in crisis...In fact, of all the services, the Marine Corps is the most culturally predisposed towards small scale conflicts requiring extensive and delicate politico-military interaction.¹⁶

From a national perspective, the Marine Corps provides a diverse force with basic training in small arms and interior guard, regardless of MOS, which can assume security functions at a diplomatic mission with little additional training.

¹⁶ Clyde H Metcalf, *A History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Van Rees Press, 1939), 41.

These Marines are reliable and highly motivated with a proven record of mission accomplishment spanning nearly sixty years.¹⁷ However, if MSG Battalion is unable to recruit a sufficient number of qualified Marine to support the MSG Program, the Corps will be in jeopardy of losing the MSG mission and all of its associated benefits.

Word Count: 2,145

¹⁷ MSG Bn Position Paper, Subj: The Marine Security Guard (MSG) Program, dated 08 Jun 04. pg 3

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