

Marine Security Guard Detachment Commander

Insights on detachment command

by 1stSgt Daniel P. Best

As one of only three recognized special duty assignments offered to Staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs), being a Marine security guard (MSG) detachment commander (DetComdr) continues to have a cloud of secrecy that is preventing qualified SNCOs from taking advantage of a unique and challenging assignment. The varied nature of MSG posts and experiences underlies that mystery, which can be a barrier to attracting high-caliber SNCOs in search of a unique and challenging assignment. The DetComdr is often the most senior Marine in the entire country within the chain of command and is required to independently operate effectively in a dynamic overseas diplomatic atmosphere that is unlike anything that is typically experienced in the Marine Corps. Each MSG detachment is a micro-unit that ranges in size but still contends with the full assortment of unit related hardships that are then magnified by the pressures of living overseas away from familiar social constructs and most resources. The DetComdr adopts the role of parent, coach, mentor, and disciplinarian—along with every other required billet that a horde of SNCOs would typically cover in a traditional unit. The purpose of this article is to shed some semblance of insight concerning the expectations and realities of the duties associated with being a DetComdr and detail the difficulties and benefits of the assignment. To accurately express the nuances of this billet, it is imperative to

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give an overview of the duty, the broad spectrum of command responsibilities, along with the family and social aspects of life working with the Department of State. The information provided stems from personal experience as a DetComdr at two embassies and the institutional knowledge acquired while serving as an instructor/advisor at the MSG schoolhouse.

Each MSG detachment is commanded by a SNCO and is one of the only instances in the Marine Corps where an enlisted Marine will hold the title

of “commander” by billet. Between the ranks of staff sergeant and master gunnery sergeant, DetComdrs serve two eighteen-month tours, each at a separate location. I was fortunate enough to be granted an extension by HQMC to serve an additional eighteen months at a third location. DetComdrs establish themselves as a skilled handler of the intricate details involved with reporting to both Marine Corps (administrative) and Department of State (operational) chains of command while maintaining positive working relationships with numerous local national and federal agencies. Understanding the Department of State culture can be daunting, as each post operates differently and independent of each other. A successful DetComdr will become immersed



Marine Security Guards are the eyes, ears, and physical security for U.S. embassies worldwide. (Photo by Sgt David Staten.)

in this new operational philosophy by remaining adaptive.

The administrative chain is comprised of a regional headquarters element, handling functions such as leave, liberty, pay, and disciplinary processes. A detachment will fall under one of nine global regions, each of which has a commanding officer, a first sergeant, a handful of inspecting officers, and a staff of administrative support Marines. The regional headquarters is usually located in another country, sometimes in a different time zone, and is not involved in the day-to-day operations of a detachment. Currently, my regional headquarters are in Florida while I am in Colombia. This distance emphasizes the importance of having an adept DetComdr who can handle complex situations while maintaining consistent liaison with higher headquarters.

Along the operational chain of command, the DetComdr reports directly to the regional security officer for all matters of security, tactical procedure, and emergency response capability. The regional security officer is a title given to special agents of the U.S. Diplomatic Security Service serving overseas who act as the principal security advisor to the Ambassador. Additionally, MSGs come under Chief of Mission (COM) authority, meaning the United States Ambassador, and not the Marine Corps, has final approval on the employment and actions of the MSGs. The DetComdr is responsible to the ambassador (or principal officer at post) for the readiness and conduct of the detachment. As a result, the DetComdr can be relieved of duty by either the ambassador or regional commander. The relationship between the two chains of command should be symbiotic, working in conjunction to support the Marines. As expected, when there is more than one person in charge, conflicts arise over who is authorized to make certain decisions or what is considered an operational versus an administrative concern. It is the DetComdr's responsibility to deconflict, direct, and execute in those instances when direction between the two chains of command leaves room for uncertainty.

When considering the leadership role of "commander," it is essential to note

that I know of no other opportunity that affords an enlisted Marine such broad latitude to command a contingent of Marines. If a SNCO is looking for a robust gamut of responsibilities that presents various challenges and potential for growth, they need to look no further than DetComdr duty. DetComdrs must rely on their prior experience, mental acuity, and character to navigate a variety of issues—from policy initiatives to leadership dilemmas—while providing expert input to superiors and fellow DetComdrs. Similarly, to other assignments there is a sense of excitement and healthy fear that accompanies a new DetComdr, the key difference comes as they set foot in a foreign country to command a detachment of Marines. That fear needs to be harnessed and directed toward their new assignment and figuring out how to accomplish the myriad of required tasks without the familiarity that accompanies other assignments. It is imperative that the DetComdr relies on their subordinates, especially the senior watch-stander on deck which is aptly titled the assistant detachment commander. These senior MSGs will have the institutional knowledge that new DetComdr is lacking—but always remember "to trust but verify" and reach out to the other DetComdrs when unsure.

