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**MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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**BRACING THE INFANTRY'S BACKBONE FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY OPERATIONS**

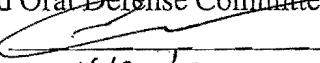
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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Bracing the Infantry's Backbone for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Operations.

**Author:** Major Thomas D. Wood, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** This paper aims to suggest ways in which the Marine Corps can meet the operational imperative to select, train and retain the type of infantry non-commissioned officer (NCO) that will thrive in the complex fights of the future.

**Discussion:** Accepting the time-proven fact that NCOs are the backbone of any military force, this paper argues that the U.S. Marine Corps infantry has a slipped disk. The Marine Corps has substituted unsupported operating concepts for real progress in educating and training our front line leaders. That said, the paper does not aim to disparage the competence or dedication of past or currently serving NCOs, as they have done what our Corps has asked time and again. However, the complexity of the contemporary battlefield demands much more than the status quo. The operational imperative is clear as is our call to action.

- We must select those men who have an aptitude for leadership and the maturity to act responsibly in complex environments. To do so, we must challenge our current acceptance of a "young force." For far too long, the Corps has embraced the notion that the vigor of youth is preferable to age and wisdom in its junior enlisted infantrymen. This may have been the case in the past's large battles of attrition, but it is detrimental to a force that requires precise lethality, discretion, and a bias for action from small unit leaders.
- Once selected, we must train and broadly educate our NCOs to act decisively in morally ambiguous, physically demanding, mentally stressful situations. In addition to the traditional tactical skills we seek to imbue in all Marines, we must develop NCOs who possess the acumen to lead well "away from the flagpole," employ supporting arms accurately, communicate across multiple mediums and dialogue with civilians. Our NCOs must possess the type of rock-solid judgment that is grounded in experience, education and cultural attunement.
- Once trained, our NCOs must be encouraged to remain in the Marine Corps. With gloomy budgetary forecasts and the hard-earned experience that stems from the past eight years of persistent conflict, we can no longer afford to allow 76% of enlisted infantrymen to leave the Corps after their first enlistment. Retention of top-quality NCOs must become a leading priority for the Corps. To achieve this end, we must change our approaches to pay, promotion and retention in order to keep our best and brightest.

**Conclusion:** In order to meet the increasingly complex demands of future warfare, the Marine Corps has an operational imperative to reform our antiquated approaches to the selection, retention, training and education of infantry NCOs. We are obligated to do more than simply label our NCOs "strategic corporals" and publish glossy handbooks that speak of enhanced training. We must put our intellect, energy and money where our rhetoric is. The Corps' success on future battlefields depends on it.

## *Preface*

*In writing this paper, I have purposely and narrowly confined my analysis to noncommissioned officers in the Marine Corps' infantry occupational field, as that community is what I know best. As a former infantry noncommissioned officer, son of a career Marine and grandson of a sergeant major, I hold the role of the Marine NCO in high regard. The history of our Corps swells with tales of NCO leadership and bravery. And yet, my experiences and observations over the last twenty years leave me deeply concerned about the stark divide between the requirements our operating concepts place upon NCOs, the complexities of current operations, and our institutional shortcomings in preparing these men to meet the challenges of the future. I contend that our Corps' current approaches to selecting, training, educating and retaining high-quality infantry NCOs are insufficient and must be improved. Our front-line leaders and the young men they lead deserve nothing less.*

*I extend to Dr. Adam Cobb, PhD and Commander Heidi Agle, USN my appreciation for their assistance in writing this paper and keeping me on track. Most importantly, I am indebted to the noncommissioned and staff noncommissioned officers who have so capably led and mentored me over the preceeding twenty years. These men showed me the ropes of the profession of arms, lifted my spirits and inspired me by their personal example and dedication. When it came to my professional development, they didn't have much to work with, but in true NCO fashion, they got the job done.*

*-Major T.D. Wood*

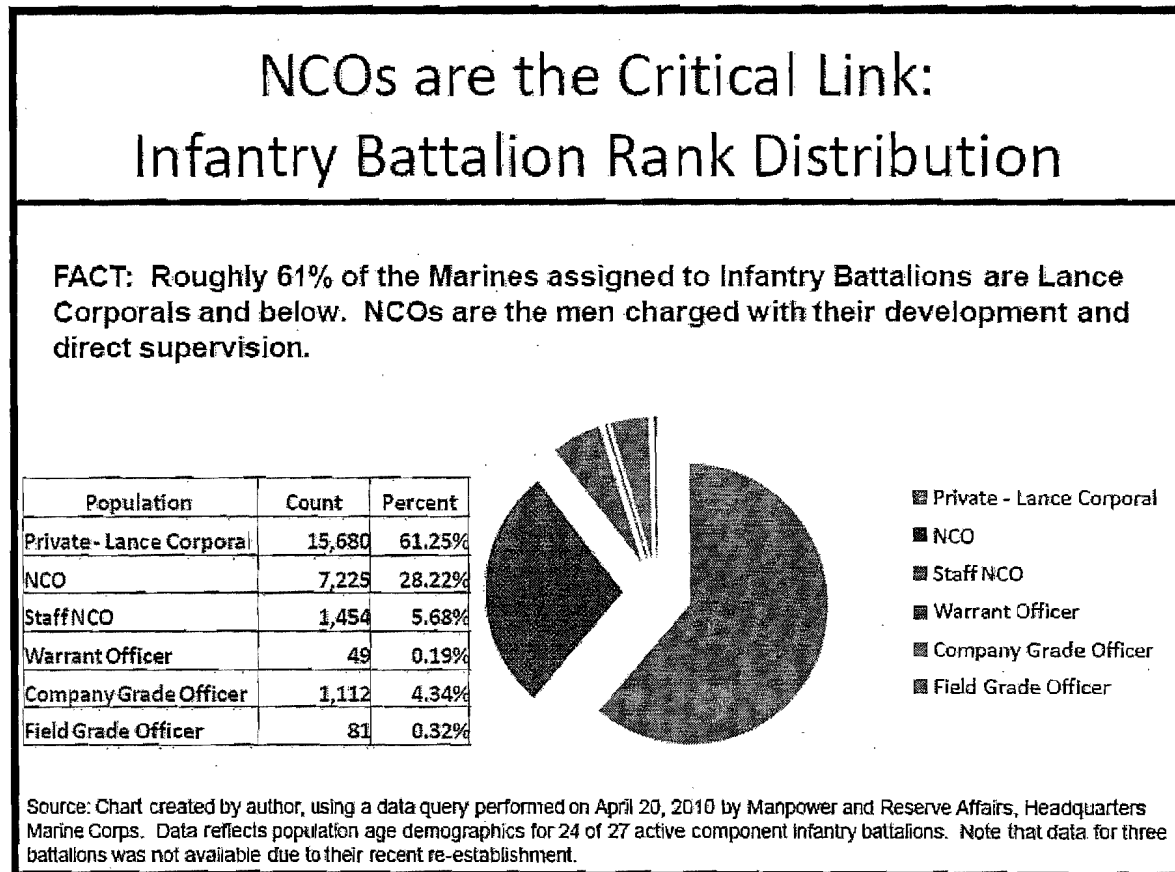
*“God is not on the side of big battalions, but on the side of those who shoot best.”<sup>1</sup>*

-Voltaire

The multitude of lessons learned in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Balkans and elsewhere are centered around the inescapable fact that success on the battlefield will hinge on tactical actions taken at the *lowest* level where decisions are made by small unit leaders.<sup>2</sup> Today’s infantrymen operate “further from the flagpole” than their predecessors could have imagined possible. Likewise, tomorrow’s Marines will increasingly operate without the benefit of direct supervision by senior leaders and will often find themselves in semi-autonomous roles where tactical cunning, resolve, cultural attunement and the ability to make morally sound judgments will be crucial. Simply stated, success or failure in future fights will increasingly rest with our “front-line” leaders: non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Their ability to make the *right* decisions and to provide strong leadership under extreme stress will be decisive on tomorrow’s battlefield. Unfortunately, while there is widespread recognition of this fact, the Marine Corps has allowed unrealized operating concepts, slogans and under-resourced training approaches to serve as weak substitutes for the type of progressive, comprehensive and tough development that a young corporal or sergeant needs and deserves to be successful. This paper aims to suggest ways in which the Marine Corps can meet the *operational imperative to select, train and retain* the type of infantry non-commissioned officer that will thrive in the complex fights of the future.

