

Recruited to Lead

Some can be squad leaders now

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At this point, a majority of Marine leaders have read concepts, articles, and studies regarding what we are expected to face on the next battlefield. The leveraging of off-the-shelf technology by our enemies, the connected network being developed by our military, and the distributed nature in which the Marine Corps is expected to operate will continue to dramatically change the character of war. Because of these factors, the *Marine Corps Operating Concept* has highlighted as a critical task, “Exploit the Competence of the Individual Marine.”¹ Filling our organization with the best and most capable Marines to lead on the next battlefield will require a paradigm shift as to who and how we recruit. More specifically, the infantry squad leader will be a critical billet as we execute tomorrow’s mission on a battlefield where maturity, strength, endurance, and the ability to think creatively will

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be mandatory traits for these combat leaders. The infantry squad leader of the immediate future will be the decision maker on the battlefield making the most impact. To ensure that we are filling these leadership positions with the best qualified, we must exploit the American talent pool and identify those who are ready to be recruited and become squad leaders now.

The Squad Leader We Need

Our squad leaders have always had the challenging task of training twelve other Marines for combat. Leading them physically during morning PT, teaching classes, facilitating discussions, and being their counselor are just some of the things that we expect from our squad leaders. This involves daily preparation and a soundness of mind and body above the standards of their Marines. The expectation is that every day they will provide what is needed regardless of the adversity they may face. This takes a consistent work ethic that has been solidified by habit and remains unwavering.

Our squad leaders must be effective communicators. Delivering an order to their squad that may not be the most popular takes the rare ability to “sell” a plan wholeheartedly and execute it. If the Marines sense any doubt in their leader, a cancer will spread throughout the unit and will be extremely difficult to cure.

The Marines of today need leaders who are not only capable of leading them on a live fire range but also capable of shaping them as moral leaders. The battlefield is going to require the type of Marine capable of killing efficiently and



The squad leader will be the decision maker on the battlefield who has the most impact. (Photo provided by author.)

continuously while maintaining poise and the moral high ground throughout that stress-filled action. The type of squad leader we need is not afraid to stand alone on a decision because he knows it is the right decision, is not afraid to confront Marines, and has the moral courage to correct his Marines and make tough decisions routinely. Ultimately, the Marine Corps requires a squad leader who can make twelve Marines bend to his will.

We make it difficult for many of our Marines to transition into the squad leader role. More often than not, they are simply promoted and expected to lead the very Marines with whom they were peers. Moreover, many of our squad leaders are extremely young (20 to 22) and have not had enough time to reflect on their leadership. When we ask these young leaders to come from within the ranks at the rate at which we do, we compromise their ability to set strong expectations, enforce discipline, and make decisions with the greater impact in mind.

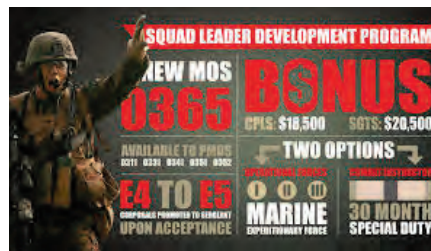
The American Talent Pool

The U.S. Census Bureau reported a population of over 20,000,000 Americans between the ages of 25 to 29.² Far removed from high school, this population group has likely faced some form of adversity—whether it is, say, attending higher education, finding and maintaining a job, or caring for a spouse and children. These very challenges build character and maturity. Those who succeed in this population group are more likely to have traits that are necessary for successful squad leaders: a consistent work ethic, the ability to communicate effectively, leadership, and judgment.

The challenge behind recruiting these potential leaders has to do with the private salary/rank, responsibilities, and roles which we offer them. It still remains true that the type of American who would want to join the Marine Corps infantry is a special individual with service at the forefront of his mind. Unfortunately, the pragmatic, thinking individual with bills and responsibilities is not likely to come running to the recruiting office for the salary, benefits,

and challenges that we currently provide him.

However, a 25-year-old who has worked the last six years of his life consistently and displayed the skills required for leadership should walk through the mall and see an advertisement asking, “Do you have what it takes to be a rifle squad leader?” We are likely to attract those who have overcome leadership challenges and always had the desire to join the Service, those who were successful displaying leadership as a civilian, had a prolonged commitment to work and/or education, and are old enough to have developed confidence



The SLDP. (Photo provided by author.)

