

Maintaining Technically Relevant Enlisted Leadership
EWS Contemporary Issue Paper
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to
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Network Centric Warfare (NCW) supports speed of command—the conversion of superior information position to action. NCW is transparent to mission, force size, and geography. Furthermore, NCW has the potential to contribute to the coalescence of the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. In brief, NCW is not narrowly about technology, but broadly about an emerging military response to the information age.

—David Alberts, John Garstka, and Fredrick Stein,
Network Centric Warfare

Whether discussing network centric warfare, fourth generation warfare, or distributed operations, a common theme running throughout all discussions of force-transformation and future conflicts is technology. With the intent of leveraging systems to help the warfighter conduct smarter and more efficient operations, the requirements have increased for technological expertise at lower echelons of command. The technical skills required of entry level communications Marines have become much greater as the equipment becomes more complex, but the time to train those same entry level Marines has not grown at a proportional rate. The endstate is an expanded emphasis on the non-commissioned officer in the operating forces to be a teacher, leader, and technical expert. The fielding of advanced technologies has created a shortfall in communications experts that requires a long-term solution to strengthen the occupational field and provide a greater return on the investment in training.

Fielding Advanced Technology

The challenge facing the communications field is a complex one that does not have a singular solution. The first aspect of this challenge, new equipment fieldings and upgrades, comes as a result of the constant attempt to maintain operational pace with technology. The Global War on Terror has produced many changes to the standard equipment employed by the operating forces, but

none have made such a significant impact upon training and education as those pertaining to communications. Radio operators are now employing man-packable radios that are IP configurable, and telephone switchboard operators are turning in their SB-3865 Tri-Tac switchboards and transitioning to the same commercial switchboard technology servicing the state of Alaska. All of these advances are necessary and contribute to improvements in effectiveness, but they come at an ever increasing cost.

Most notably, the pace of technology has outpaced the training of the enlisted leadership. The staff non-commissioned officer is relied upon by both junior Marines and senior leadership to be the technical expert capable of network planning and systems engineering within his/her functional area. The problem facing SNCOs today is that they have less experience on the equipment than junior Marines, and often the new equipment training teams focus instruction on user skills instead of those necessary for planners. This gap in technical knowledge has increased the pressure on the non-commissioned officers to be the subject matter experts

Correcting the SME Shortfall

The challenges associated with the fielding of new equipment and the ever-increasing reliance on technology have been recognized by the leadership of the communications

community, but the current solutions in place have significant shortfalls. The first of the solutions utilized is the new equipment training teams. Although these teams do provide comprehensive user training, the training is "one shot - one kill." The training is delivered when the equipment is fielded, and there is no guarantee that all the required Marines receive the training. In theory, those trained in turn provide training to others (train-the-trainer), but the standard new equipment training teams do not dedicate time for instructing students how to teach the material they have just themselves learned. In other occupational fields this may not be significant, but in the case of the switchboard operator who just tried to master T-1 theory and the new REDCOM switchboard, it is the equivalent of receiving three weeks of immersion training in an Arab language and then being tasked to instruct his/her fellow Marines. The teaching experience and technical knowledge required to teach effectively can not be imparted in such a short period of time, so units are left hoping that those Marines who received the training are also the ones who will deploy with the equipment. Obviously this is not always the case.

To mitigate this initial shortfall, new equipment training teams are augmented by the Communications Training Centers (CTC). Each Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) does or will have a CTC that serves as an extension of Marine Corps Communications

Electronics School (MCCES) that offer equipment specific courses. These CTC's are operated by well-trained instructors providing instruction similar to that of the new equipment training team. However, CTC's take the extra step of formalizing the train-the-trainer role by integrating a condensed version of the Formal Schools Instructor Course (FSIC) into many courses of instruction in order to provide the student's parent unit with a more capable trainer.

Although the Communications Training Centers and contracted civilian training teams are providing effective garrison training support, they are limited in several ways. The first limitation of the CTC's is "throughput." Using the II MEF CTC as the benchmark (the first CTC established), the staff is comprised of twelve active duty instructors and an equal number of civilian contractors. These instructors conduct a myriad of courses covering many everything from advanced single-channel radio techniques to CISCO certification, but even with an estimated 1100 students during the 2007 calendar year,¹ they are unable to provide enough training to enough students to ensure that each unit within the MEF has received the specific training required.

