

Career White Space

Exploiting junior officers' time between OCS and TBS

by 1stLt Cooper Strand

Each fall, hundreds of new Marines descend on college campuses around the country. They are usually thinner, tanner, and have worse haircuts than they did the previous semester. They are the typecast new Marine: motivated, proud, and hungry for more experience. Unfortunately, the Platoon Leader's Class (PLC) program in which they participate often fails to engage them beyond Officer Candidates School (OCS) graduation. The "white space" that most PLC candidates exist in should be exploited, and I propose the implementation of a program similar to one which already exists in the Army. Such a program would payback dividends to both the individual Marine and the institution as a whole.

Under the current system, PLC candidates graduate from OCS and return to their college to complete their senior year. To varying degrees, they stay involved in their Officer Selection Offices (OSOs), but their sustainment training does not often go beyond workouts, occasional classes taught at their OSO's discretion, and perhaps attending an OCS Prep Weekend as an instructor. Candidates routinely spend up to three or four semesters in this limbo status as they complete their degree plan. While they are valuable assets to their OSO in preparing prospective candidates, they are being underutilized. By giving fully trained candidates the option to integrate into a local Selected Marine Corps Reserve unit and shadow company-grade officers and staff non-commissioned officers at that unit's drill, we would turn out a better-prepared officer upon that candidate's commissioning.

The Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) engages its cadets (the Army's candidate equivalent) via an optional program called the Simul-

>1stLt Strand is a Combat Engineer Officer currently serving as the Heavy Equipment Platoon Commander at 9th Engineer Support Battalion in Okinawa, Japan.

taneous Membership Program (SMP). This program offers prospective officers the chance to be simultaneous members of a "Reserve Component Troop Program Unit, while simultaneously participating as a contracted cadet in [...] ROTC."¹ This program provides valuable training and experience that can and should be replicated by the Marine Corps. Under this program, cadets can voluntarily choose to enlist in either the Army Reserves or Army National Guard. They retain their rank of cadet,

Take the story of CPT Justin Ross, an Army logistics officer. He enlisted in the Army National Guard right out of high school with the intention of participating in the SMP. He attended Basic Training and subsequently began school full-time in Texas Tech University's ROTC department and part-time with the 2-142 Infantry of the Texas Army National Guard. His first year as a cadet in his National Guard unit was spent shadowing other lieutenants and learning about the various MOSs the Army has to offer. The following year, he settled on the logistics field and transferred to 2-124's Forward Support Company where he was placed in a provisional platoon leader position. In that unit, he had "an excellent XO who helped shape and mentor" him, and

By giving fully trained candidates the option to integrate into a local Selected Marine Corps Reserve unit ... we would turn out a better-prepared officer upon that candidate's commissioning.

and they retain their status as active members of their ROTC program. They are then assigned to a reserve unit and attend drill one weekend per month. During this drill period, they shadow a platoon leader, receive drill pay, attend their unit's two-week annual training, and reap the benefits of seeing how a real-world unit runs. The program offers them the option to attend Basic Training and AIT and become a fully trained soldier, but many participants choose to attend their basic ROTC training instead (simply meaning that they will not qualify for GI Bill benefits).

his opportunities grew exponentially. As a cadet, he ran M4 ranges, assisted in convoy gunnery, PMCS'd vehicles, and maintained accountability of his platoon's equipment. According to CPT Ross, the SMP helped him tremendously when he got to his first unit, and he felt significantly more prepared to take on his first billet as a commissioned officer. CPT Ross' story is one success story out of many. While individuals' experiences are dependent greatly on the leadership of their unit, those with no prior service stand to gain a significant amount of professional insight from the program.

The Marine Corps publication, *Unit Training Management Guide*, outlines the principles of training program development. Among these principles are the mandates to “train to sustain proficiency” and to “train to challenge.”² Candidates are trained to a high standard of proficiency at OCS, and that training is arduous. Offering candidates a means of continuing their training and challenges is crucial to their development as officers. Certainly, this occurs when they reach The Basic School (TBS), but an SMP-like program would bridge that gap between OCS and TBS. To further expound on the topic of “sustainment,” the Marine Corps published an entire book dedicated to helping leaders sustain the transformation that their Marines undergo in their entry-level training. Making Marines requires that young men and women are permanently changed after stepping on those hallowed yellow footprints. To borrow from retired Gen Charles C. Krulak’s forward from “Sustaining the Transformation,” “every Marine must take ownership of the process” that they undergo.³ It is up to the individual to take their transformation into their own hands, and it is up to Marine leaders to help their young Marines sustain that transformation. A “Candidate Selected Marine Corps Reserve Integration Program” would give the individual another option for sustaining their transformation, but only if their leadership is able to offer it to them. After all, this “transformation is an ongoing, dynamic process,” and that cannot be overstated.⁴ The work does not end when candidates graduate from OCS. More can and should be done to develop Candidates as officers before they reach their follow-on training at TBS.

Such a program could look like the following. Motivated PLC candidates returning home from OCS are given the option to begin actively drilling with a local reserve unit one weekend per month. Candidates are already technically enlisted in the Marine Corps’ Reserve component, so they would simply retain this status and begin actively drilling with a unit. Just as in the Army’s program, candidates would

collect a drill paycheck (equivalent to that of their E-5 pay grade from OCS) to compensate them for their time. As an attaché to their reserve unit, the candidate would shadow a company-grade officer (preferably a platoon commander), assist them in their daily duties, and participate in such unit training evolutions as would be appropriate to their own level of qualification. As with the Army’s program, a candidate would not be in a deployable status. Additionally, it is important that this program be optional for candidates, as one of the benefits of the PLC program is its flexibility and small-time commitment while in college. It would not be feasible for all candidates to participate because of varying availability and needs of some to work to pay their way through school. The candidate’s relationship to the platoon and platoon commander would be that of mentor-mentee, with

The Marine Corps could be doing more to develop its young officers ...

the candidate standing to gain much from the mentorship of the enlisted and officers in that unit. They would occupy a unique space—not enlisted, but not quite officers. This ability to play to both sides would give them unique access to learn from both.

The benefits reaped from such a program would be felt by both the individual Marine and the institution as a whole. Candidates would gain a wealth of experience in military skills and a significant amount of exposure to the workings of the operating forces. They would have exposure to enlisted personnel beyond their recruiting staff and sergeant instructors. They could complete professional military education courses, belt up in MCMAP as time permits, and learn much about the various MOSs of the unit they have been attached to. The institution would see a new wave of more-experienced second lieutenants arriving at TBS. These lieutenants could be quicker to adapt

to the rigors of TBS, more mature, and able to mentor those around them who have not had the same training opportunities. In other words, the amount of “informal instructors” at TBS would increase, thereby benefiting all students. Any officer who has spent any amount of time around a prior-service Marine can attest to the value they bring. Those lieutenants would take their experiences with them to the fleet and contribute in many similar ways that Mustangs do once commissioned. This program could also increase junior officer participation in the Reserve Component, which is consistently lacking in junior officer manpower.

The Marine Corps could be doing more to develop its young officers before they even pin on the gold bars of a second lieutenant. If you are not improving and sustaining your training, you are getting worse. It is time to offer a new opportunity for hundreds of eager young candidates each year to exploit their own “white space.”

Notes

1. Staff, *Reserve Officers’ Training Corps Simultaneous Membership Program (SMP)*, (Fort Knox, KY: U.S. Army Cadet Command, 2006).
2. Headquarters, Marine Corps, *Unit Training Management Guide*, (Washington, DC: 1996).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 6-11D, Sustaining the Transformation*, (Washington, DC: 1999).
4. Ibid.

