

# Rifle Squad Leader Staffing

An in-stride after-action

by Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment

*It is clear our world is changing and becoming increasingly uncertain. Concurrently, and not without precedence, our institution is working to find its place in the ever-changing strategic landscape. With this quest, comes new warfighting concepts and ideas on how to fight and win in future battle. That said, there remain several constants imbedded in our institutional soul. First, our warfighting philosophy defined in MCDP 1 is enduring. Second, the Corps' Expeditionary and Naval character will remain our foundation. Moreover, our center of gravity, our strength, is and always will be our Sergeant. If the premise about the Sergeant is true, then we must invest in them and truly weight the main effort. If they are truly our bid for success, then we must invest now in their professionalization and equip them for the leadership tests they will encounter in both peace and war.*

—Col Kyle B. Ellison, CO, 7th Marine Regiment

In early 2018, the Integration Branch, Manpower Management Division, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) implemented the Squad Leader Managed Assignments in Support of Readiness for Training Employment & Exercise Plan (TEEP) deployments (SMART). The initial goal of SMART was to fully staff all rifle squad leader billets across four in-

fantry battalions with five- to seven-year school trained sergeants no later than one year prior to deployment. Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment (2/7) is one such battalion. Scheduled to deploy in support of Special Purpose MAGTF—Crisis Response—Central Command (SPMAGTF-CR-CC) in the fall of 2019, 2/7 received its sergeant squad leaders in the fall of 2018, most

of whom had completed the Infantry Small Unit Leaders Course (ISULC) and had earned the MOS of 0365, Infantry Small Unit Leader. The current rifle squad leader laydown for 2/7 is seventeen sergeants who have completed the ISULC, eight sergeants slated to attend ISULC prior to deployment, and two corporals who have completed the Advanced Infantry Marine Course (AIMC). Over 70 percent of these sergeants are on their second enlistment and will make the upcoming deployment to SPMAGTF-CR-CC. Consequently, statistics demonstrate that our leader-to-led ratio is greatly enhanced at that critical echelon of close combat,<sup>1</sup> which allows greater decentralization in execution while simultaneously reducing risk to mission and risk to force at the squad level. *Deliberately staffing our rifle squads with mature, second enlistment sergeant squad leaders has improved the battalion's overall readiness and lethality by allowing 2/7 to establish necessary training and education baselines, has significantly increased the maturity of our leaders, and has postured the battalion to better support the National Defense Strategy and concepts such as the Marine Corps' Force 2025.* This article seeks to highlight the background of SMART, capture the benefits 2/7 has reaped as a battalion due to the institutional focus on this critical shortfall over the past decade, and provide recommendations for the Ground Board as it continues to refine and implement this necessary change.

## SMART Background

In his May 2018 *Marine Corps Gazette* article, "Rifle Squad Leader Staff-

ing,” LtCol Jim Lively quoted then-Lt-Gen James N. Mattis when he stated, “The small unit leader will require skills and experiences that the average squad leader today does not possess.” This quote was from 2007, over a decade ago, and the infantry community has been studying the issue of staffing and training rifle squad leaders since.<sup>2</sup> With the level of technology and capabilities being leveraged on the rifle squad to increase its range and lethality, coupled with the increasing strategic impacts our small units now have and will have well into the future, the problem of youth in our squad leader billets has certainly been exacerbated. To mitigate the issue of inexperience, force generation, and manpower models historically unable to adapt to the training and deployment cycle of an infantry battalion, M&RA began developing the SMART program to staff battalions with its sergeant squad leaders one year prior to deployment.<sup>3</sup> The first priority for M&RA is to ultimately implement a series of policy changes to ensure that our rifle squads are consistently staffed with a mature, educated, and trained squad leader serving their second enlistment.<sup>4</sup>

### **Training our Small Unit Leaders**

We look at the rifle squad leader as our center of gravity and our rifle squads as our bid for success: the main effort of the infantry battalion. While an infantry battalion’s mission is to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver, the battalion really exists to leverage collections, command and control, and combined arms lethality to locate and impose its will upon the enemy, thus allowing the squad leader and the Marine rifle squad to do the closing and destroying. Battalions begin setting those conditions early in a training cycle by ruthlessly focusing on the training and development of their small unit leaders.

