

# Innovating to Meet the Uncertainty Ahead

**Older, wiser Marines; a SOF approach to shaping tomorrow's force**

by MajGen Carl E. Mundy III, Col Travis Homiak &  
LtCol Justin W. Dyal, USMC(Ret)

**N**ot only is the future uncertain, the dizzying pace of technological and social change ensures that the world will be increasingly complex as well. Conflict between states and other actors will continue to not only be the norm but also occur more frequently below the threshold of open war. The Marine Corps must innovate to succeed in the complex, ambiguous environment of the future. While all aspects of building future readiness are important, we believe this innovation must focus on the Corps' most precious commodity: the individual Marine. Raising the capability and increasing the experience and maturity of the individual Marine will yield a learning force suited to meet the nuanced yet high-stakes challenges inherent in what our Chairman has termed competition short of war.

Today, changes in the character of contemporary warfare present challenges to the way we operate. These same changes also offer an opportunity to innovate and remake the Marine Corps into what the Nation needs most at a time when the path toward the future is anything but clearly lit. Done correctly though, the Marine Corps will be poised to reaffirm its position as a pillar of our Nation's security.

Looking ahead into the future has always been difficult. Which of the myriad signals and trends that we are tracking points the way to the "next big thing?"<sup>1</sup> Though the future will remain uncertain until it is upon us, it

**>MajGen Mundy is the sixth and current Commander, Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command.**

**>>Col Homiak is currently the Assistant Chief of Staff, Plans, Policies, and Concepts (G-5), Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command.**

**>>>LtCol Dyal leads the futures effort with the G-5, Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command.**

is clear is that the world of tomorrow will be more complex than it is today. As MCIA's *Future Operating Environment* states:

the global trends of urbanization, identity conflict, environmental disruptions, and demographic shifts are being coupled with lethal, innovative, and widespread use of advanced technologies. This convergence is creating a chaotic and unstable future threat environment.<sup>2</sup>

Whether driven by the nature of personal interaction, technological change, or both, complexity will translate into risk for our Nation's leadership. The Marine Corps must be capable of mitigating this risk in order to maintain relevance. Failing this, the Marine Corps may find itself in a role preserved almost entirely for more "traditional" major combat operations. Although we must continue to train to win major combat operations, these only account for a fraction of our operational employment. We spend the vast majority of time in the appropriately named "steady state," a condition

that is neither wholly peace nor war. Trends seem to indicate that this "competition short of war" will become more pervasive as we go forward.<sup>3</sup> As a result, it is precisely in this area that the Marine Corps should look to increase its scope of potential employment.

The Marine Corps' ability to mitigate risk in competition short of major wars will be determined as much, if not more, by the individual Marine as it will be by any weapons systems or emerging technology. The more training, the more capability; and the more opportunities we provide our Marines and Sailors to gain experience, the more effective and better positioned our Corps will be to operate (and win) in the future. We can try to achieve this with our current force and its high percentage of first-term accessions by adapting current training paradigms. Or, we can change the game. The special operations community has a list of five SOF "truths" intended to guide its development and employment—most would seem very familiar to Marines.

The first of these is that “humans are more important than hardware.” Using the first truth as a guide, there are steps that the Marine Corps should consider to maximize the potential already inherent in today’s force to create a powerful capability for tomorrow and realize the vision of Force 2025.

### Breaking Free of Convention: Rethinking Up or Out

The Marine Corps’ overall “pyramid” is firmly rooted in a model based upon high first-term turnover and an aggressive “up-or-out” advancement model. This system has deep roots that go back to the mass mobilization model of World War II and the Cold War, in which the Marine Corps had to absorb and replace significant casualties during major combat operations. Despite the move to the all-volunteer force in the early 1980s, the Marine Corps retained this system with only slight changes. To this day, it remains the youngest Service in terms of the average age of the force. Over the past 30 years, the relative youth of our force has provided us energy, aggressiveness, and a bias for action. This model also pushes both officers and enlisted through key career milestones at a rapid, sometimes blistering, pace. The downside is that individuals often have little time to learn on the job and very rarely get to apply the lessons they do learn in the same billet at a later time. This rapid move through career gates can be a driver of EAS (expiration of active) attrition when talented Marines choose to end their active service rather than having to leave the operating forces for more career-oriented billets.<sup>4</sup>

The recent implementation of the Blended Retirement System is perhaps a chance to reconsider some parts of the up-or-out model. Looking at the new system as an opportunity may allow us to leverage retaining a portion of our most able young leaders and increase their operational utilization in billets in which they have already demonstrated proficiency.

