



CREATION OF STAFF OFFICER PRIMARY MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY IN THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

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IN THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS**

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CREATION OF STAFF OFFICER MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY IN THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

AIM

1. The purpose of this paper is to advocate for the United States Marine Corps (USMC) to create a staff officer primary military occupational specialty (PMOS). This MOS will allow the USMC to identify, professionalize, and retain talented officers who are well-suited to staff functions or are more interested in serving in support roles than commanding officer billets. It is time for the USMC to embolden and retain those talented officers who wish to serve in alternate roles outside of the prestigious command billets. Further consideration will need to be given to what a specific training pipeline would like and whether an additional course or courses would need to be developed. Additional considerations are how many billets should be converted over to the new staff officer PMOS, the shape of the promotion pyramid, and whether or not these officers should compete for promotion only within the staff officer PMOS.

INTRODUCTION

2. The USMC, like the rest of the United States Armed Forces, is an up-or-out hierarchal system. This means that officers have to continue to get promoted based on time in grade or depart from the service (retire or get forced out). This is codified in United States Public Law 96-513 Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) from 1980. This type of organizational hierarchal system has fostered a culture where becoming a commanding officer is the definition of success and the goal that all USMC officers should hold. This mindset has been challenged over time but with no real changes in culture. In 2021, General Berger (38th Commandant of the Marine Corps), signed Talent Management 2030. Contained within this document was a section discussing this very topic. “By emphasizing, screening for, and promoting to command leadership skills and experiences, we necessarily deemphasize and deprioritize the leadership skills and experiences required of good staff officers”¹ The USMC needs a diverse set of skills and personalities to create the strongest organization possible. Inevitably, these skills and personalities are not all suited to be commanders. These other skills need to be honed and trained in the same manner that the current culture strives to train future commanders. As the world continues to change, so must the USMC if it wants to keep all of its talented and bright officers. The creation of a staff officer PMOS will be a step towards accomplishing this goal. From the MOS Manual, an MOS is created “to represent organizational skill requirements identified on Tables of Organization (T/O) in TFSMS, and skill qualifications assigned to personnel.”² This is the appropriate method to accomplish the best way to identify and train a professional staff officer cadre.

¹ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Talent Management 2030* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2021), 13.

² Headquarters Marine Corps. *Military Occupational Specialties Manual NAVMC 1200.1J* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2023), vi.

DISCUSSION

3. Unlike other Allied countries, the US military is based on an up-or-out organizational hierarchy. Under this system, each branch of the US military has a limit for the number of active duty officers set by law. Each branch is allowed a certain number of officers per rank. For an officer to get promoted, there needs to be a spot at the higher rank for them to get promoted to. To keep moving officers up the chain, the system has to have mechanisms in place to move the officers above out of the way. This is done through voluntary retirements, mandatory retirement dates, or by forcing officers out. These mechanisms facilitate this up-or-out hierarchy and are codified into law through DOPMA and each fiscal year's National Defense Authorization Act which outlines the end strength for each of the branches. However, not only does there need to be an opening at the higher rank, but there is also a time-based component to be eligible for promotion. Depending on the rank, the requirement is between one to three years time in grade to be eligible for promotion to the next rank.³ This hierarchal system often creates a sense of urgency amongst the officer population to ensure they serve in the key billets that will give them the best chance to get promoted. In the USMC, the time-honored pathway to success is through command.

4. The commander is the epitome of success and the job that all Marine officers are supposed to be striving for. This is the culture that brand-new officers encounter from the very beginning at The Basic School (TBS). Every Marine officer completes TBS in Quantico, Virginia where they are taught how to be rifle platoon commanders. It is here where the seeds of command being the epitome of success are planted and the pathway to promotion identified. The story goes something like this. After leaving TBS, officers will go on to be platoon commanders and then company executive officers. After promotion to Captain, they will then get their opportunity for company command. Those who succeed at company command will get promoted to Major. Once promoted to Major, the officer then serves as a battalion operations officer or executive officer. If successful, the officer then gets promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and becomes eligible for battalion command. The best is then selected for battalion command and has achieved what is supposed to be the goal of every Marine officer. If one is not selected for battalion command, then their chance at promotion to Colonel is extremely low. In the USMC, becoming a commanding officer is the end all be all.

5. There are a multitude of problems that arise from this type of culture. One problem is that there are not enough battalion-level commanding officer billets to go around for every Marine officer. The selection rate for Major to Lieutenant Colonel is around 70% while the selection rate for the Lieutenant Colonel Command Screening Board is between 20-25%. One thing to consider when comparing these numbers is that not all Lieutenant Colonels get screened for command. Officers have the option to request to be removed from the board, potentially submit for retirement (especially for prior enlisted officers), or serve in billets that preclude them from being screened for

³ *Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980*, Public Law 96-513, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 94 (1980), 2854-2855.

command. If every Lieutenant Colonel was screened, then the command selection numbers would be drastically lower. One might argue that this is a good model, that only the best should become battalion commanders. However, when building a healthy organization, the culture needs to adapt away from pushing every officer to be a commander when the organization cannot even afford that opportunity to less than a quarter of the eligible population. There are a multitude of key billets that are required to be filled but the culture deems them to be less important or even worse viewed as filled by officers that failed to become commanders.

6. This is reinforced during encounters between officers and their respective manpower management specialists or when talking with a career counselor. The conversations almost always begin around remaining competitive for battalion-level command and how that officer stacks up against past officers who have been selected for command. It is only once the officer expresses a lack of interest in pursuing command do the conversations shift to what other options exist. These types of interactions reinforce this command-first culture and perpetuate the idea that anything else is of lesser value.