The infantry has always been a specialty in which fighting is done up-close and personally. It demands professionals to manage that violence and lead the young men who apply it. As the chart below depicts, 61% of the Marine Corps’ infantrymen in the operating forces are in the first three paygrades, while commissioned officers comprise a mere 5% of the population.

Hence, NCOs are as relevant today as they ever have been. They continue to serve as the critical link between the officer who commands and the enlisted man who executes.



However, today's NCOs do far more than simply "connect" the chain of command. Recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan re-confirm that commissioned officers have limited spans of control. Officers cannot personally influence every tactical action, nor should they have to. Consequently, there is little question that Marine NCOs will remain the men charged with the critically important responsibility of leading and making important decisions at points of friction where tactical actions can often have strategic implications.

In his seminal 1952 book entitled The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Practice of Civil-Military Relations, Samuel Huntington asserted that enlisted men are not professionals because they lacked the broad education and longevity which characterize members of a

professional class.<sup>3</sup> That assertion may have indeed been valid at that time in American military history, but we must not accept that proposition as the default for today's infantrymen. Our nation's military simply cannot afford to field anything less than a fully developed and professional cadre of front line leaders. For too many years, noncommissioned officer development has been relegated to a back seat role, with officer training and education receiving the lion's share of attention and funding. We must remedy that neglect. Likewise, the Marine Corps cannot afford to allow thousands of NCOs to depart its active duty ranks with little thought of what impact those departures have in terms of experience and the leadership void that these separations create.

Some may argue that the Corps' history of operational excellence validates the current, time-honored models for NCO development. In essence, they would argue that our victories substantiate the status quo. Others may take a position that massive investments in training and education for NCOs are cost-prohibitive. I accept neither of these positions and contend that following nine years of war, the Marine Corps enjoys a unique and critical moment in time which should be exploited. The Marine Corps must decide to professionalize its NCO Corps.

### **A Call to Action: The Tactical Challenges of The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*"The term "hybrid" has recently been used to capture the seemingly increased complexity of war, the multiplicity of actors involved, and the blurring between traditional categories of conflict. While the existence of innovative adversaries is not new, today's hybrid approaches demand that U.S. forces prepare for a range of conflicts. These may involve state adversaries that employ protracted forms of warfare, possibly using proxy forces to coerce and intimidate, or non-state actors using operational concepts and high-end capabilities traditionally associated with states. Future adversaries may use surrogates including terrorist and criminal networks, manipulate the information environment in increasingly sophisticated ways, impede access to energy resources and markets, and exploit perceived economic and diplomatic leverage in order to complicate our calculus. Because such approaches may be difficult to detect or predict, the ability of our forces to rapidly innovate and adapt will become even more critical."*<sup>4</sup>

-2010 Quadrennial Defense Review

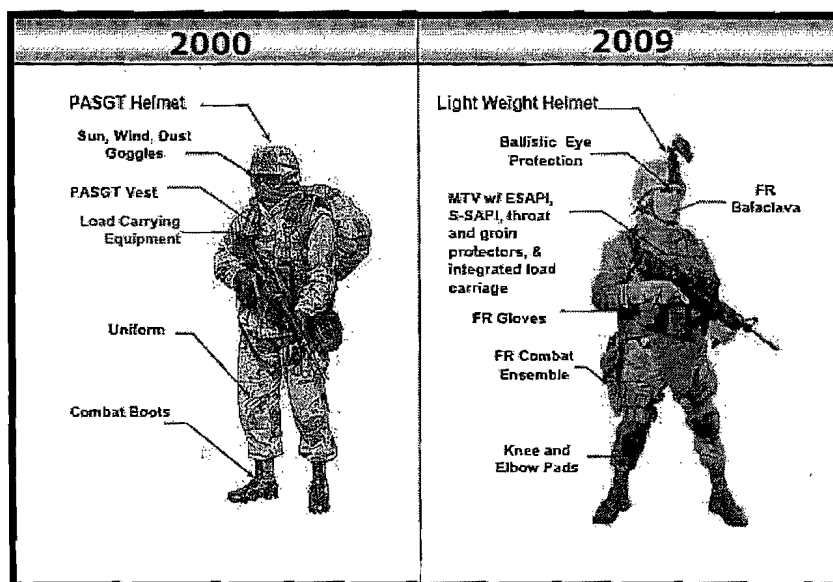
As the Corps' 31<sup>st</sup> Commandant, General Charles Krulak said in 1999, "The threat of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century will not be the son of Desert Storm; it will be the stepchild of Chechnya."<sup>5</sup> Clearly his visionary assertion, confirmed by the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, conveys the fact that future wars will complex, lethal and just as they always have been, chaotic. This realization presents significant implications for those who shoulder the responsibility of leading small units within the tactical level of war. Fighting amidst masses of innocent non-combatants, differentiating between friend and foe, leveraging increasingly complex technological tools and harvesting information gained from multiple mediums are but some of the challenges that small unit leaders will face. Indeed, while the nature of warfare will not change, significant transformations in ground operations are already well underway.

Traditional linear formations that allow for maximum firepower to be applied against one frontage or another are being re-examined. Increasingly, small units will operate in a disaggregated fashion, with "networked" small units widely dispersed over vast battlespaces. This dispersion will place a new premium on small unit leadership. It will tax the noncommissioned officer, his critical thinking, resourcefulness and creativity. To articulate the demand that independent, dispersed operations place upon small unit leaders, General Krulak put forth two terms in the late 1990 which proved prophetic.

The first was an overarching conceptual description of the hybrid operating environment dubbed the "Three Block War." In it, Krulak described the complexities of the modern battlefield emphasizing that young Marines of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century would be required to act across the range of military operations in short order, often in the span of a single day and sometimes in areas as small as three city blocks. While the Marine Corps had ample experience

in similar “small wars” during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the American experience in Somalia served to galvanize the concept of a Three Block War. Small units operating there routinely found themselves conducting security operations, assisting with the distribution of humanitarian relief supplies and disarming warring factions simultaneously or within very short timeframes. Leading these small units were American NCOs. To highlight the requirements to succeed in this morally, mentally and physically challenging environment, Krulak coined the term “strategic corporal” to illustrate the type of man who would be required to lead effectively in this dynamic environment.

The Corps’ tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs), organization and equipment have changed markedly since 2001. The Marine Corps has introduced scores of weapons systems, optics, vehicles and intricate electronic devices to aid in communications and situational awareness. Operating all of them, under severe conditions are non-commissioned officers. In fact, as depicted below, even our personal protective equipment has increased in complexity in the past decade.



Clearly, given the complexities of the asymmetric battlefield, the Corps' strategic corporals will deal with a bewildering array of equipment, challenges and threats. As General Krulak asserts, the very nature of the fast-paced three block war will require them "to confidently make well-reasoned and *independent* decisions under extreme stress -- decisions that will likely be subject to the harsh scrutiny of both the media and the court of public opinion. In many cases, the individual Marine (led by his NCO) will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and will potentially influence not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well. His actions, therefore, will directly impact the outcome of the larger operation."

