

The Goldilocks Option

0372s, 8999s, and senior enlisted leadership in MARSOC

by GySgt Derek W. Sharp

“The porridge in the big bowl was too hot. The porridge in the middle-sized bowl was too cold. The porridge in the little bowl was just right—so she ate it all up.”¹

—Goldilocks and the Three Bears

In the well-known tale, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, a young girl stumbles upon a home in the woods belonging to a family of bears. The story follows the girl as she samples the bears’ rocking chairs, bowls of porridge, and even their beds. The intrinsic lesson of this familiar story is that when one is required to make a selection from a range of options, one should avoid choosing an option that is either excessive or insufficient to one’s needs. Instead, one should seek to select the option that is “just right” for one’s specific circumstances.² This is known as a Goldilocks Option.

The Marine Corps is in need of a Goldilocks Option when it comes to the management of senior enlisted leaders (SELs) within the Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC). The manner in which the Marine Corps currently assigns SELs to positions within MARSOC is inefficient, schismatic, and fails to provide optimal benefits to both the Service and MARSOC. It fails because the Marine Corps’ system is misaligned with standard practice within the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), constrains the leadership opportunities available to MARSOC’s 0372-critical skills operators (CSOs), and limits the extent to which the larger Marine Corps benefits from its investments in MARSOC. Most proposals that claim

to address these deficiencies are either similarly insufficient or excessive and create problems worse than the ones they were intended to resolve. Thus, the Marine Corps should implement a Goldilocks Option which modifies its senior enlisted management policies enough to account for the unique needs of MARSOC and the 0372-CSO population while simultaneously expanding the extent to which the Marine Corps can benefit from the unique training, education, networks, and experience that MARSOC CSOs possess.

A Critique of the Status Quo

Despite the Marine Corps and special operations forces (SOF) being similar and complementary in many ways, their approach to managing SELs is not aligned. These differences manifest themselves both structurally and qualitatively. The structural misalignment is due in large part to the fact that the Marine Corps system for managing senior enlisted personnel is an outlier

among those of the other Services. Unlike the Marine Corps system, which divides senior enlisted roles into two separate career and promotion tracks based on technical and leadership functions, SELs in SOF units have tactical, technical, and leadership advisory responsibilities to SOF commanders.³ In short, SOF SELs spend the majority of their careers in SOF and are expected to perform both technical and leadership functions. This dual role is the standard not only in the other SOF Service components, such as the Naval Special Warfare Command or the U.S. Army Special Operations Command but also in joint SOF commands. These disparate structural approaches to the management of senior enlisted personnel taken by the Marine Corps and USSOCOM reveal an underlying qualitative misalignment between the Marine first sergeants and sergeants major (8999s) and the command sergeants major and master chief petty officers who typically hold SEL positions in other special operations units.

The central factor of this qualitative misalignment is that SELs in SOF, both within the individual SOF Service components and in joint SOF commands, are career SOF professionals. They have been specifically assessed, selected, trained, and educated to understand and conduct special operations. While the selection and training mechanisms vary among the different

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SOF Service components, each organization spends considerable time and resources on ensuring that they assess, select, train, and educate the right personnel to lead their units. By contrast, each formal SEL position in MARSOC is held by an 8999—none of which have been assessed, selected, or trained to conduct special operations. Moreover, SOF SELs, aside from their unique selection and training, have many years of experience conducting a wide variety of special operations missions in various joint environments and operational theaters. SOF SELs also enjoy the personal, professional, and operational networks germane to a career in SOF. By comparison, 8999s largely have extremely limited experience conducting special operations and leading special operations units. The advantages of placing SOF professionals in SOF leadership positions are, however, not limited solely to tactical or operational matters.

Senior enlisted SOF professionals also develop a deep understanding of both the strategic utility of special operations and the unique capabilities of joint special operations forces. Much of this education and knowledge is gained through experience; however, SOF SELs have also been progressively educated in SOF-specific educational institutions and programs such as those at the Joint Special Operations University Enlisted Academy, the National Defense University, and the Naval Postgraduate School. Former USSOCOM CSEL, CSM Patrick McCauley, highlights the necessity for SOF CSELs to have this unique range of capability, experience, and education writing, “as the senior enlisted advisor to Gen Thomas [Former USSOCOM Commander], I am afforded unparalleled access to the commander. I participate in most meetings and engagements, and provide feedback on issues across the operational spectrum.”⁴ CSM McCauley’s comments demonstrate why an enlisted SOF professional must have extensive special operations experience, a thorough understanding of special operations, and outstanding leadership abilities before being placed into SOF leadership positions.

