

Marine Student Naval Aviators

How to utilize their maximum potential

by 2ndLt Jack Whalen

The Marine Corps aviation community is trapped in a bleak “Catch-22” situation. Qualified company-grade aviators are leaving the Marine Corps at an alarming rate, consequently placing squadrons well-below readiness levels and contributing to pilot shortages across the Corps. The most logical response is to increase the throughput of students through introductory flight training, but the shortage of funding and experienced pilot instructors is causing extensive back-ups and waits in the aviation training pipeline. Senior leadership is thus faced with a difficult decision. They can choose to focus money and efforts on retention of skilled company-grade pilots in squadrons, or they can channel resources towards pushing junior lieutenants through flight training. Both choices involve large amounts of funding and will likely not show full effects for several years after implementation. In the interim before far-reaching policy decisions take full effect in 2023, the Marine Corps must act to alleviate the pressure of personnel shortages in operational squadrons by taking full advantage of the abundance of junior Marine second lieutenants awaiting introductory flight school training.

The Marine Corps is desperately attempting to ameliorate the mass departure of qualified aviators by offering large bonuses to officers who consent to remain in the Marine Corps. According to Shawn Snow, senior reporter for the *Marine Corps Times*, “Over the past two years the Corps has been dishing out lucrative bonuses to lure pilots into staying in the cockpits of Marine aircraft. The bonuses in fiscal 2018 were

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nearly \$40,000.”¹ Company-grade officers are leaving the Marine Corps at rates that are unsustainable and are causing massive shortages across all aviation platforms. Snow argues that primary reasons for this exodus in pilots are higher wages offered by commercial airlines as well as morale or family concerns that are “pulling factors.” These external factors are difficult for senior leadership to address as they are largely external to the Marine Corps and the scope of military policy.

However, Snow also highlights a lack of flight time as a primary “pushing factor” concern for these pilots. These “pushing factors” are internal to the Marine Corps and well within the grasp of senior leaders to identify and fix. This lack of flight time is usually attributed to either insufficient maintenance or understaffed squadrons. Capt Brent Kreckman, an active duty aviator, brings up a second “pushing factor” that he believes is infrequently discussed. Kreckman believes the Marine Corps is not focusing enough on “mismanagement of pilots due to unwritten rules of the aviation promotion system.”² He blames the shortage of pilots on the inherent and unintentional consequences that arise from a system that rewards pilots who obtain “optional” qualifications with command and promotions



Long delays in the pilot training “pipeline” are prompting many lieutenants to reconsider their aviation contracts. (Photo by Senior Airman Adam Shanks.)

opportunities. Thus, the qualifications have transformed into an unofficial prerequisite for command positions. Because these qualifications, specifically weapons tactics instructor, are difficult to obtain and available to a select few, otherwise qualified aviators quickly find themselves at dead ends in their careers.

The second major concern with regard to filling critical pilot shortages is that there is an overabundance of Marine Corps second lieutenants awaiting training for flight school because of large back-ups and lack of qualified aviation instructors. Lieutenants graduating The Basic School in Quantico are being notified that the current wait time will be seven months or longer. Gen Berger addresses this as a major concern in his planning guidance by stating the Marine Corps must focus on

continuously optimizing MOS production management to limit Marines awaiting training as much as possible, as well as ensuring that while they are waiting, there is a plan for using their time as constructively as possible—to include additional educational opportunities.³

As of Spring 2020, these opportunities are limited to individually oriented temporarily assigned duty with no established structure focused on maximizing the use of personnel. From the financial perspective, Marines awaiting



Marine Student Naval Aviators conduct a wide variety of exercises while awaiting training at NAS Pensacola. (Photo by Jason Bortz.)

expenditure of more than \$1.8 million for a single cohort of students over the course of the seven months of waiting. *Marine Corps Aviation Plan 2020* even identifies inefficient flight school wait times as a major concern indicating that “HQMC Aviation is leading an ongoing effort to maximize efficiencies in the pipeline and seek opportunities to increase throughput wherever possible, without compromising the quality of training.”⁴

“The initiative is clearly the preferred form of action because only through the initiative can we ultimately impose our will on the enemy.”⁵ For Marines designated as 7599 student naval aviators, they must come to terms with the difficult reality that they will spend years completing a training pipeline that, without wait-time factored in, takes twelve-nineteen months to complete. These Marines must rationalize the considerable amount of time before they will be able to employ their initiative in an operational capacity in the FMF. The Marine aviation community is unique among the four service branches in that it heavily emphasizes an officer’s role as a “Marine first and pilot second.” It is concerning that the Marines may continue to experience the loss of qualified pilot candidates who prefer to serve the Marine Corps with the certainty of leading as a ground officer in significantly shorter time.

Senior Marine leadership has been wrestling with this dilemma and is still waiting to see the results of decisions that have been made. According to Scott Maucione from the *Federal News Network* and Shawn Snow from *Marine Corps Times*, effects from policy adjustments will not begin showing until at least the year 2023.⁶ In the meantime, the Marine Corps can seek to maximize

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flight school training could pose an unnecessary expenditure for an already financially burdened force. For example, 58 student naval aviators graduated from The Basic Officer Course from Golf Company in 2019. Assuming each graduate is a second lieutenant making standard O-1 pay with standard Base Allowance for Housing, the Marine Corps will be spending \$4,600.00 per second lieutenant per month for a total

