

Growing Effective Communications Chiefs

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Growing Effective Communications Chiefs

All 2nd Lieutenants in the United States Marines Corps remember their first Staff Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) because they expect their SNCO's to be a reliable source of knowledge within their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). 2nd Lieutenants enter the operating forces with the expectation that they will be able to leverage this knowledge and experience of their SNCO. However, 2nd Lieutenants in the communications community, should not expect their SNCOs to have the appropriate level of knowledge in order to be effective communications chiefs. The typical training pipeline of the enlisted communicator does not support the requirements that are placed on them once they become SNCOs. As such, the Marine Corps needs to modify the enlisted training pipeline for future communications chiefs by providing effective training throughout their careers that develop improved network planners and managers.

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Background

Communications Officers in the U.S. Marine Corps receive a full year of training before entering the operating forces. This includes six months at The Basic School (TBS) and then six months at Communications School. Despite a full year of training, most 2nd Lieutenants still lack the experience needed to be successful in the operating forces. Many new communications officers are sent to infantry battalions and are tasked as S-6 staff officers and platoon commanders. Others are sent to communications battalions or squadrons and are required to manage Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) level networks in a Systems Control Center (SYSCON). Because new communications officers must rely on the knowledge and experience of their communication chiefs in order to survive, the talent of a communication chief frequently determines the success/failure of a 2nd Lieutenant at his/her first billet.

For enlisted communicators, there is a prescribed roadmap for success that can be found in the MOS Roadmaps. Initially, all enlisted Marines receive extensive entry-level training within their particular MOS at Marine Corps Communications Electronics Systems School (MCCES). Once they reach the rank of Sergeant, they are expected to be the duty experts within their MOS. Typically, it is at this point of a Marine's career that he/she must satisfy a B-billet and he/she becomes a recruiter or

drill instructor. After three years outside their MOS, these Marines are then required to attend Systems Chiefs Course as a Staff Sergeant. This course is designed to make them "specialists" within their MOS's.

The final step in the training pipeline is Command Control Communications Computers Planners Course (C4PC). This training is required for Master Sergeants in order to become communication chiefs. At this point, communication Marines are expected to be able to manage and plan entire communication networks. As stated in the mission statement of C4 Planners Course: "The objective of the C4 Planners Course (C4PC) is to provide a formal skill progression-training program in technical C4 planning to Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS) communication students, Master Sergeants (currently holding the PMOS of 0619/29/59), MOS 0602 Captains serving in the operating forces, and other select C4 planners."¹ This training is essential in order for Master Sergeants to be effective network planners and managers. Realizing this, Headquarters Marine Corps C4 disseminated MARADMIN 580/03 which states: "the primary MOS of 0699(Communications Chief) will only be awarded to Marines upon

¹ Communications School Webpage, C4 Planners Course (C4PC), www.tecom.usmc.mil/cs/c4pc/c4pc.html

their attendance and completion of the C4PC."² However, this mandate from C4 is essentially unenforceable because the school does not have the requisite number of seats required for all future Communication Chiefs to receive this training. Additionally, current operational tempo (OPTEMPO) prohibits many staff non-commissioned officers (SNCOs) from attending any extended training away from their unit.

Within the communications community there are four main disciplines: transmissions, data, voice/switching and radio. Most of the Master Sergeants attending C4PC have a firm grasp of one of these disciplines. However, many struggle to understand the other facets of communications. For instance, if a Master Sergeant spent his career as a switchboard operator, then he most likely has a complete understanding of the digital switch network. Conversely, he most likely does not have a firm grasp of data communications, transmission systems or single channel radio. Frequently, C4PC is a SSCO's first exposure or formal training in the other disciplines of communications

Although it is important to have a firm understanding of one's MOS, it is vital for communication chiefs to understand the capabilities and limitations of all the communication disciplines. Our tactical communication systems are too

² **MARADMIN Number:** 580/03 **Date signed:** 12/15/2003
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integrated for a planner to be isolated in a particular discipline. As Chief Warrant Officer 5 Graniero explains: "Without this understanding, you are essentially planning in a vacuum."³ For example "Voice Over IP (VOIP) (which uses data and telephone systems) and Video Teleconference (VTC) (which normally uses data and transmission systems)" combine various disciplines.⁴ Essentially, Marines that do not understand how the disciplines are integrated are ineffective as planners and cannot adequately support the mission.

