

A Call for Improvement

USMC infantry standards, career development, and education

by MSgt Marc J. Chaplin

The Marine Corps is shifting gears from fighting yesterday's battles toward preparing to fight in tomorrow's conflicts. This preparation includes training to combat peer adversaries with pacing capabilities using maneuver warfare doctrine and evolving tactics like distributed operations. It also includes incorporating new and emerging technologies that make the Marine Corps more capable, lethal, and expeditionary. The purpose of this article is to examine some areas where the infantry community can improve standards, career development, and education. The 38th Commandant asks in his *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (CPG), "What are we doing that we should be doing differently—a better way?" Standards, career development, and education are the basis of mission accomplishment and improving in these areas are vital to fight and win in any future operating environment.

The foundation of proficiency and performance begins with standards and that is where a disparity exists within the infantry community in comparison to other MOSs. To provide reference, the minimum required general technical (GT) score for 03XX MOSs is an 80; however, an 85 is required to be a fabric repair specialist and a 90 is required to be a postal clerk. The low minimum GT score has the potential to be detrimental to mission accomplishment as more critical thinking, decision making, and technical skills are required from infantry Marines at the individual and small unit levels. Squad systems operators are becoming organic members of infantry squads and are employing technologies like small unmanned aerial

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surveillance, communications gear, and electronic warfare equipment. Infantry Marines are also required to know how and when to communicate with higher and adjacent units in denied or degraded environments. The higher demand in critical thinking and capacity to employ more technical equipment should correlate to higher minimum GT scores required for the 03XX MOSs.

Another area where the infantry can improve standards is by enforcing the benchmarks of the MOS-specific physical standards in the Fleet Marine Force (FMF). These physical standards are especially critical in distributed operations where individuals are carrying more gear and squads are operating farther away from support. Higher standards will inevitably equate to lower numbers, consequently quality will be emphasized over quantity.

Career progression of many junior Marines takes them outside of the infantry community before they even get to the FMF. Infantry Marines are being assigned to fill Marine Security Guard watch-stander billets immediately after earning their MOSs at the School of Infantry. After a three year tour of duty, these Marines execute orders to victor units as corporals or sergeants with no sustainment or maturation of their training. By rank, these Marines are in position to hold team, section, or squad leader billets, but with no experience. A step toward professionalizing the infantry is to stop sending junior Marines directly to MSG duty without

having served in the FMF first. Sending Marines to the FMF right out of the School of Infantry allows for natural growth through experience and training. Sending infantry Marines to MSG duty and having them come to the FMF in position to fill leadership billets sets the expectation for them to lead without setting them up for success.

The infantry community has a large amount of attrition from top tier second-term Marines who leave the infantry community through requesting orders to independent duty stations, special duty assignments, or expiration of active service. Marines perceive they will be more competitive for promotion as drill instructors or on recruiting duty in comparison to combat instructor duty. Retaining the aforementioned Marines within the infantry as combat instructors is a way to improve the infantry. The first practice would be to keep these Marines in the FMF to lead sections or squads. This would place mature, top tier Marines in positions to lead, train, coach, and mentor junior Marines. Subsequently, this would create more proficient, capable, and lethal units that are better postured to operate independently and conduct distributed operations. The second option would be to assign these Marines to serve as combat instructors. The target audience for combat instructor duty would be those top tier Marines that want to leave the FMF but remain within the infantry community. They would serve as combat instructors at the Advanced Infantry Training Battalions, teaching and molding current and future leaders. Above recruiting and drill instructor duty, combat instructor duty should be

the premiere special duty assignment within a warfighting organization.

Nested within the infantry community are corresponding PME schools at the squad, section, small unit leader, infantry unit leader, and operations chief levels. These schools are designed to develop infantry leaders as they progress through the ranks and billets. Section and squad leaders attend MOS-specific advanced infantry training courses where they learn the technical and tactical aspects of how to doctrinally employ their sections or squads in synchronization with combined arms. The next school in the PME progression is the Infantry Small Unit Leaders Course where sergeants—primarily—of all infantry MOSs develop critical thinking skills at the tactical level. Platoon sergeants attend Infantry Unit Leaders Course as staff sergeants where they are trained to advise platoon commanders and as-

ment and refinement. The overall intent of the Marine Corps Tactical Operations Group is to enhance warfighting capability and operational readiness within the GCE.

The drawbacks of enlisted PME are not resident to the infantry community, they exist within general PME. Lance Corporal Seminar, Corporals Course, and all the schools encompassed within the SNCO Academy center on customs, courtesies, management, and administrations. These are all important factors in maintaining structure and administratively running the institution, but these factors do not aid in gaining or maintaining overmatch over the nation's adversaries. In the mid 2000's the Marine Corps granted waivers for infantry Marines from attending SNCO Academy PME courses as long as they attended their rank appropriate infantry PME course. Granting these waivers now would allow Marines to focus on

The Marine Corps invests a significant amount into training officers at all levels. Platoon commanders receive a more robust training package at the entry level through Infantry Officer Course compared to entry-level enlisted Marines at School of Infantry. Captains attend Expeditionary Warfare School or Maneuver Captains Career Course and field grade officers and above attend various top-level schools. Officers change duty stations to attend PME between assignments for approximately five to ten months. A similar type of model on the senior enlisted would narrow the gap between officer and enlisted PME, which can be accomplished by sending more master sergeants and master gunnery sergeants through SMC and/or by expanding PME within Training and Education Command.

The Marine Corps is in constant competition with known, unknown, and emerging threats to gain and maintain an advantage over:

As good as we are today, we will need to be even better tomorrow to maintain our warfighting overmatch. We will achieve this through the strength of our innovation, ingenuity, and willingness to continually adapt to and initiate change in the operating environment to affect the behavior of real-world pacing threats.¹

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sume the role of the commander in his absence. IULC's desired end state is to develop technical skills, tactical decision making, and leadership. Company-level operations chiefs attend Ground Combat Element Operations Specialists (GCEOS). GCEOS concentrates on an understanding of the functional responsibility of current and future operations. The areas of focus on the Marine Corps Planning Process, amphibious operations, information management, unit training management, and intelligence preparation of the battlespace. Advanced Maneuver Warfare Course resides at Marine Corps Tactical Operations Group and is designed for battalion level and higher operations chiefs. This course instills a maneuver warfare doctrine mindset, examines emerging concepts, and teaches training standard develop-

their warfighting mission and give them more time within the pre-deployment training cycle to train their Marines as a cohesive unit.

The Army offers a ten-month Sergeants Major Course (SMC) for their senior enlisted level PME. In comparison, IULC is ten weeks and focused at the tactical level, GCEOS and Advanced Maneuver Warfare Course are five weeks. SMC prepares senior enlisted leaders to elevate from the tactical level of thinking to an operational and strategic-level mindset. It is structured to prepare senior enlisted leadership for positions at the battalion, brigade, regiment, division, Service, and joint command levels. The Marine Corps currently sends a small number of senior enlisted Marines to SMC annually, but that number is limited due to manpower constraints and available seats.

Note

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