The aviation MOS may face additional, less tangible concerns because of long wait times. Competent lieutenants are opting to cancel their flight contracts in favor of ground contracts. For these Marines, cultivation of initiative and bias for action are heavily emphasized throughout training at The Basic School in preparation for assuming billets as platoon commanders soon after graduation. *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, affirms,

its officer employment in squadrons and cut down on financial excess through creative employment of second lieutenants awaiting training. As a means to cope with pilot shortages, the *Marine Corps Times* reports, “the Navy and the Corps took steps to ensure that deploying squadrons were fully staffed. Those steps included putting senior pilots in junior positions and increasing their deployment tempo.”⁷ This problem can be remediated by sending second lieutenants to fill base-level jobs and relieve company-grade officers to complete technical or more complex tasks. While second lieutenants awaiting flight school lack necessary qualifications to operate aircraft, they possess leadership skills, administrative responsibility, and decision-making authority that can make them desirable for tasking in undermanned aviation squadrons. Placing junior lieutenants in labor-intensive roles within the squadron could reduce the workload on qualified aviators to

free up their schedules for taking on highly desired flight hours. Snow from *Marine Corps Times* also blames maintenance setbacks, stating, “The Corps also has been trying to overhaul aircraft maintenance issues to keep more fighters in the sky and increase flight hours ... a big issue for many pilots who say they don’t get to fly enough.”⁸ Commanding officers can identify maintenance personnel shortages and task junior officers to help rebuild aircraft readiness rates to provide full combat readiness. Some student naval aviators could be enrolled in auxiliary air support MOS schools like Aircraft Maintenance Officer Course (58 training days), Air Support Control Officer Course (91 total training days), or Aviation Supply Officer Course (92 training days).⁹ Not only would this align with the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* to provide educational opportunities to Marines awaiting training, but it could allow for further flexibility in billet and

career options for pilots during future assignments. Such a proposal would provide an alternative career path to the pursuit of WTI, and other such high-demand qualifications that Capt Kreckman believes severely restricts officer advancement. Kreckman draws from the example in the Army aviation units,

an alternate track could be derived from Army Aviation in how they create a maintenance track and a tactical track for their aviators. Perhaps certain aviators are more apt at maintenance procedures and testing than they are at tactics and could fill the billets of AMO and Assistant AMO throughout the fleet.¹⁰

Instead of sending pilots to additional MOS schools after entry to a squadron when they could be flying desirable and much-needed flight hours, the Marine Corps should explore the feasibility of sending student naval aviators during the holding period before starting

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How can Student Naval Aviators be best employed by the Corps while awaiting training in the cockpit? (Photo by Senior Airman Adam Shanks.)

flight school. Even if the junior officers could not fill all personnel gaps, any form of assistance would likely free up schedules and improve quality of life for aviators, thus leading to increased retention for company-grade pilots. Junior lieutenants could gain valuable on-the-job training, leadership experience, and practice with administrative procedures that they would otherwise not be exposed to until reporting to a squadron more than two years after completion of The Basic School.

Placing junior Marine officers into active squadrons can have other, less measurable effects on unit effectiveness. In Capt Adolf von Schell's *Battle Leadership*, the World War I author makes an observation that experience from veteran, battle-trying fighters provided a very successful substitute for the formal schooling that inexperienced troops lacked. After receiving poorly trained troops in the beginning of the war, the author had integrated these troops into his ranks of experienced soldiers because of lack of a better alternative. Capt Von Schell observed, upon reflection on the Battle of Mazuria in 1915, that "[i]f we give these inexperienced troops a backbone of experienced soldiers and experienced commanders their efficiency will be tremendously increased."¹¹ Junior second lieutenants are the inexperienced

soldiers in this case. While these lieutenants would not be expected to serve in the same roles as qualified aviators, they could still serve alongside experienced officers in squadrons who could mentor the junior officers and provide useful guidance for the formative phase of an officer's career. While there will not be quantitative results from such an experiment, the experience would undoubtedly instill a deeper sense of pride and purpose among student naval aviators that could promote retention at the end of their contracts.

The Marine Corps' problem of retaining qualified pilots is a two-pronged challenge. In order to ensure the long-term readiness of aviation assets, the Corps must focus its experienced aviators and its student naval aviators awaiting training. Both populations can offer much to the Marine Corps, but they are falling through the cracks and not being employed to their fullest potential. While increased funding for bonuses and staffing the training pipelines may ease the pilot shortage over time, it will not fix the immediate shortage of personnel required to maintain readiness over the next three years. To ameliorate this issue, the Marine Corps can take advantage of the pool of second lieutenant student naval aviators awaiting training in flight school to staff key bil-

lets in squadrons, allowing qualified pilots to focus on flying aircraft and increasing readiness rates. At the worst, there would be no measurable effect on aircraft readiness and flight hours, but second lieutenants would be getting valuable experience in squadron operations and administrative duties. At the best, second lieutenants could fill critical personnel gaps and enable qualified aviators to improve unit readiness, allowing commands to focus on obtaining air dominance rather than struggle to catch up on maintenance demands and personnel shortages.

Notes

1. Shawn Snow, "Marine Aviation Bonus 'Take Rates' Are High, but Pilot Shortage Likely to Linger into 2023," *Marine Corps Times*, (December 2018), available at <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com>.
2. Brent Kreckman, "Here's Why the Marine Corps Is Losing Experienced Pilots—and What It Can Do to Fix It," *Task and Purpose*, (July 2019), available at <https://taskandpurpose.com>.
3. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *2019 Marine Corps Aviation Plan*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
6. "Marine Aviation Bonus 'Take Rates' Are High, but Pilot Shortage Likely to Linger into 2023."
7. Ibid
8. Ibid.
9. Staff, *Marine Officer MOS Assignment Handbook*, (Quantico, VA: The Basic School Camp Barrett, n.d.).
10. "Here's Why the Marine Corps Is Losing Experienced Pilots."
11. Adolf Von Schell, *Battle Leadership*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, 2017).

