On-Station Extension for Individual Augments

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Marine Corps tactical fixed-wing aircrew are expected to develop into confident and proficient operators of some of the most capable weapon systems in the world. Yet Marine Corps aviation commands are compromising the development of these same individuals. To prevent the degradation of unit capability and individual proficiency within the tactical fixed-wing community, Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC) needs to grant on-station continuation periods to individuals selected at the Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) and Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) level to fill individual augment (IA) positions.

Current Practice

Two methods are used to select aircrew for IA positions. The first is a position assigned by HQMC through the Personnel Management Division of Manpower & Reserve Affairs. The second is through unit-level assignments to fill MAW and MAG personnel requirements. When aircrew are selected via unit-level assignments, they are removed from their current operational squadron tours for six to twelve months. At the end of the IA tours, aircrew return to operational squadrons to finish the duration of their operational tours. Their overall time-on-station is not affected, and the individuals rotate to a follow-on tour on the same timeline as if they had been in an operational squadron for their entire tour.

Degradation of Unit Capability

Nevertheless, unit-level assignments adversely impact the capability of squadrons from which aircrew are drawn. In order to train aircrew toward a specific proficiency level, squadrons expend time and training assets.[1] Once trained to a specific level of qualification, aircrew members are expected to transition to instructor roles to train others within the squadrons. When squadrons are required to give up trained aircrew to fill IA billets, overall capability is affected as they lose the expertise of those individuals. The impact doubles as additional time and resources must be expended to train replacements.

Consequently, facing an uncertain timeline for current combat obligations, squadrons are dealing with the reality of long-term effects from unscheduled personnel sacrifices. Squadrons are experiencing increased difficulty maintaining qualification levels specified in platform-specific training and readiness (T&R) manuals and filling minimum combat leader requirements.[2] Overall experience lost can be significant as squadron members become more and more junior, in expertise if

[1] Navy Marine Corps Directive 3500.99, *Training and Readiness Manual AV-8B, (2006)*, 3-7. Cited hereafter as NAVMC DIR 3500.99; Navy Marine Corps Directive 3500.107, *Training and Readiness Manual FA-18, (2006)*, 3-7. Cited hereafter as NAVMC DIR 3500.107.

[2] Required squadron flight designations are divided into three categories: Section Lead, Division Lead, and Mission Commander; NAVMC DIR 3500.99, 9; NAVMC DIR 3500.107, 17.

not in grade. At first glance, no major concerns with squadrons maintaining their instructor requirements may be apparent, but the lack of obvious symptoms may be due to department-head and second tour officers within the ranks, individuals who were fortunate enough to receive their qualifications during their first operational tours.[3] This ratio will eventually shift, however, as senior aircrew with multiple qualifications are replaced by a diminishing number of experienced, qualified peers.

Individual Proficiency Issues

Negative effects are even more evident among the individuals who are selected to fill unit-level IA positions. Removal from operational squadrons for six to twelve months not only reduces aircrew proficiency, but it also could lead to the end of tactical flight careers after only three years of operational status. The most effective method for developing flight skills is repetition through a consistent training regimen. The recognition of perishable skills and concepts of training applied in early stages of flight school[4] continue to

[3] Unless otherwise noted, material in this section is based on the author's personal experience as a squadron pilot during an operational tour with VMFA(AW)-242 from May 2004 through July 2007.

[4] Rear Admiral Don Quinn, USN, Commander Naval Air Training Command, 2006, "Focus on Training: Building the Foundation for Safety," *Approach*, online ed., URL:<http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/media/approach/issues/Jul-Aug07/PDFs/Building_The_Foundation_for_safety.pdf, accessed 6 January 2008, 6.

apply in later stages as aircrew are continually exposed to new concepts and systems. IA's lose this opportunity; hence, individual skills can deteriorate.

Furthermore, within the tactical fixed-wing community, qualifications needed for career advancement are obtained through experience and training. The number of individuals reaching higher-level qualifications during their first operational tour is decreasing, especially in squadrons deploying in support of combat operations. In their first tour with an operational squadron, pilots should typically become eligible to obtain a section lead qualification[5] within the first year. Almost two years should remain for them to become more capable and work toward higher level qualifications[6]. These numbers are already adversely affected due to operational tempo and the inability to train while deployed in support of combat operations. Aircrew who are removed mid-tour from flying duties to serve as IA's for six to twelve months find it virtually impossible to obtain the necessary training to qualify for one of these higher designations. Consequently, an increasing

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[5] Section lead is the lead pilot of a flight of two aircraft. A comparable qualification for a similar time frame in an operational tour of a Weapons Systems Officer (WSO) is Forward Air Controller (Airborne) (FAC(A)).