The Blended Retirement System shatters the old paradigm in which a Marine was either a “first term” or a “career” Marine by allowing service



*The Corps has the opportunity to rethink career models. (Photo by LCpl Tojyea Matally.)*

members to leave with some level of vesture for service short of 20 years. This change presents the Marine Corps with a distinct opportunity to rethink its career models and actively seek a portion of junior enlisted leaders interested in another deployment but not necessarily in promotion or a career at that particular time.<sup>5</sup> There would be distinct value in having a slightly older, more experienced sergeant staying on as a squad leader.

This can be achieved through a competitive extension or specific reenlistment process for another deployment cycle. Our current system struggles mightily to fill all squad leaders’ and platoon sergeant-equivalent billets with their T/O ranks. Retaining highly qualified Marines to fill these would be a nod to the value the Marine Corps places on such leaders. This option also allows Marines to “pause” at a level that matches their known talents and interests rather than systemically pressuring them to get out or advancing them too quickly. Implementing this system might prompt a reevaluation of incentives, such as offering additional financial or other incentives for experience or key skills that are not exclusively linked to promotion.

Rethinking up or out also has several positive downstream effects, the foremost of which being that the age,

experience, and talent of junior leaders would begin to more closely align with the operational problem set and the level of political risk. As such a system took root, it would also likely reduce the annual recruiting burden as more talent was retained. This, in turn, would allow the Corps to be more selective on the personnel it recruits and would perhaps even bring in some elements of the Whole Marine approach that we will develop later in the article.

A reduction in the numbers of vacancies for NCO promotions would be a secondary effect as Marines elected to forego promotion and career advancement move in order to extend operational time.<sup>6</sup> Fewer open billets would introduce a heightened level of competition into the promotion process and should ultimately lead to more qualified candidates in key leadership billets. Such a move promises to have a net positive effect on the institution and the overall quality of its NCO leadership.

The combination of the preceding effects likely does much to empower NCOs and raise the overall effectiveness of units across the force. One of the key advantages that SOF enjoys is that its teams are populated not just by specially selected personnel but by individuals who are typically older and more experienced. Detaching from a wholesale up-or-out model would

bring a measure of that advantage into Marine Corps units. This concept so substantially breaks from longstanding policies and processes that implementation would require thoughtful planning across HQMC. Yet, it is really this area of increased human capital, based on maturity and experiential knowledge, that promises the greatest increase in operational effectiveness. Retaining more talent and reinvesting it at the ground level where operations are most impacted could be transformational for our Corps.

### Targeted Attributes for the Future: Whole Marine Approach

***“Those who build great organizations make sure they have the right people on the bus and the right people in the key seats before they figure out where to drive the bus. They always think first about who and then about what. When facing chaos and uncertainty, and you cannot possibly predict what’s coming around the corner, your best “strategy” is to have a busload of people who can adapt to and perform brilliantly no matter what comes next.”***

***—Jim Collins,  
Good to Great***

At its most basic, the Marine Corps is a people business—the Corps’ effectiveness ultimately comes down to its ability

to organize, train, and inspire those who fill its ranks. We have long recognized this and placed outsized efforts on the process of “transformation” and making Marines. Marine leaders are quick to note that the individual Marine is the critical capability and the force multiplier in most every situation. SOF has a similar focus on the importance of first finding the right individual through a selection process, as the first SOF truth demonstrates. This selection process looks for specific attributes within the individual that, if present, indicate an aptitude for special operations. Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command has a selection that is representative of this called the “Whole Marine” approach.

Over time, we have determined a set of attributes that will enable a Marine to excel across the range of special operations missions. Our selection process is simply a venue to assess the degree to which candidates possess those attributes. These range from predictable attributes such as physical ability and determination to more nuanced ones including adaptability, effective intelligence, and teamwork. Each attribute is linked to specific testing and/or performance data that enables it to be quantified and then compared to the results of other successful candidates. The unique combination of the ten attributes form a relative “shot group,” with some near the ideal “bullseye” and others perhaps landing in the outer rings. This pattern provides a “picture” of the candidate based on an ideal archetype and makes it possible for a board to determine where to accept risk and where an individual is a solid match for the required tasks.

