

Permeability

Leveraging the Marine Corps' most valuable asset

by Maj Dario Donatelli

The Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution envisions a well-regulated militia composed of ordinary citizens. A modern parallel to this vision is the Marine Corps' concept of permeability, as illustrated by my journey of military service.

After nearly seven years in the active component (AC), I left to pursue a master's degree and reconnect with family, only to discover through the Selected Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR) that I could balance graduate school with part-time service. This flexibility, offering extra income and affordable health insurance, allowed me to weave Marine Corps duty into my life without fully stepping away, embodying the amendment's ideal of citizens ready to serve when needed.

As my civilian career and personal life evolved, permeability continued to adapt my service to my circumstances. I transitioned to the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) when work demanded more time and later took a one-year deployment to the Middle East on Active-Duty Operational Support (ADOS) orders when my civilian job disappointed. I eventually found stability in the Active Reserve (AR) program after marrying and starting a family. Through each shift—AC, SMCR, IRR, ADOS, and AR—the Marine Corps remained a constant, demonstrating how permeability not only enabled me to meet life's changing demands but also proved how permeability can reinforce the Corps with a flexible, committed force, echoing the Second Amendment's enduring call to duty.

Permeability refers to the increased opportunity and ability to transfer between Marine Corps component categories. These categories include the IRR, SMCR, Individual Mobilization Augmentee (IMA) Program, IRR/SMCR/IMA on ADOS orders, IRR/SMCR/IMA on AR short tour orders, AR, and AC. It presents a viable opportunity for Marines to find and continue their patriotic path of service. Life can be complicated by goals, family, education, or location, which may become incompatible with the goal of a standard twenty-year AC career. When the traditional AC lifestyle no longer aligns with a Marine's desired life plans,

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Cpl Reagan Trent, combat engineer, 4th Combat Engineer Battalion, 4th MarDiv, Marine Forces Reserve, who was nominated as a Renowned Reservist during BRIGHT STAR 23 at Mohamed Naguib Military Base, Egypt. BRIGHT STAR 23 was a multilateral U.S. Central Command exercise held with the Arab Republic of Egypt across air, land, and sea domains that promoted and enhanced regional security and cooperation, and improved interoperability in irregular warfare against hybrid threat scenarios. (U.S. Marine Corps photo illustration by Cpl Samuel Qin.)

a door may close, but another may open in the RC.

The IRR provides low-commitment service through optional correspondence courses, funeral honors, and musters. The SMCR fosters camaraderie and provides numerous indirect monetary benefits through monthly or quarterly weekend work periods (drills) and two weeks of active-duty service with a reserve unit each year. A key direct monetary benefit is travel expense reimbursement that currently provides a \$750 reimbursement for round-trip travel expenses for up to 11 trips per fiscal year for SMCR Marines in a valid billet identification code whose primary residence is 150 miles or more from their home training center (Reserve Training Center). Individual Mobilization Augmentee billets offer greater scheduling flexibility with equivalent pay and benefits. Short-term options like ADOS or AR short tours allow active-duty service for six to twelve months. Conversely, an agreement to join the AC or AR program generally requires a three-to-four-year commitment, potentially leading to a full career and active-duty retirement.

There are several means to engage in the concept of permeability. The AC Marines may transfer to the AR by following the latest MARADMIN instructions on applying for AR accession. Upon reaching their end of active service date, AC Marines may also seamlessly transfer to an SMCR or IMA billet by requesting from an AC command career counselor to apply for the Direct Affiliation Program. Marines in the SMCR may request to transfer to an IMA billet by submitting an inter-unit transfer using the Inventory Development and Management System (IDMS), which is a sub-module within the Requirements, Transition, and

Manpower Management System. The IMA Marines may also submit a request in IDMS to transfer to an SMCR billet. The IRR Marines may contact their local Prior Service Recruiting Station to apply for an SMCR or IMA billet. The SMCR, IMA, and IRR Marines may also apply for short-term, active-duty billets funded by ADOS or AR Short Tour funds by contacting the points of contact listed for such billets, which are advertised on the Marine Forces Reserve Active Billets website.

