

Leading at One of the Corps' Hidden Excepted Commands

A command opportunity for field-grade officers and E-8 master sergeants

by U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command

Maj Fiducia turned around to see his operations officer, senior enlisted advisor (SEA), and senior operations civilian looking over a map of the hurricane-impacted areas. As the commander, he knew that he was responsible for the safety of all of the 49 joint service members and civilians assigned to his independent station, but his team had the additional challenge of ensuring that future combat power was delivered to nine locations, in support of all five of the DOD uniformed Services and the two National Guard units that he directly supported. As the on-scene national incident liaison for his joint command, Maj Fiducia's team was looking at the map, because they had to quickly determine how to continue operations, disperse key personnel to three other locations, assure combat power delivery, and finally maintain communications with his regimental commander, Col Brady, and the joint command commander, CAPT Kemp. It was the most chaotic event during his entire two-year command—and it was perfect! Marine leaders of all ranks thrive in chaos, and Maj Fiducia could not wait to do what Marines love to do—run towards the chaos, embrace the challenge, lead, support, dominate, and win. While he had enjoyed the 48 months of his tour, he could not have imagined a time when he had more fun as a military entrance processing station (MEPS) commander.

If that story was interesting and sounded like a command opportunity that you would like to experience, then

you should consider serving as a MEPS commander or E-8 SEA. The story was a summary of the scenario that Maj Fiducia, a 6002 Aviation Maintenance Officer, found himself in during Hurricane Maria. The uninterrupted combat power that he had to deliver to nine locations were over 377 future warrior applicants that had to be delivered to the nine Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard training locations. Additionally, the regimental and joint component commanders were the sector commander (a regimental level equivalent commander), Col Brady,

Majors and master sergeants that elect to serve at a MEPS lead a truly joint team charged with the mission to “evaluate applicant [suitability for service] using the DOD Standards.” USMEPCOM has 65 independent field stations across the United States that deliver future warfighters or combat power to all the Services. Each MEPS commander and SEA leads a station that conducts joint and special assessment entrance physicals, plans and executes a regional testing program, and directs a joint processing team that integrates products to qualify and eventually ship

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and the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command (USMEPCOM) Joint Activity to DOD Commander: CAPT Kemp. Service as an O-4 commander or E-8 SEA (a billet carried by first sergeants in the other Services) at 1 of the 65 MEPS is a tremendous training and development opportunity for an officer or staff non-commissioned officer (SNCO). You are in charge of an independent duty command, and as highlighted in the story—can be called upon to serve as a national incident commander during natural and man-made disasters.

applicants. Given the mission, today's MEPS commanders and SEAs are more joint and special entrance assessment commanders who oversee the entrance processing functions than simply officers in charge of enlistment processing.

However, despite the opportunities associated with serving at a MEPS, most officers and senior enlisted leaders pass on this opportunity mainly because they are not familiar with the advantages associated with the command and the joint leadership opportunities an O-4 level joint command presents. In the remainder of this article, I argue seven

and enhance your promotion or program selection board brief.

Joint and Cross-Functional Skill Development that Sets You Apart from Your Peers

As a Marine, you are always a Marine and expected to be proficient at Marine things (physical training, shooting, and Marine administration for example); however, as a joint commander or SEA, you will become proficient in Army, Navy, Air Force, civil servant, civilian, and Coast Guard administrative matters; DOD Entrance Examination standards; and state-specific hiring processes. As a field-station commander, you will be in charge of the development of at least 27 full-time equivalent

or HR management experience, business knowledge, a strategic mindset supported by tactical decision-making experience, and relationship-building skills.¹ As a MEPS commander or SEA, you are the de facto CEO or regional vice management experience to their resumes. The skills developed here translate well for promotion boards and the corporate world.

High Quality of Life, Civilian Education, and Professional Certification Opportunities.

Serving at a MEPS provides Marines assigned to a station with an opportunity to reconnect with their families and advance themselves academically and professionally. Most stations are lo-

of Human Resources Management and Project Management Professional certifications by simply documenting their work hours, completing the training on Marinenet/Skillport, and passing the examination. Finally, officers from technical career fields have also earned industry-specific certifications such as Security+, Certified Ethical Hacker, Cisco Certified Route and Switch, Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert certifications, and financial industry certifications like the Financial Modeling and Valuation Analyst certification while assigned to MEPS within the last two years.

A Chance to Contribute to the Good Fight

As a MEPS commander or SEA, you are in charge of what the USMEPCOM Commander calls, “Freedom’s Front Door.” You are responsible for every applicant that is qualified at your station and leaves to start initial entry training. Each MEPS provides a business-to-business support function between the recruiters on the streets and the Services’ boot camps. As the senior leaders at your stations, you have the ability to positively impact how much combat power is delivered to all of the DOD. If you are an aggressive and supportive commander or SEA, the recruiting partners (especially your fellow Marines) will see this and flow business through your station. If you neglect your responsibilities or perform poorly, then you have become a roadblock to Freedom’s Front Door and your recruiting partners will find a way around your station. Ultimately, leading a MEPS means that you have a chance to help your partners identify, screen, and deliver now warfighters to the fight—an honor or privilege for any commander or enlisted advisor from any Service.

Competitive Promotion Rates

This is probably what most of the readers wanted to review when they started reading this article. Promotion rates for officers who have fleet MOS credibility when they arrive and desire to remain on active duty have been promising. Four of the last five captains

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DA civilian/military personnel and 18 temporary employees. You will master six other evaluation systems, interact with local representatives as well as state elected/appointed leaders, and—as stated in the opening vignette—serve as an on-scene incident commander when natural or manmade disasters occur. All this will require you to exercise due diligence with respect to joint matters and sharpen your skills as a civilian leader/manager, which brings up the next item on the seven reasons to serve at the unknown command opportunity: general management and C-Suite Skill Development.

