



Professional Note

Take care of 'em

Base Plate McGurk Expounds . . .

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I didn't know Johnny Johnson was here!" Tex exclaimed as we were sitting in our regular booth at Happy Hour. Mike, Dusty and I all turned to look in the direction Tex was beckoning and sure enough Johnny was heading in our way with a wide grin on his face.

Joseph Roger Johnson was very popular in our TBS class. Average height, he was quick in both his reflexes and in his thought processes. That probably explains why he stood at the top scholastically and was the best shot with both the rifle and pistol. As he sat down we all started to question him at the same time. Johnny just laughed and shook his head until we quieted down.

"You characters haven't changed a bit," he smiled. "Yes, I'm still at P.I. I've been on leave and dropped by Headquarters to talk to my monitor. I'm heading back to my recruit company tomorrow."

"How do you like recruit training duty?" Dusty asked.

"I really enjoy it" Johnny answered enthusiastically. "You've had that kind of duty haven't you, Dusty?"

"No," Dusty shook his head. "I had recruiting duty on the West Coast, not recruit training at a MCRD. However, I used to follow up on some of the people I recruited because I wanted to see how they did in boot training and how they made out later on at their first duty stations."

"I'm interested!" Johnny leaned forward. "I've done a little of the same. What did you discover?"

"To put it succinctly," Dusty answered, "Disappointment at the best, disillusionment at the worst."

"Say which?" Mike asked. "I don't read you." I must admit I was startled by Dusty's answer and even Tex was rubbing his chin the way he does when he's stumped.

"You're referring to how newly joined Marines are assimilated by their first unit after boot camp, right?" Johnny nodded.

"Right!" Dusty agreed. "Or, as it turns out in too many cases, to how little effort is expended in joining the individual and making him feel a part of his new unit. New Marines particularly have a tough time in finding themselves and getting oriented in a new outfit after leaving the daily close supervision they became used to in their recruit platoon. This has always been a pet peeve of mine since it's obvious that until a newly joined Marine finds his or her place in an organization, they won't produce up to their potential."

"I see what you're driving at," Tex said. "I've seen it myself. Initial impressions are lasting. It's absolutely essential that every Marine understands that he or she is an important part of the unit."

"Originally, reception practices throughout the Corps evolved essentially as informal traditions. How-

ever, most commands now have more formalized procedures," Dusty said. "The problem is, there are differences in geography, mission, resources and personalities that determine which approach is most suited to a particular command."

"True," Johnny agreed. "However, generally speaking there are two approaches. The larger bases and air stations utilize the Joint Reception Center because there are so many different activities assigned. Places like Lejeune, Quantico, Okinawa, etc. have these centers where newly joined Marines are put on the assembly line approach."

"Yes, and that's where the most glaring deficiencies can easily occur," Tex said. The worst places too often are the joint disbursing facilities, pass and I.D. offices, and base housing. These places are sometimes staffed with demoralized, rude jerks who pass on their negative feelings to incoming personnel."

"Well, in all fairness," Johnny pointed out, "the reason those types have a chip on their shoulder is that none of the heavies ever stop by to pat them on the back. They only hear from the base or division sergeant major when the chief of staff raises hell because of a screw up."

"Probably, but another reason I've noticed is that often the OICs and staff NCOs are birds who can't handle battalion, battery, or squadron jobs," Tex answered.

"Well, I'll bet you'll agree that we've all seen one Joint Reception Center that really is a smooth and effective operation," Johnny shot back.

"You're talking about the one on Okinawa," Tex nodded. "Yes, that Joint Center for the 3d MarDiv, Camp Butler, and the 3d FSSG is an exception. I'd forgotten."

"You spoke of two approaches Johnny," Mike said, "What's the other one?"

"I think of it as the sponsor approach," Johnny answered. "Many smaller commands and even some pretty good size units utilize it. For instance, the 1st Marine Brigade has an outstanding Sponsor Program. Smooth as silk."

"Yeah, that's the one I use," Mike grinned. "I just have one of my Marines who's available show the new guy around. I don't see what's so complicated about joining new people."

"You're making the common mistake of believing that units have no competitors when it comes to securing the allegiance of newly arrived individuals," Johnny answered. "Within every unit, even smaller ones, certain cliques or groups exist. For example, typical groups are field grade officers, staff NCOs, and minorities. The danger, of course, lies with others like the potheads and those with such bum records they're just putting in time as differentiated from the group that has esprit and are proud of their unit."

