

# Maturing the Force Through a Multi-Prong Approach

Building experienced small-unit leaders

by Maj Devon P. Sanderfield

The geopolitical landscape in the world is changing and the Marine Corps must adapt to ensure it can continue to provide a combat-ready force that is prepared to “fight tonight” against a capable and determined peer adversary. While there has been rigorous and passionate debate recently on the direction that the 38th Commandant has taken the Corps, there is no doubt that we are changing to meet his vision. For nearly two years, Alpha Company 1/2 Mar was at the forefront of Force Design experimentation as the designated Infantry Battalion Experiment for 2d MarDiv. This designation allowed the company to operate under an adjusted task organization table of equipment and drastically improved the maturity and experience within an infantry rifle company through a significant increase in staff non-commissioned officer and non-commissioned officer leadership. To test this new force structure, the company participated in five separate Force Design exercises designed and facilitated by 2d MarDiv in conjunction with the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab. These complex and strenuous exercises took the company through the swamps of Camp Lejeune, to the mountains of West Virginia, and disaggregated operations throughout southwest Arizona, California, and San Clemente Island. After a year of operating under the proposed infantry 2030 task organization and executing dozens of training exercises that resulted in a

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good mix of successes and failures, one thing has become clear: a more mature and experienced force brings superior performance and lethality to the infantry formation. The Marine Corps must take significant steps to mature the enlisted infantry force to meet the security challenges of the future.

This article is intended to address the Commandant’s vision to mature the force as part of infantry *Force Design 2030*. I will allow others to continue the ongoing discussion regarding the sensibility of a force without armor, the reduction of cannon artillery, and the applicability of the Stand-In Force construct. While a necessary discussion, this article does not intend to delve into those areas of the debate. Instead, it will focus on the manpower and task-organization design of the future infantry rifle company and provide recommendations for improvements going forward. These observations and recommendations are shaped by



**A rifleman with 1/2 Mar launches a small unmanned aircraft system during training on San Clemente Island. This training and experimentation helps develop small-unit leaders for distributed company-level operations. (Photo by LCpl Sarah Pysher.)**

my experience as the commander of a Force Design infantry rifle company from July 2021 to April 2023.

### Maturing the Force

The Commandant has emphasized the necessity to distribute forces in the face of an adversary equipped with advanced sensors and precision-guided munitions. In his *Talent Management 2030* guidance, he states, “Success on future battlefields as a distributed stand-in force will require our Marines to be more physically fit and cognitively mature, with a higher level of operational experience.”<sup>1</sup> Over the past year, Alpha Company has changed dramatically to meet this vision and test this theory. Within the company, a master sergeant operations chief replaced the traditional company gunnery sergeant. Gunnery sergeants assumed the duties of platoon sergeants, staff sergeants as the rifle squad leaders, and sergeants filled the critical small-unit leader role as a team leader. In addition to these key leaders filling these important billets within the rifle squad, each fire team had several additional talented young corporals that can be leveraged by the unit leaders to carry out mission-critical roles within the team. This increase in rank structure naturally brought with it Marines with additional years of military service, additional advanced-level schooling, and general life experience that allowed them to approach and solve problems in a superior way.

Superior decision making and adaptability in uncertain environments were the key benefits observed throughout the past year. The maturity was especially evident while operating in field environments. While executing a Force Design exercise in Fola Mine, WV, as part of one of the battalion’s deployments for training, the company conducted a nighttime air assault into an exercise box nearly one hundred miles from the battalion. The company was tasked with locating and destroying a coastal defense missile battery and a key anti-air missile system that was a threat to our naval fleet offshore. While intelligence knew with high probability that these adversary systems were in the operational area, their exact location was

unknown upon insert. It was believed that the enemy had utilized some of the many mines in the area to conceal their assets from overhead reconnaissance satellites. A reduced infantry company from an adjacent battalion served as the adversary force to defend these systems and was equipped with unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and ground signals intelligence systems that complemented their conventional small-arms weapons. This exercise required platoons to distribute over fifteen miles for five days, providing tremendous pressure on my ability to command and control these disaggregated units. While some would argue that deploying a rifle company this far from the battalion and base of support may be unrealistic, it is undeniable that this exercise allowed the company to put its increased maturity to the test.