You Develop Sought After General Management and C-Suite Transferable Skills

Polishing or developing solid general management and future corporate chief or “C-Suite” skills is one of the most advantageous but least known benefits associated with leading and serving at a MEPS. According to a recent corporate leadership development article in *Forbes Magazine*, the four skills aspiring C-Suite executives must have are people

cated in major metropolitan areas with acceptable home-to-station commute times. When the station closes, you head home and most stations close no later than 1900 hours, which allows Marines assigned to reconnect with their wives and kids if they have been recently forward deployed.

Because most MEPSs are located in major cities, commanders and SEAs are also able to finish post-baccalaureate degrees or professional certifications while assigned to a MEPS. On average, 89 percent of the Marines (enlisted and officer) assigned to the command enroll in off-duty education or certification training; 100 percent of the officers assigned either already had an advanced degree (MS, JD, or PhD) or were enrolled in an advanced-degree training program while assigned to a station. Marines with special skills have also earned civilian industry certifications. In fact, another lesser-known advantage associated with serving at a MEPS is that because the field station billets fulfill general management and HR functions officers and enlisted personnel assigned can easily earn the Society

that have served at USMEPCOM were promoted to major, and 90 percent of the majors who desired to remain on active duty were promoted to lieutenant colonel. Now while those are not bad promotion selection rates for the officers, the SNCOs have not fared as well. A little over 65 percent of the sergeants that desired to remain on active duty were promoted to staff sergeant and only X of the Y SNCOs that desired to remain on active duty were promoted to the rank of master gunnery sergeant. All that being said, the enlisted Marines that desire to remain on active duty have found other ways to become more competitive. Marines have earned their martial arts instructor belts while assigned to MEPS and volunteered and qualified as National Incident On-Scene team leaders to improve their chances for promotion.

In closing, volunteering to serve at a MEPS is an honor, privilege, and op-



Fargo Marines and officer candidates conducting MCMAP training under SSgt R. Moreno. (Photo courtesy of SSgt R. Moreno.)

portunity. As a MEPS commander or SEA, you are the face of the active-duty component of the DOD within your area of operations, and you are always a big deal in your community.

MEPS commanders and SEAs serve a vital supporting establishment function and master executive-level joint matters skills while leading a station. Being the leader responsible for enabling access to Freedom's Front Door is a great opportunity, and if you are up to the challenge, volunteer to command or advise a MEPS.

Note

1. Sally Blount, "4 Skills Aspiring C-Suite Execs Must Have," *Forbes Magazine*, (May 2018), available at <https://www.forbes.com>.



Restricted and Restrained

Applying talent management to the restricted officer community

by Capt Jason R. Tyx

In January 2014, a group of sergeants and staff noncommissioned officers shuffled into a large classroom at The Basic School (TBS). After taking their seats, one of the school's first sergeants strode to the front of the classroom, introduced himself, and clicked past the title slide. At that point, the class transformed into square pegs, thus beginning their journeys to awkwardly fit into the round hole that is the Marine officer.

Nearly 300 Marines, with experience ranging from 8 to more than 16 years, sat stunned as the first sergeant began explaining to the class the very basics of what constituted service "A," "B," and "C" uniforms for a Marine: green blouse, khaki tie, long-sleeved khaki shirt, one-eighth of an inch.

Suddenly aware of his audience, the first sergeant sheepishly began to speed through the slides, pausing occasionally to deliver the relevant information to the Warrant Officer Basic Course students. The information had little value, but the message was clear.

This was hardly the first time that these Marines, only days away from making the transition from enlisted to officer, would be reminded that they were an afterthought—both at TBS and in the officer corps at large. The Marine Corps has consistently ignored restricted officer growth, choosing instead to force these highly specialized officers into the sidecar of unrestricted officer development. As the Marine Corps prepares for a transition to a more modernized approach to personnel, assignments, and professional development, it cannot afford to ignore the unique capabilities and corresponding needs of its restricted officer community.

>Capt Tyx is a Meteorological & Oceanographic Officer, currently assigned to II MEF. He has deployed to CENTCOM three times in support of Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and INHERENT RESOLVE. He is a Limited Duty Officer, having previously reached the ranks of Gunnery Sergeant and Chief Warrant Officer 3.

In November 2021, the Commandant of the Marine Corps released *Talent Management*.¹ Once its goals are realized, this watershed document will signal a wholesale change in the way the Marine Corps conducts its human resource management. Outlining a vision of substantial overhaul to enlisted and officer recruiting, retention, assignments, and career progression, *Talent Management* is silent on one key element of the Marine Corps population: restricted officers.

Talent Management is silent on ... restricted officers.

The restricted officer community consists of warrant officers in the grades of warrant officer through chief warrant officer 5 and limited duty officers in the grades of captain through lieutenant colonel. Aside from their vastly different backgrounds, the primary difference between restricted and unrestricted officers is that restricted officers may only be assigned to restricted officer billets within their respective MOSs.²

After their transition and graduation from Warrant Officer Basic Course, many warrant officers attend a follow-on

MOS school while some do not. Thus ends the Marine Corps' intentional investment in the professional development of Marines to whom it entrusts many critical people and programs. While professional military education for officers—which includes Expeditionary Warfare School and Command and Staff College—offers some value to restricted officers, the opportunities for personal and professional development are few and far between.

Unrestricted officers find themselves skipping through a meadow of endless opportunity: joint billets, foreign schools, graduate education, special duty assignments, lateral moves, and many others. This is made possible because the unrestricted officer population far exceeds the needs of the FMF and supporting establishment. It is not the intent of this article to advocate for restricted officer lateral moves, placement on the drill field, or other similar outcomes. However, there is no program of any kind that allows restricted officers to attend resident graduate-level education in their technical specialties or to broaden their expertise through a tour in a billet related to, but not designated for, their primary MOS.

First, it is necessary to note that a college degree of any kind is not a requirement to become a warrant officer. It is, nonetheless, widely known that a degree with a major related to the applicant's occupational field will make

an enlisted Marine more competitive for selection. Further, many restricted officers do possess undergraduate and graduate degrees. By allowing these officers opportunities to pursue advanced education at venues such as Naval Postgraduate School, the Marine Corps would be making a tangible investment in their development.