Sadly, it is in the joint SOF environment where the structural and qualitative misalignment of the Marine Corps system and SOF management practices are often maligned and cause the most consternation and confusion. MARSOC’s joint SOF counterparts and foreign partners are often confounded by the fact that the formally designated 8999 SELs of MARSOC units, through no fault of their own, have limited experience in or familiarity with special operations. This lack of credibility and experience in the joint SOF environment can cause some to question the utility of 8999s in special operations units and could create conditions where they are not as effective in their role as SELs in SOF units as they are in con-

portunities available to them. Within MARSOC, CSOs serve in most enlisted leadership positions up to Marine special operations team (MSOT) level command. However, starting at the company level and continuing up the chain of command, formal SEL positions are filled by 8999s assigned to the command by Headquarters Marine Corps. While each level of command in all other MARSOC units does have an 0372-CSO E8 or E9 as part of its headquarters, they are not formally designated as the unit’s SEL. Accordingly, their official billet descriptions and subsequent fitness reports do not capture the more robust role they play.

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ventional Marine units. MARSOC, for its part, seems to be tacitly aware of this reality and has attempted to rectify it by creating a quasi-formal “SOF Senior Enlisted Advisor (SOFSEA)” position in its operational commands and at the component level. This SOFSEA position is filled by an 0372-CSO and partially addresses the issue of SOF *bona fides* in a command senior enlisted position. However, in addition to being an inefficient use of MARSOC’s limited E8 and E9 8999 and 0372 structure, it can also exacerbate confusion because commanders of MARSOC units *come with two*. This phrase is a reference to MARSOC commanders having two separate named senior enlisted advisors: one 8999 assigned by Headquarters Marine Corps and without a doubt the *de jure* unit SEL while the other is an 0372-CSO selected from within MARSOC and most often the *de facto* unit SEL.

The status quo regarding the assignment of SELs in MARSOC units also has adverse effects on CSOs in that it limits and constrains the leadership op-

serve in SEL positions within MARSOC puts them at a critical disadvantage when compared to their Navy SEAL and Army Special Forces (SF) peers who serve in formal SEL positions as both E8s and E9s. The limiting of 0372-CSO leadership opportunities naturally constrains the competitiveness of 0372-CSOs for nominative SEL positions in joint SOF commands. While senior 0372-CSOs often match or exceed the operational expertise and experience of their SEAL and SF peers, the current Marine Corps system, because it requires a professional split at the E8 ranks, does not afford them the opportunity to serve in formal SEL positions at the E8 or E9 level. For an E7 0372 to select “F” on his fitness report, he would be required to forgo the opportunity to serve in the critical MSOT team chief billet which is an MSgt billet and a universal career milestone within the SOF enterprise. To skip this experience and promote to the 8999 MOS would be analogous to a Marine infantry officer skipping a

platoon commander tour in order to serve as a rifle company commander. Simply put, the status quo not only limits the leadership opportunities of CSOs within MARSOC but also constrains their ability to compete for leadership opportunities in the joint SOF environment. The deficiencies of the status quo become more apparent and irksome when one considers that the 8999s who do serve in SEL positions at MARSOC will likely not go on to be selected for a nominative CSEL position in a joint SOF command. Due to their not having been assessed and selected and their lack of SOF experience, many within the SOF enterprise would not consider status quo 8999s appropriate for these positions outside of MARSOC. Moreover, even if the issue of qualifications were set aside, one should consider if non-SOF 8999s would even be competitive for such positions when compared to their career-SOF SEAL CMC and SF CSM competitors. Given that, to date, no 8999 has secured a SOF nominative CSEL position and 0372 MGySgts have, it is likely safe to assume that special operations experience is considered necessary to serve as a CSEL in joint special operations units.