The “Whole Marine” approach accepts that each Marine is unique and will have a distinct range of performance across all of the attributes. A candidate lacking in one attribute may be offset by strength in others. The Whole Marine approach is far more data driven and objective than many might assume at first glance. *Applying the Whole Marine approach to the larger Corps holds great potential and the promise of increasing the overall quality of our individual Marines and the effectiveness of our teams.*

We are not suggesting that our Corps needs to adopt an entirely new selection process or revamp existing board processes. Quite the contrary. This approach is much more about looking toward the future operating environment for cues as to which attributes will be required than incorporating a mechanism to consider those measures of the attributes in existing retention, promotion, and other selection boards. A hard-nosed look at the future suggests that Marines will need additional skills and attributes beyond those traditionally measured within the current Performance Evaluation System and board processes. Additive skills and attributes for Marines engaged in “competition short of war,” such as the ability to *think*, *adapt*, and *collaborate* with allies and partners, are weakly measured today, but they may make the difference between success and failure in the future.

Measuring these skills could be simply accommodated within current norms. One example would be to leverage the time spent in the existing Marine Corps education continuum. In contrast to the established practice of writing non-observed reports for schools and training courses, instructor staff would evaluate and rate students’ ability to think and collaborate. If these attributes are important, we are missing an opportunity to promote them within the force. Marines use many of these skills in educational venues as they interact with their classmate peers, yet they receive reports that are of little value other than to signify completion. The senior enlisted Marine at a staff academy or the faculty advisor at Marine Corps University is in a perfect position to render critical feedback about students in a setting that emphasizes soft skills.

Likewise, there are probably other attributes readily available to measure if the Corps sought a way to test for them and utilize the data as part of larger personnel and career processes. The answer lies in bringing additional and more meaningful data into the boardrooms. A board should be able to differentiate demonstrated performance as one vital piece of the decision from data which indicates attributes that may be increasingly important as a Marine advances.



**We can provide more training and rely on our first-term accessions, or we can change the game.** (Photo by LCpl Claire McIntire.)

A rigorous Whole Marine approach could substantially alter retention decisions for the better. A Marine with indicators of intelligence, judgment, and teamwork would reasonably be retained in preference to one who just happened upon the career planner sooner. Over time, the analysis of data from this approach would begin to correlate key attributes with success. At that point, these measures could be used to set retention goals. For example, the best proxy measure for effective intelligence, whatever that may be, could be used to set a baseline goal for retention. We would then accord Marines with the best scores for that attribute priority for available boat spaces.

### Structure for the Coming Problems

The challenges of tomorrow are unlikely to call for unilateral U.S. solutions and even less likely to routinely feature Marine forces acting alone as a “one Service” solution. As competition increases among adversarial nations, regional powers, and allies or partners short of war, there will be complex, chaotic challenges which require the Corps to be a part of a larger, more complex overall response. In such an environment, there will undoubtedly be a stark requirement for more SNCOs and officers than Marine structure

currently provides. To prepare now for these challenges, we should thoughtfully add officer and senior-enlisted structure over time.

The primary requirement is to have a ready force of seasoned, capable leaders able to influence and liaise across joint headquarters, interagency part-

---

***The primary requirement is to have a ready force of seasoned, capable leaders able to influence and liaise across joint headquarters, interagency partners, and partner-nation entities.***

---

ners, and partner-nation entities. The Marine Corps has been challenged to do this in recent years, in part because its leader-to-led ratio is larger than other Services—we simply do not have the same capacity as Service counterparts to source requirements for more senior Marines. We also tend to treat these increasingly predictable manpower requirements like a short-term problem or an unexpected surprise. As a result, we often struggle to staff operational elements and headquarters, the supporting establishment, and IA (individual augment) billets. There are numerous

future scenarios wherein the Marine LNO, observer, or IA is the decisive actor who plays an outsized role in the overall success of a national effort. Having the capacity to flex to these requirements in operations short of major combat demands an institutional investment in additional SNCO and officer end strength.

This investment does several things. Most apparently, it preserves the integrity of operational units against IA “taxes.” Creating a way to knowingly select, staff, and employ leaders against the myriad requirements that call for high-quality Marine leadership also shifts the perception of these assignments to one commensurate with their potential impact.

The increase in SNCOs and officers also introduces additional flexibility to become less primary MOS and more MAGTF oriented with respect to assignments and career development. It is equally important to place these officers against crises, problems, and regional assistance to build their expertise as practitioners in applying an expanding set of tools to environments outside of traditional Marine venues. Enhanced participation within a joint or inter-

agency construct has the further potential to create additional entry points for Marine capabilities and partnerships.