While restricted officers can enroll in Naval Postgraduate School distance learning graduate programs, these programs require a significant investment of time on the part of the officer concerned.³ Conversely, many unrestricted officers can simply attend the school and complete an advanced degree as a part of their career progression. If the Marine Corps wants its technical specialists to maintain currency and relevance within rapidly evolving competencies, it needs to commit resources to its lifelong training and educational development.

This could be accomplished with a small increase in restricted officer populations. By creating an excess restricted officer structure, these officers would be able to conduct a career-broadening or education tour. The current manpower model is comprised of a one-for-one, vacancy-based selection system that offers no flexibility in terms of assignments outside of a very strict window. While it would be foolish to assign an aviation maintenance warrant officer as a regimental gunner, opportunities do exist. A personnel officer could attend Naval Postgraduate School to earn a Master of Business Administration degree while an intelligence, communications, or meteorological and oceanographic restricted officer could rotate through an assignment as a space operations officer.

The coming changes offer the perfect opportunity to address restricted officer development. It also gives a chance to address another fundamental flaw in the existing manpower model: promotion inequity. The one-for-one, promote-to-vacancy model is archaic and does not ensure that the top-performing officers are promoted and retained. This is at loggerheads with the objectives laid out for enlisted and unrestricted officers in *Talent Management*.

The current restricted officer promotion system is simple and makes

sense on its face. When an officer retires, that opens a spot for officers of junior rank and within the same MOS to fill the vacancy. However, given the extremely small population of many restricted officer communities, the outcomes are frequently suboptimal. After promotion to CWO2, which is noncompetitive, many CWOs are able to be promoted one, two, or even three more times without any competition on the selection board—often immediately upon reaching the minimum time in grade for advancement. In small fields, an enlisted career path that results in applying for the warrant officer program further along in one's service can mean being completely boxed out of the higher ranks by those who have less total time in service. Meanwhile talented, competitive officers in other MOSs are being passed over for promotion or stuck waiting for vacancies to open up. This applies equally to the LDO ranks.

One method to address this inequity is by implementing a new model, similar to unrestricted officers, that creates universal promotion systems for the CWO and LDO populations. By doing so, the Marine Corps can ensure a steady, equitable promotion flow for all restricted officers regardless of the community's population.

It is uncommon for one CWO to work directly for another, so the specific rank on the collar of the officer assigned to a given billet is not of significant consequence in this case. For example, if a community were short by one CWO5, the senior CWO4 (likely the odd officer out) would occupy that billet. The lack of CWO5 insignia would not change the experience, competence, or professional knowledge of the officer concerned. Conversely, an overage in another field would merely result in a billet being occupied by a more senior officer. This is particularly effective in the case of CWOs, all of whom are company-grade officers and all of whom would be able to compete for deserved promotions with their peers on a steady and predictable timeline. As warrant officer and LDO captain ranks are filled by accession boards and not promotion boards, the overall health of each occupational field would not be

impacted by changes to the promotion system.

By creating universal competition for promotion, the Marine Corps can eliminate the situations it currently sees wherein restricted officers—because of a lack of competition—need only meet the *fully qualified* standard for promotion as opposed to the *best-qualified* standard levied on many of their peers.⁴ In the context of promotion selection, competition breeds strength. The restricted officer corps would be stronger, and the likelihood of retaining many of the most deserving officers—who may not have had promotion opportunities commensurate with their talent—would be greater.

With two simple changes, the Marine Corps can remove the restraints from the restricted. By investing in the most specialized and technically proficient officers in its ranks, more qualified, educated, and ready leaders can be identified, grown, developed, and retained. The timing could not be better for the Marine Corps to invest in its restricted population.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Talent Management*, (Washington, DC: November 2021).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1300.8, Personnel Assignment Policy*, (Washington, DC: May 2021).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 162/22, Academic Year 2021–2022 Naval Postgraduate School Distance Learning Opportunities*, (Washington, DC: April 2022).
4. Acting Secretary of the Navy, *Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2022 USMC Chief Warrant Officer Promotion Selection Boards*, (Washington, DC: August 2021).



The Missing Attribute

A measure of accountability for command climates

by Maj Phillip M. Tate

The Marine Corps indoctrinates Marines through a continuum of individual entry-level training, professional military education, and continuous professional development. Much like its understanding of history and warfare has continued to evolve, the Marine Corps has continued to evolve to incorporate learning more from society, culture, and humanity. As we have innovated and adapted in war, we have not applied the same rigor to how we manage and evaluate talent. Our most visible example of this is that the current fitness report has failed to change for over two decades. With the criticality of unit cohesion and effectiveness remaining unevaluated, the Marine Corps fitness report requires change. This critical tool can no longer remain stagnant and risk losing relevance. To best evaluate the unique responsibility and authority of commanders, the Marine Corps should modify fitness reports to evaluate commanders on the organizational cultures they foster to improve accountability for command climates.

Command climates and troop welfare are directly intertwined. Evaluating commanders on their command climates will represent a greater understanding of Napoleon Bonaparte's philosophy of: "[t]he moral is to the physical as three to one."¹ Bonaparte's philosophy is centered on the development of troop welfare and its direct impact on warfighting. Evaluating commanders on their command climates is a deliberate connecting file between troop welfare and the authority commanders possess over their commands. As commanders' authority over their commands is absolute, the commander is ultimately responsible for everything the command does or fails to do. A codified

>Maj Tate is currently the Bravo Company Commander for Headquarters and Support Battalion, Marine Corps Installations Pacific-Marine Corps Base Camp Butler. He has previously served as a Performance Evaluation Advisor at the battalion- and division-level staff as a Manpower Officer. Maj Tate is also a key contributor to the Manpower, Personnel, and Administration occupational field training and readiness overhaul.

metric of evaluation and accountability regarding command climate should accompany this authority.

