

Infantry Squad Leaders

Increasing prestige to get the leader we need

by Capt Tommy Simonds

“Infantry squads have a distinct and unique role in the Joint Force. As such, infantry personnel and units require tailored manpower management policies and practices to achieve overmatch.”¹

—Secretary James Mattis

For too long, the principal fighting unit of the Service has been led by immature and inexperienced junior Marines because the Service has failed to professionalize the critical squad leader billet. The average infantry squad leaders were in high school or working at Starbucks three years earlier, and this life-or-death command is usually their first leadership position. Commandant Krulak noted the significance of the Strategic Corporal in 1999. In 2005, Commandant Hagee defined the future demands of the infantry squad leader.² In 2007, future Commandant Neller “argued that unless the Marine Corps commits to making a significant investment in the development of infantry squad leaders, it will never achieve its desired results.”³ Commandant Dunford introduced the Squad Leader Development Program to “address the current gaps in the NCO and SNCO leadership” and directed that the Service “would pioneer other initiatives to improve the experience and maturity of small-unit leaders.”⁴ “In 2018, then-Secretary of Defense Mattis established the first national organization intended solely to enhance the lethality of close-combat units,”⁵ the Close Combat Lethality Task Force, whose top line of effort is

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manpower policy to increase performance and retention of squad leaders. Gen Berger’s *Commandant’s Planning*

Guidance (CPG) states, “We cannot afford to retain outdated policies, doctrine, organizations, or force development strategies,”⁶ which pertains to squad leaders. If the squad leader truly wields decision-making capabilities with potentially strategic significance, as Gen Krulak states, the Service has done little to reward that responsibility. The leaders of our base units must be the best we can provide. To attract and retain the best squad leaders, the Service must increase the prestige of the billet by raising standards for the billet, upgrading the MOS itself, and instituting low-cost incentives.

The fight of tomorrow will be more challenging; the infantryman of tomorrow must be more capable. According to retired Army MG Robert Scales, “decisions formerly made by colonels



The need for highly trained, mature leaders at the infantry squad level has been clearly identified since the later 1990s. (Photo by SSgt Jamal Sutter.)

must be made by sergeants.”⁷ To attract and retain better squad leaders, we must enhance the billet’s *prestige*, which is the “widespread respect and admiration felt for someone or something on the basis of a perception of their achievements or quality.”⁸ The minimum general technical (GT) score required for 03XX accessions is a mere 80 (the same GT score required to be a squad leader).⁹ The standard for reconnaissance Marine, critical skills operator, and 75th Ranger Regiment operator (even a private) on the other hand is 105. If we want a more mentally agile squad leader tomorrow, we must eradicate the “dumb grunt” mindset today and show that we value our infantry by increasing the intellectual requirements for squad leaders to a GT of 105. This will be challenging because “the competition for intellectually competent young men and women is increasing with the advent of [cyber], and [the F-35], among other programs.”¹⁰ However, an infantryman who entered the Service with a standard GT score can easily re-test to meet the standard. Additionally, conventional science considers the average brain fully mature at age 25 for male and 21 for female.¹¹ Because age is a major factor in maturity, the Service should create an age requirement of 21 for squad leaders. This age represents a fully legal adult and would prevent squads from being led by teenagers. If the Service truly desires a more mature force, it must also reconsider the up-or-out model, which is connected to this issue but beyond the scope of this article. This will present the Service with a challenge, but it is a long-term investment designed for a game-changing performance enhancement in future generations. As the Commandant states, “Our manpower system was designed in the industrial era to produce mass, not quality.”¹² We must accept this burden today to outpace the enemy tomorrow.

Increased standards are the first step in a holistic plan. One area where the service can affect rapid changes is in its management of the squad leader billet and MOS. Squad Leader Development Program and the introduction of the 0365 MOS is a recognition of the issue and the way ahead to produce a

significantly better squad leader, which is a good first step. The next step is to establish 0365 as the *only* squad leader MOS and categorize it as a *critical* MOS. Currently, a Marine can be an 0311 or an 0365 sergeant and serve in the billet. This redundancy is confusing and erodes prestige. Still, even if all battalions *deployed* with all 0365 sergeant squad leaders, it would not be enough

manifestation is less important than the recognition and the prestige that will follow.

Along with the recognition worn on the uniform, the top squad leader in the Service should be recognized annually. An annual squad leader trophy should emulate the Leftwich and Hulbert trophies. The namesake should be a renown Marine infantry NCO. There is

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because—as then-Secretary Mattis stated in his *Directive-type Memorandum (DTM)-18-001*, “Infantry squads have a significant personnel turnover,” which has “negative impacts on unit training, cohesion, and small unit leadership.”¹³ Gen Berger recognizes that the current model “forces Marines to move out of skills they excel at in the name of developing them.”¹⁴ To reduce turnover and affect significant improvements in unit performance, the Service must provide this critical billet with Headquarters SDA Selection Team exemption until approximately year eight or nine. A singular, critical MOS will increase the prestige of the billet and aid the turnover problem.