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within themselves. Upon contacting a recruiter, there should be a list of attributes that the Marine Corps is looking for, to include:

- *Proven leadership capabilities.* This can come from extensive work experience or a mixture of high school, college, and work experience where the prospect has displayed leadership skills.
- *Maturity.* Marines need to be led by exceptionally mature leaders who have a wisdom that transcends the junior ranks. Our Commandant has been adamant about maturing the force. If maturing the force is a goal that can be reached in a myriad of ways, we should realize that recruiting ma-

turity is a way. According to research done by psychiatrist Beatriz Luna from the Pittsburg School of Medicine, the age that people cross into adulthood is “probably closer to 25.”³

- *Physical fitness.* These leaders have to be physically tough with the ability to set the example for their Marines. It should be required that every squad leader achieve a first-class PFT and CFT.
- *Cognitive fitness.* These squad leader prospects (SLPs) must display the ability to think critically and possess an appetite to learn. Our infantry has consistently required the lowest of GT scores to enter its ranks. It is time to raise these standards. SLPs would have to attain a 100 GT score because of the level of independent operating we expect from them on the future battlefield.

Training Pipeline

Once an SLP is identified and successfully completes the initial recruitment phase, he would then go on to a six-week leadership-screening course at the Officer Candidates School (OCS) in Quantico, VA to further confirm his ability to lead. The OCS mission statement states exactly what we want done for future squad leaders:

to educate and train officer candidates in Marine Corps knowledge and skills within a controlled, *challenging, and chaotic environment* [in order to] evaluate and *screen* individuals for the *leadership, moral, mental, and physical qualities* required for commissioning as a Marine Corps officer.⁴ (Emphasis added.)

It would be vital that we screen SLPs before we can entrust them with making difficult decisions in a challenging environment. It is even more critical that we screen these potential leaders to ensure they possess the moral qualities necessary to lead during a combat operation. While the recruiting depots do a phenomenal job transforming mostly young civilians into committed Marines, its focus is not on creating *leaders*. The recruit depot mission states:

We make Marines by recruiting quality young men and women and transforming them through the foundations

of rigorous basic training, our shared legacy, and a commitment to our core values, preparing them to win our nation's battles in service to the country.⁵

The differences between OCS and the recruit depot mission statements highlight that the former focuses on leadership in the physical, mental, and moral domains. Leaders who can lead physically, mentally, and morally will become even more of a requirement as the world becomes more complex and hostile. Once this screening is conducted, only the most capable of SLPs will have made it through the training and on to the next phase.

Upon completion of OCS, SLPs would be promoted to sergeant and go on to the Advanced Infantryman Course (AIC). At this course, they would learn the skills required to operate within the rifle squad while being taught by instructors with recent squad leader experience. The SLP would deliberately bypass going to the Infantry Training Battalion and the respective Schools of Infantry. In order to immediately surround the SLP with fellow NCOs and prevent him from being surrounded by privates and PFCs. It is critical that leadership development continue to be the main focus for the SLP as he will be thrust into a leadership role when he enters the Operating Forces. There is an argument that the curriculum at AIC may be too difficult for the SLP, who lacks infantry experience. The counterargument is that the average SLP will have proven that he is more mature, intelligent, and committed than your average student and will be able to pick up the subject matter more effectively. Upon graduating from AIC, the SLP would then attend Infantry Small Unit Leader's Course as his culminating exercise before joining the Operating Forces as a squad leader.

Counterarguments

Our squad leaders have performed admirably during our history as a service. Why the change? The Service that fails to adapt must prepare to fail. Warfare has only gotten more complex as the battlefield has become more ambiguous. The caliber of small unit leaders that we recruit must continue to improve, or we



Leadership requires physical, mental, and moral character. (Photo by author.)

risk being beaten. Just as nations and organizations that exploit new technologies to their advantage gain an edge over their adversary, so too does the side that exploits the human element of war.

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These squad leaders would have no experience, and the Marines will not respect them. The Marine Corps already thrusts inexperienced Marines into leadership positions in the form of our lieutenants. We make up for that lack of experience by investing greatly in their leadership and their education. The same method would be used to close the experience gap in our SLPs. In fact, our average SLP would be just as old, if not older, than our average officer candidate.