These options are all in addition to the Return to Active Duty (RAD) option for officers and the Prior Service Enlistment Program (PSEP) option for enlisted. Both the RAD and PSEP allow members of the SMCR, IMA, and IRR to conduct an inter-component transfer to the AC.

Permeability succeeds by connecting qualified, motivated Marines with available opportunities wherever they exist. When a Marine eager to serve cannot fill a vacant billet they are suited for, permeability falls short. To ensure its success, we must reduce or remove the barriers that prevent these vital connections between Marines and their roles.

Three obstacles stand in permeability's way: a system too slow to keep up with Marines' needs ("moving at the speed of relevance"), a rigid billet search and assignment platform that struggles to customize opportunities for each Marine, and the vacant-billets listing is not streamlined for easy applicant engagement.

First, timing is everything; a perfect plan that arrives too late is as good as a missed shot. The same goes for permeability: if we spot the ideal billet for a Marine after they have already walked away from the Corps, all we are left with is another gapped position and a lost opportunity. Imagine a Marine, skills honed and ready, slipping through the cracks because the system could not pivot fast enough to meet their moment of need.

The Marine Corps has identified this need and is tackling this head-on with rolling boards for AR accession, RAD, and PSEP packages. These are not just bureaucratic tweaks; they are a shift to a nimbler, more responsive

approach, cutting the lag between a Marine's readiness and the Corps' call. Speed matters, and this move toward *relevance pace* ensures Marines are not left waiting or, worse, walking away when the right role is out there.

Second, the traditional three-year PCS tour offers benefits like stability and deep engagement, but it does not work for everyone. Many Marines want to serve on active duty yet find a full tour impractical, whether due to family needs or civilian commitments they cannot set aside. These Marines often bring valuable skills, like civilian job experience or new ideas, and can make a real difference, even in shorter stints. A year of service from someone capable is far better than an unfilled billet.

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Consider a Marine with logistics experience from the private sector, such as FedEx, UPS, or Amazon. A short tour could put those skills to use rather than letting them go to waste. In the past, options like ADOS were limited by funding and scope. Now, the reserve component is leveraging AR short tours, using AR funds to bring Marines on for as little as a few months to a year to fill open billets. This not only opens the AR program but also gives Marines a say in their duty station. Such flexibility helps the Corps adapt, matching opportunities to Marines' lives and strengths.

The third and most pivotal friction block to permeability is the absence of a centralized, accessible, and interactive source detailing available opportunities and their locations. Consider a Marine who recently transitioned from civilian work, equipped with sharp skills and a strong desire to serve again, prepared to fill a vacant billet perfectly suited to their expertise. Yet, without a clear path to find it, that connection never happens. Current tools like the MARFOR-

RES Sourcing Cell Dashboard offer a partial view of available billets but do not include available SCMR and IMA opportunities and often omit AR short tours. A prior service recruiter will identify SMCR and IMA openings only in their local region and have little incentive to mention ADOS opportunities, as those conflict with their regionally assigned SMCR and IMA mission quotas. The result is a fragmented system where no single platform exists to show Marines all open billets, complete with contacts and details, leaving funded positions unfilled simply because Marines do not know they are there.

This gap is not a minor inconvenience; it is a fundamental flaw that erodes permeability's purpose. Unfilled

billets represent more than empty slots; they are lost chances to leverage Marines' experience, strengthen units, and maintain readiness. A logistics NCO with private-sector know-how, a cyber expert ready to bolster defenses, or an officer skilled in mentorship could all be sidelined by this opacity. Across the force, thousands of positions remain vacant, not from a lack of talent or funds but from a lack of more prominent visibility.

