

Live Feed Promotion Boards

Using technology to add transparency

by CWO3 Mark Baldwin

On 9 June 1967, during a House Armed Forces Committee hearing, Chairman L. Mendel Rivers proclaimed, “We are very concerned with this question of a man understanding the system he lives by, with the lack of what we call, for want of a better term, the visibility of the system.”¹ Since that date, very little has changed with how most Marine Corps members view the current promotion system. I have personally benefited from this very system as I have never missed a promotion in my seventeen years of active duty service, but I have known plenty extremely worthy Marines that were passed with literally zero understanding of why.

The Marine Corps must make strides in advancing how we retain and promote the most qualified Marines, and the first step in that process is improving the way we conduct our promotion boards by leveraging technology to validate our talent management practices.

For well over two decades, the Marine Corps promotion boards have seen little change except for the technological advancements of the actual board room. More recently, promotion photos were stripped from promotion boards—though the Corps was the last one to accept that change and implement it (holding on to the idea that a photo can somehow attest to a Marine’s military bearing).² Multiple studies and dozens of thesis papers have been conducted on the current state of our promotion boards and nearly all of them end with the same sentiment: something has to change.³

Our current system appears more like a chapter from George Orwell’s book, *1984*, with Marines being briefed to a

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board bound by secrecy to not disclose any details and never actually knowing what is said or even *how* it was said. These small details are vitally important and could mean the difference between a one-time separation payment or a lifetime annuity.⁴ If a briefer has only a short period of time (normally two minutes) to detail your entire career to a group of men and women who will decide your fate, Marines should know for a fact that the briefer was prepared and did not make any mistakes. There should be no questioning on if the letter the above-zone Marine sent to the board was read in its entirety. What about the

updated PFT the below-zone Marine ran two weeks before the board—was it actually seen by the board? All of these “what ifs” only promote the idea of flaws within our system. Imagine if it were possible to do away with even the abstract or perceived notion of unintentional errors, and if there was a way, would we embrace it?

It is simple: live stream all promotion boards (through a website that uses a single sign on authentication like that used for Marine Online).⁵ This simple add on only requires a single multipurpose camera and a better than average internet connection.

Personal identifiable information can be navigated around to ensure that anyone watching does not get information that is not already accessible via other means (nearly all information passed to the board members are readily available



Promotions may be the most important part of any Marine’s career. (Photo by Cpl Danny Gonzalez.)

via Command Profile).⁶ Derogatory or adverse information concerning persons on the board would also require a work around, and I propose briefers just state to the members, “Derogatory/ Adverse Information in grade (or out of grade) is provided in his/her package in the digital board room.” This would give board members time to pull up the data and review for themselves, thereby not spilling the information to anyone watching the board process live and preventing awkward moments at the scuttlebutt.

Additionally, if the Marine Corps decides at some point to take names, genders, or even pronouns out of our fitness reporting system or the board process as a whole, the live streamed event would require no additional changes and personnel would still benefit from the experience.⁷ Frankly, just being made aware of how competitive (or not competitive) your peers are in relation to your own career trajectory can provide the impetus to make yourself better.

At the conclusion of all promotion boards, there are Marines that are passed for promotion and they basically have two options: contact a senior mentor and try to determine what could have caused a board member to not vote in your favor or contact a career counselor



Whether a Marine is selected for promotion or not can cause lingering questions about the promotion board process. (Photo by LCpl John Hall.)

board actually did not select you—even if it makes you feel better about the why.⁸

The only way you will ever truly know why you were passed is by being present in the room and listening to all other packages being briefed. By watching the board process and listening to the exchanges, the Marine that got passed will be able to hear all in-

least competitive or if they needed to adjust their career path.