There are other measures the Commandant can approve to increase the billet’s prestige. The Service can tangibly demonstrate how important the infantry squad leader is by authorizing a unique badge, breast insignia, or new billet insignia for wear on the uniform and by inaugurating an annual award for the top-performing squad leader. There is precedent for a breast insignia; the service recently authorized one for critical skills operators.¹⁵ Even the winning squad of a Division Super Squad Competition is authorized a special badge, and those are usually stacked squads with top Marines from a company, not organic squads. The most appropriate device for a squad leader is probably a gunner-like insignia worn on the left side of the uniform, while the sergeant insignia is worn on the right so that a new rank is not required. The

no shortage of legendary Marines from which to choose. This small, low-cost commitment will increase Service-wide awareness of these critical billet holders. Small tokens of the Service’s appreciation for superior service members are appropriate, especially for our young, frontline Marine leaders.

The Service certainly values squad leaders but has come up short in demonstrating it. These recommendations present certain challenges, and the greatest resistance will be against raising the standards for the billet. Many will argue it impossible to increase the age and GT requirements and still produce squad leaders, but there is no proof of that. The Marine Corps is the youngest Service by far in terms of average age, and “70–75 percent of the first-term infantrymen opt to leave the Marine Corps after four years.”¹⁶ There is a maturity and resilience epidemic: hazing, sexual assault, and suicide. We cannot afford to keep relying on immature people to lead our squads. Maturity must be prioritized.

While a single squad leader MOS may not receive much pushback, MOS exemption will. Manpower managers will cite the high demand for 0365 sergeants in the supporting establishment. Unfortunately, there exists a high demand for them in their *primary duty*. We must keep the main thing, the main thing. Service lethality must be a priority over supporting establishment efficiency; the Service will carry on just fine recruiting and training Marines without these particular sergeants. If there is

pushback on the creation of an insignia or device for our principle frontline leader, then the Service must not be very serious about retention, which flies in the face of the *CPG*. This low-cost retention tool should not be dismissed.

Gen Berger states in his *CPG* that he agrees with Commandant Neller's observation that the Service "is not organized, trained, equipped, or postured to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving future operating environment."¹⁷ His five focus areas have linkages to the squad leader billet shortfalls. The next battlefield may be on desolate islands in an expeditionary advanced base operations contest or in other hellish places, like Central African Republic, where nimble, tech-enabled proxy forces thwart our every move. The fight will require a more capable combat leader than our model produces. This is a clarion call to heed the counsel of generations of commandants, the Close Combat Lethality Task Force, and Commandant Berger. The Service cannot just give a squad leader better weapons and greater capabilities. As then-MajGen Mundy, et al. state in their article "Innovating to Meet the Uncertainly Ahead," "humans are more important than hardware."¹⁸ We must start with smarter, more mature squad leaders, then develop them on a singular path with critical status, and prove we value them through tangible benefits to retain them. Since World War II, infantrymen have suffered 90 percent of combat deaths.¹⁹ They deserve the best leadership possible so that we might bring that number down. It is time to enact changes so that we have combat leaders we need. The combined prestige of these measures will help get the Service closer to the goal.

Notes

1. James N. Mattis, *Directive-type Memorandum (DTM)-18-001, Establishment of the Close Combat Lethality Task Force (CCLTF)*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, March 2018).

2. Brandon N. Currie, "Preparing the Infantry Rifle Squad Leader to Succeed in the Future Operating Environment," (master's thesis, Marine Corps University, 2018).



Developing the best infantry squad leaders possible must include the right experience, selection, training, education, and also appropriate recognition and prestige. (Photo by LCpl Samuel Brusseau.)

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Robert H. Scales, "Tactical Art in Future Wars," *War on the Rocks*, (March 2019), available at <http://warontherocks.com>.

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

7. "Tactical Art in Future Wars."

8. *Lexico*, s.v. "Prestige," available at <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/prestige>.

9. "Preparing the Infantry Rifle Squad Leader to Succeed in the Future Operating Environment."

10. Ibid.

11. Staff, "Understanding the Teen Brain," *University of Rochester Medical School Health Encyclopedia*, (n.d.) available at <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu>.

12. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

13. *Directive-type Memorandum (DTM)-18-001*.

14. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

15. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 490/16: Marine Special Operators Breast Insignia*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

16. "Preparing the Infantry Rifle Squad Leader to Succeed in the Future Operating Environment."

17. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

18. Carl E. Mundy III, et al, "Innovating to Meet the Uncertainty Ahead," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: January 2018).

19. Daniel S. Roper, "Regaining Tactical Overmatch: The Close Combat Lethality Task Force," Institute of Land Warfare, Association of the United States Army, (April 2018), available at <http://www.ausa.org>.