The solution lies in a bold step forward: a Marine Corps Opportunity Portal, a comprehensive, user-friendly platform that consolidates every Service option in one place. Unlike static lists or limited dashboards, this would be a dynamic resource where Marines can explore all openings (e.g., SMCR billets in northern California, a six-month ADOS assignment overseas, an AR short tour in Virginia, or a RAD option for an 0311 MOS). Users could filter by location, duration, or required skills (e.g., engineering, Midwest, under two years) and instantly see tailored matches, each with a descrip-

tion, point of contact, and application link. For SMCR and IMA Marines, the Marine Corps Opportunity Portal could integrate with IDMS or supplement IDMS to submit an interunit transfer request to fill a billet in another unit or request reassignment to a new open billet within the currently assigned unit. In situations where mul-

This is not an abstract ideal; it is a practical necessity to unlock the potential of a permeable Marine. A centralized portal would bridge the gap between Marines' skill sets and the Corps' readiness needs, operating at the speed of relevance while honoring the flexibility modern military Service demands. The impact could be transformative: a

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iple applicants apply for the same open billet within a specified timeframe, Headquarters Marine Corps, recruiters, and gaining commands could review all applicant data and make informed decisions about who is the most qualified candidate.

Designed for accessibility, the Marine Corps Opportunity Portal could function seamlessly on mobile devices, letting Marines browse during a commute or downtime. To enhance engagement, it might include brief profiles from Marines who have taken similar roles: "My year on ADOS in Europe sharpened my leadership and brought me back to the Corps full-time." It could be elevated further with smart features: an alert system could notify Marines of new billets matching their profiles, such as "Your operations experience fits a 12-month AR tour in Pendleton," while a directory connects them directly to billet sponsors for quick, informed discussions about expectations and logistics. Virtual briefings could showcase units with open roles, offering Marines a chance to hear from leaders and assess the fit. Integrated with efforts like the Talent Management Engagement Portal for AC Marines, and programming that incorporates billet assignment policy rules that are programmed in IDMS, this platform would unify the full spectrum of component category options into a single, transparent view, ensuring no opportunity slips through the cracks.

force where every open billet finds its Marine, where talent aligns with the mission, and where readiness becomes a certainty, not a question. Increased billet visibility is the vital thread that weaves speed, adaptability, and service into a stronger, more responsive Marine Corps.

Efforts like the Talent Management Engagement Portal signal progress toward supporting permeability, but their success hinges on one thing: a unified platform that reveals billets in all component categories in a single, accessible view. This one-stop shop would erase the knowledge gap that keeps willing Marines from serving, ensuring no opportunity stays hidden. Yet, even as we tackle today's barriers, a bigger question looms: If the Corps wants to keep its Marines, and those Marines want to stay, what could permeability become?

Unlike traditional, active component-focused *up-and-out* careers, permeability offers flexibility, letting Marines craft paths that fit their lives and families. Past attempts, like the Career Intermission Program, stumbled, but its potential shines through with smooth transitions from active to reserve component with a guaranteed return to full-time service.¹ Such a path could let Marines explore civilian opportunities, gain skills, and enrich the Corps upon return. Imagine a program where Marines pursue higher education; for example, earning a degree in data science via an SMCR or IMA billet using their GI Bill, then transition to an

active-duty billet via RAD or PSEP after one to two years. Enlisted Marines could finish undergraduate degrees full-time while staying a reserve Marine with their return secured. Such an AC-to-RC-to-AC model, purposeful and time-bound, could yield immense value, blending civilian expertise with military duty.

Ultimately, the Marine Corps must evolve to meet modern realities while holding fast to its enduring mission, a mission rooted in the Second Amendment's call for citizens ready to serve. Permeability answers that call, offering a practical way to weave service into Marines' lives, retaining talent, honoring commitment, and enhancing readiness by meeting them where they are: geographically, professionally, and personally. *By dismantling barriers, illuminating opportunities, and embracing flexible models, the Corps can redefine the career Marine as one whose contributions span a lifetime*, not just uninterrupted active-duty years. The time has come to embrace permeability not as a work-around but as a strategic cornerstone, building a force as adaptive and capable as the citizens it draws upon.

Notes

1. Hope Hodge Seck, "In 12 Years, Almost No Takers for Marines' Career Intermission Program," *Military Times*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2025/01/28/in-12-years-almost-no-takers-for-marines-career-intermission-program>.

>Author's Note: Maj Andrew Butler, LtCol John Aaron, and GS-14 Mr. Joseph Garcia contributed to this article.