The May 2018 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette* featured an article titled “The Intimacy of the Last 100 Meters,” by Maj Kevin Fallon, et al. The authors argue that to be successful, battalions must develop small unit leaders who possess judgment, an immersive understanding of supported and sup-

porting relationships on the battlefield, and proficiency derived from deliberate and repetitive training in battle drills.<sup>5</sup> With a dwell time of eighteen months and deliberate staffing of experienced, second enlistment sergeant squad leaders, 2/7 had an opportunity to build a baseline of the above points during a three-week tactical small unit leaders course (TSULC), focused primarily on the development of its fire team leaders. While fire team leaders benefit from instructors such as platoon sergeants,

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platoon commanders, and the battalion gunner, the real value is in the mentorship, leadership, and instruction provided by experienced sergeant squad leaders—Marines who had recently occupied those team leader billets and now have the breadth and depth of experience, maturity, and knowledge to effectively train their team leaders. Without a population of seasoned sergeant squad leaders, units will find it difficult to fully maximize the value of TSULCs, create an experience of immersion in the art and science of small unit tactics, and foster the necessary cohesion and development that derives from such an enhanced leader-to-led ratio.

The preponderance of training a fire team leader receives is in the Operating Forces as part of the Marine rifle squad. As such, internal unit training is the primary way to train an organization’s fire team leaders. Experienced sergeants, not SNCOs and officers, are the champions of the initial baseline established with packages such as a TSULC and the subsequent repetitive grind of gaining mastery of battle drills through standardized repetition with increasing conditions. This is the epitome of a systems approach to training at the lowest level, and it is most efficient and

effective when a battalion has stability and predictability at the squad level. We must continue to reinforce the idea that our mature, second term sergeants are the backbone of the institution by building off the progress M&RA has made thus far. As an institution, we have an amazing opportunity to do right by our small units by ensuring they are consistently led by sergeants with the experience and maturity necessary to build a cohesive and resilient team that is able to withstand the violent crucible of close combat.

### **Stability and Predictability: Educating our Small Unit Leaders**

The prioritization of education and formal training for our enlisted Marines is not where it needs to be, especially for a force striving to make education and formal training a priority. Infantry battalions will always have competing interests and requirements that stand in the way of justifying the commitment to send a Marine to resident education and training. This is a part of the problem. The idea that formal education and training from advanced-level schools is not as important as doing well at the Integrated Training Exercise (ITX) or at a Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation (MCCRE) is short sighted and self-defeating. Formal education and training must be treated as an investment in both the Marine’s and the Marine Corps’ future; organizations must view themselves as stewards of the Marine’s growth and career. Stabilizing units at a 1:2 or even a 1:3 deployment to dwell ratio and sustaining the staffing of experienced, second enlistment sergeants in key squad leader billets will ease the issue of prioritizing training and operational tempo over educating our force.

The stabilization of our squad leaders a year out from deployment enables the battalion to send its untrained small unit leaders to requisite and valuable Advance Infantry Training Battalion and PME courses prior to conducting collective and Service-level training; this is a tremendous opportunity that must be capitalized upon, refined, and sustained long into the future. Anyone who has experienced what Gen Dun-

ford has called “the death spiral of an infantry battalion”<sup>6</sup> will appreciate the opportunities of a long dwell coupled with the early arrival of experienced small unit leaders. Of course, battalions still must deliberately make the education and formal training of their enlisted Marines a priority. If they do not, no manpower model or concept in the world is going to fix the problem. However, the work that M&RA has done to pave the way for creating early stability and predictability for battalions will certainly enable these essential efforts.

### The Value of Maturity

In his book, *Scales on War*, MG Robert Scales, USA(Ret), discusses the value of older Soldiers and Marines, stating, “The optimum age for a close-combat infantryman is between twenty-eight and thirty-two.” He goes on to say, “An older infantryman bonds better with his peers and traditionally acts more in concert with the group rather than as an individual when moving against an enemy.”<sup>7</sup> S.L.A. Marshall, in *Men Against Fire*, captures the fluidity and complexities that must be taken into account when leaders make decisions in combat, compared to the inability of training to truly replicate battlefield effects. He states:

Our training methods are conditioned by the ideal of automatic response. At the same time, our observation of the battlefield’s reality makes clear to us that we need men who can think through their situation and steel themselves for action according to the situation.<sup>8</sup>

Both authors recognized the institutional value of mature small unit leaders in combat, maturity through age in the case of *Scales on War*, and maturity through experience in *Men Against Fire*.