Not only will these "strategic corporals" be challenged by chaotic, fast paced operations, operations, they will also lead their men in austere physical environments.<sup>6</sup> The Marine Corps' "Strategy and Vision 2025" assessment emphasizes that roughly 60% of the world's populace will live in urban areas by 2025.<sup>7</sup> This urban migration means several things to small unit tacticians as offered by Colonel Paul Kennedy in his 2001 essay on this same subject. "First, city fighting historically requires decentralization of command and control as units become compartmentalized within 'urban canyons.' High-rise buildings, rubble streets, and subterranean passages frustrate if not negate communications and visual control. Adding to this difficulty is the inevitable close contact with the larger population, as a narrower physical separation exists between combatants and non-combatants. In short, more will be expected of our (front line) troop leaders."<sup>8</sup> Accepting Colonel Kennedy's assertions, which are widely supported by existing doctrinal publications, decentralized operations are here to stay. Given that the United States is unlikely to either return to compulsorily military service or significantly

raise the endstrength of its ground services, decentralized operations are likely to remain an attractive concept for the foreseeable future due to a critical shortage of manpower.

In fact, the Marine Corps fully recognizes the challenges associated with de-centralized operations and is coalescing many of its operating concepts around the premise that units will increasingly be intentionally distributed over areas larger than traditionally assigned, proportionate to their size. In 2005 the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory embarked on a series of experiments to analyze the effect of decentralized and “distributed operations” (DO) where “small, highly capable units spread across a large area of operations will provide the spatial (and temporal) advantage commonly sought in maneuver warfare. . .”<sup>9</sup> In 2006, the DO effort morphed into an overarching operating concept dubbed Enhanced Company Operations (ECO), which was followed in 2009, by Enhanced MAGTF Operations (EMO).<sup>10</sup> While ECO affirms a widely held belief that the company is the “sweet spot” for conducting independent operations, ECO/EMO and DO are otherwise nearly synonymous. All three concepts recognize and embrace the fundamental requirement to train and broadly educate NCOs in order to maximize their capabilities on the battlefield.

While these concepts serve may eventually lead to substantive changes in the ways that small units operate, disappointingly none of them addresses the fundamental requirement to select, train and retain those NCOs who lead within these units. The balance of this paper analyzes this gap and provides recommendations to close it.

*Who Then Should Lead Us? : Current NCO Demographics and Why We Must Change*

*“Maturity of mind is the capacity to endure uncertainty.”*

-John Finley, author of Homer’s Odyssey

Before beginning any discussion related to changing the current system for NCO development, it is helpful to examine the demographics of today’s infantry NCOs. Historically, the Marine Corps has done an outstanding job in developing leadership in young men. Unfortunately, I assert that the circumstances under which these capable leaders emerged does not jive with current reality. Prior to World War II, young Marines cut their teeth in the “small wars” of the Caribbean and Latin America and their combat experiences were interwoven with long periods of garrison and sea duty which fostered maturation and leadership development.<sup>11</sup> Commonly referred to as the “Rudyard Kipling of the Marine Corps,” Lieutenant Colonel John Thomason once famously wrote about Marine NCOs in World War I,

*“(They are) a number of diverse people who ran curiously to type, with drilled shoulders and a bone-deep sunburn, and a tolerant scorn of nearly everything on earth. . . . They were the Leathernecks, the Old Timers: collected from ship’s guards and shore stations all over the earth to form the 4th Brigade of Marines, the two rifle regiments, detached from the Navy by order of the President for service with the American Expeditionary Forces. They were the old breed of American regular, regarding the service at home and at war as an occupation; and they transmitted their temper and character and view-point to the high-hearted volunteer mass which filled the ranks of the Marine Brigade.”<sup>12</sup>*

Unquestionably, the NCOs that Thomason described were considerably older than our current generation of NCO. These “old breed” Marines possessed years of service and experience under their belts. By and large, they reflected the maturity, judgment, and strength of character General Krulak epitomized in his strategic corporal model which called for “above all else, a *leader* in the tradition of the Marines of old ...”<sup>13</sup> However, contemporary Marine NCOs are far younger and more inexperienced than many would suspect. Consequently, they often lack the maturity and experience required to “transmit their temper and character,” much less

thrive on a complex battlefield. Again, I do not question the bravery or tactical competence of today's NCOs nor do I seek to slander their efforts. What I question is the Marine Corps' "institutional pride" in maintaining a youthful force, given the complexities and demands of contemporary hybrid warfare challenges.

While some may question the assertion that an older Marine makes for a better decision-maker, the evidence is clear. "While society and tradition have placed the point of intellectual maturity, the "age of reason," at eighteen, the study -- an international effort led by NIH's Institute of Mental Health and UCLA's Laboratory of Neuro Imaging -- shows it comes at about age 25."<sup>14</sup> In fact, many common practices and understanding validate this fact. It is widely accepted that the human brain does not cease physically growing until the age of twenty-five. Coincidentally, for decades actuaries have found that twenty-five is the appropriate age to reduce automobile insurance rates based on historical rates of reduced accidents, which can be attributed to increased maturity, developed decision-making skills and reductions in accepting unnecessary risk.<sup>15</sup>

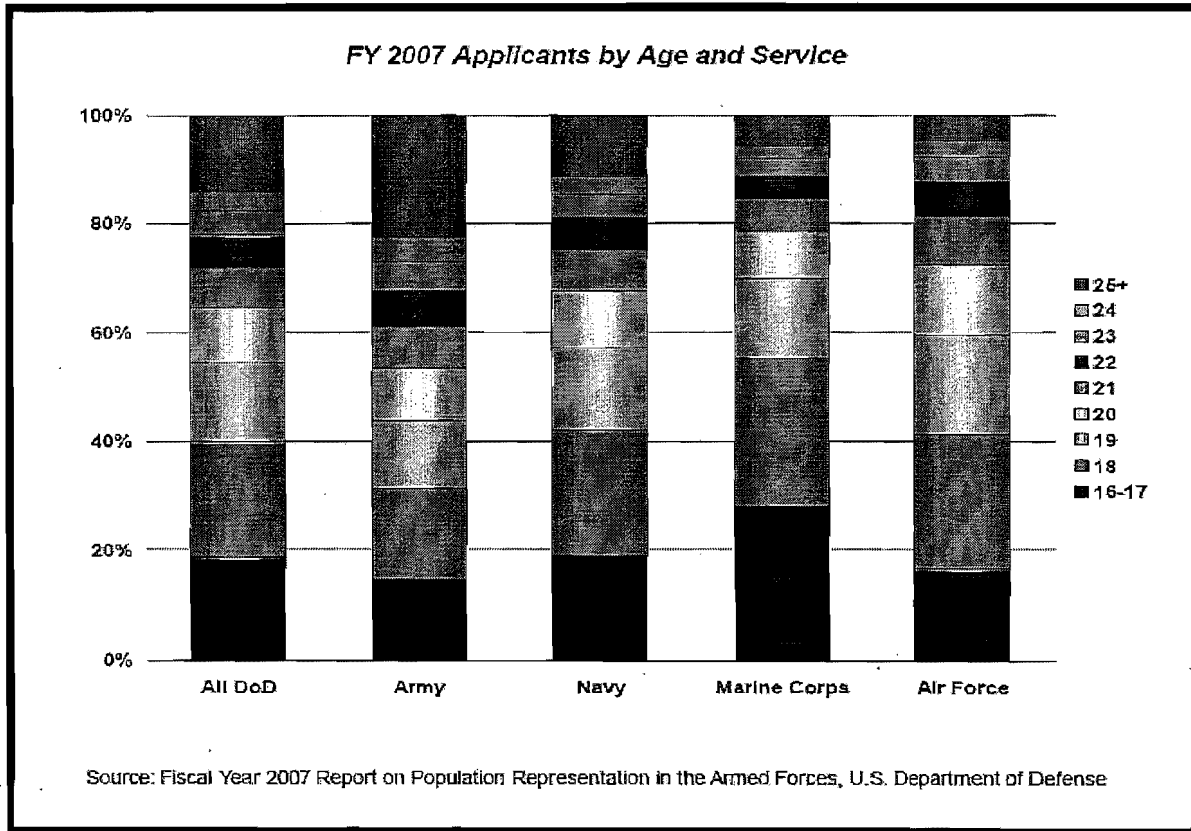
Although the scientific evidence regarding age and maturity is compelling, examples of the Corps' bias toward youth are plentiful. A 2008 marketing survey by Marine Corps Community Services entitled "A Youthful and Vigorous Force" touts that sixteen percent of all Marines are teenagers.<sup>16</sup> Indeed the very first page of the Corps' most recent annual Service Posture Statement to Congress boasts that "almost 70 percent of Marines are on their first enlistment and some 30,000 are in their first year of service."<sup>17</sup> I contend that the Marine Corps chooses to retain a young force based on two factors. First, it simply costs less to do so. Typically, young men do not have the monetary demands of older ones who tend to be married and have higher personal expectations. Second and more importantly, I believe that the Marine