These lessons were never more present than when I arrived to my first post in the small east African country of Kigali, Rwanda. The detachment had been operating for several weeks without a DetComdr, a common practice because of personnel shortages. I wanted to observe how the Marines operated for at least a week before taking over full control since it may be unsettling for a new leader to start their tenure by altering everything. That philosophy lasted three days before I felt compelled to step in and take my position as the leader of the detachment. They were not bad Marines, but they were forgetting to "stay Green," which is a term used on MSG duty to describe when the Marines are not acting like Marines first and start believing they are Department of State personnel. After a detailed rebuke of their behavior, demeanor, and appearance, they all bounced back spec-

tacularly. My assistant DetComdr and I created an unstoppable team because we trusted each other, eventually winning detachment of the year.

Marines serving on MSG duty are among the best Marines any DetComdrs will ever have the privilege to serve alongside. Each of them has undergone intensive screening that includes psychological testing, personality assessments, and peer evaluations. On average, MSGs are among the most capable and well-rounded Marines in the Corps. Though MSGs are mature and talented, they are still in need of consistent and professional development from a devoted mentor. These watch-standers provide 24-hour security which makes scheduling mentor sessions a challenge. These types of issues make underutilized contemporary skills like leadership through email a necessary evil but are a useful and effective tool if done with sincere appreciation for the welfare of the Marines. It is not uncommon to go several days without interacting with a particular watch-stander, depending on which shift they work because deliberate effort should be made to avoid disrupting their sleep cycle. The fact remains, it is the responsibility of the DetComdr to guide and mentor the junior Marines by any means necessary regardless of obstacles.

The independent nature of this duty acts as a conduit for innovative and original leadership practices to cultivate an environment of lifelong learning that will benefit the DetComdr throughout their careers. That effort will then be repaid through the actions of the watch-standers as they execute their own demanding responsibilities with the respect for a leader that is guiding them to reach their full potential. It is a tried and true core belief that to be effective in this program, the DetComdr must safeguard the welfare of their Marines by mandating constant improvement in every facet of life, epitomizing the "Whole Marine Concept." That means each DetComdr must display a genuine concern for his Marine's welfare by setting them up for success in either a career as a Marine or in life as a former Marine.

The daily life of a DetComdr varies widely based on post officials, security threats, host country cultural norms, detachment size, and leadership philosophies. Prior to becoming a DetComdr, all I ever heard were vague phrases like, “That duty is so easy, or all you do is travel and live in beautiful countries,” from Marines that were never DetComdrs. This is a disservice to all prospective DetComdr’s since it sets a false reality that can affect the decision to become a DetComdr or entice a certain caliber of SNCO that finds that narrative attractive. As a new DetComdr, I quickly learned no schedule dictates the actions of a DetComdr; therefore, their performance is predicated on personal initiative and being able to operate independently without intrusive supervision. I endeavored to follow a standard fleet schedule of 0730–1630, some immediate impediments were the mandate to periodically stand duty alongside the watch-standers, perform random after-hours inspections on the embassy and Marine house, along with the frustration linked to tasking and following up with Marines that perform shift work. If the DetComdr works a shift that kept them up all night or inspected the Marine house at 0230, there is no supervisor telling them that they have to work the next day. There are often task deadlines that must be met or scheduled meetings that prevent DetComdrs from working a standard schedule. Ordinary tasks like conducting physical training or completing PME can be easily pushed to the side to spend more time focusing on the numerous requirements associated with MSG duty. DetComdrs must develop a routine that works for them without taking advantage of the lack of regular observation. It is more appropriate to view becoming a DetComdr as a lateral move into an unknown military occupation with practically no semblance of normalcy.