While the Marine Corps is not seeking to recruit thirty-year-old men and women to attend recruit training, what we are gaining through the SMART program is the necessary maturation of the squad leader billet. For years, the institution was forced to accept a high population of corporals and lance corporals staffing its rifle squad leader billets—these are corporals and lance

corporals on their first enlistment with less than 2.5 years of serving and deploying as squad leaders. This is not to take anything away from such Marines who have led squads with honor and courage through training and combat, but the fact is: maturity is a force multiplier. As a battalion, the average age of our corporals and below across the various infantry specialties is approximately twenty-one years.<sup>9</sup> Coupled with the idea that many of those corporals have historically been entrusted to serve as squad leaders, one can see that we are a young force and will continue to be into the foreseeable future. A sergeant with five to seven years of service has the experience and maturity necessary to truly serve as a mentor, role model, and even father figure to a squad of young Marines with significantly less experience, but who are required to close the last hundred meters just the same. As proof, and much closer in line with MG Scales’ point, the average age of 2/7’s sergeant squad leaders is twenty-six.<sup>10</sup> That maturity and experience at the squad leader level mitigates the relative lack of maturity and experience throughout the ranks and pays dividends during the battalion’s workup and, most importantly, when the Marine Corps truly starts conducting distributed operations.

### Support to the Global Operating Model

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) highlights the need to “Build a More Lethal Force,” and “Develop a lethal, agile, and resilient force posture and employment.” The forces referenced here are small units that are capable of operating independently and in complex environments as a joint, multi-national force. The NDS describes the global operating model, which illustrates how the joint force will fight across four “layers:” the contact, blunt, surge, and homeland. The Marine Corps is and will continue to operate in the contact layer—the layer “designed to help us compete more effectively below the level of armed conflict.”<sup>11</sup> This is a layer that will require persistent presence, while building capacity through enduring partnerships with allies. The February 2019 issue of the *Marine Corps*

*Gazette* featured an article titled “Not Yet Openly at War, But Still Mostly at Peace,” by LtCol Scott Cuomo, et al. The authors state:

This persistent engagement will afford our Corps the ability to leverage our maneuver warfare philosophy through the use of small, independent, and comprehensively lethal units.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of the organization of these units in the future, we will continue to call on them to operate in increasingly distributed environments and expect them to make tactical decisions with strategic implications in the contact layer. This has significant implications on our small units because for the past two decades, we have viewed distributed operations as a rifle squad on a patrol a few kilometers from its platoon patrol base, or a squad running an observation post five- to-six kilometers from its higher headquarters. Friendly and adversarial technology in the form of sensors, weapons, and communications are pushing our small units increasingly further apart over vast distances, making our way of conducting distributed operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan over the past two decades appear as close order drills. Mature and skilled sergeants, consistently present in our formations, are required to make this new way of conducting operations a reality.

Our battalion has seen myriad opportunities to operate in a manner that, while not completely replicating what we will see in the future, certainly lends credibility to the idea of putting our doctrine of trust and mission tactics to the test. We have sent two companies to the Mountain Warfare Training Center to serve as the adversary force for two separate Mountain Training Exercises, multiple companies to conduct deployed for training exercises aboard Camp Pendleton, and in the coming months, a company each to Alaska for a month and Singapore for three weeks for joint and multi-national training exercises. Additionally, we have executed a litany of live and non-live fire training events, most planned and executed by our sergeant squad leaders. We exploited these opportunities in part because of

our long workup, but the success our companies experienced during these exercises has in large part been a result of the leadership, professionalism, and proficiency of our mature, second enlistment sergeant squad leaders.