### Conclusion

The world is becoming more complex and the character of contemporary warfare continues to evolve. Today, competition short of war is a much more frequent occurrence than major combat operations; this will likely remain the case into the foreseeable future. Although the Marine Corps must continue to prepare for both eventualities, there are some organizational and procedural

changes that will make it more capable and more relevant overall, particularly in the steady state. One sure way to achieve this is to increase the ability of our human capital to perform and make decisions in the complex, uncertain, and politically charged situations that the future will bring. SOF has long recognized the necessity (and value) in carefully selecting and developing their human capital. This fact accounts, at least in part, for SOF's utilization in what we refer to as ODTAAC (Outside Declared Theaters of Active Armed Conflict) operating environments. One scholarly article on the rise of SOF in the modern era attributes their wide-ranging roles and abilities not only to training but more so to "the high quality of their recruits, intense process of selection, and years of dedicated service."<sup>7</sup>

Given its small size relative to the other Services, the Marine Corps can adopt elements of this approach as a great advantage. It can do so by modifying some of its manpower selection and retention processes with little risk to force or mission. The payoff promises to be a Marine Corps that is more capable of operating in that ambiguous swathe between peace and war—and better suited for either end.

Increasing the relative experience and judgment of the Marines that fill our ranks has been a regular topic, whether as an article within the *Gazette*, in the field over MREs, or as a formal agenda item within a general officers' symposium.<sup>8</sup> Like-minded initiatives such as the Squad Leader Development Program are steps in the right direction. That said, it is our current mass mobilization-oriented manpower model that is neither the most relevant nor the most applicable to the future operating environment. For some time already, the Marine Corps has found itself doing tasks that a generation ago would have been considered the purview of SOF.

We are not manpower experts and recognize that each proposal merits further analysis, particularly the costs associated with adopting any of them. However, we believe the Marine Corps stands to gain much with adjustments to how it manages its most precious asset—the individual Marine—and

to recast itself as a more capable, more relevant force. We can do this by gradually extending the age and increasing the experience of our Marines, while more carefully screening for attributes that portend success in the complex environments of the future, a fact that bears resemblance to historic special operations approaches to individual selection.

#### Notes

1. Richard Danzig, *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions about Prediction and National Security*, (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2011).

2. Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, *2015–2025 Future Operating Environment: Implications for Marines, 2016 Update*, (Quantico: MCIA, September 2016).

3. Ibid.

4. This statement is admittedly somewhat anecdotal, but it is backstopped by discussions with occupational field sponsors, MOS monitors, commanders, and executive officers. All of these individuals identified a highly talented portion of the population who EAS rather than move to a "B" billet. What remains unknown is this population's size and percentage spread across occupational specialties. Second, it is difficult to quantify the specific motivation of Marines choosing to EAS. The manpower system builds attrition into its models and doesn't necessarily account for the quality of those leaving or their specific reasons for doing so.

5. The Blended Retirement System frees both the Service and the individual Marine from having to view enlistment as a binary choice between a single term or the pursuit of a 20-year career. Multiple "off ramps" now exist. Experienced individuals who are comfortable where they are and wish to continue "in place" can stay, serve, and delay "career" decisions while accruing benefits. HQMC can explore other incentives to further "decouple" financial incentives from advancement. Although implementing these measures on a broad scale would require reevaluation of career paths and overall incentives, HQMC could test the feasibility and attractiveness of this incentive on a limited population such as infantry squad leaders and platoon sergeants without undue risk to current manpower/retention norms.

6. Service-wide structure for a given rank is relatively fixed, with promotions synchronized to vacancies at a macro-scale. Given a population of "extended" squad leaders—comprising individuals who would have otherwise EAS'd—there would be fewer structure spaces in which to promote. How much of an effect this would have on promotion rates depends on the number of Marines seeking to participate in this concept; and how M&RA subsequently chooses to model promotions.

7. Eitan Shamir and Eyal Ben-Ari, "The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, (Online: August 2016), available at [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com).

8. A notable example is Maj Carl Forsling, USMC(Ret), "Investing in Marines," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Online: May 2017), available at <https://www.mca-marines.org>.



**MARINE CORPS Gazette** Professional Journal of U.S. Marines  
**Leatherneck** MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES  
**DOWNLOAD OUR APP TODAY**  
 FIND IT IN THE APPLE APP STORE AND IN GOOGLE PLAY