To be successful in avoiding enemy detection and accomplish our mission in this type of environment, the platoons were forced to further distribute their squads. At multiple points up to fifteen separate units were moving through the snowcapped hills of Fola Mine, each equipped with their own long-haul communications assets and tactical UAS and were each being hunted by an adversary with similar capabilities. The ability for these small units to operate for hours and even days at a time outside of direct communications with their higher headquarters required unit leaders who were more mature, proficient, and possessed an increased understanding of commander’s intent and mission-type orders. Due to the adversary’s ability to detect radio transmissions, communication between elements required a leader who could analyze the current adversary situation, exploit terrain to mask transmissions, and use a series of brevity codes and communications windows to ensure they were not compromised before accomplishing their mission. After days of largely avoiding detection and searching the operational area, the company was able to locate both enemy systems utilizing organic sensor capabilities, unmanned aerial systems, and small organic ground reconnaissance teams to allow the commander to put together

a plan that resulted in platoons simultaneously destroying both systems in the dead of night against an unsuspecting enemy.

Additional training exercises continued to stress the company’s task organization and highlight the benefits of the increased maturity and experience within the unit. When the battalion deployed for training to Yuma, AZ, in support of Weapons and Tactics Instruction, we once again wanted to put our Force Design structure to the test—this time in the desert. To do this, my team designed a complex squad live-fire attack range where we would again test the implementation of the Arms Room Concept and overload the rifle squad with additional gear not commonly found within a traditional small unit.<sup>2</sup> We also wanted to design the training to emphasize decision making in an environment of uncertainty, something rarely seen incorporated into live-fire exercises. To start, the Marines were not allowed to walk the range prior to conducting their dry run rehearsal, and squads were not allowed to observe other squads executing before they themselves had finished. This forced the squad members to operate in an environment of uncertainty. Prior to arrival at the range, the squad leader had not received a detailed operations order—instead, he received his task over the radio only 30 minutes before execution. The fragmentary order they received only told them that an enemy force had been spotted in the area by the company’s airborne UAS. They were provided a six-digit grid coordinate and tasked with destroying this unit that was nearly a kilometer away on the other side of a terrain feature. The squad leader led an Arms Room capable force equipped with recoilless rifles and medium machineguns, a 60mm mortar tube with limited ammunition, and a quadcopter sUAS system. This chaotic and uncertain situation and the amount of gear and technology available forced the squad leader to think on his feet. If the additional gear and not seeing the terrain prior to execution were not enough, the squad leader was also informed that the company’s tactical UAS was overhead

and available for their tasking. When the squad leader stopped and looked up, he would see the unmanned aircraft flying over his position. *What now staff sergeant?*

While some squads certainly outperformed others, it was clear that the increased maturity and experience that resulted from having a staff sergeant in the squad leader position and two sergeants leading the fireteam increased their ability to rapidly assess the situation, make decisions, and leverage their technology to help them place their unit in the best position to win. After nine iterations with each squad in the company, the results were undeniable. All of the gunnery sergeants and above evaluators within the company, all of which had multiple combat deployments over nearly two decades of service, all agreed on one thing: maturity and experience matter.

### **Maturity and Experience Matter**

The increased experience and maturity that have accompanied the expanded rank structure within a *Force Design 2030* company have not only increased our effectiveness and lethality in the execution of combat scenarios but also in the facilitation of effective and efficient training. With a gunnery sergeant platoon sergeant, three staff sergeants, six sergeants, and multiple corporals, platoons can execute self-supported training in ways that could never be accomplished by a rifle platoon under the legacy structure. While executing training in Yuma Proving Grounds in the spring of 2022, platoons were consistently in the field executing multiple live-fire ranges simultaneously—all with little to no support provided by the company. Not only were they able to meet the rank requirements to administratively conduct the range, but the inclusion of additional staff non-commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers brought with it the resident knowledge, experience, and maturity to provide their own instructors, coaches, and provisional safety officers. This allowed the company to be exceptionally efficient in training many Marines across multiple training areas in a limited amount of time.

Under this model, rifle squads are even capable of executing live-fire training independent of their platoons, an impossible notion under our current task organization. With our Nation's pacing threat dedicating significant time and resources to improving the training of their armed forces, time must be efficiently maximized to properly prepare our Marines to face this looming threat. Additionally, the ability to

maturity within an infantry formation is by extending the initial enlistments for infantrymen from four to six years. This is not a completely foreign concept as the Marine Corps already does this with some of our infantry contracts. Currently, Marines who come in on Security Forces or Ground Reconnaissance contracts sign a five-year initial enlistment. Extending the initial service obligation for our enlisted infantry

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execute more efficient training not only results in a more combat-effective force, but also reduces the amount of time in the field required to achieve the same tasks, improving the work-life balance that will help as we attempt to retain more of our top-performing Marines.