As a supply chief, I had no prior knowledge of developing operational response strategies, creating detailed training plans, reporting protocols, or being a trusted assistant with fitness reports. The MSG schoolhouse training attempts to prepare potential DetComdr’s to execute every aspect of the mis-



U.S. Marine Security Guards prepare for a mock scenario during apprehension training at the U.S. Embassy in Madrid, Spain. (Photo by Tech Sgt Brian Kimball.)

sion, often facing time constraints that prevent the more beneficial in-depth comprehension before graduation. It immediately becomes clear as the DetComdr settles into their roles that they are expected to not only comprehend but demonstrate mastery of these skills because the watch-standers would suffer for their ineptitude. Depending on prior exposure and billets held some matters pertaining to the management of pay, leave, MOL, financial audits, and living standards may come easier, but every DetComdr will certainly face new difficulties that will be humbling. This humility is experienced by all and if it is harnessed as a learning experience and not used as an excuse to avoid obstacles, the DetComdr will certainly acquire all necessary skills.

For a successful and enriching tour of duty, a DetComdr’s family must be committed to facing the difficulties of overseas living and the high work tempo that the new DetComdr will inevitably experience. When a family is assigned an overseas post, there are many things to learn rather quickly. The spouse can attend a week-long orientation in Quantico, VA, where they will receive classroom instruction, identify resources, and connect with other spouses that are also embarking on this new adventure. It is important to remember that

every post location is unique with specific advantages and challenges; most entitlements depend on host country availability and post official guidance. It is impractical to accurately cover all potential questions in this format but here is a review of the most popular concerns. Understand that any kind of domestic service, including child-care, that a family utilizes is never paid for by the U.S. government. There is typically a monthly newsletter or social media resources that will list available domestic help in the country that have experience working with American families. In Rwanda, we had a full-time housekeeper, cook, and gardener; in Colombia, we have a nanny and housekeeper, so the prospects are available and are typically cost-effective to employ. Items like educational opportunities for school-aged children are often among the highest quality in the country but wholly determined by the post and available resources. DetComdrs with children will only be assigned to a post that can provide adequate dependent education, which typically negates assignments of more austere locations. The housing options are as varied as the countries but are characteristically a higher degree of quality and size than any military installation. We had a six-bedroom house in Rwanda and had no

children; in Colombia, we live in an eleventh floor three-bedroom apartment with amazing views. The ability to bring pets with you will be determined by the country and your financial restrictions; it is not uncommon to spend thousands of dollars on shipping pets around the world. There are agencies available to provide options like temporary adoption or rehoming your pets if you are unable to bring them to post. Be cognizant that spouse employment has its own trials such as navigating the new employment channels, which can be intimidating as well as confusing. Many posts have employment opportunities specifically for spouses and the competition can be tough for adequate employment, but that does not mean that good jobs are not available. My wife has been fortunate to find rewarding and high paying jobs at each location, but the clearance process took several months. All travel opportunities are all subject to each family's available time, finances, and preferences; nonetheless, many families experience more travel than they ever imagined. Since joining the MSG program, my family and I have visited 23 countries and taken full advantage of standard leave and liberty.

One of the most positive experiences

during the program is the relationship your family can develop with the detachment. Because of the unique and familiar construct, duty as a DetComdr provides ample opportunity for spouses and families to become involved in supporting the detachment's mission. Sharing family events and activities with the detachment can become memorable morale boosters for both families and the Marines. We have hosted every type of social or family event from Christmas parties, birthday celebrations, Super Bowl viewings, and traditional Hail and Farewells. The embassy community usually wants to get involved with supporting the Marines as well, and it builds a good community of support for all involved. What is true across the board is that a successful tour on the MSG program will consist of many hours for the DetComdr and a family unit that is open and flexible to the new work and social cultures that will assuredly be faced. There are so many amazing positive opportunities, as well as some very new and difficult challenges even seasoned families will have a hard time with. Common tasks associated with primary change of station orders like setting up internet, buying groceries, or exploring new communi-

ties are intimidating when considering hindrances like language barrier, fashion choices, and cultural gender customs. It is important to come into the program with a strong marriage, an open mindset, and lots of patience with yourself and others.

There are many benefits to serving as a DetComdr, though they carry significant investments in both time and effort. The essence of the Marine Security Guard comes from delegation of leadership and requires that DetComdrs are able to thrive in an atmosphere that is equal parts rewarding and demanding. A successful DetComdr understands how to achieve the balance of training, mentorship, and direction that enables Marines to effectively execute the mission of the Marine Security Guard: *To provide protection to mission personnel and prevent the compromise of national security information and equipment at designated diplomatic and consular facilities.* Despite its challenges, there is no other assignment in the Marine Corps that provides the professional development and personal experiences of this unique and remarkable duty.