Despite a recognition of the importance of a healthy command climate, the Marine Corps has failed to develop a uniform metric to evaluate commanders on the cultures they cultivate. The performance evaluation system order states:

The fitness report provides the primary means for evaluating a Marine's performance to support the Commandant's efforts to select the best qualified personnel for promotion, career designation, retention, resident schooling, command, and duty assignments.²

The current fitness report construct includes fourteen attributes divided into five sections. These five sections are mission accomplishment, individual character, leadership, intellect and wisdom, and evaluations. The leadership section

includes the following attributes: leading subordinates, developing subordinates, setting the example, ensuring the well-being of subordinates, and communication skills.³ Based on the dynamics of these attributes, evaluating healthy command climates can be effectively implemented in the leadership section. A general definition of this attribute can be: the effective implementation of a culture of personal and professional development. A clear demonstration of an environment dedicated to equitable, respectable, and accountable traits within leaders and subordinates alike. A complete performance-anchored rating scale for a healthy command climate attribute is captured in Figure 1.

Modifying the fitness report to include a healthy command climate attribute in the leadership section aligns with the section's general context outlined in the performance evaluation

F. LEADERSHIP							
6. HEALTHY COMMAND CLIMATE. Effective implementation of a culture of personal and professional development. A clear demonstration of an environment dedicated to equitable, respectable, and accountable traits within leaders and subordinates alike.							
ADV	Knowledgeable of programs and resources. Complies with associated directives, timelines, and demonstrates a priority for fostering environment.		Actively employs practices known to support protective factors. Engaged in detecting and identifying risk factors. Encourages cohesion across the scope of the total force.		Dedicated to all facets of a healthy organizational climate. Actively mitigates risk factors to prevent negative aspects of a permissive environment. Effective implementation of a culture of accountability, and fostering proactive approaches in all aspects of organizational climate.		N/O
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 1. Proposed performance-anchored rating system. (Figure provided by author.)

system order. Evaluating commanders on a healthy command climate can be majorly subjective. This level of subjectivity presents many challenges when attempting to develop uniform metrics for evaluation. Commanders, reporting seniors, and reviewing officers require objective criteria for the evaluation of healthy command climates. One approach is overlaying measures of performance and measures of effectiveness against a doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) analysis structure. The measures of performance compared against the pillars of DOTMLPF present objective means for evaluation. The measures of effectiveness for this approach are subjective; however, they also present objective benchmarks to contain, or direct, much of the subjectivity. An abbreviated example of this approach could resemble:

Measure of Performance: Doctrine

Measures of Effectiveness: Doctrine Resource Incorporation

Evaluation: Does the commander have doctrine in place? Does the doctrine provide direction, or implementation for organization(s), training, materiel, and personnel? Does the doctrine effectively incorporate resources such as The Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute Organizational Climate Survey inputs, external agencies' capabilities, and creative methods of employment?

As demonstrated previously, incorporating measures of performance and measures of effectiveness compared and contrasted against a standard analysis structure such as DOTMLPF presents a fusion of objective milestones and subjective interpretation. This approach also provides freedom to demonstrate, and evaluate, creativity in attempting to solve dynamic problems.

A brief explanation for why holding commanders accountable for their command climates is significant can be found in the recently published *Hard Truths and the Duty to Change: Recommendations from the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military*. The Commission composed of civilians, retired military personnel, and former commanders concluded that: "Commanders must be held ac-

countable for their unit climates and for their action—or inaction—when it comes to protecting their people."⁴ This sentiment is also affirmed in the Fort Hood Independent Review Commission's report of 2020. Additionally, each Commandant of the Marine Corps from Gen Michael Hagee to Gen David Berger has testified to Congress or publicly addressed a problem with maladaptive behaviors such as hazing, sexual assault, and sexual harassment in the Marine Corps. These behaviors can be indicative of toxic command climates. Since 2003, the Marine Corps has uninterruptedly broadcast those maladaptive behaviors are a significant problem in the Service. In that same timespan, no formal adaptation to evaluate commanders on these conditions has manifested.

Trust tactics begin in garrison with organizational cultures that commanders foster ...

Modifying the fitness report to include an attribute for healthy command climates will reinforce the Marine Corps' position of further reducing maladaptive behaviors and prohibited activities through proactive approaches. Punishment, or the threat of punishment, is not an effective deterrent against sexual assault, sexual harassment, hazing, and other maladaptive behaviors. In 2021, the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military proposed four lines of effort and eighty recommendations and sub-recommendations to stop sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military.⁵ Modifying the fitness report to include a command climate evaluation directly addresses three of the four lines of effort and ten of the eighty recommendations and sub-recommendations to counter military sexual assault and harassment.

MCDP 7 states: "continuous learning is essential."⁶ The context of this quote is within the frame of mind cen-

tered on maneuver warfare; however, the essence of the quote is an enduring principle for personal and professional development. The Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military details four lines of effort to stop sexual harassment and sexual assault which are: accountability, prevention, climate and culture, and victim care/support.⁷ By evaluating commanders on their command climates along the context presented in Figure 1, the Marine Corps can directly address the accountability, prevention, and climate and culture lines of effort. For the previous eighteen years, the Marine Corps has openly identified problems, issues, and concerns with maladaptive behaviors within its ranks. During the same time span, the Marine Corps has not effectively addressed the evaluation and accountability of the command climates in which these behaviors occur. Efficient and effective maneuver on the battlefield demands trust tactics. Trust tactics begin in garrison with organizational cultures that commanders foster: "Ultimately, success of this recommendation will occur when prevention competencies are taught in leader professional military education, evaluated in annual performance reports, and a key consideration for promotion readiness."⁸

Notes

1. Quote attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, 1808.
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1610.7A Performance Evaluation System*, (Washington, DC: 2018).
3. Ibid.
4. Department of Defense, *Hard Truths and the Duty to Change: Recommendations from the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military*, (Washington, DC: July 2021).
5. Ibid.
6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 7, Learning*, (Washington, DC: 2020).
7. *Hard Truths and the Duty to Change*.
8. Ibid.



