

With the New Breed

**Transforming the 8059 Aviation Acquisition Officer Corps
to best support *Force Design 2030***

by LtCols Jay Zarra & A. Jack Ramthun

In order for the Marine Corps to rapidly deliver high performing aviation-related weapons systems to the Fleet Marine Forces, in 2004, the Commandant introduced a new MOS: 8059, Aviation Acquisition Management Professional. The Commandant charged this newly formed cadre of acquisition officers to effectively lead and manage critical aircraft programs from initial requirements generation to demilitarization. Today, approximately 50 total 8059 qualified Marines directly supervise \$12 billion dollars' worth of Marine Corps aviation aggregated assets and annual budget funds, or on average, \$240 million dollars managed per 8059; in terms of magnitude, this level of fiscal responsibility represents 26 percent of the total fiscal year 2021 (FY21) annual fully funded Marine Corps budget. Additionally, since the inception of this small group of talented program managers, the overall portfolio of Marine aviation assets and technological capabilities continues to greatly expand in scale, scope, and design complexity. Yet, sixteen years since establishment, the force design of the Marine aviation acquisition officer corps has remained relatively unchanged. This condition represents a source of increasing risk to the Marine Corps, where the legacy structure, size, and capabilities of the 8059 professional community may fail to adequately fit and support the increasing number and complexity of future aircraft program management requirements. As a result, a growing gap in both aviation acquisitions total number of personnel and depth of diverse professional acumen threatens to slow the development and delivery pace of critical capabilities in support of *Force Design 2030*, (Washington,

>LtCol Zarra is a F-35 Lightning II Test Pilot, Aviation Acquisition Officer, and serves as the F-35 Flight Test Director at Air Test and Evaluation Squadron 23, NAS Patuxent River, MD.

>>LtCol Ramthun is an AV-8B Harrier Pilot, Aviation Acquisition Officer, and serves as Secretary of Defense Executive Fellow at Shell Oil in Houston, TX.



LCpl Turner, a plane captain with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 122, conducts a pre-flight check on an F-35B Lightning II at MCAS Yuma, AZ. (Photo by Cpl Nicole Rogge.)

DC: HQMC, March 2020) and the Marine Corps warfighter.

To address this challenge, the Marine Corps should make three critical changes to transform 8059 force design. First, “formalize a framework” for new careers and associated development paths in aviation acquisitions, with multiple entry points and structured transitions for both 75XX MOS junior grade officers and various types of aviation-related, non-75XX MOS personnel to join the aviation acquisition force. Second, “right-size the population” by

increasing aviation acquisition force structure to secure depth and experience to meet all present and future Marine, Joint service, and PME aviation acquisition assignment requirements. Finally, “sharpen the saw” by increasing the number and type of diverse external career development opportunities to professionally develop and mature the 8059 cadre to “best in class” standards. These proposed force design innovations will enable the aviation acquisition community to better support the Nation’s naval expeditionary force-in-

readiness during the coming period of intense force modernization.

Formalize a Framework

The present aviation acquisition officer career development framework (see Figure 1) is unable to meet professional development and 8059 accession requirements. Finding and ultimately transitioning appropriate 75XX MOS individuals to a new primary MOS of 8059 has proven very difficult, yielding inconsistent results. Because of the timing and nature of traditional unrestricted officer career paths, few Marines meet the minimum statutory Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act training and education prerequisites to be eligible for 8059 transition. For example, FY20 8059 transition board selection criteria excludes all officers lacking 36 total months of acquisition experience, with no credit provided for acceptable graduate education, such as officers possessing related Naval Post Graduate School education or Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduate degrees. As a result, 75 percent of all 8059 MOS accessions originate from the test and evaluation field because of the opportunity to accrue acquisition career time while serving as test aircrew. Further, 100 percent of all 8059 officers transition from the 75XX MOS (Pilot or Naval Flight Officer). Only in FY20 did the Marine Corps begin accepting applicants with a 7315 Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) MOS; at present, 6002 MOS Aircraft Maintenance Officers and 6602 MOS Aviation Supply Officers are excluded from transitioning to the 8059 MOS.