Is it not time the Marine Corps leads the way for military Services in advancing past our archaic ways? We were the last Service to remove photographs from promotion board briefs because the Marine Corps wanted to “review military bearing and medals;” we were the last to desegregate our units with MajGen Holcomb proclaiming he would take 5,000 whites over 250,000 negros, and we will be the last to fully integrate recruit training.¹⁰ Now is our chance to be the first Service that allows boards to be made publicly accessible for any Marine that actually wants to become better or more competitive. Sure, watching and listening to the board still will not be the deciding the factor for a promotion, but it is a guaranteed way to prevent the idea of institutional flaws in a program that has been ridiculed for years because of its perceived patterns of unfairness. In 1967, at the same hearing which was quoted earlier, an Air Force Technical Sergeant who had recently retired following a very successful career summed up the dilemma with the promotion system some five decades ago, and the issue is still relevant today when he stated, “Secrecy prevents a man from properly preparing himself for advancement because he cannot see where he stands in

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and try to determine what could have caused a board member to not vote in your favor. In both instances, the person will likely give you the same vague info—such as if you did not deploy, you should deploy; if your current PFT is lower than last years, increase your PFT; if you did not have a special duty assignment, you should go get some. The point being that the information provided by either course of action is useless because it does not accurately reflect any tangible insight to why the

formation concerning each Marine they competed directly against and grasp a far better understanding on why they were less competitive and did not make the cut.

Finally, this subtle change would not detract from the board process or go against applicable law (when appropriate). Board eligible Marines would still not know if they were selected by the board as all votes are anonymously cast via the Digital Board Room software.⁹ But they would know if they were at

relation to other men; nor can he get this information by request to higher authority.”

Notes

1. For the entire transcript, see *Hearings before the Subcommittee on Enlisted Promotion Policy Review* from August through November 1967. The Chairman was very specific in describing a system that is shrouded in secrecy.
2. Mark Jobst and Jeffrey Palmer, “Analysis of the USMC FITREP: Contemporary or Inflexible,” (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, March 2005).
3. All available studies primarily focused on the subject of equitable distribution of promotions with an emphasis on gender or ethnic bias. Though that issue is not raised as a point of reference for this recommended change, a public viewing of the board for eligible population would also validate each of those studies by allowing all parties to personally confirm no bias exists in the process.

4. For more info on force controls and separation pay, see applicable Marine Corps Orders.
5. Though there are several ways to live stream an event such as a promotion board, suggesting Single Sign On would ensure that only specific personnel with a need to know would be granted access similar to the Marine Online platform.
6. Command Profile is an administrative tool sponsored by Manpower Management, which provides unfiltered access to personnel records including PFT, CFT, duty assignments, and other data.
7. Predicting the eventual moving away from pronouns and even names on promotion boards appears inevitable based on the CY16 SECNAV Memo, which directed that the Navy and Marine Corps review occupational field titles and rename 33 with gender neutral titles, i.e. rifleman to basic infantry Marine. Additionally, the Coast Guard has already removed pronouns and names from their promotion boards.
8. Though career counselors can offer some insight post board regarding statistics of the

board, very little real developmental data can be mined unless a Marine actually knows why he was personally not selected and sadly that information will never be factually known because of our system. For more information concerning “Above Zone Tactics” from MMRP-50 (Career Counselors) for personnel that have been passed for promotion, including suggestions such as “Getting a letter of recommendation from a GO,” “Changes the Numbers” on a FITREP, and billet selection (as if most E6s have a real choice) visit their webpage at <https://www.manpower.usmc.mil>.

9. Digital Board Room brief created and provided by Marine Corps Manpower and Promotion Branch. The brief can be obtained by visiting <https://www.manpower.usmc.mil>.

10. Bernard C. Nalty, *The Right to Fight: African-Americans In World War II*, (Camp Hill, PA: Orison Publishers, Inc, 2018).



MAJGEN HAROLD W. CHASE PRIZE ESSAY CONTEST



The annual MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest invites articles that challenge conventional wisdom by proposing change to a current Marine Corps directive, policy, custom, or practice. To qualify, entries must propose and argue for a new and better way of “doing business” in the Marine Corps. Authors must have strength in their convictions and be prepared for criticism from those who would defend the status quo. That is why the prizes are called Boldness and Daring Awards.

Prizes include \$3,000 and an engraved plaque for first place, \$1,500 and an engraved plaque for second place, and \$500 for honorable mention. All entries are eligible for publication.