Sourcing Foreign Security Advisors

A software-based approach for “hacking” human resource optimization
by Mr. Jeremiah Marquez

Hack (noun) 6: a usually creative solution to a computer hardware or programming problem or limitation.¹

The Marine Corps has many highly qualified individuals in its ranks but—for various reasons—runs into trouble when trying to identify and deploy them to locations where they would have the most impact. This is especially true in how we source Marines for security cooperation missions. It seems like every policy document, from the President’s *National Security Strategy* to the guidance from the last three Commandants, has stressed the need for an increasingly well-educated force that can engage in civil-political-military style operations that are specifically tailored to geographic areas of responsibility.² Yet, with the way our system is currently structured, we do not always source the right candidates to the right places. Part of this resistance is cultural and part of this is related to funding. Providing an irregular warfare capability is not how the Marine Corps has historically justified its budget to Congress, and, even if it were, we do not have the funding to train all the necessary individuals from scratch. Ultimately, however, we can solve this problem without weakening the mission of the big Marine Corps and without spending millions of dollars; we just need to pull from the resources we already have. Silicon Valley compa-



A Marine with Special Purpose MAGTF–Southern Command talks to a role player during mock marksmanship training as part of the Marine Advisor Course. (Photo by Sgt Justin M. Smith.)

nies are famous for solving complicated problems in novel ways with often very little startup capital. If we model our problem-solving techniques after some of these companies—like UBER—we can revamp the way we source Marines to these deployments at little to no cost or danger to the fleet, thereby ensuring that the Marine Corps’ irregular warfare capability keeps up with the 21st century and maximizes our return on investment from training with other forces. But first, let us take a closer look at the problem to see how we arrive at the solution.

The Problem

Ethiopia is becoming an important name in geopolitics again. It houses the headquarters of the African Union, could generate \$738 million (U.S.) worth of mineral resources by 2035, and it has 76.8 million people whose only means of employment is agriculture—a fact that the Chinese are looking to exploit by creating factories there.³ Because of its growing importance, President Obama not only visited Ethiopia in 2015 but the U.S. Government also spent a combined total of \$814,839 (U.S.) on security cooperation there

>Mr. Marquez is a former Marine Communications Officer and Foreign Security Force Advisor. He left active duty in 2018 after serving for six years and achieving the rank of captain. He previously served with Marine Wing Communications Squadron 38 and 1st Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company.

in the same year.⁴ How many of the personnel the government sent to participate in this training had any knowledge of Amharic (the native language of Ethiopia) or any previous experience in the region? It is a hard question to answer, but according to a report from Fiscal Year 2013, the Marine Corps had only two officers in the entire force that had received official language training in Amharic and none who had received training in Tigrigna or Somali (the native languages of neighboring Eritrea and Somalia). The cost of that training? Roughly \$180,893 per Marine.⁵ Evolving battlefield or not, a force of our size cannot afford to spend that kind of money on every Marine. The good news is we do not have to—enter Capt Kaleb.

Capt Kaleb is a highly experienced company-grade officer and a graduate of the Tactical Air Control Party and Marine Advisor Courses. What makes him special? He spent his childhood visiting family in Ethiopia's capital city where he became fluent in Amharic and Tigrigna. He could basically tell you everything you would ever want to know about the security situation that currently exists in those countries, and he has received the requisite security cooperation training to be able to conduct those types of missions. Had the Marine Corps paid for his training, it would have cost \$361,786.⁶ What has the Marine Corps actually paid for Capt Kaleb to have these skills? Nothing. Capt Kaleb is a \$361,786 cultural asset that we have received for free just by nature of him being himself. Yet, as long as he works for the Marine Corps (or the DOD), he will never be used in a capacity that takes full advantage of his specialized skills. How could that possibly be? Surely, Marine Forces Africa, if they knew he existed, would want someone like him working on their team?

If you were going to deploy on a security cooperation team today, the process would look something like this: a Marine foreign area officer (FAO) working out of Country X would, in conjunction with the Department of State, develop a plan for the Marine Corps to be able to further the U.S. diplomatic mission in his country with the strategic place-

ment of a handful of Marines. Once the number of Marines he needed are identified, he would send his plan up to whichever combatant command he fell under, the combatant command would submit a Request for Forces to one of the three MEFs, and then from there, the request would trickle down the MEF through a byzantine chain of command structure until suitable (and often unsuspecting) candidates

... candidates were identified—usually based solely on their MOS...

were identified—usually based solely on their MOS and career timing. The candidates are then sent to advisor training, eventually deploy, and learn the cultural environment as they go along.⁷

The opaqueness of this process has created the illusion of a “good ole boys club” in the eyes of many highly qualified Marines that want to deploy but for reasons that are completely beyond their control are not being afforded the opportunity to do so.⁸ The reality is

not that the selection process is purposely discriminating against Marines like Capt Kaleb or that he is not qualified (clearly he is) rather, it is that the process itself currently makes no sense. In the current system, the success of the FAO's mission is in the hands of someone six to seven degrees of separation away, who may not know or care what the FAO is trying to achieve. If we are sending Marines to liaise with our foreign counterparts based solely on having the right MOS and timing, we have to ask ourselves: are we really providing the best product to conduct security cooperation missions abroad, especially when we have resources like Capt Kaleb sitting on the bench? To solve this problem as it relates to security cooperation, several officers submitted an article to the *Gazette* last year suggesting that the Marine Corps establish a Marine Advisor Unit in each MEF that would be fully staffed and able to respond to security cooperation missions as needed.⁹ It was an idea that could have potentially fixed our part of this issue; however, the problem was that it was too expensive, especially in an environment of sequestration. We cannot afford to take three battalions worth of Marines permanently away from their parent commands—especially to conduct a mission that, although it may be important, is not



A Marine major converses with role players engaged in an advisor skills immersive training scenario during the Marine Advisor Course at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek–Fort Story, VA, 13 May 2022. (Photo by Kealii De Los Santos.)