Furthermore, there are significant institutional costs associated with the status quo SEL management system in MARSOC. While the 8999 community generally benefits from the status quo as it has access to the SEL positions in MARSOC, which provides the MOS with additional billets, including one at the two-star level, the various other groups who have a stake in the management of SEL positions in MARSOC, such as the Marine Corps, MARSOC, and 0372-CSOs, do not derive nearly as much benefit from the status quo. As detailed above, the assignment of 8999s to SEL positions in MARSOC has direct tangible costs for 0372-CSOs. MARSOC, while certainly benefiting from the considerable experience, expertise, and administrative leadership capabilities provided by status quo 8999s, is currently constrained in its ability to leverage its limited SEL positions into expanded influence within the joint SOF environment. This is evidenced by the fact that in its seventeen-year ex-

istence, MARSOC has had none of its 8999s and only two 0372-CSO Master Gunnery Sergeants selected for nominative CSEL positions in a joint SOF command. However, it is the Marine Corps itself that gains the least from the status quo as the Service is generally unable to benefit from its substantial investments in the 0372 MOS.

As currently arranged, the Marine Corps' system for managing senior enlisted personnel permanently sequesters many high-quality enlisted Marines within the 0372 MOS and MARSOC. The Marine Corps has long been aware of this type of problem. It was a central theme of the critiques lodged against the Marine Raiders of World War II and informed the initial conception of how CSOs would serve in MARSOC.⁵ Before the advent of the 0372 MOS in 2011, CSOs were assigned to MARSOC for five-year tours at the end of which they were to rotate back into conventional Marine units. The idea was that these enlisted special operations Marines would then spread their SOF operational experience, exposure, and knowledge throughout the Marine Corps. This model was quickly abandoned due to its impracticality but the issue it attempted to address remains unsolved—namely, how the larger Marine Corps can best leverage the unique talent, training, and experience resident in the 0372 MOS and MARSOC to benefit the entire Marine Corps.

Ironically, it is the Marine Corps' own system and its inflexibility that limits the extent to which the larger Marine Corps can benefit from the 0372 MOS. In its twelve-year existence, very few Marines in the 0372 MOS have elected to promote to the 8999 field. There are many contributing factors as to why this is the case, but perhaps the central one is the 0372s-CSO's overwhelming desire for continued service in special operations. Given that there is currently no guarantee that an 0372-CSO who elects to become an 8999 will ever return for service in MARSOC, 0372-CSOs simply elect to remain in their MOS so that they can continue to serve in special operations. In short, 0372-CSOs are not incentivized to promote into the 8999 MOS. This has been

the case since the implementation of the 0372 MOS and prevails today despite genuine interest in doing so and the faster promotion rates and formal leadership opportunities associated with the 8999 field.

Solutions: Too Cold, Too Hot, and Just Right

Having identified and described the problem, this article explores three basic solutions which maintain the Marine Corps model for managing its E8 and E9 population. The first option is to maintain or make marginal improvements to the status quo. The second option is to abandon the standard Marine Corps model within MARSOC, convert the 8999 personnel structure in the command to 0372-CSO billets, and assign 0372-CSOs to the SEL positions within the command. The third—and the only option considered by this work to be suitable, feasible, and acceptable for all relevant stakeholders—is for the Marine Corps to implement a policy that modifies its senior enlisted management policies enough to account for the unique needs of its special operations Marines and units while simultaneously expanding the extent to which MARSOC can benefit the larger Marine Corps.

The simplest option that the Marine Corps could implement, and the one that does the least to address the issues identified above, is to maintain or make marginal improvements to the status quo. Admittedly, improving the status quo would be difficult as the quality of the 8999s assigned to MARSOC is outstanding. The issue is not 8999s in MARSOC *per se*; rather, the issue is that the 8999s in MARSOC are not assessed, selected, and experienced SOF professionals. This status quo option would keep in place the normal Marine Corps system and entails the continued assignment of currently produced 8999s to SEL positions within MARSOC and an informal leadership role for senior 0372-CSOs. However, this option would be insufficient to address the deficiencies outlined above for a number of reasons. First, it does not address the structural deficiencies between the Marine Corps and SOF

senior enlisted management practices. SOF SELs will still be expected to have special operations expertise and leadership skills. The Marine Corps system will still produce 8999s unable to meet this requirement. Second, this option does not address the qualitative misalignment of conventional 8999s and SOF CSELs. In this system, 8999s will still lack the special operations background and experience required to be

both the technical and leadership advisory functions required of SOF CSELs. In this system, all MARSOC SELs will have been assessed, selected, trained, and educated to conduct special operations and lead special operations units.