Corps has misread the changing character of war, in which an older, more experienced force would be optimum.

The Corps' bias towards youth inhibits the selection of those men best qualified to eventually become NCOs. Just as oak trees originate from acorns, Marine NCOs do not magically appear; they are developed and selected from the junior enlisted ranks. In short, like every other military member who comprises today's all-volunteer force, NCOs are recruited. In 2008, sixty-eight percent of all Marine Corps non-prior service enlisted recruits were under the age of twenty.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, perhaps based on a misperception that youthful vigor equates to efficacy in modern combat, the Marine Corps has mistakenly *chosen* not to recruit from an older, more experienced demographic.

The chart below compares the Corps' target recruiting demographic to that of America's other armed services. While it is true that individual applicant preference and inclinations are major factors in recruiting the all-volunteer force, it is also true that each service can target its advertisement campaigns to selected demographics. This begs the question as to why the Corps

would purposely choose to target such a young demographic.

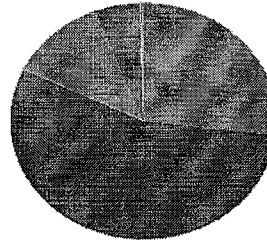


The charts two charts on the following page are drawn from age and time in service data for twenty-four of the Corps' twenty-seven infantry battalions. They highlight that for the infantry, the challenge of youth is even more pronounced.

## Maturity: Age Survey

**Fact:** Roughly seventy-seven percent of the Marines assigned to active component infantry battalions are 25 years old or younger and 17-20 year olds make up a significant population.

Population	Count	Percent
17-20 Years Old	6,898	26.94%
21-25 Years Old	14,143	55.25%
26-30 Years Old	3,040	11.88%
31-40 Years Old	1,410	5.51%
41-50 Years Old	109	0.43%



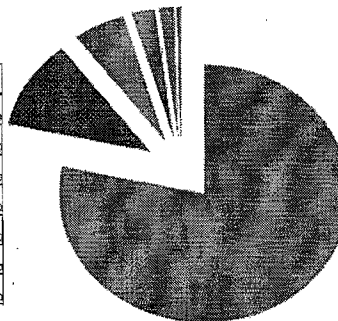
- 17-20 Years Old
- 21-25 Years Old
- 26-30 Years Old
- 31-40 Years Old
- 41-50 Years Old

Source: Chart created by author using data provided by the Total Force Data Warehouse, Manpower & Reserve Affairs, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps. Data pull of USMC active component Infantry battalions conducted on April 20, 2010. Note: No data was available for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines as these units were recently re-established.

## Experience: Time in Service Survey

**Fact:** Of the 25,600 Marines assigned to twenty-four of the Corps' twenty seven active component infantry battalions, 20,063, roughly 78% of the survey population, have less than four years of service.

Population	Count	Percent
Less than 4 Years	20,063	78.37%
4-6 Years	2,884	11.27%
7-10 Years	1,476	5.77%
11-14 Years	653	2.55%
15-19 Years	409	1.60%
20+ Years	111	0.43%
Unknown	4	0.02%



- Less than 4 Years
- 4-6 Years
- 7-10 Years
- 11-14 Years

Note: No data was available for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines as these units were recently re-established.

Source: Chart created by author using data provided by the Total Force Data Warehouse, Manpower & Reserve Affairs, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps. Data pull conducted on April 20, 2010.

Youth and vigor certainly have their place on the battlefield, as high intensity combat unquestionably requires a high degree of interpersonal spirit and a physical stamina that is common among younger men. However, the complexities of contemporary and future combat

operations demand other attributes equal to, if not more important than youth. Counter-insurgency and hybrid conflict demand that small unit leaders possess the qualities of strength of character and judgment that are derived from maturity. Make no mistake, *experience and wisdom matter*. Such wisdom can only be cultivated from individuals with the innate talent to prevail in conflict. In short, the Marine Corps' self-chosen "youth bulge" does not enhance combat capability, it hinders it. For this reason, it is essential that the Marine Corps aggressively change its approach to entry-level recruiting and eventual NCO selection.

In his 2008 Marine Corps Gazette article entitled "Age the Marine Corps," Lieutenant Colonel B.B. McBreen asserted that maturing the youthful Marine Corps will be essential to our future capability.<sup>19</sup> McBreen's credentials on this issue are impressive. A graduate of the School of Advanced Warfighting and a former battalion commander, McBreen makes a strong case to recruit and retain an older force.<sup>20</sup> Beyond his argument, I contend that the Marine Corps must make a concerted effort to recruit from college students, skilled craftsmen and diverse professionals who bring inherent talent and varied experience to the Corps. While these populations may not possess the natural skills of infantrymen, they bring versatility of thought, tangible artisan skills and invaluable maturity to a force that will increasingly require it

While the Marine Corps cites youth as a positive military attribute, elements of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) have recognized the inherent value of age. According to an article in the Naval Institute's *Proceeding's Magazine*, "the average age in a SEAL platoon is 28; for a Special Forces A-team, 32."<sup>21</sup> Some would correctly counter-argue that SOCOM elements have the luxury of accessing candidates from experienced and older members of the Marine Corps and other General Purpose Force (GPF) services which makes the comparison invalid. However, I assert that this comparison is warranted for a two compelling reasons.

First, the operational activities conducted by both SOCOM and GPF units are becoming intertwined and the lines between the two increasingly blurred. As an example, until recently Theater Security Engagement (TSE) missions to develop and enhance foreign military forces had been the traditional providence of SOCOM units. With an increased demand for TSE activities and an over-stressed special operations force, GPF units have supported these requirements with ever increasing regularity. Second, SOCOM and GPF forces compete for the same “market share” of candidates. A twenty-nine year old American citizen in good physical condition with an above average intellect is just as attractive a candidate for retention in the GPF as he is to SOCOM recruiters.

