

Crucible Marine on Point: Today's Entry-Level Infantry Marine

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Crucible Marine on Point:
Today's Entry-Level Infantry Marine
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Submitted by Captain MC Cameron
to
Major PM Bragg
and
Major B "Mutha" Saunders, CG04
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"Ultimately, people not machines-determine our success in war."

- Gen. Charles C. Krulak,

USMC

The Marine Corps Operating Forces' perception of today's entry-level Infantry Marine is that he is marginally technically and tactically proficient and substandard in his physical and mental conditioning. Less than nine years ago, a Marine's immediate obeisance to orders was considered to be the most important lesson he could learn during entry-level training. The Marine Corps' current Program of Instruction for the training, qualification, and assignment of the entry-level Infantry Marine is exceptionally tailored for his immediate transition to a deploying unit in the Operating Forces.

Background

This "Old Corps" mentality of "Just do it" does not meet the requirements of today's fluid operational environment or of the Marine who is expected to excel in it. This is a direct result of the multiple changes that have occurred within the infantry programs of instruction over the past ten years and the relative lack of understanding of how and why it occurred.

The Operating Forces' perception of the recently trained, qualified, and assigned Infantry Marine is he possesses a

limited skill set relative to his MOS and no true understanding of the rigorous nature of the tasks that lie in his future.

This perception was perpetuated by the changes that occurred within the Entry-Level infantry curriculum from 1997 to 2003.¹

The introduction of the Crucible event (four day exercise designed to test the recruits' body, mind, and spirit) at the Recruit Training Depots in the beginning of FY 1994 resulted in the Schools of Infantry (SOI) assimilating the basic warrior training phase into the training schedule. This created a ripple effect within the training pipeline. The addition of instruction and training hours to the schools of infantry increased the logistical and planning requirements that SOI was unprepared to staff or fund. As a result, training standards were increasingly diluted as the training schedule shifted from thirty-six to forty-four days.

In addition to the Crucible, friction was caused by the lack of a formalized program of instruction. At Infantry Training Battalion, the primary instructional guide was the FMFM 6-5 Marine Rifle Squad. This produced a spectrum of instructional methodology and subsequent training. Often a student would hear the refrain, "You'll learn when you get to the fleet." Obviously, this was problematic on many levels. The most important being the level of proficiency an individual student could be expected to achieve. Prior to 2000, practical

application examinations in the form of live fire events were the only manner of gauging a student's proficiency.

Introduction of the SAT Process

Fortunately, the Marine Corps' adaptation of the "Systems Approach to Training" (SAT) made for sweeping changes for the training and qualification of our infantry Marines. This introduction of a true training methodology and guideline improved exponentially not only the level of instruction but also the level of student retention. The adherence to the SAT process and approved Master Lesson Files (MLFs) effectively eliminated the potential for "interpretation" or poetic license during periods for instruction by developing Course Descriptive Data (CDD) for each phase of the training cycle. It also ensured the standardization of training on both the east and west coast.

This system of constant analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation identified multiple shortfalls within the curriculum, particularly in the areas of weapons handling and employment, marksmanship, land navigation, and physical fitness. As a result, a fifty-two day training schedule was proposed and approved in a course content review board during the second half of FY 2001.²

Infantry Training Battalion (ITB), the unit tasked with the training, assignment, and qualification of the five infantry Military Occupational Specialty(s)' (MOS) (0311 Riflemen, 0331 Machine-Gunners, 0341 Mortarmen, 0351 Assaultmen, and 0352 Anti-Tank Guided Missilemen), established the instructional methodologies of: teaching, demonstrating, (pre-brief) practically applying, evaluating (debrief), remediating, and reinforcement of the tasks learned by each student. As a result, in 2002 an instructional philosophy was developed and implemented through mission analysis by the ITB staff: to continually inculcate the student Marine in infantry skills. In order to achieve this, specific areas were focused on for instruction by the staff and instructors:

1. Fieldcraft

- a. The student understands the mission of the marine infantryman and recognizes his personal role.
- b. The student becomes intimate with his personal equipment (weapon, gear, and uniform) and the care/maintenance of it.
- c. The student is confident in his ability to thrive in an austere environment.

- d. The student possesses baseline proficiency and all infantry Common Skills.

2. Three Core Competencies

- a. Individual and crew served weapons proficiency.
- b. Individual offensive fundamentals.
- c. Individual defense of fundamentals.³

The measuring stick used to gauge the level of proficiency attained by each individual student is defined by mastery, reinforcement, and exposure.

SAT defines mastery as the student being required to achieve a score of 80 percent or greater on a common skills or MOS specific written examination or practical application. During the two-week portion of the training cycle devoted to Marine Corps Common Skills (MCCS), each student has three opportunities to pass each one of the three common-skills phase tests. These tests cover basic individual skills ranging from patrolling skills to offensive and defensive operations, and weapons employment.

If a student does not pass each test in three attempts he is recycled to a training company that may properly remediate that Marine based upon which phase of the training cycle best suits his remediation needs. This would seem to be an obvious result of substandard performance but, prior to 2001, this was

not the case. Additionally, a student's performance during this phase directly influences his assignment to an MOS.