Yet, while this option addresses many of the core issues identified previously, it does not address them all and has the potential to create new problems. First, the replacement of 8999s with

in both MARSOC and conventional Marine units, very similar to how it already has 8999 drill instructors and 8999 Marine security guards. Via the coding of MARSOC's 8999 billets in a similar manner and a simple assignments memorandum of agreement, the Marine Corps could guarantee a career path in MARSOC for CSOs who promote into the 8999 MOS while maintaining the current 8999 billets in MARSOC. Such a policy would incentivize some 0372-CSOs to promote into the 8999 MOS each year and become a hybrid 8999-CSO. The policy should mandate that these 8999-CSOs complete their necessary team chief tours, receive priority when it comes to assignment to SEL positions within MARSOC, and that between tours at MARSOC these 8999-CSOs would be eligible for assignment to conventional Marine units.

The creation of the 8999-CSO is the superior option because it addresses all of the issues identified in this article and is mutually beneficial to all relevant stakeholders. It reduces the structural misalignment imposed by the status quo system as the 8999-CSO would leverage his extensive special operations experience and 8999 expertise to perform technical and unit leadership functions for SOF commanders. Given that the 8999-CSO will have been assessed, selected, trained, and educated to conduct special operations and will have many years of experience in special operations units, this option also addresses the qualitative misalignment described earlier and provides the 8999 MOS with SOF *bona fides*. This option also allows for CSOs to have access to SEL positions at the E8 and E9 ranks both in MARSOC and across the Marine Corps. As a result, 8999-CSOs should be as competitive as their SOF peers for nominative SEL positions in joint SOF commands. Perhaps most importantly, however, this system allows the Marine Corps to capitalize on its substantial personnel investments in the 0372 MOS and MARSOC by having 8999-CSOs serve in SEL positions across the entire Marine Corps. This arrangement also allows for the growth of the total number of CSO-qualified

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maximally effective. They will still not have been assessed, selected, trained, and educated to lead special operations units. This option still disadvantages and constrains the leadership opportunities available to 0372-CSOs. As a result, 0372-CSOs will continue to be less competitive for nominative CSEL positions in comparison with their SEAL and SF peers. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this option does not allow the Marine Corps to tap into or leverage its investment in the 0372 MOS, MARSOC, and special operations. In essence, this option does not do enough to address the problem and, in the Goldilocks analogy, is far too cold.

A second option would be for the 0372 MOS to absorb the 8999 structure assigned to MARSOC. With its 8999 billets converted to E8 and E9 0372 billets, this absorption would allow for 0372-CSOs to be assigned to each SEL position within the command. Given that they now have access to leadership positions at the E8 and E9 ranks, this option would address the issue of 0372-CSOs not being competitive when compared to their SEAL and SF peers for nominative SEL positions in joint SOF commands. This option would also address the structural and qualitative misalignment problems identified as 0372-CSOs would be able to perform

0372-CSOs in the SEL positions in MARSOC does not address the fact that the wider Marine Corps would not gain additional benefit from its investment in the 0372 MOS. In fact, allowing the 0372 MOS to absorb the 8999 structure all but eliminates the likelihood that 0372-CSOs would ever elect to promote into the 8999 field. This option could also disrupt the 8999 MOS as it will lose access to a number of SEL billets including one position at the two-star level. MARSOC would also suffer from the loss of the unique and valuable leadership, experience, and expertise provided by 8999s. Lastly, this option has the potential to increase any latent resentment of MARSOC within the Marine Corps. Implementation of this option could be incorrectly viewed as evidence that MARSOC views itself and its needs as separate from and more important than those of the larger Marine Corps. While this option is suitable and feasible in that it would address most of the issues identified, it is not acceptable because the potential costs of its implementation would likely outweigh the benefit gained. Considered in the Goldilocks analogy, this option is excessive and far too hot.