[6] Higher level qualifications typically attainable in an individual's first operational tour include: air combat tactics instructor (ACTI), FAC(A), and division lead (lead pilot of up to four aircraft).

number of aircrew are rotating out of squadrons with only section lead equivalent designations or less.

Technical ability is not the only thing that suffers when individuals are required to fill IA positions. Aircrew are required, after three years, to rotate to follow-on tours with their peer groups. The typical practice for those who want to continue flying tactical aircraft is to serve an initial operational tour, spend one to two years in a non-flying tour, and then return to an operational squadron. If aircrew leave squadrons without higher-level qualifications, they are not likely to be considered for placement into operational tactical squadrons later in their careers. After losing valuable experience and training opportunities early in their careers, their time as a tactical aviator is virtually over.

Proposed Solution

The requirement for personnel to fill IA positions is not going to decrease while the Marine Corps sustains its current level of combat operations. Unfortunately, nothing produces proficiency in aviation skills like continuity in the cockpit. Therefore, allowing tactical aircrew to serve three full years in an operational squadron would prevent the degradation of overall squadron capability. Manpower-assigned IA duties have no significant impact on squadrons or individuals as they occur

in a fashion similar to follow-on tours. However, unit-level IA positions should receive HQMC visibility and result in on-station continuation periods of equal duration for those selected.

Granted, this solution would complicate squadron assignment practices, since individuals will still need to be assigned based on their return from IA status in conjunction with squadron deployment cycles. Additional consideration would also have to be given to the selection of units from which to pull IA's, individuals' intentions to remain in the same squadrons upon return, their ability to meet pre-deployment requirements, and squadron re-assignments.

However, the resulting benefits to tactical fixed-wing aviation will outweigh the increase in assignment variables. The decline of overall unit capability will be mitigated. Squadrons will be able to retain the corporate expertise developed and receive a return-on-investment for their efforts.

Aircrew returning from IA's will not be able to reach the same levels of capability and proficiency as they would during an uninterrupted tour. Nevertheless, an equal amount of overall operational time would allow aircrew the opportunity to partially redeem proficiency levels. Aircrew would be allowed to obtain levels of training near or equal to their peers, and

their efforts to continue careers in tactical aviation would remain competitive.

Counterarguments

Opponents would argue that personnel shortages are shared across the Marine Corps. Due to operational tempo and deployment cycles, every community has to make sacrifices for mission accomplishment. Granted, no exception should be made in regards to tactical aviation personnel, but this should not include implementing practices which systematically degrade the expertise and tactical proficiency of an entire community. With instructor qualifications residing in only the highest ranking personnel of a squadron, uneven ratios will expand over time into larger problems.

Still others will resist any attempt to extend a tour of duty within a community when other communities do not provide continuation periods for filling IA requirements with mid-tour personnel. However, the situation in the tactical fixed-wing community is different. With aging aircraft, fleet extension measures, and training limitations due to combat operational tempo, tactical aviation is facing a unique shortage of time and

assets to train its personnel to expected levels of expertise.[7] The squadrons affected most by this current situation are those deploying in direct support of combat operations. Unlike other aircraft platforms[8], the missions flown by tactical aircraft while deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan comprise a small fraction of required mission types where proficiency is demanded for earning training qualifications. Time spent in support of combat operations hinders the ability for individuals to develop credibility within their military occupational specialty (MOS).

Conclusion

Due to current operational obligations, personnel shortages exist across the Marine Corps. The aviation community is no different, and has created myriad new positions to support combat operations. Many positions support unit-level operations and are filled by individuals under the assigning command without involvement of the Personnel Management Division. By requiring tactical fixed-wing aircrew to rotate on the same timeline as their peer group despite filling IA positions mid-tour, the Marine Corps is receiving less than three years of

[7] Capt JD Jones, USMC, "Training Revolutions: Revised Core Skills for the F/A-18," Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS) Contemporary Issues Paper, February 2005, 1-2.

[8] Flights flown by other aircraft types during a combat deployment more similarly reflect the types of flights and skill-sets required for training qualifications.

MOS-related service from the affected tactical aviators. An equal amount of on-station continuation should be applied to these individuals. Without a time extension, squadrons will see fewer and fewer aircrew receiving higher level qualifications, which will continue to deteriorate squadrons' capabilities, adversely affecting the overall quality of support to Marines on the ground.

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