

Training and Selection of Small Unit Enlisted Leaders

Subject Area Training

EWS 2006

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EWS Contemporary Issue Paper
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to
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February 7, 2006

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 07 FEB 2006		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Training and Selection of Small Unit Enlisted Leaders				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps,Command Staff College Marine Corps University,2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command,Quantico,VA,22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 11	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Success on the battlefield is directly related to small unit leaders. Lieutenants and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) have a huge influence in determining how battles are won which, in turn, relates to victory in wars. Throughout the Marine Corps history, it has consistently produced outstanding small unit leaders that have time and time again accomplished amazing feats and have been the deciding factor in victory or defeat. These small unit leaders continue to uphold the Marine Corps traditions on today's battlefields despite the fact that the training of Lieutenants is quite different than that of NCOs. Lieutenants are required to go through a more thorough selection and training cycle than do NCOs in the current training programs for small unit leaders in the Marine Corps. With the new buzzwords like "Strategic Corporal", "4th Generation Warfare" and concepts like "Distributed Operations" small unit leaders importance and challenges on future battlefields will continue to increase. To ensure that our small unit enlisted leaders are prepared for the future challenges faced by the Marine Corps, a cultural change in the way the Marine Corps trains and selects its small unit enlisted leaders is long overdue.

Entry level officer training vs. entry level enlisted training

Comparing the mission of the entry level training of an Infantry officer and an Infantry enlisted Marine outlines the major focus of the training.

At Officer Candidate School (OCS), an officer candidate goes through a tough and thorough screening process (this also happens at the Officer Selection Officer before the candidate even goes to OCS) to ensure that they possess the leadership potential to serve successfully in the Operating Forces⁷. While at Marine Corps Recruit Depots (MCRD) an enlisted recruit is transformed from a civilian into a basically trained United States Marine who can succeed on the battlefield, in garrison, and in society⁴.

At The Basic School (TBS), newly commissioned officers are then trained and educated in the high standard of professional knowledge, esprit-de-corps, and leadership required to prepare them for duty as company grade officers in the operating forces². While at Infantry Training Battalion (ITB) an enlisted Marine is trained to become a MOS-qualified Marine Infantryman and ITB also develops character, leadership, and discipline for effective service⁹. Once he has completed ITB, his formal entry level infantry training is complete and the enlisted Infantryman

then goes to the operating forces and becomes a member of a infantry platoon.

The officer, however has one more step in his entry-level training program though, Infantry Officer Course (IOC). At IOC, the Infantry officer is trained in advanced infantry skills for preparation for duties as platoon commanders within the Infantry Battalion, developed as a leader who has the will and knowledge to take decisive action in an uncertain environment, within the commander's intent, and is confident in his ability as a leader and decision maker in both peacetime and war¹. After he has completed IOC, the Infantry officer then goes to the operating forces and his formal entry level training is complete.

Because of the differences in the initial training programs, the officer and the enlisted Marine are not armed with similar skill sets. With the missions of each school defined, a definite difference in the officer and enlisted training programs is highlighted. The officer program places a greater emphasis on leadership potential, leadership development and preparation for leadership billets while the enlisted program focuses on basic Marine skills and MOS qualifications.

What are the current qualifications to be a small unit enlisted leader?

When a 2nd Lieutenant completes his entry level training he is a product of a strict evaluation and screening process. In essence, the Marine Corps has signed off on the Lieutenant as being ready to be a platoon commander. In fact, the new 2nd Lieutenant is the only check in the system for selection as a small unit leader. He has gone through a rigorous selection process and training program to prepare him for his first leadership billet. The same cannot be said of a small unit enlisted Marine leader. Taking a closer look at our small unit leaders below the Platoon Commander and Platoon Sergeant, highlights how the Marine Corps fails to adhere to a standards based training and selection process for our enlisted small unit leaders.

One of the hardest transitions to make in the Marine Corps is that from follower (the Private, Private First Class and Lance Corporal) to leader (a Corporal or senior Lance Corporal). Ironically, however, this is where we invest our least training effort. There are no requirements to become a Fire Team or Squad Leader, other than graduation from ITB as a Private. Most of the time, when a Fire Team or Squad Leader gets appointed to these

billets it based on seniority, not whether or not they are qualified to be a Fire Team or Squad leader. If the situation arises where a non-NCO is appointed to a leadership billet, he is usually assigned the billet because he is a so called "meat eater" in the eyes of his senior leadership. Once again, not whether he is qualified for the leadership billet or not.

One requirement for a Marine to attend Infantry Squad Leaders Course is that "a Marine must be a Corporal or a Sergeant"⁹. Lance corporals may attend the course, but must arrive with a letter endorsed by their commanding officer stating that they are serving in a squad leader's billet"⁹. So, for example, a Marine may be a Corporal for say two years, and then a Sgt for two years and in that time was a squad leader for three of those years before going to Squad Leaders Course. A Lance Corporal has to be serving in a Squad Leader billet before going to Squad Leaders Course. So, an enlisted small unit leader can hold or has held the billet, an especially important billet, before he was formally trained for that billet. Think about that for a second and relate that to what it would be like if a 2nd Lieutenant became a platoon commander before he went and completed TBS/IOC.

What should a small unit leader be able to do?

Well, first and foremost, his responsibility is to fight the enemy, but in order to get to that point, he must be proficient in and master (ability to teach and evaluate) the skills of his MOS. There are two "muscles" that need to be exercised in our young leaders in order to accomplish this⁸. The first muscle is that of basic individual techniques and procedures. Examples of this are; weapons employment, combat conditioning, individual movement techniques, etc. Our junior leaders not only need proficiency in these skills, they need to demonstrate mastery. Not only will mastery of these skills ensure that they are the instructor cadre of the Platoon, but will give them superior confidence as a leader.

The second muscle is the decision making and leadership muscle. Once mastery of the required technical and procedural skills is achieved, then the junior leader can focus on developing his leadership style and making continuous tactical and problem solving decisions (the art of fighting the enemy). Repetition under the supervision of proficient senior leadership will make the small unit enlisted leader better at pattern recognition and decision making. Currently, our small unit leaders are still lacking the proficiency at their basic infantry skills, and

are not exercising their decision making and leadership to the level a small unit leader should be at in order to hold that billet.

How can we change the training and selection of small unit leaders in the Marine Corps?

There are a few solutions immediately available to the Marine Corps to improve the training and selection of small unit enlisted leaders. First, have the School Of Infantry focus its training on creating proficient Marines on a select set of infantry skills. Second, create a standards based training and selection process for our Fire Team and Squad Leaders. They must be at the mastery level of the basic infantry skills, which will enable their decision and leadership skills to further develop. Third, we must focus our monetary efforts on creating demanding and realistic training opportunities for these young small unit leaders.

What will it mean?

As our enemy continues to be more adaptive, decentralized, and elusive the Marine Corps continues to adapt its tactics to hunt these people down and eliminate them. Small unit leaders are at the forefront of this. As noted in Project Metropolis' After Action Reports of

Stability and Support Operations (SASO) pre-deployment training of nineteen Battalions, the current Battalion Task Force Commander's comfort level of training is at the infantry Platoon ¹². This is in large part due to the Platoon Commander being a known quantity, a product of strict screening, evaluation and standards based training. Overhauling the training and selection of small unit enlisted leaders will only strengthen the ability of that platoon to fight and win our countries battles. After all, MCDP-1 states that "war is a violent struggle between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on each other"¹¹ and our small unit enlisted leaders are the best representatives of our collective will on the battlefield.

Word Count: 1532

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