This overly exclusive 8059 selection criteria has unintentionally created two primary problems for the MOS. First, the lack of inclusion greatly limits the number of talented Marine Corps officers making up the potential aviation acquisition professional transition population. Thus, previous 8059 selection boards have missed accession targets because of a lack of total viable candidates, creating gaps in 8059 staffing as a result of inadequate availability of aviation acquisition officers to meet structure requirements. Second, the exclusivity of the 8059 board drives

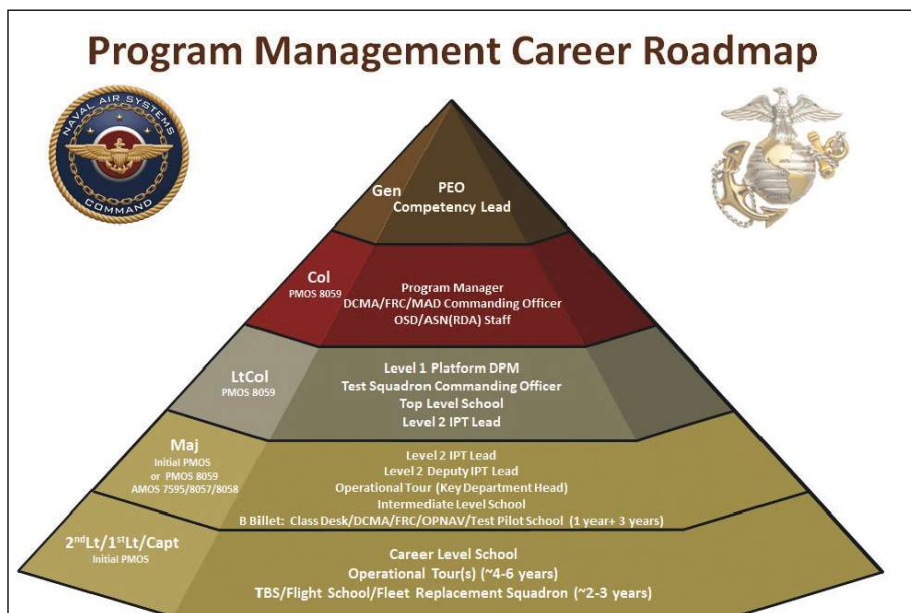


Figure 1. Present Marine Corps Aviation Acquisition Officer Career Development framework.

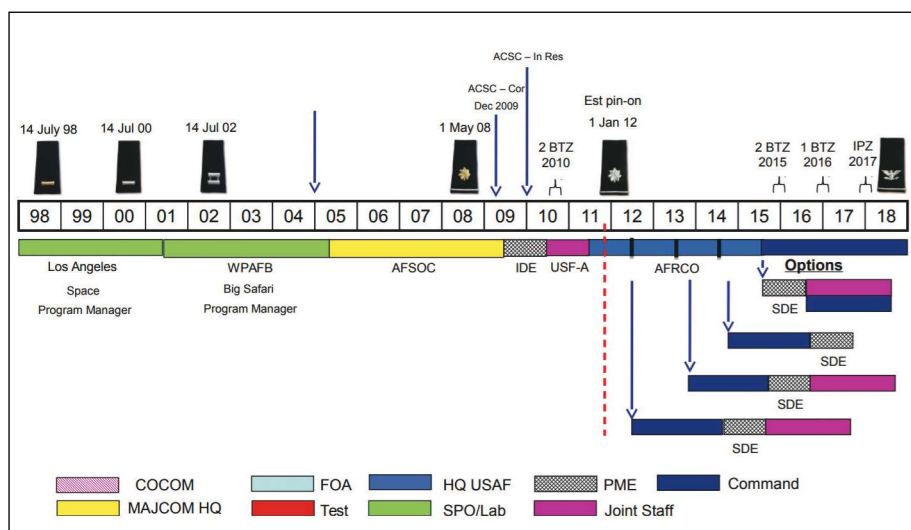


Figure 2. Example of a generic Air Force Acquisition Officer career path.

selections based solely on career paths and milestone events, rather than appropriate overall acquisition experience and business acumen. The phenomenon creates a gap in depth of talent and experience, leading to a less diverse aviation acquisition force and unfit to succeed in critical program management billets. These two problems cumulatively contribute the most to increasing human talent performance risk for the 8059 community.

For developing and implementing risk-reduction solutions, the Marine

Corps has an opportunity to benchmark and reform the 8059 profession by leveraging the best practices of other Service acquisition communities. Specifically, the Marine Corps should closely examine the successful Air Force acquisition officer career model (see Figure 2) for external inputs to innovate a new Marine Corps aviation acquisition career path framework. For example, the Air Force introduces acquisition-related billets to officers early in their career paths. The Marine Corps can leverage this practice to create earlier entry

points into the aviation acquisition field while still ensuring junior officers accrue requisite operational experience; in this case, the Marine Corps would onboard officers directly following their first fleet tour, with placement in one- or two-year entry-level 8057 MOS program management billets. The path preserves operational experience and provides early acquisition career exposure, accumulating valuable career acquisition time outside of traditional flight test entry points; these captain-level officers may then return to the Fleet Marine Force to pursue department head tour opportunities and later rejoin the aviation acquisition field as an experienced major or lieutenant colonel assessed 8059. These new early entry points will increase the annual number of 8059 accession candidates and speed the maturation pace of acquisition officer development.