Scores of post-combat reviews collected by the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned contain assertions from Marine leaders that emphasize the vital role of the infantry squad leader (read: NCO) in counterinsurgency operations. The commanders and senior enlisted men cited in these reports recognized that their counterinsurgency effort would not succeed without competent and mature NCOs. As Lieutenant Colonel McBreen states, “the Marine Corps is not the Special Operations Command (SOCOM). We are not building small, top-heavy teams of specialists. But we cannot remain an Iwo-Jima-era force. Expeditionary ground combat is a young man’s fight, but we cannot engage around the world with an overly inexperienced force. We cannot mistake enthusiasm for capability.”<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the argument to ‘age the infantry,’ there exists an equally compelling requirement to increase the skill requirement for the infantry. Becoming a Marine Corps infantryman requires absolutely no skill or qualification beyond that of a basic Marine. A young man seeking to join the infantry must only pass the standard USMC Physical Fitness Test, qualify with his service rifle and demonstrate passing-level mastery of rudimentary skills taught

during five weeks of entry-level infantry training. Given the uniquely harsh demands of the infantry and its physical nature, I assert that the basic physical qualifications must be raised to include testing on a timed obstacle course and 15 mile endurance road march under a combat load of no less than fifty pounds.

Perhaps more troubling is that the infantry shares the lowest intellectual entry requirements in the Corps. To enter into the infantry, a man must possess a score of 85 on the “General Technical” portion of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery exam<sup>23</sup>. The infantry shares this low distinction with occupational fields such as supply. Conversely and surprisingly, the military occupational specialty of “videographer” requires a minimum GT of 100.<sup>24</sup> Even an applicant who desires to be a cook in the Marine Corps must score a 95.<sup>25</sup> Given the complexities of counterinsurgency and irregular warfare, it is past time to raise the infantry’s minimum intelligence standard.

### ***Building the Backbone One Vertebrae at a Time : Fixing NCO Training and Education***

*“A renewed focus on the development of squad leaders will be the single most important leadership investment a unit can make prior to deployment for distributed operations. The ability of small unit leaders to be problem-solvers who have a bias for action and can “think outside the box” will be critical in solving complex problems in the COIN fight.”*

-Quoted from an After Action Report from  
3d Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Marines following a tour in Afghanistan

A 1980’s Marine Corps recruiting slogan proudly celebrated Marine training by declaring that “We still make ‘em like we used to.” Regrettably, my assessment is that the attitude of “making them like we used to” is at the heart of the problem. The bulk of our NCOs learn how to lead and make tactical decisions through on the job training (OJT). This approach may have proven sufficient in wars of attrition where units fought toe-to-toe in linear formations.

However, OJT as a primary training mechanism does not meet the demands of warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Evidence suggests that the Marine Corps recognizes this dilemma, but has yet to develop or implement a course of action to correct it.

*“Building on our existing ethos and our maneuver warfare philosophy, we must continue to elevate the already high competence of our most junior leaders, educating them to think and act at the tactical level of war. For example, we will provide infantry squad leaders a broad understanding of command and control systems, the intelligence cycle, fire support coordination, logistics, and other disciplines, in which extensive knowledge has heretofore been principally the domain of Marines far more senior. Further, we will provide junior leaders additional technical skills that will enable them to perform combat tasks normally accomplished at higher levels of command. Marines at the infantry squad level will be trained to direct all forms of supporting arms, to provide terminal guidance for rotary wing aircraft, to perform casualty evacuation, to establish access to high-level communications networks, and other functions, without the aid of the specialists typically found at higher levels of command. A greater focus on cultural factors and language training will enhance small units in operating in complex environments.*

*The addition of extensive and complex new training standards and professional education requirements will demand concomitant adjustments in the personnel policy pillar of combat development. For example, increased training requirements will affect staffing levels in units as Marines attend additional or longer duration schools. Further, the time required to master new skills will potentially be considerable, calling for a review of personnel policies concerning tour length, promotion, and career patterning.”*

-USMC Concept for Distributed Operations, 2005<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, the initiatives described in this overarching document are as exciting as they are hollow. Five years after publishing the Concept for Distributed Operations, the Marine Corps has shown little progress in educating our NCOs. In fact, nowhere in the nine-page Marine Corps Concept for Distributed Operations does it provide the specificity required to embark upon such a lofty and important endeavor as developing our front line leaders. There are insufficient resources tied to this important effort, and there is no timeline for implementation. In short, there is little meat behind the rhetoric.

That said, the Marine Corps' traditional infantry-specific NCO development courses have made a modicum of headway in the past five years. In 2009, the Infantry Squad Leader Course was expanded from nine to ten weeks in duration in order to enhance its students' abilities to

control aviation and surface supporting fires. The plethora hard-earned experience gained through multiple deployments over the past nine years has resulted in a cadre of NCOs that possess superior tactical skills. But what of the future? With defense budgets all but guaranteed to decrease significantly in the coming years and the President's promise to begin reducing forces in Afghanistan in 2012, what will happen to tomorrow's generation of Marine NCO? The clock is ticking and it is vital that the Marine Corps identify the attributes and tangible skills it requires of infantry NCOs in order to design and implement a strategy for their education and training. As a first step, the Corps must address several problematic areas.

Enlisted infantrymen currently advance through their careers in a bifurcated progression of professional military education (PME) and advanced tactical skills development courses. This fractured developmental pathway brings with it divergent goals and different skill sets. Although recent policies have allowed for consolidation of some requirements, promotion boards tend to favor those who have met the requirements in the PME pipeline. This bias results in needless redundancy and wasted training time and effort. With oppressive timelines to conduct unit-level pre-deployment training, units in the operating forces do not have the luxury of sending NCOs to two separate schools.

As an example, Sergeants must complete their PME requirements through either the resident or non-resident Sergeants Course, which focus on generic military leadership development. In order to hone tactical proficiency, sergeants may attend the Infantry Squad Leaders Course, but are not required to do so. Here again is a dilemma where time competes with requirement. The resident Sergeants Course is eight weeks in length; the Squad Leaders is ten. While providing NCOs a diversity of educational opportunities may appear to be advantageous, the fact is that it is overly duplicative and wasteful, particularly given that many

infantry battalions have only six months to train between deployments. Should a Sergeant attend both the Squad Leaders and Sergeants Courses, he would be absent from eighteen weeks of a twenty-four week pre-deployment training period – an alarming seventy five percent of the time -- thus robbing his men of essential leadership and degrading unit cohesion, which is crucial to combat effectiveness.

A second deficiency that must be remedied is as essential as it is simple: Placing the importance of NCO development on par with that of the commissioned officer. An experienced Staff NCO, Gunnery Sergeant M. Choquette, attended the Infantry Officer Course (IOC) as a student in 2007. His aim in attending this demanding ten week course alongside brand new second lieutenants was straightforward. He sought to gain greater insight into what makes IOC successful in order to subsequently improve enlisted education and training at Camp Lejeune's School of Infantry. He came away from the course awe struck by its tough realism, vast resources and dynamic instructional methods. Following the course, his comparison of enlisted and officer training was stunning and disappointingly, a clear indictment of the disparity between the two. "At the end of three months at IOC I walked away with a wealth of information and unfortunately, a deep-seated feeling of being educationally cheated to this point in my career. As a staff noncommissioned officer (SNCO) and professional infantryman, I now feel that the enlisted infantry leader is being set up for failure,"<sup>27</sup> he stated. Cheated indeed.

Newly minted officers at IOC undergo some of the finest training that the Corps has to offer. IOC instructors are hand-picked from among the best captains in the Marine Corps. The school's resources are vast. Allocations for training ammunition, helicopter support and fixed wing aircraft sorties are generously robust. IOC's curriculum places a premium on decision-making and tactical proficiency. Most importantly, the operating forces have consistently

endorsed the efficacy of IOC. It is universally accepted that Marine infantry lieutenants are skilled tacticians who possess a bias for action. While relatively inexperienced, students attending IOC are exposed to hundreds of realistic scenarios in which real-world experience is effectively simulated. Lieutenants graduate from IOC prepared to lead and make ethically and tactically correct decisions in ambiguous situations. For the most part, IOC students lack real world operational experience, but using a football analogy, they are treated like the future “quarterbacks” that they are to become. Over the course of ten weeks, they are exposed to hundreds of realistic “snaps” which serve to develop what Patton and Frederick the Great would call the coup de’ oeil.