Another variable in a Marine's level of understanding of the entire network is his past duty assignments. For instance, a Marine that has served time at a communications battalion has had exposure to all facets of communications most likely has an understanding of the entire communications network. Conversely, a Marine that has spent most of his time at an infantry battalion is exposed only to single channel radio communications. It is often the case that the difference in understanding of communications is a product of exposure vice desire to learn.

Another common scenario occurs when a communication Marine must spend time out of his MOS and complete a tour recruiting or

³ Graniero, Brian J., CW05, USMC, 2510 (Network Management Officer), Senior 2510 in USMC, Instructor, Communications School, Quantico, VA. Interview by the author, 30 November 2005.

⁴ Graniero, Brian J., CW05, USMC

on the drill field in order to be considered for promotion. The extremely demanding nature of these billets requires the complete focus of the Marine on the mission at hand. Naturally, technical skill and knowledge atrophy when not utilized. The natural loss of skills/knowledge over time is further stymied by the advancement of technology and, as a result, many SNCO's return to the fleet severely lacking in MOS knowledge. However, the Marine who remains in his MOS and has a firm grasp of his MOS is frequently at a disadvantage for promotion. This produces an atmosphere where less knowledgeable Marines who have completed B-billets are promoted into senior positions over Marines who possess greater technical skills/knowledge thereby "creating a resentful atmosphere within the community."⁵ Nevertheless, it is still common practice to send Marines directly from their B-billets to C4PC or into challenging operational billets. In either scenario, these Marines are expected to transition into a situation that requires them to have an understanding of how to plan and manage complex networks. Frequently, these Marines must rely on their leadership and managerial skills until they can gain the necessary technical skills for their new role.

The challenges that many Master Sergeants face at C4PC provide the observer with an understanding of the inadequate

⁵ Graniero, Brian J., CW05, USMC

training pipeline for enlisted communicators. "Of the 27 Master Sergeants at the most recent C4PC (Fall 05), only 3 had any formal MOS training since their initial MOS training as a PVT/PFC."⁶ This lack of formalized training has produced a situation where knowledge is only gained on the job and, as a result, there is a disparate level of knowledge amongst the Master Sergeants depending on their experience and MOS.

Since the schoolhouse must teach to the lowest common denominator, the C4PC curriculum spends several training days teaching the basics of communications. "This has created a target audience at C4PC that has an enormously broad range of knowledge of communications."⁷ Conversely, many of the Captains who also attend the course have experience with communications planning and are seeking advanced training. This creates a non-conducive training environment that does not train Marines effectively for future roles in the operating forces.

Despite these challenges, the staff at C4PC is tasked with taking specialists in one aspect of communications and creating generalist that can plan and manage networks. These Marines must gain an understanding of all facets of communications in eight short weeks. Currently, "the curriculum at C4PC is beyond the understanding of many future Communication Chiefs" because,

⁶ Graniero, Brian J., CW05, USMC

⁷ Graniero, Brian J., CW05, USMC

for a large portion of the SNCOs, it is the first time they are exposed to many of the aspects used to plan networks.⁸

C4PC, which was initially created to provide advanced training to career level captains, should be revised to better train communication officers. Likewise, SNCOs should attend a separate course with a curriculum more suited to their needs. Since SNCOs require a curriculum that focuses more on the basics of communications and planning, they should attend a course similar to Basic Communications Officer's Course (BCOC). The curriculum that 2nd Lieutenants receive at BCOC is better suited to provide Master Sergeants with general training in all four communication disciplines. According to its mission statement:

The Basic Communications Officer Course (BCOC) is a 23-week program of instruction that provides leadership and professional training in the planning and employment of tactical communications systems in order to prepare company grade officers for entry-level billets in the Operating Forces. Core curriculum areas include communications theory, single channel radio, tactical telephone switching systems, tactical data networks, tactical multi-channel radio systems, and communications planning.⁹

Although BCOC is tailored to "entry level billets", it provides training in basic communications planning and concepts that is more in line with the needs of many Master Sergeants. C4PC should be reserved for advanced communications training. Once training "stepping stones" are implemented throughout an

⁸ Graniero, Brian J., CW05, USMC

⁹ Communications School Webpage, Basic Communications Officer Course (BCOC), www.tecom.usmc.mil/cs/bcoc/bcoc.html

enlisted Marines' career, will we have communications chiefs that can benefit from the resources and training at C4PC.