### Conclusion

As an institution, we have made strides to increase the lethality of our squads. From Secretary Mattis' Close Combat Lethality Task Force to the Commandant of the Marine Corps' Force 2025 concept, the Corps is committed to improving the recruitment, manning, training, and equipping of our Corps' small units. With capabilities such as small unmanned aerial systems, M27 Infantry Automatic Rifles, the Carl Gustav recoilless rifle, collaborative tablets, and a myriad of other capabilities and systems coming to our rifle squads to increase their lethality and range, we must continue to get the right people into these leadership positions. All too often, we see inexperienced and junior leaders in billets well outside their scope of proficiency and experience. Given our likely future role, the expectations of our squad leaders will continue to increase along with the threat and the environment. M&RA is on the right track with the SMART program. Based on our experience thus far, we are excited to see the outputs of the expansion of programs such as SMART that will allow additional infantry battalions to stabilize early and avoid the death spiral upon redeployment. As LtCol Lively stated,

The goal is a progressive approach to change what we can now, under existing authorities and policies, while simultaneously exploring costs, risks, and benefits to making deeper improvements.<sup>13</sup>

M&RA and the Ground Board have made tremendous progress thus far over eighteen months of focus and development. Just a year ago, less than twenty percent of all rifle squads were staffed with an ISULC-trained sergeant squad leader and less than half of all squads were even staffed with a sergeant. Those numbers are now up to thirty-four and sixty-two percent respectively.<sup>14</sup>

That is not the end of it. This is an institutional effort, and M&RA alone will not be able to solve the problem and sustain this structure. Organizations such as Marine Corps Recruiting Command and Training and Education Command must take a hard look at the potential opportunities that exist in the recruitment and training of our Nation's best as small unit leaders. M&RA and the Ground Board should seek to leverage opportunities that exist within other specialties. With more systems and capabilities being infused into our rifle squads, there is value in potentially transferring Marines with specialized skills into the infantry community, whether as small unit leaders or as systems operators. Infantry battalions that are serving as the test bed for this concept have an obligation to "lead up" by providing continuous feedback to our Service level-leaders to identify gaps and seek to ruthlessly exploit success along the way. The sky is the limit and the NDS has given us our marching orders. Our warfighting doctrine coupled with our assigned, Service level-missions demand capable, dynamic, dispersed small unit leaders who are able to analyze complex and often ambiguous problems and ruthlessly engage with a solution. This can only be accomplished with both a heavy investment in the training, education, and progression of our small units and assigning the correct Marines to those critical squad leader billets. Just as it always has been, our institutional center of gravity is the rifle squad leader. Success for the Marine Corps and the DOD—as a whole—rests on our ability as a Corps to invest fully in ensuring our rifle squads, our main effort and bid for success, are led by mature, quality, and trained second enlistment sergeants. As our Commandant has stated numerous times: we have to win.<sup>15</sup>

### Notes

1. The authors conducted a search on V27's command profile page to determine the average age of all 0311 corporals and below and the average age of all rifle squad leaders.

2. LtCol Jim Lively, "Rifle Squad Leader Staffing," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 2018).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Maj Kevin Fallon, "The Intimacy of the Last 100 Meters," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 2018).

6. Then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., explained the idea of the "death spiral" of an infantry battalion when discussing the effects of manpower rotations within battalions upon redeployment. Gen Joseph F. Dunford Jr., "Comments," (presentation, 2015 MCRC National Operations and Training Symposium, San Diego, CA: 2015).

7. MG Robert H. Scales, USA(Ret), *Robert H. Scales on War: The Future of America's Military at Risk*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016).

8. S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

9. The authors conducted a search on V27's command profile page to determine the average age of all 0311 corporals and below and the average age of all rifle squad leaders.

10. Ibid.

11. Department of Defense, *2018 National Defense Strategy*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

12. LtCol Scott Cuomo, et al., "Not Yet Openly at War, But Still Mostly at Peace." *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 2019).

13. LtCol Jim Lively, "Rifle Squad Leader Staffing," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 2018).

14. LtCol Lively provided squad leader staffing statistics to the authors via email.

15. Marines, *We Have to Win*, YouTube video, 2:05, (Online: September 2016), available at <https://www.youtube.com>.