Additionally, the Air Force does not require officers to be qualified aircrew to serve in key aviation-related program management billets. Rather, their career path model enables all officers, regardless of original MOS, to leverage diverse career opportunities and obtain depth of experience to perform at high levels in any program type; at present, several Air Force General Officers, without pilot or aircrew ratings, serving in program executive officer billets supervising major aviation weapon systems. This characteristic of the Air Force's structured path of development for program managers ensures the best officers—those with the optimal balance of experience, education, acumen, and training—are available to meet their force design requirements with maximum flexibility.

The Marine Corps should consider adopting a similar accession model for aviation acquisition management professionals, creating new entry points into the 8059 field for 6002 and 6602 MOS qualified officers. Similar to the revised early onboarding career model proposed for 8059 development, 6002 and 6602 Marines could serve in acquisition billets post first fleet tour, accruing program office type of acquisition billet time and experience; this would enable them to more effectively understand and navigate the Marine Corps aviation



Marines with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 163 (Reinforced), 11th MEU lift an RQ-21A Blackjack UAS onto a launcher before flight operations aboard the amphibious transport dock ship USS John P. Murtha (LPD 26). (Photo by Adam Dublinske.)

acquisition strategy at the tactical level upon return to the Fleet Marine Force for department head duty. At present, these talented non-aviators often serve in aviation acquisition-related organizations during shore tours, to include, but not limited to: Fleet Readiness Centers, Naval Supply Systems Command Weapons Systems Support, Defense

Logistics Agency Aviation, etc. The business acumen accumulated during these tours is immensely valuable for acquisition officer duty; similar acumen could be augmented with later service in a traditional aviation program office. By exposing 6002 and 6602 qualified officers to acquisition billets early in their careers, they would act as prime



Marines with Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadron One prepare to launch an RQ-21A Blackjack UAS in support of Weapons and Tactics Instructor course 2-19 at Canon Air Defense Complex in Yuma, AZ. (Photo by LCpl Auburne Johnson.)

candidates to compete for 8059 accessions, effectively increasing the size of the overall selection pool and permanently bringing diverse business skills to the aviation acquisition community.

Right Size the Population

Like many MOS staffing challenges found across Marine Corps aviation today, the 8059 MOS suffers from a lack of depth. Senior executive decisions to perpetually extend legacy aircraft programs well beyond their initial out of service dates have not aligned with 8059 personnel structure requirements; as a result, inadequate structure presently exists to support all Marine Corps aviation programs, as it was assumed many legacy programs would have already ceased to exist. This issue, combined with the previously stated 8059 selection population exclusion phenomena, have severely limited the number of 8059s selected annually and has created several negative consequences. First, given legacy Marine Corps aviation has suffered from a readiness crisis for some time and requires 8059 acumen for resolution, the Marine Corps accepts risk by gapping other structured 8059 billets in order to staff unstructured legacy program office billets with 8059s. Second, the limited selection population has created a significant 8059 peer group gap. The 8059 MOS presently lacks an adequate number of lieutenant colonels to promote into future colonel required Acquisition Category I aviation programs over the next four years (projected thirteen colonels to cover twenty critical colonel 8059 billet requirements), to include those supporting *Force Design 2030*'s robust UAS vision; as a result, our most critical and complex aviation platforms will lack direct Marine Corps advocacy, oversight, and leadership. Finally, the lack of MOS depth prevents 8059s from taking advantage of tremendous professional career development and enhancement opportunities, such as joint acquisition billets, external and industry fellowships, and top-level school. By not exposing 8059s to these types of transformative assignments, we fail to prepare and create diverse and business savvy talent for placement in



The Commandant and members of the 2dMarDiv and MAGTF-TC staff land in an MV-22 Osprey at Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, CA. (Photo by GySgt Leon Branchaud.)

The 8059 MOS presently lacks an adequate number of lieutenant colonels to promote into future colonel required Acquisition Category I aviation programs over the next four years ...

billets of critical program management importance.

In order to best support the Commandant's future vision of *Force Design 2030*, the Marine Corps must strategically right-size the 8059 MOS population. First, the Marine Corps should immediately increase 8059 structure to cover all present aviation acquisition billet requirements. This enables the 8059 community to avoid gapping billets and plan for selecting consistent and predictable 8059 accession peer groups. Though it may take two years to transi-



MV-22s with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 265 (reinforced), assigned to the 31st MEU delivers equipment to Marines with BLT, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, near Kagoshima, Japan. (Photo by Sgt Audrey Rampton.)