Stepping Stones

In order to provide more effective training it has been recommended that enlisted communicators "receive shorter and more frequent training."¹⁰ Upon graduation from boot camp, communications Marines are given an extensive amount of entry-level training at the Marine Corps Communications Electronics School (MCCES). This training is designed to "cover every aspect of the their MOS for the first eight years of their career (from Private to Sergeant)."¹¹ Upon completion of entry-level training, enlisted communication Marines are expected to enter the operating forces with MOS specific knowledge and training. However, despite this training "most Marines were not effective communicators until they received several months of on the job training (OJT)."¹² Essentially, the Marine Corps was wasting time and money by training Marines at the incorrect point in their careers.

In order to correct this gap in the training pipeline Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence (C4I) decided to shorten the entry-level training requirement.

¹⁰ Herdegen, Dale, LtCol, USMC, 0602 (Communications Officer), former Director of Communications School, Communications School, Quantico, VA. Interview by the author, October 2005.

¹¹ Herdegen, Dale, Lt Col, USMC

¹² Herdegen, Dale, Lt Col, USMC

The Marine Corps now provides entry-level training that focuses on the aspects of an MOS that will enable the Marine to succeed in his first billet in the operational forces. Using these saved training days, C4I was then able to create additional training “stepping stones” for Marines later in their careers. The first “stepping stone” that was created was the Communications NCO Course.

The Communications NCO course is designed to give communication Marines additional specialized training as they advance in their careers and to introduce aspects of the Marine Corps communications network that they might not have encountered in their formal schooling or through on the job training (OJT). The goal of this course is to create the first “stepping stone” across the training gap between PVT and SSGT. It is as the NCO course that Marines are trained for future responsibilities “by gaining exposure to the other disciplines and by being tested into the next level of their career or MOS” as SSGT’s.¹³ This training is built “to address the Marines that are expected to be retained in their MOS.”¹⁴ Conducting this training after a Marine has had several years in the operational forces is more effective than providing it as part of his early

¹³ United States Marine Corps. *C4 Training Vision and Strategy, Transformation Blueprint*, 17 June 2004, published by Training and Education Command. Page 5

¹⁴ *C4 Training Vision and Strategy, Transformation Blueprint* Page 37

formal schooling because the Marine can reference his own experiences. Additionally, the training given regarding other aspects of communications gives the Marine exposure to and an awareness of future expectations. Once a Marine understands his future expectations he will be able to more readily adjust when expectations become requirements.

The next "stepping stone" for the enlisted communications Marine is Systems Chiefs Course. Typically, this training takes place after the Marine returns from the drill field or recruiting. After three years out of the MOS, most SNCOs require extensive training in communications in order to refresh and learn many of the new technologies that are being implemented. Therefore, in response to the requirement to create better communications chiefs, the mission of Systems Chiefs Course has expanded to make SSGTs specialists within their MOSs and to provide further instruction on the other aspects of the communications network. This additional training prepares the Marines for future billets. It is also another stepping stone on the path to becoming a more effective communications chief.

These new courses at MCCES will give enlisted communicators the requisite training to help them succeed later in their careers. However, it will take several years before these "stepping stones" will pay dividends. In the mean time, the

Marine Corps is left with a generation of Master Sergeants that are expected to perform beyond the level of training that has been provided to them.

MOS Training

Training is a vital to the success of the U.S. Marine Corps. For Marines, training is a part of everyday life. Marines are held accountable for completing required training in various areas including training on the rifle, information assurance, equal opportunity, NBC, sexual harassment and physical fitness. However, "training which is most crucial to mission accomplishment is MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) specific."¹⁵ Ironically, MOS training for enlisted Marines is not a requirement in most circumstances.