How can the Marine Corps better identify the “cultural assets” already in its ranks? (Photo by SSgt Vitaliy Rusavskiy.)

how the Marine Corps has historically justified its budget to Congress. A study by Joint Special Operations University has also cited funding as a key barrier to recruiting individuals like Capt Kaleb so we are not the only organization experiencing this problem.¹⁰ However, the heart of this issue lies not in our inability to pay for more training but in our inability to keep up with advances in human resources. The reality is that we do not need to create some huge new bureaucratic system to funnel these types of individuals into new units or ramp up expensive recruiting efforts; we only need to solve two simple problems: How do we connect Capt Kaleb with the combatant command that needs his skill set and how do we do this without spending any more money?

We can solve this by looking to Silicon Valley for inspiration. After several years of the DOD getting blasted for its lack of creativity and an outdated human resources system (what Undersecretary for Defense Brad Carson called a “polaroid in the age of digital cameras”), entrepreneurs and college professors from some of America’s most prestigious institutions have taken an interest in trying to help the DOD solve some of these problems.¹¹ One such entrepreneur, Steve Blank, of Stanford University’s recent program “Hacking for Defense,” writes that the beauty of Silicon Valley-style innovation is not

only that it consistently produces state-of-the-art tech but that for us it could create “new ways to think about, organize, and build and deploy national security people, organizations and solutions.”¹² Without going all the way to Palo Alto, we can take some of the ideas and asymmetric problem-solving styles used by many of the Valley’s most successful companies and use them to solve our own problems.

Each combatant command could list how many jobs they had available ...

In less than eight years, UBER—a taxi company that owns no taxis—has become the most successful taxi company in the history of the world. The secret to this success was its founders’ ability to identify and asymmetrically solve the problems of two distinct groups of people: people who were underemployed and wanted to earn a little extra cash and people who wanted to take a taxi but did not want to pay full price. By using a simple, yet outside-the-box, technological solution to connect these two groups of people, UBER has nearly

destroyed the old taxi cab industry, recently received a \$66 billion valuation, and completely changed the way Marines conduct safety briefs.¹³ The truth is that we can solve the problem of connecting Capt Kaleb to Marine Forces Africa, we can even create Maj’s Smith and Myler’s Marine Advisor Units, but we just need to do it digitally at the lowest cost possible. *We need to create UBER for Marine Foreign Security Advisors.*

The Solution

Where do we even start to create a system like this without rounds of funding and mountains of government oversight? The beauty of Steve Blank’s Lean Start-up model is that it allows us to refine the product as we go along and it is designed for start-up companies with little to no venture capital.¹⁴ We can use these two ideas, UBER and the Lean Start-up, to create a product for ourselves that gets the job done and costs next to nothing. The average cost to host a domain (meaning have a marines.mil website) is \$100 per year. For this cost almost any 065x could create the actual interface for a website and additionally add the public key infrastructure that would allow us to securely post sensitive, yet unclassified, information. The homepage could have a graphical depiction of each geographic combatant command, which, when clicked on, would take the user to a page of job listings. Each combatant command could list how many jobs they had available, a rough timeline for the deployment, and what specific skills they were looking for source. From there, any Marine with his CO’s approval could submit his resume to that combatant command and apply for short six-month long deployments. Marines would then return from these deployments to their parent commands ready to share their experiences with the rest of the fleet.

This type of system would immediately increase the quality of Marines being sourced to these deployments because it would allow the combatant commands to raise the bar on language skills and provide tangible meaning to the Regional, Culture, Language Familiarization (RCLF) program. Marines with previous life experience, high De-

fense Language Proficiency Test scores, and those who had completed the RCLF program up to their grade would have an outlet to make their skills useful to the Marine Corps. Additionally, the transparency of such a system would encourage other Marines to work on acquiring their own language skills and completing their RCLF classes, thus fostering a culture of education and competition across the force.

Future iterations of this product could have algorithms that would allow us to allocate Marines to these billets in a process that would be more streamlined. There is no reason that Activision should have a more efficient process for sourcing gamers to multiplayer sessions of *Call of Duty* than the Marine Corps (with all its history, pride, and tradition) should have for sourcing talented Marines to specific conflict areas with real-world consequences. Maj Petra Seipel has already created such a system for allocating Marines to RCLF assignments while working on her MBA at the Naval Postgraduate School, but many similar models exist for emulation.¹⁵ For now, however, we could get a baseline working product by simply putting the combatant commands in touch with interested candidates. As we continued with the development process, we would need creative feedback from the combatant commands and any other experienced leaders who thought they could add something insightful to help refine it. This product would be so cheap to produce, if we get buy-in from the right groups of people, we may even be able to have a working prototype before the end of the calendar year. The key is getting the design process started now. To quote GEN Patton, “A good plan, executed violently now, is better than a perfect plan next week.”¹⁶

If we were able to do this, we would be leading the Department of Defense in innovation in human resources per the direction of Undersecretary Brad Carson.¹⁷ We would increase the career retention of talented individuals like Capt Kaleb. We would strengthen the fleet by creating a competitive environment for Marines to pursue deployments as well as adding tangible meaning to the RCLF program and the

acquisition of additional language skills. But perhaps more important than any of these things, we would be providing a better product to conduct security cooperation abroad in defense of American interests by tapping into tens of millions of dollars worth of human capital that we are currently neglecting. We can do all this for less than \$100 a year and with a little bit of input from a few key individuals. That is how we are going to solve sourcing Marines to participate in irregular warfare in the 21st century. With the risk for meaningful financial loss nonexistent, we have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Notes

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Belief Systems in Irregular Warfare

Religious/cultural literacy as a combat multiplier

by Mr. Tim P. Lynch

Practical knowledge of belief systems, although useful for operational planning and decision making, has little to do with developing culturally proficient forward-deployed operators. There was a time when cultural competency was essential to the development of Marines, but that time passed shortly after World War II. Prior to that, America had neither the money nor the personnel to deploy military forces overseas for anything other than extended periods. The North China Marines of the 4th Marine Regiment, who were stationed in Shanghai, China, from 1927 to 1941, are a perfect example. Marines assigned to that regiment could anticipate spending their enlistment in China and many, if not most of them, were culturally proficient enough to both mingle with and understand the local civilian population. They had little choice—they were not going anywhere and there was not much to do during off-duty hours back in the pre-television era. They were culturally proficient enough to rescue my grandmother and my infant mother from a Chinese troop train heading to Manchuria they had mistakenly boarded. My grandfather was a navy physician and not culturally savvy enough to figure out Chinese train schedules—something the officer of the day figured out when he saw the regimental medical officer back on base hours before he should have been.