A final option for addressing the issues detailed in this article involves the Marine Corps implementing a policy to create a hybrid 8999-CSO for service

Marines in the Marine Corps without having to increase the size of the 0372 MOS.

Aside from addressing the deficiencies highlighted earlier, this option has many additional advantages, which would benefit relevant stakeholders. First, the ability for CSO-qualified Marines to serve in conventional Marine units is largely unheard-of today and would be beneficial for both the Marine Corps and MARSOC. The 8999-CSO option would incentivize this to occur. Having 8999-CSOs in leadership positions throughout the Marine Corps, especially as it continues with *Force Design 2030*, would also contribute to the Marine Corps' efforts to improve the integration, interdependence, and interoperability of conventional Marine and SOF units in the course of expeditionary advanced base and re-

8999 MOS field also benefits from this option as the influx of 0372s into the career field would lead to a more diverse and well-rounded corps of 8999 first sergeants and sergeants major. Lastly, the creation of the 8999-CSO would in theory expand the total number of joint CSEL positions available to Marine sergeants major. 8999-CSO hybrids would be eligible for nominative CSEL positions both within joint SOF commands and conventional joint commands. This is perhaps the most significant advantage of this option as it would expand the network and overall influence of enlisted Marines in the joint environment. When considered in the Goldilocks analogy, this hybrid option is neither too cold nor too hot. In fact, because it is a suitable, feasible, and practical solution to the problem, it is just right.

entire "tried-and-true" Marine Corps system for managing senior enlisted personnel. This option also increases the extent to which the entire Marine Corps can benefit from MARSOC and would enhance the diversity, expertise, and reach of the 8999 MOS. The fact that this solution addresses so many issues without imposing any substantial costs on either the Marine Corps or MARSOC, is mutually beneficial to all relevant stakeholders, and requires only slight modifications to standard Marine Corps practices and policies, should make it a very enticing option to any who seek to further integrate the Marine Corps and MARSOC. When viewed holistically, considered thoughtfully, and judged above parochialism based on what is likely best for the Marine Corps, this solution is just right.

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connaissance/counter-reconnaissance operations. This option would also further MARSOC's "MARSOFF as a Connector" initiative from its *MARSOFF 2030* vision statement. Given the centrality of the Marine Corps and SOF presence to any future contingency or fight within the first island chain, any method of connecting their operations, activities, and investments should be seriously considered. Lastly, having 8999-CSOs serve in conventional Marine units would likely go far in dispelling any lingering negative perceptions of MARSOC and could raise awareness of MARSOC's capabilities and strategic value to the Marine Corps and the Joint Force.

Furthermore, the creation of the 8999-CSO hybrid would also provide unique advantages for the 8999 and 0372 communities. The 0372-CSOs who become 8999s would benefit from the diverse leadership opportunities, excellent mentorship, and considerable experience within the 8999 MOS. The

Conclusion

As with most complex problems, even the best solutions are not immune from critique. This Goldilocks Option described is no exception and its implementation would certainly involve further consideration and adaptation. For example, SOF career milestone timing and special pay realities associated with the 0372 MOS would have to be addressed. Absent a reasonable solution to these issues, an E7 CSO would be required to forgo the essential SOF career milestone of MSOT team chief and accept roughly \$1000 per month *pay reduction* in order to *promote* into the 8999 MOS. However, something like the creation of the 8999-CSO meets the criteria to be considered a viable Goldilocks Option and applies to other similarly situated MOS populations as well. It goes far enough with its recommended policy changes to address the unique senior enlisted leadership needs of the Marine Corps' special operations component without abandoning the

Notes

1. Feodor Rojankovsky, *The Three Bears* (New York: Random House, 1948).
2. Ibid.
3. Patrick CSM McCauley, "Value of a Civilian Education for Military Personnel," *Norwich Online Blog*, November 2, 2017, <https://blog.online.norwich.edu/value-of-a-civilian-education-for-military-personnel>.
4. Ibid.
5. Joseph H. Alexander, *Edson's Raiders: The 1st Marine Raider Battalion in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

>Author's Note: The views in this article are the author's alone and do not reflect the official views or position of the Marine Forces, Special Operations Command.