In the communications community, training is especially vital to mission accomplishment. This is evident in the way communication officers are trained. After six months at The Basic School (TBS) our Communication Officers receive six months of training at BCOC. From the beginning they are trained to be generalists. Conversely, the enlisted Marine receives approximately two to four months of specialized entry-level training, and then possibly another two months of formalized training as a SGT or SSGT. Ironically, "the CommChief, who is

¹⁵ Herdegen, Dale, Lt Col, USMC

supposed to be the CommO's number two, receives less training in his whole career than the CommoO receives at the entry level."¹⁶ Enlisted Marines must have a viable training pipeline before they can be expected to be effective planners and managers.

Enforce Training

As evident with C4PC, mandatory training does not mean that all eligible Marines will attend. Factors such as operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and personnel shortages that prevent attendance cannot be overcome. Despite these obstacles, it is vital to Marines' success as communicators that they are adequately trained. Therefore, the C4 community must establish methods to ensure Marines are trained within their MOS.

The first step is to "create a program similar to Professional Military Education."¹⁷ This training should focus on MOS skills specific to certain ranks and disciplines. It should be an annual requirement and conducted in electronic format via the USMC Distance Learning Program. This would negate the time and money factors that are inherent in having a Marine travel to a particular training center but would still provide him with advanced training. Fulfillment of the annual requirement means the Marine must pass a prescribed number of relevant courses. In

¹⁶ Graniero, Brian J., CW05, USMC

¹⁷ Herdegen, Dale, Lt Col, USMC

order to be eligible for promotion, the Marine must complete the training.

Electronic Training Jackets

As stated in the C4 Training Vision and Strategy, "each Marine should also have an electronic training jacket to track available courses and proficiency levels as they proceed."¹⁸ At the end of each course the Marine should have to pass a battery of tests. "By electronically recording the results of these tests the C4 community can identify the gaps between operational effectiveness and desired capability."¹⁹ The identification of these gaps in training will then enable the communications community to use its training contact teams more effectively.

Roadmaps

Another method that leaders can use to track a Marine's training progress is the MOS Roadmaps. The purpose of the MOS Roadmaps is:

Providing enlisted marines and their leaders with a single-source reference for mos training and education requirements and recommendations. The program is designed to be a "one-stop shopping" guide that will enable you to capitalize on all available opportunities to enhance your professional, educational, and personal development and that of your marines.²⁰

¹⁸ *C4 Training Vision and Strategy, Transformation Blueprint.*
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¹⁹ *C4 Training Vision and Strategy, Transformation Blueprint.*
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²⁰ **ALMAR Number: 044/05 Date signed: 09/08/2005**
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Although roadmaps are essentially used as a counseling tool, but they could be used more effectively if they were directly linked to training requirements, distance education, and electronic training jackets.

Just in Time Training

The other strategy for training our enlisted Marines is “just in time” training. Contrary to developing a training pipeline, the concept of “just in time” training provides that Marines receive training upon request when a gap is discovered. Usually, this occurs when a new piece of gear is fielded and the unit using the gear has plans to deploy in the near future. Despite its responsive nature, “just in time” training indicates we are a community that is just getting by rather than a community of professionals.”²¹ Frequently, this form of training will enable a Marine to simply implement a network and function for a moment in time. It does not give the Marine the ability to troubleshoot or optimize that piece of gear.

Conclusion

Communications is an integral and growing part of today’s battlefield as the networks that are being implemented become increasingly more technical and integrated. Recognizing these factors, the Marine Corps created an effective training pipeline for communications officers. However, enlisted communication

²¹ Herdegen, Dale, LtCol, USMC

Marines must bear the brunt of a training pipeline that is largely ineffective. Unfortunately, this deficiency affects the communications community in its entirety and, as such, must be remedied. Communications Chiefs are struggling with unrealistic expectations due to a lack of training. As a result, 2nd Lieutenants are frequently not able to use their Communications Chiefs as sources of knowledge and enlisted Marines are not being trained to their full capacity due to the limited knowledge of our SNCO's. Until an effective training pipeline for enlisted communicators is implemented, Marine communications will not be able to effectively support the warfighter.

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