Marines respect leaders who know their craft and are passionate about their welfare. An SLP fresh out of the pipeline would be the most proficient regarding the profession of arms, and he would be the most committed to proving himself much like our junior enlisted Marines and officers are. What the SLP lacks in experience, he would make up with knowledge, maturity, and idealism.

Finding the caliber of civilian to make the SLP program work will not be sufficient enough to fill over 600 squad leader billets in our active duty Marine Corps. It is not necessary to find 600 SLPs to fill up our ranks. We argue that filling up approximately one-third of the available billets with SLPs will have a synergistic effect across the board and improve the capabilities of all squad leaders. The experience base that the current squad leader has will be useful for an SLP to benefit from, while the knowledge base and selectiveness of the SLP will benefit current squad leaders.

We also argue that it would not be difficult to find the caliber of talent that we are searching for. We currently find it difficult because we are not providing opportunities for this type of caliber to be attracted to our Service, as previously explained. The SLP program will attract more mature and physically capable civilians to do the job. We would also recommend attaching a \$30,000 bonus to SLPs who graduate from all of their schools in order to further incentivize the program.

Assessment

We recommend that the Marine Corps execute this program for three years to assess its effectiveness. The goal would be to have at least 20 percent of squad leaders in the fleet from this program (120-150 squad leaders). This will provide enough data to track and evaluate the performance of all of the

squad leaders who were produced from the SLP program and compare them against the performance of traditional squad leaders. At the end of three years, a board should convene and decide whether the program should continue as is, be terminated, or be expanded. We argue that even though SLP Marines would make up 20 percent of the available squad leaders, the vast majority would be evaluated as performing in the top 50 percent based on fitness reports and similar metrics.

Dare to Win

We feverishly seek technological solutions to tomorrow's battlefield problems. The same urgency should be applied to our personnel, the ones who will fight the wars. Col John Boyd, USAF(Ret), is known for stating "people, ideas, hardware, in that order." The human element is a fixture in the nature of war that will never go away. We must be capable of breaking current paradigms

about our personnel like we have regarding the changing character of war. To win, we must dare to do so. The SLP program would be a step forward in ensuring that our Marines are led by

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the best and brightest that our Nation has to offer.

Notes

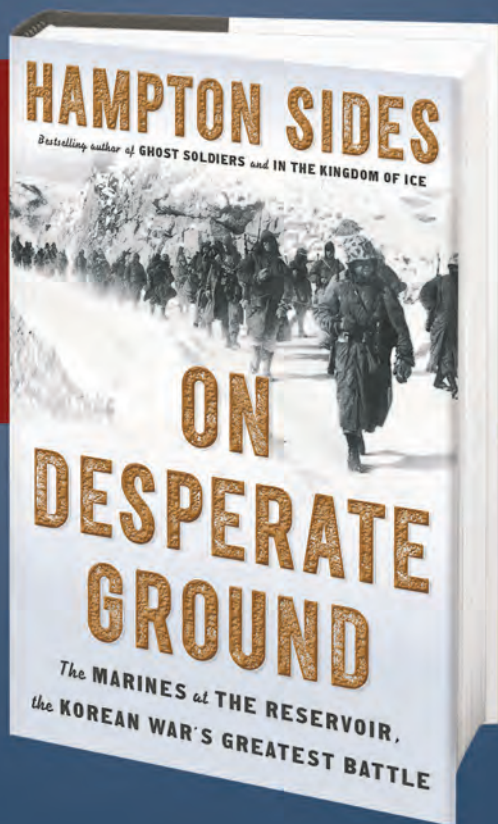
1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, (Washington, DC, September 2016).

2. United States Census Bureau, *Estimates of U.S. Population by Age and Sex*, (Online: 21 April 2016), available at www.census.gov.

3. Ben Tuft, "Adulthood Begins at 25, Says New Research," *The Independent*, (February 2015).

4. Officer Candidates School mission statement, available at www.trngcmd.marines.mil.

5. Marine Corps Recruit Depot mission statement available, at <http://www.mcrdpi.marines.mil>.



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