### **Recommendations**

My time as the commander of a Force Design rifle company has continuously reinforced a commonsense notion: Increased maturity, proficiency, and experience result in increased combat power. That said, manning Alpha Company 1/2 Mar as an Infantry Battalion Experimental company required 2d MarDiv to cannibalize gunnery sergeants, staff sergeants, and sergeants from across the division. This is clearly not sustainable without a massive change to our current manpower system. To achieve a force with an increased level of maturity, proficiency, and experience as envisioned as part of the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, changes will have to be made. There are several steps the Service can take almost immediately to ensure we have a mature and experienced infantry force that is postured to succeed in both competition and conflict.

### ***Six-Year Initial Enlistments***

One step the Marine Corps can take to increase the level of experience and

force will allow Marines more time to attend necessary advanced schooling and increase experience levels through additional time serving in various leadership billets within an infantry formation. Under the current structure, Marines have time on their four-year contract to execute at most two pre-deployment training workups and subsequent deployments. Additionally, a quick examination of an infantry battalion shows that most of the small-unit leader positions are filled by Marines with only one deployment and less than three years of operational experience. With the introduction of complex technology at the small-unit level and the increased requirements to distribute forces further to survive against an enemy that can detect and target massed forces, this is no longer a sustainable model that will posture the Corps for a future conflict. We must invest in our infantry and provide commanders with Marines who have the time on contract to learn, train, and build the necessary experience required to operate in the future operating environment.

### ***Six-Year Fleet Obligation***

B-Billets such as drill instructor duty, recruiting, and embassy duty provide a unique growth opportunity for Marines and provide a necessary service within our Corps. However,

we must do better in ensuring our non-commissioned officers have time to gain experience within an infantry unit in the operating forces. Recently, a newly promoted sergeant in Alpha company received orders to serve on recruiting duty. While this Marine will undoubtedly learn valuable skills on this duty that will make him a better Marine and overall leader, he is being robbed of his critical formative years as an infantry small-unit leader in the operating forces. This is the time when he needs to gain experience through training and leading others. He needs to conduct difficult training, make mistakes, and have the time to reflect on those mistakes and grow. More than likely this Marine will get promoted to staff sergeant on recruiting duty and will return to the operating forces having missed out on years of experience that help mature the force in preparation for a future conflict. The Marine Corps cannot hope to meet the Commandant's vision of a more experienced and mature force by continuing with this approach. I am not arguing that infantry Marines be completely exempt from filling these duties—that would be unrealistic. However, if the Marine Corps is serious about building the maturity, proficiency, and experience necessary to be successful in a future fight, infantry Marines should be required to stay in the fleet for their initial six years

before being eligible for subsequent assignments. It is time we realign our priorities.

#### *Advanced Infantry Training Requirement for Promotion*

There is currently no requirement for infantry sergeants and below to successfully complete grade-appropriate advanced infantry training to become eligible for promotion to the next rank. This requirement does exist; however, when it comes to other developmental schools such as Lance Corporal Seminar, Corporals Course, and Sergeants School. Marines who fail to complete these courses will not be considered for promotion until they take steps to complete them. Why is this not the case for advanced infantry schooling? Is it somehow more important for an infantry Marine to be Sergeant School or Corporals Course complete than it is to attend Advanced Infantryman's Course or Infantry Small-Unit Leader's Course? This is not to argue that schooling such as Sergeants School is unimportant. They certainly provide tremendous value to all that attend. It is again simply a matter of priorities. If the Marine Corps is serious about achieving a more mature force, it is time we realign our priorities to ensure we have Marines with the necessary capabilities, experience, and maturity that are developed and honed through our advanced infantry schools.

Although there is much controversy regarding certain aspects of Force Design, improving the maturity and experience within our infantry formations should not be one of them. Just like with any team, whether in business, sports, or a military organization, increasing the level of maturity, operational experience, and advanced education is going to increase the quality of the results. As the company commander for a Force Design company for the past eighteen months, this is exactly what my team and I have been witness to. While the recommendations outlined above may not be the exact answer or may need refinement as time goes on, there is no doubt that the current model requires adjustments to meet the vision of a more mature and experienced infantry force. The Marine Corps should implement the recommendations outlined above to ensure the future infantry force has the maturity and experience required to meet the security challenges of the future.

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#### Note

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Talent Management 2030*, (Washington, DC: November 2021).
2. D.P. Sanderfield, "The Arms Room Concept," *Marine Corps Gazette* 107, No. 8 (2023).