INSTRUCTIONS

The contest is open to all Marines on active duty and to members of the Marine Corps Reserve. Electronically submitted entries are preferred. Attach the entry as a file and send to gazette@mca-marines.org. A cover page should be included, identifying the manuscript as a Chase Prize Essay Contest entry, and including the title of the essay and the author's name. Repeat the

title on the first page, but the author's name should not appear anywhere but on the cover page. Manuscripts are accepted, but please include a disk in Microsoft Word format with the manuscript. The *Gazette* Editorial Advisory Panel will judge the contest and notify all entrants as to the outcome shortly thereafter. Multiple entries are allowed; however, only one entry will receive an award.



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Modernizing Compensation to Prioritize the Corps

An overhaul is needed

by Capt Thomas Voutsos & GySgt Travis West

The blended retirement system is an overdue modernization of the military retirement system. It recognized that the old military retirement system did not serve all service members and replaced it with a system in which everyone can participate.¹ The new retirement system recognizes the contribution of a Marine regardless of his length of service. Other parts of military compensation need to be overhauled to treat all service members fairly. The current system of basic allowance for housing (BAH), basic subsistence allowance (BAS), and family separation allowance (FSA) create an unfair compensation structure in our enlisted ranks. The DOD has limited resources, so benefits for one group of Marines means reduced benefits for others or less funding for training and readiness.

Current Situation

Two Marines with the same background who go through training together will likely arrive at their first unit as a private first class making \$2,070.70.² If one Marine gets married upon arrival at the unit, the Marine will be able to move out of the barracks. He will not have a roommate (other than his spouse). This Marine will now have the option of eating at any establishment he wants, rather than eat meals at the chow hall, with the additional \$386.50 in tax-free income received.³ This, coupled with BAH, amounts to a 72 percent increase in pay if you are stationed at Camp Lejeune.⁴ If living

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Married Marines have the option to move out of the barracks. (Photo by PFC Timothy Childers.)

on base, BAH will pay for your housing and the majority of your utilities costs if you stay within a specified utilities usage.

This Marine now avoids having leadership inspect his living area each week, and the expectation is that the chain of command will make time for this

nascent marriage in a way it will not for a single Marine's family situation. If the married Marine deploys, he will now be entitled to an additional \$250 in tax-free income.⁵ Although this incurs an additional loss of BAS, the intent of BAS is to feed the Marine, not a supplemental income to his family.⁶

Problem

Current DOD policy incentivizes marriage to the point of unfairly compensating single service members. BAH and BAS policies were designed to provide married service members the ability to provide for their families while maintaining equity with single service members that were receiving free lodging and meals. The current policy of dual BAH for married military members exposes that BAH is really a marriage bonus. The DOD website states, “BAH is an allowance to offset the cost of housing when you do not receive government-provided housing.”⁷ However, if two married Marines live in base housing, they still receive the BAH of the lower-ranking Marine in addition to receiving BAH of the higher-ranking Marine to pay for the cost of base housing.⁸

Additionally, millennials are more individualistic than any prior generation. There is a non-monetary value of allowing a married Marine to not live in the barracks and have a genuine meal choice. Married Marines’ housing quality and quantity, both on and off base, far exceeds what they get from the barracks. This is the same reason many Marine officers did not live in dorms all four years in college. At the University of Notre Dame, 63 percent of seniors live off campus.⁹ At Michigan State University, freshmen are required to live on campus; however, 61 percent of all undergraduates live off campus.¹⁰

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While the BAH system rewards Marines for marriage, the current system for BAS ends up punishing married Marines who go to the field. The system logically makes sense. The DOD website is clear, “BAS is meant to offset costs for a member’s meals. ... This allowance is not intended to offset the costs of meals for family members.”¹¹ However, Marines do not budget in a vacuum. When BAS makes up 11



Many new Marines do not see the barracks as preferred living conditions. (Photo by PFC Timothy Childers.)

percent of the above-mentioned PFC’s income, the absence of that income because of a 29-day field exercise is a big deal for that family. Even if the Marine gets FSA for exercises greater than 30 days, it does not make up the entire difference. Married Marines take a pay cut any time they go to the field.

Solution

It is unrealistic to propose a solution that replaces BAH with a corresponding increase in basic pay and cost of living adjustment based on geographic area.