Determining there were two American female dependents on a Chinese troop train heading to Manchuria, organizing a squad size mounted patrol, and then riding north into the Chinese countryside for an entire day to get them off the train indicates a de-

>Mr. Lynch is a retired Marine, current freelance writer, and the founder of Free Range International, a blog focused on Afghanistan. He enlisted in the Navy in 1979, spending six years in the Navy as a hospital Corpsman. He served the next sixteen years as an Infantry Officer, commanding at every rank until his retirement in 2000. During this period, he participated in three overseas deployments, served in instructor billets at both The Basic School and the Infantry Officer Course, and served as the Officer in Charge, Special Missions Branch, Special Operations Training Group, Marine Forces Atlantic.

tailed knowledge of, and comfort with, local atmospherics. Interestingly, my grandmother said when the train was stopped in the open countryside “the biggest Marine officer she had ever seen” entered the train to take custody of her and my mother. After the war, she was introduced to the by-then colonel who turned out to be Victor H. Krulak. She was actually taller than he was which speaks volumes about human memory.

LtGen Victor H. Krulak (Ret) was stationed with the 4th Mar in China from 1937 to 1939. He was knowledgeable in local atmospherics (to include belief systems) enough to roam the countryside. Using a telephoto lens, he even captured pictures of Japanese ramp-bow landing craft. His Wikileaks page tells the rest of the story:

Recognizing the potential use of such a craft by the U.S. armed forces, Krulak sent details and photographs back to Washington, but discovered years later that they had been filed away as having come from “some nut out in China”. Krulak built a model of the Japanese boat design and discussed the retractable ramp approach with boat builder Andrew Higgins who incorporated elements of Krulak’s input into the Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP) or “Higgins boat”, which

played critical roles in the Normandy Landings and amphibious assaults in the Pacific.¹

Were there any Marines stationed in Afghanistan who could have matched then-captain Krulak’s ability to roam the countryside at will? There were a few; I remember talking with a Marine lawyer in Naw Zad who had volunteered for a deployment as a civil affairs officer. He had worn out two pairs of boots walking in the valley surrounding Naw Zad; he told me he not only knew every family but could identify the owner of every goat in the valley. The pity is that when he deployed back home most of his hard-won knowledge went with him.

The only belief system that is relevant to operational planning and decision making is our internal belief system in which (for the American military) the number one imperative is to accomplish the mission. Staying with the Afghanistan example, the mission there was to support the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but that government remains a completely corrupt enterprise that has never been considered legitimate by a majority of the population. The fact that the government was installed and remained supported by foreign military power

throughout its short tenure is all the average Afghan needs to know about its legitimacy.

Once given a mission, our belief system dictates that we commit to accomplishing as much of that mission as possible during deployments that averaged seven months. What that means at the maneuver battalion level is uncovering bad guys and thumping them hard, so they will concede turf to our allies while supporting the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. But who are the bad guys?

By 2009, when the Marine Corps entered Helmand province, the intelligence picture was clear enough to reliably identify enemy combatants. However, at the beginning of the war that was not the case, and in our eagerness to find somebody to fight, we made multiple, serious mistakes that were not a product of a lack of appreciation for local belief systems. They were instead a reliance on warlords who had entered Afghanistan with us and were clearly using our military as a tool to consolidate control and gain power in their respective regions.

The probability that our initial interventions into any complex system will produce our desired results is zero.

In December of 2001, there was a meeting of tribal elders in the province of Kandahar. They declared the old Taliban regime null and void and conducted a Shura to determine their next move. At this assembly, a veteran Mujahedeen commander from the district of Maiwand, who was the leader of the millions-strong Ishaquazi tribe named Haji Burget Khan, stood and addressed the men. He urged that they go with the Americans and Karzai because there would be jobs, development, and the farmers would be left alone to grow what they wanted which in Maiwand was opium.

As related in the book *No Good Men Among the Living* by Anand Gopal, Haji Burget Khan was elected as the gover-

nor of Maiwand district at that Shura, he persuaded hundreds of Taliban to come to the Karzai side and delivered over fifteen truckloads of weapons to the governor of Kandahar. He also took the time to visit the Americans in January of 2002, spending several days telling them all he knew about the Taliban.

All this good work did not save him because Maiwand was known as “Dubai” to the locals because of its lush farmland and well-stocked bazaars. There were two warlord families who, using the Americans, were struggling to control the province, and when warlords “control” something that means gaining all available market share in every sector. The Karzais were one of those families and the other was headed by Gul Agha Sherzai. The elder Karzai was obviously occupied in Kabul, and until he could get Sherzai out of the way (he appointed him to the lucrative position as the governor of Nangarhar province in 2004), Sherzai was cornering the American construction and intelligence business.

Back in 2002, the American military had a problem; they were there to

hunt down the Taliban, but the Taliban had surrendered their weapons and gone home or over the border to Pakistan. What do you do when you have a war to fight and the enemy refuses to cooperate? This is a question we never had to ask because we relied on the Sherzai and Karzai networks for information. The Sherzai network identified Haji Burget Khan as a Taliban leader and also labeled the Afghan National Police (local men) of the district an anti-government militia. Our special forces raided Haji Burget Khan’s compound shooting him several times, killing a bunch of his family members, and removing the wounded leader and every fighting-age male in his village to a detention camp at the Kandahar Airfield. Haji Burget

Khan was never seen alive again. The 53 men who were taken with him were released after 5 days of questioning (which included the shaving of their beards—a huge cultural insult) when the American interrogators realized that they had, in fact, been supporters of the central government. Maiwand district subsequently went back over to the Taliban.