7. Another problem that arises is the way officers are evaluated in the USMC. The USMC uses the fitness report as the way to measure performance. The report contains “14 attributes across 5 sections: mission accomplishment, individual character, leadership, intellect and wisdom, and fulfillment of evaluation responsibilities.”⁴ Following these attributes is a comment section for the reporting senior (RS) to describe the performance of the officer during this reporting period and their future value to the USMC. However, the RS is limited to only positive comments in this section. Marine Corps Order 1610.7B Performance Evaluation System prevents the following types of comments from being placed in this section by the RS. “Comments identifying minor limitations, shortcomings, occasional lapses, or weakness in an otherwise overall positive performance.”⁵ These comments would be considered negative comments and would render the fitness report adverse. An adverse report would essentially prevent that officer from being promoted and due to the up-or-out hierarchy system, end the career of that officer. Therefore, RSs are limited in being able to provide accurate detailed comments outlining the performance and potential of the officers under their purview. This can lead to inflated reports and officers who don’t possess the qualities or characteristics the USMC wants of its commanders to be pushed down the road to command. Not all officers have the traits and characteristics to be placed in charge of a unit. However, the current reporting system discourages accurate feedback and allows for officers to continue to be pushed down the line toward command when a different system would not be competitive for command selection.

8. If an RS were to include a comment such as, this officer is not well suited to be a commanding officer, it would be considered adverse and the RS would be told to remove

⁴ Headquarters Marine Corps. *Performance Evaluation System (PES) Marine Corps Order 1610.7B* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2023), 4-20.

⁵ Headquarters Marine Corps. *Performance Evaluation System (PES) Marine Corps Order 1610.7B* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2023), 4-42.

the comment. Instead, RSs have to remain positive and convey their concerns about an officer's ability to command by not including command recommendations. There is currently no positive method to convey to Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC) that an officer is better suited to be a staff officer vice a commander. However, if the USMC were to create a staff officer MOS, then there could be a very simple change made to the fitness report that would allow for that very thing. There currently exists in the fitness report for Gunnery Sergeants an option for the Marine being Reported On (MRO) to select whether they want to become a First Sergeant or a Master Sergeant. The RS is then required to comment "regarding what grade the Gunnery Sergeant is best qualified to fill."⁶ The same could be done for officers at the Captain rank. Create an option for the officer to select which path they would like to pursue (either command or staff) and then require the RS to comment regarding which path the officer is best qualified to fill. This would provide a mechanism for the RS to provide honest feedback to HQMC on which path that officer is best suited to take.

9. This would also attempt to fix another problem within the current culture of pushing all officers to be commanders. This problem is that not all officers want to be commanders. Many talented and bright officers don't wish to become commanding officers. They might have interests in other areas of expertise, might want to have more opportunities to stay in one place, or are not interested in the burden of command. But whatever the reason, there are plenty of officers who RBR from the command board and choose to continue to serve differently. However, for many of these officers, this choice is often one they keep to themselves. Due to the prevalent culture, these officers many times see themselves as outsiders to the organization and fear that if their RS knew their true intentions, those intentions would be held against them. There is a fear that their fitness report would not be graded as high or the comments would not be as glowing when compared to their peers who were pursuing command. This can breed discontent and could even drive officers to resign or retire before they desire to. This causes the organization to lose key and valuable members for reasons that shouldn't be there in the first place. Normalizing a pathway to be successful outside of the command route would incentivize these officers to remain in the organization and put their talents to use in billets that provide meaning to both themselves and the organization.

10. The USMC has recognized the value of creating specialist and subject matter experts in a variety of other fields. This is evident in the use of warrant officers and limited duty officers to create experts in specific fields. These restricted officers are only able to serve in billets that are associated with their specialty. They are selected from the enlisted ranks and create a cadre of professionals within those specialties. Additionally, the USMC has created acquisitions MOSs to identify those officers who have served in acquisition billets and wish to continue to serve in that capacity. The USMC has recognized the value of having officers focus on those particular skills and select candidates each year through a board process. The same should be done for staff officers. The USMC should hold a board each year where they select a certain number of

⁶ Headquarters Marine Corps. *Performance Evaluation System (PES) Marine Corps Order 1610.7B* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2023), 4-14.

officers to become professional staff officers. This will formalize an alternate path to success for those officers who wish to pursue something other than command. It should be a volunteer board and will build off the identification process outlined in the change to fitness reports above.

CONCLUSION

11. The current USMC culture of trying to drive all officers to become commanders is counterproductive. It emphasizes one important role over all the other supporting yet just as integral roles that exist within the organization. It drives away talented and intelligent officers who wish to continue to serve but don't want to be commanders. It fails to address the importance of staff roles and misses an opportunity to professionalize those billets that are critical to commanders. As General Berger said in *Talent Management 2030*, "Making all officers conform to fit industrial age notions of leadership inefficiently matches the talent of our officers with appropriate billets, impacting the effectiveness of our commanders and their staffs."⁷ The importance of commanders will never be forgotten, however, there is an opportunity to increase the importance and value of professional staff officers by creating a staff officer PMOS.

RECOMMENDATION

12. The USMC should create a PMOS to create a professional cadre of staff officers ideally suited to support commanding officers. The entry point for this PMOS will be at the Major rank with options for lateral move into the PMOS up through Lieutenant Colonel. The current fitness report should be modified to include a field for officers to select whether they wish to pursue a command or staff pathway. Additionally, include a mandatory comment from the RS on the pathway that the officer is best suited for. Further study should be conducted to determine which staff billets on a unit's T/O will be changed to match this new PMOS. Additional consideration will need to be given to the PMOS promotion shape, professional education and training for staff officers, and what unintended consequences might arise from the creation of a new PMOS.

⁷ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Talent Management 2030* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2021), 13.

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