tion enough 8059s to source and staff the new structure requirements, the change sets the initial conditions to achieve depth in personnel; without this action, depth may go perpetually unrealized. Second, the Marine Corps should add new 8059 structure now to support emerging *Force Design 2030* program management requirements. This enables the Marine Corps to capture 8059 talent now, affording time to develop and mature appropriately to adequately fill critical program management leadership billets associated with heavy UAS development and procurement efforts scheduled early in this decade. This action also prevents a repeat of history, where 8059 structure fails to cover transitioning and emerging billet requirements. Finally, the Marine Corps should ensure enough structure exists to rotate 8059s into PME assignments without causing staffing gaps at traditional program office sites. Presently, the 75XX community often fails to send talented officers to Service schools and exchange tours because of poor MOS depth, rightfully prioritizing fills to operational billets over shore opportunities. This reactive-staffing policy stunts professional growth, reduces career competitiveness, and negatively impacts



Gen David H. Berger, Commandant of the Marine Corps, speaks to Marines and Sailors during a town hall while visiting Bahrain. (Photo by Sgt Olivia G. Knapp.)

on external assignment development opportunities. Presently, the Marine Corps relies upon Defense Acquisition University training and Naval Air Systems Command internal “on-the-job-training” experiences to further develop 8059 qualified officers. Along the present 8059 career path, Marine aviation acquisition officers are rarely

program exists to send talented 8059s to receive graduate MBA education at world class United States academic institutions. Lack of planned external exposure increases performance risk for 8059s, where they may unintentionally be programed simply to operate as “soda straw view officers” vice “well-rounded business and acquisition professionals.”

To be successful in senior military program management billets, aviation acquisition officers must be masters of strategy, risk, innovation, critical thinking, mission alignment, and relationship management.

job satisfaction for aircrew. The 8059 community is not immune to these negative consequences and should be afforded adequate structure to ensure PME career development opportunities are available to our best and brightest aviation acquisition officers.

Sharpen the Saw

With a new career path framework in place and adequate personnel structure established, the Marine Corps must then leverage 8059 depth to transform and enhance present acquisition professional acumen, with an emphasis

exposed to external development billet assignments. For example, over the past five years, only two 8059s were board selected to attend resident top-level school at the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy, the premier DOD graduate acquisition executive education institution. During the same period, only two 8059s were board selected to serve as Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency Service Chiefs’ Fellows: the leading program for agile and rapid acquisitions practices. Also, unlike our peer Services, no present

To be successful in senior military program management billets, aviation acquisition officers must be masters of strategy, risk, innovation, critical thinking, mission alignment, and relationship management. Further, they must both mentor and challenge subordinates and protégées to learn and revolutionize in these key skill areas. External assignments afford 8059s the ability to both learn in the context of other successful organizations and exercise their unique experiences to transform stagnant vision and group think back into parent aviation acquisition commands. To stimulate this type of graduate transformation, the Marine Corps should further develop and mandate 8059 participation in external acquisition opportunities, such as resident top-level schools, advanced external degree paths (i.e., MBAs), corporate and industry fellowships, senior government executive exposure fellowships, acquisition exchange tours (U.S. and allied militaries), and

joint program office types of experiences outside of Marine Corps aviation (i.e., United States Space Force). These external institutions maintain a strong appetite to welcome our most talented Marine Corps aviation acquisition officers into their organizations. An opportunity exists now to increase involvement in these external partnerships, to include bringing in their most outstanding personnel to operate inside our Marine Corps aviation program office—further increasing the pace of positive transformation across the aviation enterprise. Also acting as career enhancing incentives to retain top 8059 talent, these unique experiential opportunities ultimately enable officers to learn and grow outside of Naval Air Systems Command, quickly returning to apply new perspectives and best practices to achieve success in the face of the increasingly complex challenges in *Force Design 2030*.

Conclusion

The 8059 Aviation Acquisition Management Professional MOS represents a critical leadership and management element to the success of Marine Corps aviation programs. After nearly sixteen years of tenure, the 8059 MOS has not

**... increase involvement
in these external partnerships ...**

transformed at a pace commensurate with changes found in the U.S. military's wider acquisition field. Failure to transform the 8059 MOS now may lead to a lack of the business and acquisition talent required to successfully represent Marine Corps interests, ultimately resulting in negative consequences to "warfighting" capabilities during a

period of intense force design change to counter a complex near-peer threat. The introduction of *Force Design 2030* presents a timely opportunity to innovate and change the 8059 community to align with new priorities and future challenges. Changes to the 8059 career path framework, personnel staffing structure, and access to external professional development opportunities represent key institutional enhancements to ensure future generations of aviation acquisition professionals deliver high performing warfighting products on time and at an affordable cost.



UNCOMMON VALOR

AMONG THE MARINES AND THEIR FAMILIES, UNCOMMON VALOR IS A COMMON VIRTUE

Your STRENGTH and TENACITY define our military might.

www.commissaries.com

COMMISSARY

MP20132