The initial disruption this would cause is not worth reaching an ideal solution of equitable compensation. However, three changes to BAH would yield the desired results:

Remove Dual BAH. Keeping in line with the DOD’s stated purpose for BAH mentioned above, if married Marines are stationed within 50 miles of each other, they should not receive a de facto bonus. This will have the added

benefit of reducing contract marriages to the extent that these occur.

Merge With and Without Dependents BAH into A Single BAH Rate. Keeping in line with the DOD’s stated purpose for BAH mentioned above, there should not be a distinction in BAH rates for those with or without dependents. Would Google compensate its employees differently based on whether or not they had dependents? The private sector would never make such a distinction, and the military should not either.

Provide a Monthly Stipend for Single Marines. To bridge the current marriage pay gap without drastically overhauling military pay, single Marines living in the barracks should receive a monthly stipend that increases with rank. A more capable researcher could determine what level stipend would make the marriage pay gap null and alter the marriage incentives created from BAH.

Additionally, this policy would help keep more NCOs in the barracks and could more closely model the resident assistant (RA) system used on many college campuses. RAs are upperclassmen that reside in dorms to supervise college students and assist them. Colleges utilize the incentive of free room and board to entice these responsible individuals to stay in the dorms as RAs. At many schools, the RA is a sought-after

position. In a similar way, the Marine Corps can incentivize NCO presence in the barracks by paying them a monthly stipend.

Following these changes in BAH, two changes to BAS and FSA will bring equity to married and single Marines while not penalizing Marines for going to the field.

Create a Flex Meal Option for All Marines. Most colleges offer flex meal options to all students, regardless of whether they live in dorms or off campus. This has the benefit of encouraging all students, regardless of living situation, to eat a certain portion of meals together while allowing them flexibility to eat according to their schedules. A flex meal option for Marines would cut the current enlisted BAS rate down to \$129 and make the rate the same for officers. All Marines and Marine officers would have 60 chow hall meals available to them on their ID card. By providing 3 meals a day for 5 days (15 meals) a week over 4 weeks, 60 meals would provide Marines enough meals to go to the field each month without being docked pay if in a garrison environment. If a unit goes on an exercise that requires more than 60 meals to be consumed, the unit should fund the additional meals. This will eliminate the deduction Marines receive for going to the field. Additionally, no chow hall is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Marines will have more flexibility in their work schedules to skip the chow hall occasionally with a flex meal option.

Give All Marines FSA and Change to a Deployment Incentive. Married Marines should not be the only ones receiving FSA, and non-local TAD in the United States should not qualify a Marine for family separation. The corporate world does not compensate their employees for being away from their family in the United States. Deployments are the reason Marine units train, and Marines who make it to a deployment should receive an incentive, regardless of marital status.

Conclusion

The current pay structure incentivizes marriage to the detriment of the



Current compensation policy may incentivize marriage for the wrong reasons. (Photo by LCpl Joshua Brown.)

Marine Corps and at the expense of single Marines. By making marginal changes to BAH structure, the marriage incentive currently in place can be mitigated. Additionally, by reforming BAS and FSA, the Marine Corps can stop penalizing Marines who go to the field. This would bring pay in line with DOD policy and equity to all Marines.

Notes

1. Staff, "The Uniformed Services Blended Retirement System," *Militarypay Defense*, (March 2018), available at <https://militarypay.defense.gov>.
2. Staff, "Military Pay Charts 1949 to 2021," *Defense Finance and Accounting Service*, (March 2018), available at <https://www.dfas.mil>.
3. Staff, "Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS)," *Militarypay Defense*, (2018), available at <https://militarypay.defense.gov>.
4. Staff, "2018 North Carolina BAH (Basic Allowance Housing) Rates," *Military Benefits*, (2018), available at <https://militarybenefits.info>.
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7. Staff, "Basic Allowance for Housing," *Militarypay Defense*, (2018), available at <https://militarypay.defense.gov>.

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9. Margaret Fosmoe, "Notre Dame Making Switch to Require Students to Live on Campus Three Years," *South Bend Tribune*, (September 2017), available at <https://www.southbendtribune.com>.

10. Staff, "Do I Have to Live on Campus?" Michigan State University, (n.d.), available at <http://liveon.msu.edu>; and Staff, "Michigan State University," *U.S. News*, (2018), available at <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/michigan-state-2290>.

11. "Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS)."