Conversely, the resources provided to conduct effective training for enlisted men at the Infantry Squad Leaders Courses (ISLC) are woefully short. An interview of instructors at Camp Lejeune’s ISLC, paints a clear picture of the disparity between the enlisted and officer leaders’ schoolhouses.<sup>28</sup> ISLC’s students are routinely unable to accomplish many of the course’s objectives due to a lack of resource availability. Astoundingly, every single ISLC class graduated in 2008 and 2009 without the benefit of a helicopter assault due to the school’s low prioritization for aircraft sorties. ISLC lacks computers for the students to prepare operations orders. It does not possess many of the equipment sets found in the operating force such as Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, fourth generation night vision devices or even the newest service rifles fielded to the operating forces.

In general, ISLC classes are comprised on 40-60 student NCOs or senior lance corporals who are filling NCO positions within their parent operating force units. Students as important as these men should not want or need for anything in their training. They should be provided the finest training systems that replicate those found with units forward deployed in order to enhance

student training and proficiency. Recognizing that officers lead larger and more complex organizations than NCOs do and fully aware of fiscal reality, I do not advocate that the Corps seek to completely close the gap between training for officers and enlisted men. However, I find irony in the fact that the Marine Corps places such a lopsided emphasis on the development of a young man, fresh from college with no proven track record of performance while simultaneously short changing the NCO who has proven his mettle in the crucible of combat. Beyond irony, I contend that this disparity degrades our warfighting capability.

Having examined many of the current shortfalls in enlisted education and training, it is appropriate to offer solutions to remedy these deficiencies. Given the uncertainty and friction associated with combat, NCOs should first and foremost be critical thinkers, who possess the judgment and strength of character to assess a complex situation, decide how or if to respond and act decisively while leading their men to address it. They must be capable of distinguishing between situations where restraint is required and ones in which the application of violence will achieve optimum results. In short, NCOs must know when to use a handshake and when to use a gun. As former company commander Captain James Prudhome said in a 2008 Center for Marine Corps Lessons Learned report: "NCOs need to be capable of making quick decisions based on limited information."<sup>29</sup>

In addition to the requirement to develop NCO recognitional decision-making skills, our front line leaders must be capable of more than rudimentary combat operations. The versatility to fight responsibly and ethically among civilian populations is critical to defeating insurgents in an irregular fight. Being culturally attuned has proven to be an essential ingredient to succeeding in "sustained operations ashore," one of the Marine Corps' six core competencies. The Commander of US Joint Forces Command and one of the Corps' four Generals confirms this.

Shortly after assuming Command of First Marine Expeditionary Force in August of 2006, then-Lieutenant General James N. Mattis stated, "We now have the same expectation of our noncommissioned officers as we do of our field-grade officers -- that they will be able to read the cultural terrain. [Reading cultural terrain] is more important now in a time when you don't seize [physical] terrain and when the army against you doesn't come at you in mass formation."<sup>30</sup>

Obvious changes are required in NCO education and training. First, the Corps must fully support and resource existing courses. Second, the Marine Corps must conduct a thorough task analysis to determine what the core competencies of an infantry NCO should be. From that effort, the Corps can refine the training requirements for infantrymen which will focus the NCO and facilitate his professionalization. Third, the Marine Corps must do a better job of utilizing simulation training for infantrymen. Just as aviators are exposed to hundreds of hours of flight simulation, so should our infantry small unit leaders be. The Infantry Immersion Trainer at Camp Pendleton and work by the Marine Corp Warfighting Laboratory on this issue are positive steps in the right direction. However, the operating forces must maximize the use of simulation training to again increase the number of "snaps" that our NCOs experience before entering the crucible of combat. Finally, the Marine Corps must consider a resident "academy" for NCOs.

Using The Basic School as a model and the ISLC curriculum as a baseline from which to build, this academy would serve as a screening and training venue for aspiring NCOs. It would be months in duration, not weeks and it would be well-resourced with the finest enlisted and officer instructors the Corps can provide. In addition to providing comprehensive instruction in the classic infantry tasks of attacking, defending and patrolling, it would provide instruction in contemporary communications equipment, information operations, language, culture, ethical decision making and supporting arms employment. Students would matriculate as certified Joint

Tactical Air Controllers, capable of providing terminal guidance for fixed and rotary wing close air support missions. During the academy, they would train in mountainous, jungle, arctic and urban environments. Like the officer students at IOC, NCOs attending the academy would be exposed to hundreds of “snaps” to prepare them for service as the future quarterbacks that they are. In short, a well-resource resident academy of appropriate length would help to develop the “strategic corporals” that our Corps requires.

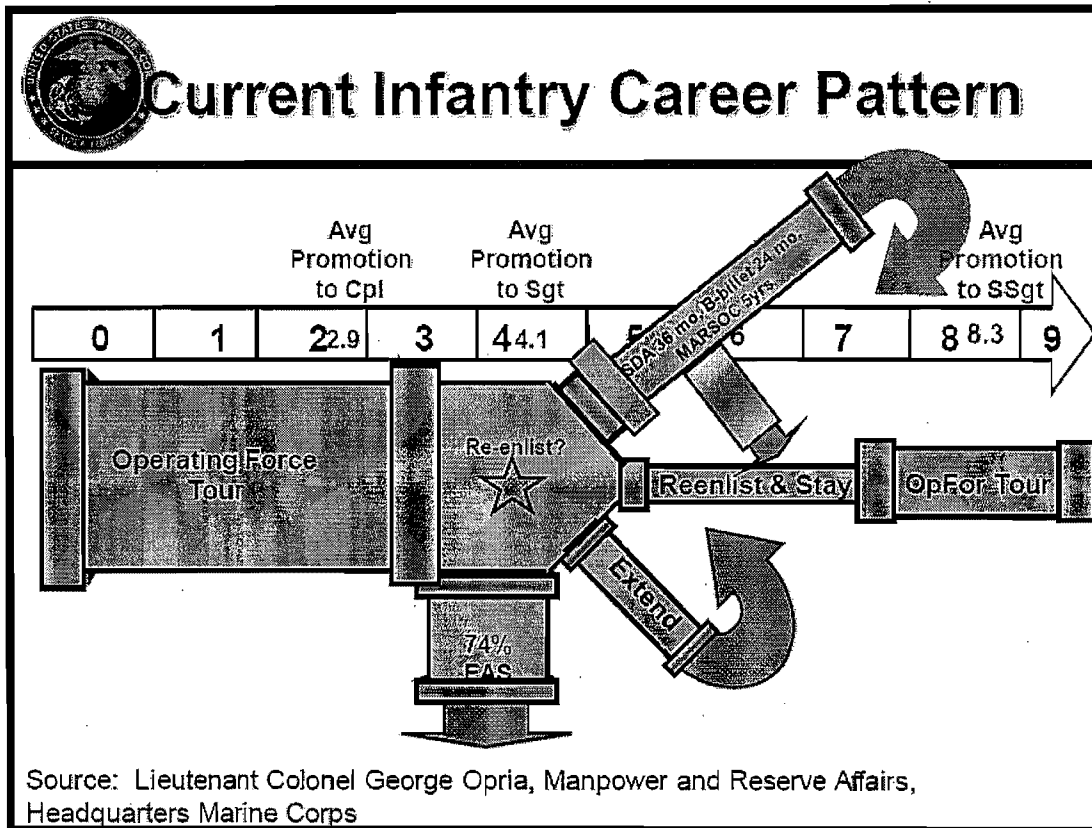
Enlisting in the all-volunteer force is a contractual agreement in which both parties, the Government and the enlistee, share a burden. Among other things, the enlistee promises several years of faithful service. Among the Government’s obligations is the absolute requirement to provide that young man the high-quality training and education that will allow him to succeed and reduce his chances of becoming a casualty. As the “trustee” of this contractual agreement, the Marine Corps has obligations to both parties. Most important of these obligations is the requirement to ensure that deploying Marines are trained to fight and win.