A student's MOS assignment upon completion of the common-skills phase is determined by the company staff. The criterion includes the following:

1. Physical ability, to include PFT score and performance on hikes.
2. Practical application examination results.
3. Written examination results (Average. of three phase tests).
4. Platoon commander recommendation

This technique for MOS selection places the individual Marine with the job he can best perform. Of course, there are exceptions. For example, a physically exceptional Marine who lacks the acumen for an academically intensive MOS (such as an antitank guided missile man) would be placed with a less technically oriented MOS, (such as a rifleman). This method serves two purposes: 1. assist the student in his progression, and 2. ensure the operating forces receive a Marine who is less likely to become disenchanted with his MOS because he understands *why* he has the MOS.

Physical Conditioning: Bend, Don't Break

Most physical conditioning at ITB is designed to sustain the Marine. Sustainment is defined as maintaining the level of fitness attained at the respective Marine Corps Recruit Depots (MCRD). A student is not recycled for achieving less than 80 percent on a Physical Fitness Test(PFT) because it falls under sustainment in the physical fitness curriculum. Often gaining units will voice concern over a former students ability to earn a First Class PFT. In the combat conditioning portion of the curriculum, mastery of the twenty kilometer hike is required per the MLF. Mastery, in this instance, is awarded upon completion of the hike. If the hike is not completed by the student, he is given two additional opportunities to remediate. After failing a third time, he is recycled to the appropriate company.

The current physical conditioning program is designed to prepare the Marine for the rigors associated with combat, and, to the greatest extent possible, strengthen his body and mind while preventing injury. This requires a shift in focus from training to the PFT and hiking without regard to other fitness events in the curriculum. This is a direct result of a statistical study conducted at the MCRDs and SOIs during a two-year period, FY 2003 and 2004.

This study was conducted in response to the number of lower-body injuries that occurred either during recruit training, particularly during the Crucible, then resulted in the re-injury and dropping of the student at SOI. On average, seventy-five percent of all Marines who incurred lower-body injuries at one of the MCRD's re-injured themselves during entry-level MOS training. This seventy-five percent was represented as a mean of 6 percent of attritted students in a 228 student company that were either recycled or dropped to another training company. During a fiscal year, twenty-one classes graduate. This results in a true attrition rate of 4 percent, where the student is reassigned permanently a non-infantry MOS or is medically separated. That translates to approximately 140 students per year originally assigned to the infantry occupational field who are lost.⁴

Marine Combat Instructors

The most relevant and vital part of a student's instruction, as a result of the Systems Approach to Training, is the recognition and certification a Marine Combat Instructor receives. In the past, only an informal orientation to the standing operating procedures required for an instructor to be qualified to instruct students. Then that instructor would be sent to the training company for on the job training.

Without a standard for instruction, results varied depending on the caliber of instructor.

Under the current system, a seven-week course is devoted to the training of each Marine Combat Instructor (MCI). After completing his training, the instructor is subject to a probationary period of one class where he shadows(learns from a senior Marine Combat Instructor) the intricacies and requirements of the billet assigned. This situation, while not ideal, is adequate until staffing quotas reach a level where companies can meet the student-to-instructor ratio and simultaneously train a new instructor. It is expected those levels will be reached by FY 2008.

Special duty assignment billet status and higher pay have increased the quality of instruction by improving the quality of the instructor who wants to train entry-level infantry Marines. There is an appeal to stay current in his respective MOS and receive the same recognition in pay and promotion opportunities as those in the recruiting or the recruit-training occupational field.

A fortunate and positive result of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom is the influx of combat experienced instructors to the entry-level infantry training pipeline. These instructors and their awareness of the current operational environment has promoted flexibility and

adaptability within the intent of standardized training based on the applicability and relative timeliness of these combat veterans recommendations for the improvement of training.

Conclusion

In support of educating the Operating Forces, the infantry training battalions are available to provide instructional background to ensure a positive battle hand over is conducted and assist the using unit in understanding its new Marines and their capabilities.

These newly qualified infantry Marines of today are better trained, conditioned, and prepared for rapid transition to today's battlefield(s) based on the improvement in instructors, instruction, methodology, conditioning, and mentoring. Although difficult to understand due to past institutional disconnect between the entry-level training pipeline and the Operating Forces. Ultimately, it is the gaining units' recognition and understanding of these Marines and their capabilities that will ensure the success of their units and the individual Marines.

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Endnotes

1. Infantry Training Battalion, School of Infantry (East), MCB Camp Lejeune, Battalion Historical Archive, Operations, AY 1995-2005.
2. Infantry Training Battalion, School of Infantry (East), MCB Camp Lejeune, Program of Instruction, Course Content Description, 1 October 2004.
3. Infantry Training Battalion, School of Infantry (East), *Roadshow Presentation*, published in loose-leaf and electronic formats, 1 January 2005.
4. Infantry Training Battalion, School of Infantry (East), *Medical Attrition Study*, compilation of End of Course Statistical Summaries, published in loose-leaf and electronic formats, FY 2003-2004.

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