Another limitation of both Communications Training Centers and contractor support teams is that they rely heavily upon

¹Major Hammond, Jeff L., phone interview with author, 17 December 2007

funding for civilian support. As funding for the Global War on Terror continues to come under greater and greater scrutiny, these positions will become increasingly susceptible to budget cutbacks.

Long-Term Solution

These training agencies are effective in providing “as required” training but do not effectively address the problem facing the communications community. The problem of maintaining and sustaining technically relevant enlisted leadership can be addressed by adopting the infantry community’s model of the combat instructor.

In 2002, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James L. Jones created the combat instructor MOS (8513) and designated it as a special duty. “General Jones recognized, and articulated in a number of forums, that the Schools of Infantry (SOI) had been treated in a manner that is inconsistent with the significance of their contributions to the development of our basic Marine warriors.”² By making the combat instructor a special duty, General Jones effectively put the instructors at the Schools of Infantry on par with drill instructors and recruiters for purposes of promotion and pay. Furthermore, he ensured quality, career oriented non-commissioned officers would

² Melvin G. Spiese, “Every Marine a Rifleman—Completing the Vision,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 2002 pg 31

be drawn to a critical billet that previously had not received the level of attention it required. The same argument can be made for instructors within the communications school houses today.

Strengthening the Communications Community

Making the communications instructor an official B-billet and special duty will strengthen the occupational field throughout all ranks. It will mandate a screening process and assignment criteria for those Marines desiring to serve as instructors, in turn giving the school house leadership the opportunity to have a vote in who will shape the future of the community. Special duty pay provides additional incentives for those capable Marines to volunteer for this challenging and essential mission. Nevertheless, the two biggest advantages to making the communications instructor an official B-billet and special duty are the equivalency with other special duty assignments for promotions and the return on investment received when returning instructors to the operating forces.

Placing the communications instructor on par with other special duty assignments gives the career-oriented Marine an opportunity to take ownership in his/her occupational field. It also ensures that the time spent training and shaping future communicators will not adversely affect the careers of these exceptionally capable subject matter experts. Currently when a

Marine is faced with choosing his/her career path, he/she must choose between a special duty that will undoubtedly leave the Marine atrophied, if not completely outdated, in terms of technical skills (yet viewed favorably in the eyes of promotion boards), or continuation within the occupational field (and risking being less competitive for promotion). This is not to say that those currently serving as communications instructors are below average or without a future, only that Marines should not have to choose between technical relevance and future promotions.

Providing a Return on Investment

The other advantage to making the communications instructor a special duty is the return on investment gained by the communications community and the Marine Corps as a whole. Instructors at all communications school houses receive intensive technical training that is not readily available to many operating forces units and then spend their tour teaching the intricacies of their equipment.

For example, during fiscal year 2007, a data network specialist serving as an instructor at Communications School, Quantico, Virginia, received an average of \$19,000 worth of technical training on a variety of equipment. Field radio operators received \$14,000 worth of Harris Corporation training on advanced techniques for high frequency and satellite

communications.³ Because these Marines were not serving in an official special duty, however, over 70% were screened and received orders to recruiting duty where their training would be effectively wasted.

While other occupational fields (specifically combat service support MOS's) would like to make this same case for their MOS producing schools, no other MOS has experienced or can expect to continue to experience the constant state of transformation experienced by communicators. This continual advancement and state of transformation ensures the Marine Corps maintains pace with technology, therefore, the Marine Corps must ensure the communications community is capable of providing what the warfighter requires.

Conclusion

The reliance on advanced technology at the lowest tactical levels is intended to make the Corps more flexible, adaptable, and network centric. However, "smart operations" requires smart Marines, and without a concerted effort to improve the technical proficiency of junior leadership, technology will impede those processes it should enhance. Instructor duty at Marine Corps Communications schools should be made an official B-Billet to ensure the community maintains technically relevant enlisted

³Major Puntney, Gregory T., Course Coordinator for the Basic Communications Office Course, Communications School, interview with the author, 17 December 2007

leadership poised to meet the future demands of the technological battlefield.

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