***Don’t Let a Good Thing Go: Retaining Our Corps’ Most Precious Asset, The NCO***

*“I’m trusted to take my squad on patrol in Fallujah,  
but back home I’m not trusted to drive home and back on a weekend.”*  
-Marine Sergeant quoted in a 2007 CNA study<sup>31</sup>

The Marine Corps has a retention problem. While it consistently retains the *quantity* of infantrymen it needs to serve beyond an initial enlistment period,<sup>32</sup> it often fails to retain the best *quality* Marines needed to lead men in combat. Why? I assert that the Marine Corps manpower management process is almost singularly focused on quantitative measurements of effectiveness and consequently the institution fails to manage talent properly. The Marine Corps must change this paradigm and actively *target and aggressively attract* those men who have the aptitude and

proven track record for continued service as leaders. For reference, the current infantry career path is graphically depicted on the following page.



Historically, an alarming average of seventy four percent of first term Marines are discharged at the end of their enlistments.<sup>33</sup> Let's examine what this important fact means and its operational impact. In Fiscal Year 2010, the Marine Corps will recruit approximately 7,000 new enlisted infantrymen.<sup>34</sup> Assuming a historical average of seven percent attrition due to misconduct or injury, 6,500 of these Marines will complete their first enlistment in 2014. Based on the historical norms, 5,000 of these now highly skilled and experienced infantrymen will leave at a time that is likely to see continued conflict around the world. Assuming that the preponderance of these 5,000 will be NCOs with two seven-month deployments to Afghanistan, the resulting loss will be a cumulative 70,000 months or 5,833 years of combat experience in

2014. This example illustrates that the Marine Corps, indeed the nation, cannot afford to continue this perpetual loss of military experience and skill.

Aside from institutional impacts, consistently high first term attrition rate has a direct impact on deploying infantry units. Marine Corps infantry battalions are comprised of twenty-seven rifle squads, each of which should be led by a sergeant according to tables of organization.<sup>35</sup> In 2006, the Center for Naval Analysis determined that, on average, deploying infantry battalions were deficient by twelve sergeant squad leaders, nearly half of the requirement. It goes without saying that this type of shortfall presents not only a manpower challenge, but an “experience deficiency” which translates to reduced capability. Quoted in a 2008 Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned report, a Marine company commander asserted that “we must keep more experienced leadership in our small units in the fleet. A lance corporal squad leader whose only experience was a deployment as a PFC has trouble understanding sustained counterinsurgency operations. Squads should be led by 5-7 year sergeants.”

It is evident that retaining high quality infantry NCOs must become a top priority for the Corps. Why then do superb leaders with valuable real-world experience men leave the Marine Corps at such rates? In my judgment, there are two reasons. First, as stated earlier, the Marine Corps does not have any special or distinguishing standards for infantrymen. This critical flaw perpetuates the Corps sole requirement to retain only those who meet basic standards for any Marine, vice exceed them.

Second, the Marine Corps simply does not possess a system to manage talent the way that is commonly practiced by other large organizations. To meet its first term re-enlistment target, the Marine Corps allocates quotas to major subordinate commands (MSCs). Commonly known as FTAP goals, these quotas are viewed by many commanders as an administrative requirement

to be quickly addressed, rather than a critical leadership issue that deserves careful thought. Consequently, the faster that a commander can meet his FTAP goal, the sooner that he can turn his attention to other matters. The result is that many Marines who would be exceptional candidates for re-enlistment are overlooked in favor of those candidates who simply have few choices other than to remain in the Marine Corps.

While not a quantifiable statistic and consequently not empirically attributable to the Corps' historically high rates of separation, it is important to note a casual factor that affects retention: the type of man who should be retained for future service often feels let down by the Corps itself. Contrary to popular belief, today's high operational tempo actually serves to satisfy the desires of most infantrymen, who by-and-large enlisted yearning the experience of combat. While deployed, an NCO is typically given all of the responsibility he can handle and in some cases, he is pushed beyond his perceived limits. This results in a feeling of immense personal and professional satisfaction. However, upon returning from deployment, many NCOs are disappointed by the mundane experience of garrison life. In a 2005 study on retention by the Center for Naval Analyses, the restrictive nature of living in the barracks was cited as a primary driver for Marine dissatisfaction<sup>36</sup>.

Some may dismiss complaints about "barracks life" as harmless griping, but the restrictions placed upon young, single Marines do in fact have real effects. Due to constant unit deployment rotations, Marines move barracks rooms frequently during their enlistments. These movements are disruptive and require Marines to move all of their personal belongings from one building or room to another. Often cynically dubbed "no-entitlement PCA moves," by young Marines, these re-locations foster resentment. Additionally, living in the barracks comes with a multitude of regulations, all of which are well-intentioned, but sometimes have a crushing

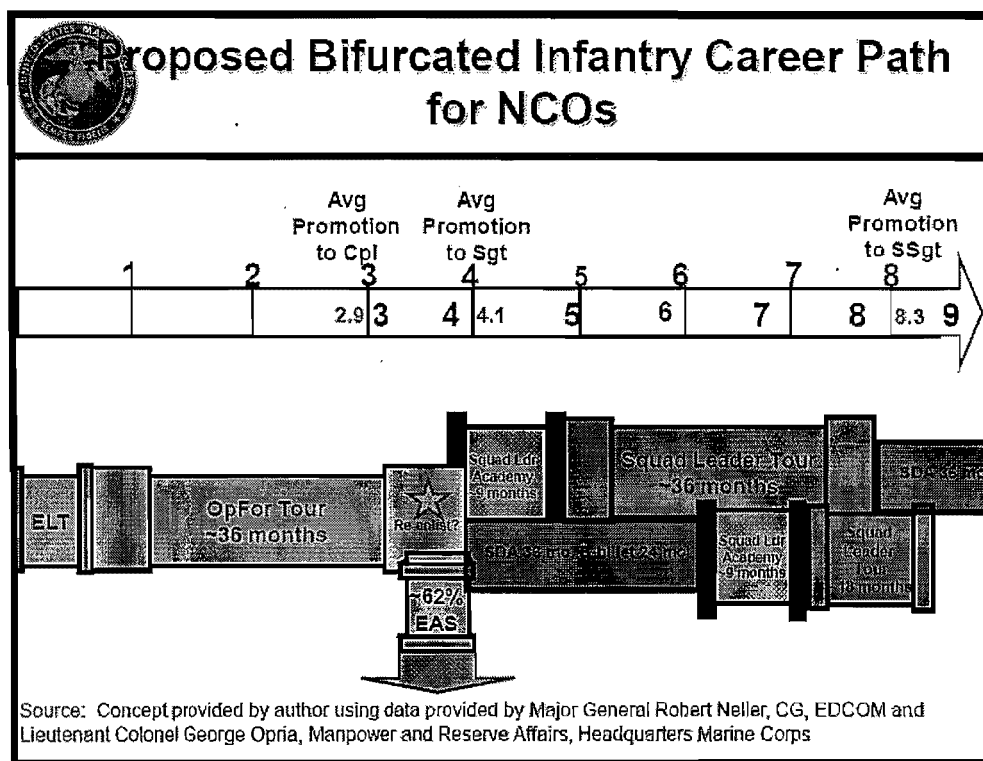
cumulative effect on morale. Young NCOs often perceive short or no-notice inspections as intrusions into their personal lives. Prohibitions against alcohol and women in the barracks are seen by many to be overly restrictive. I contend that the Marine Corps must find ways to balance the requirement for good order, discipline and safety against providing Marines with a true sense that their barracks is their home. In addition, the Marine Corps should construct and set aside Bachelor Enlisted Quarters for each infantry battalion in order to allow Marines to leave their personal effects behind in “their home” during deployments. Doing so will reduce the number of “no-entitlement PCA moves” a Marine makes as well.