Afghanistan was a complex system that we feared would degenerate into absolute tyranny after we removed the Taliban. That did not happen; in a majority of the country, former Taliban turned in their arms and went home or went to Pakistan. The only exception to that trend was the al Qaeda and Taliban fighters who moved into and stayed in the Shahi Kot valley some 60 miles south of Gardez. They were the target of Operation ANACONDA, a large fight that would have gone better had we slowed down, done a proper intelligence preparation of the battlespace, and laid on an adequate fire support plan. But we did not do that; instead, we threw every special operations unit available with a battalion from both the 10th Mountain Division and 101st Airborne into the valley, in some cases landing on top of enemy fighting positions, and slugged it out with an opponent who should have been fixed and finished with supporting arms before we closed with him.

In an attempt to derive lessons from our early involvement in Afghanistan, it is useful to focus on one fact—that we will not understand the local political, social, or economic systems and that our intervention will inevitably have consequences we did not anticipate and that run counter to our stated intent. The probability that our initial interventions into any complex system will produce our desired results is zero. That is the one historical fact that should always be incorporated into any intervention regardless of purpose.

If a post-conflict political system is not degenerating into absolute tyranny, then it is doing better than most; degeneration into abject tyranny is the historical norm in traumatized societies. At the start of 2002, Afghanistan was not degenerating into tyranny. If we had not inserted mountains of cash, weap-

ons, maneuver battalions, and special forces teams and left the Afghans alone to work out their new government, they could have worked it out because it was to everyone's advantage to do so. The United States has always been able to adapt to local ground truths over time and eventually sharpened its enemy combatant detection capabilities. What we seem incapable of doing is entering post-conflict countries like Afghanistan and not de-stabilizing them with a tsunami of both military and civil aid money. The United States needs to learn how to slow down the introduction of help until it understands who needs help and how much help they need.

Where does practical knowledge in local belief systems fit into our operational planning cycle back in 2002? Even if there were senior folks in Kandahar who had a basic understanding of local mores, history, and traditions, how could they have stopped our growing counterinsurgency program dead in its tracks by explaining we do not know enough of the ground truth to separate the good from the bad? There were plenty of former Taliban leaders who had moved to our side and were willing to give the Kabul government a chance. There were also tribal leaders on our side who were clearly motivated by both greed and money and had no interest in a Kabul-based central government.

Where in the American military planning system is there an option for moving into a post-conflict area and taking the time to sort out the good from the bad before doing anything? The American military performs a variety of tasks and missions but the one thing it does not do is nothing. When the Americans hit an objective area, things are going to start happening, bad guys unmasked and killed, local infrastructure improved, and cash for work programs established. If we run out of things to do, we'll have the locals painting rocks for cash which a South African NGO worker told me actually happened in Marjah, but I never saw any painted rocks on my visits there, so he might have been joking.

Practical knowledge of Afghan belief systems (and there are significant varia-

tions within the Afghan population) was of significant help to me during my stint as a USAID direct implementor. My colleagues and I dressed in local clothes and drove in local vehicles while living in local compounds without elaborate U.N. Minimum Occupational Safety Standards augmentation. We avoided speaking in English when outside our compounds and although not many of us were fluent in Dari or Pashto we could speak and understand enough to get by. We provided for our own security while finishing every project on time and on budget because we personally supervised every project even though we worked only in contested provinces. I was comfortable enough in Afghanistan to have my children visit me for months at a time and they enjoyed the visits. But my detailed knowledge of Afghan belief systems was of little use to my Marine Corps friends when they deployed to Helmand.

I was close friends with the first two regimental combat team commanders who deployed into the Helmand province, Paul Kennedy at the helm of RCT 2 and David Furness who commanded RCT 1. I moved to Lashkar Gah in 2010 specifically to support their efforts with USAID money, and I was able to spend days imbedded with them both, but my knowledge of local belief systems was of little use to them. They were fighting an enemy who had a border they could disappear behind to rest and refit unmolested anytime they wanted to. They were supporting a government that was not in any way considered legitimate by the local population in the Helmand province. They were mentoring troops who came mostly from the north and were as alien to the Helmand valley as the Americans were. They spent as much time problem solving pay and logistics problems with their Afghan Army troops as they did fighting the Taliban.

At the senior general officer level, one would think that a demonstrated practical knowledge of cultural belief systems would enable an individual to have a disparate impact on National Command-level plans. Yet, the most competent general officer (regarding the Middle East) of his generation, Gen

Anthony Zinni, was ignored when he pointed out (correctly) the folly of going into Iraq without enough ground troops in 2003. Every subsequent problem in Iraq was predicted by Gen Zinni, which resulted in what? Not much at this point in history but unquestionably fertile research material for future generations of historians.

There are Marines who are adept at befriending and learning from host nation populations. They come in all ranks and from all backgrounds, but I have seen no evidence and can find no literature that identifies a practical knowledge of belief systems as essential to the development of these culturally proficient operators. That is because practical knowledge is gained from experience which is the opposite of theoretical. Any pre-deployment training that goes into detail about the belief systems of highland Pashtun tribes is theoretical until the Marines actually meet and deal with highlander Pashtun.

There are no shortcuts to developing culturally-proficient operators. To gain cultural proficiency, the operators need to operate inside the culture for extended periods of time. The theory that detailed instruction on belief systems (as opposed to being embedded in that system which is the only way to gain practical knowledge) will develop culturally-proficient operators may sound good in a PowerPoint presentation, but it is not practical. The only way to develop culturally-proficient operators is to expose them to the culture you desire them to be proficient in and leave them there for extended periods of time.

That is not going to happen nor should it because a cadre of culturally-proficient operators is meaningless in the context of strategic planning. Rather than emphasizing cultural proficiency, what the military should concentrate on is how to intervene in the third world without completely destabilizing local economies and security systems.

Note

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