Even with all of the frustrations faced by young Marines, the truth is that the Marine Corps does not have a problem in meeting its numerical re-enlistment goals for infantrymen. Historically, “boatspaces” for those desiring to re-enlist as infantrymen are limited and fill up rather early in a fiscal year. As an example, in Fiscal Year 2010, the Marine Corps’ goal for first-term infantrymen is to re-enlist 553 of 6,388 Marines, a mere 8.6% of the eligible population.<sup>37</sup> This raises several questions. First, is the Marine Corps retaining an ample number of infantrymen to meet its requirements each year? Clearly, as the study from the Center for Naval Analysis concludes, there is a shortage of NCOs in the operating forces.

The second question that a deliberate “high attrition, low retention” rate model raises is tied to the first. If the Marine Corps is in fact retaining all of the NCOs it needs, why are they not in the operating forces? The Marine Corps must examine both of these issues carefully as there are numerous competitors within the Corps itself for NCO talent. Special Duty Assignments (SDAs) such as are viewed by many in the Corps as premier postings. Postings to Marine Embassy Security Group, recruiting or drill instructor duty are highly sought after and are universally accepted as necessary for a Marine’s professional development. Unfortunately,

SDAs often have little to do with infantry tactical proficiency. Moreover, Marines returning to the operating forces following a three year posting to an SDA are often far behind their peers and in many cases their subordinates in terms of tactical proficiency.

The graphic below provides a conceptual framework for a bifurcated career path that can serve as starting point for further analysis. It has two aims. First, it incorporates the “NCO Academy” construct mentioned previously in this paper. Second, it aims to retain sufficiently numbers of highly trained NCOs in the operating forces, while simultaneously providing enough Marines to meet supporting establishment demands. However, this concept would require a significant change in the number of infantry Marines retained each year. This would result in an infantry occupational field grade shape that looks more like an almond and less like a pyramid. In essence, the infantry would have far more NCOs and Staff NCOs that it currently has today. The costs in pay, housing and entitlements would be significant. However, doing nothing and accepting the status quo may prove even costlier on the battlefield.



## **It's Time to See the Chiropractor: Closing Thoughts**

*“Accompanying this emerging challenge is a new opportunity. After a quarter century of unwavering commitment to the maneuver warfare philosophy, we are harvesting a generation of junior officers and noncommissioned officers who are fully prepared to assume much greater authority and responsibility than is traditionally expected at the small-unit level. They have proven their critical thinking skills and tactical competence in combat, achieving results that exceed our highest expectations, and demonstrating a capacity for small-unit leadership that will enable us to realize the full promise of maneuver warfare philosophy, through maximum decentralization of informed decision-making, guided largely by commander’s intent.”*

-USMC Concept for Distributed Operations, 2005<sup>38</sup>

The Marine Corps Intelligence Activity’s 2007 Mid-Range Threat Assessment stresses that the contemporary and future global threat environment will be characterized by complex mixes of terrorism, irregular combat, religious extremism, poverty, resource scarcity, crime and a mosaic of other challenges.<sup>39</sup> Without question, the business of fighting wars has become an intricate and deadly cocktail, which will place new and extremely taxing demands on those who lead men in it. At the tip of the spear and often with little guidance, the Marine NCO will increasingly be the key to mission success or failure. As reflected in the citation above, the Marine Corps has an operational imperative to reform and improve our antiquated approaches to the selection, retention, training and education of infantry NCOs. Make no mistake; all three of these functions are inter-related and integral to the success of professionalizing the Corps’ NCO Corps.

A typical Marine officer will attend nearly three years of resident instruction during the course of his career, culminating in a top-level school which is chartered to prepare him or her to function at national or strategic levels. As General Krulak contends and recent history proves, our NCOs don’t have that luxury of time. They will be expected to lead and potentially make decisions with strategic consequences today, tonight and tomorrow. For far too long, there has

been too little talk and not enough action on this front. Our Corps is morally obligated to do more than simply brand our NCOs “strategic corporals” and publish glossy handbooks that speak of their importance while simultaneously failing to enhance their capabilities. We must put our intellect, energy and money where our rhetoric is. Our Marines deserve the best noncommissioned officers we can produce and the Corps’ success on future battlefields depends on it.

### Consolidated List of Recommendations

<u>#</u>	<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>Rationale</u>	<u>Source Page #</u>
1	Recruit from an older demographic	Entry-level Marines eventually become NCOs. The Marine Corps' NCOs are the youngest of all the services and youth is not optimum for COIN and/or hybrid conflict.	9-15
2	Establish minimum physical fitness standards for the infantry	No current standards exist, even though the infantry routinely "lives harder" than other occupational fields.	15-16
3	Increase the minimum GT score requirement for the infantry	The complexities of hybrid conflict demand intelligent infantrymen who demonstrate the ability to reason, think critically/creatively and make independent judgments. The infantry currently shares the lowest GT score requirement in the Marine Corps.	16
4	Re-invest in NCO education. Use The Basic School as a model.	The complexities of modern operations demand formal, world-class education, vice OJT. The current school houses for NCOs are woefully under-resourced.	16-22
5	Establish an NCO Academy for infantrymen	The complexities of modern operations demand formal, world-class education, vice OJT. The current school houses for NCOs are woefully under-resourced.	22
6	Change manpower processes to recognize the importance of retaining <i>quality</i> personnel, not simply "making the FTAP mission" numerically.	Retaining top-quality NCOs is critical to mission success. Contemporary manpower processes reward commanders and Marines who "re-enlist early" rather than deliberately attracting those who are best suited for continued service.	25-27

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- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> DO Operating Concept
- <sup>27</sup> Richard Choquette, "Bridging the Gap", *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 2008.
- <sup>28</sup> Interviews conducted by author with several staff members of ISLC in March 2009.
- <sup>29</sup> Prudhome, MCCLS Report.
- <sup>30</sup> Mark Walker, "Mattis: Success in Iraq Now a Test of Wills." *North County Times*, August 22, 2006. [http://www.nctimes.com/news/local/article\\_66919dbf-0a68-55ea-9e68-4b2d57380e5c.html](http://www.nctimes.com/news/local/article_66919dbf-0a68-55ea-9e68-4b2d57380e5c.html) (accessed on 1 March 2010).
- <sup>31</sup> Center for Naval Analyses, "Deployment Tempo and Retention in the U.S. Marine Corps" October 2005.
- <sup>32</sup> U.S. Marine Corps "Improving the Infantry Squad Leader (Working Brief)" January, 2009.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>34</sup> Author's research, based on USMC FY 10 Recruiting goals. This number is an estimate, based on a hypothetical situation.

<sup>35</sup> Marine Corps Tables of Organization, Total Force Structure Division, Marine Corps Combat Development Command.

<sup>36</sup> CNA Study on Retention

<sup>37</sup> MARADMIN 717/09

<sup>38</sup> DO Operating Concept

<sup>39</sup> Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, *Marine Corps Midrange Threat Estimate: 2005-2015* (Quantico VA: Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, August 2005), pp. 33-37