"Roger that!" Tex said. "Any Marine, and particularly the younger, less experienced ones, will simply join the first group receptive to them, especially when their unit as a whole has not successfully drawn them into its structure. Unfortunately, all too often it's the losers who take the time and effort to make them feel welcome."

"Yes," Johnny nodded, "and that's understandable. A Marine on his way to a new duty station has a number of worries. He knows he has to find new friends. He has to learn to get along with new seniors. He thinks about his job and whether he can handle it. All of this comes together in a need to find his place in his new surroundings. Whether he recognizes it or not, he has a need to restore stability to his life."

Dusty had been unusually quiet just letting Johnny and Tex volley the subject. Now he smiled and got with the program. "Something else that hasn't been singled out concerns the young Marines assigned to headquarters billets. They must understand who is their immediate NCO and meet their officer-in-charge. Some of the most confused troops are young Marines working at division/wing headquarters with tons of field grade officers and staff NCOs running around but not knowing who they can go to for help."

"We used to brief the new arrivals on the first day about the facts of life in a line unit since many of them had come from some headquarters or school duty," I said.

"O.K." Mike said. "Enough of the psychology. Let's get specific about exactly what a 'welcome aboard' program should include."

"Well, Mike," Dusty said, "most programs have three broad phases—reception, orientation, and assimilation. Under those general headings you will find various and different techniques depending on the command's circumstances."

"Not just 'circumstances' either," Tex interrupted. "Initiative and imagination play big parts also. I've seen commands that are similar in geography, climate, size and resources with 'welcome aboard' programs as different as day and night, good, bad, or what ever."

"You're absolutely right!" Johnny agreed. "I've experienced the same thing. Sometimes you can attribute the success or lack of success to the commander involved. Other times the commander's head is screwed on right, but the officer he placed in charge of the program would foul up a two-car funeral."

"No arguments there lads," Dusty smiled. "The main thing is to make the Marine feel wanted, important and needed as soon as possible when he arrives. To look at him as just another number that trickled out of the pipeline is self-defeating. It's imperative that he gets settled with a minimum of hassle and inconvenience. This is the purpose of the reception phase."

"Well, what takes place in the orientation phase?" I asked. "I presume you mean giving him a guided tour of the area—PX, movie, restaurant, hostess house, that kind of thing."

"Yes, but a great deal more," Dusty answered. "For instance, if you want to save yourself from future disciplinary problems you'd better lay out for him, loud and clear, information on the surrounding civilian community, including cultural differences and both good and bad features of the locality. Also covering, of course, what opportunities exist for healthy recreation and educational improvement activities."

"I'd say equally as important in this phase is to help him understand his new command and his unit's role in its overall mission," Johnny offered.

"As part of that, how about spelling out for him his unit's goals and the plan to reach them?" Tex asked. "It seems to me he should be aware of what he can do to contribute to reaching those goals and of the difficulties he can expect in accomplishing them."

"I think that falls under the next phase or assimilation phase," Dusty answered. "It's a continuing process that gradually eases his adjustment into his new assignment. While doing this, you try to get from him either an actual or tacit commitment to do his best in fulfilling the job expected of him. Once you have this, however, it must continuously be nurtured by the leadership qualities of those senior to him."

"Well, I still say you should assign an old hand to show him around," Mike grouched. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, Mike," Johnny smiled. "In fact, it's very important. But this 'buddy' must be carefully selected. Also be sure he can be spared from his squad or crew. Furthermore, if the new arrival has a family, the sponsor can be a big help."

"I was just going to mention the distaff side," Dusty said. "If his family isn't happy, your Marine is not going to be able to concentrate no matter how good your program is. Wives want to be made welcome, they want to know the command is available to help and how to obtain it, and they want to know how their Marine is contributing."

"One thing that hasn't been brought up concerns time," Tex pointed out. "The time involved in the necessary administrative processing should be short and sweet. If the administrative processing is lackadaisical, sloppy, or tedious, the new arrival will become bored and disillusioned. He also needs free time to get his personal affairs and family squared away. If he is hassled and has a lot of loose ends hanging in his personal affairs, you'll get neither his attention nor his loyalty."

"To generalize what we've been saying," Johnny said, "a successful reception program feeds your retention and reenlistment programs."

"Yes!" Dusty agreed. "Every facet of a successful 'welcome aboard' effort must reflect a sincere interest in the Marine as an individual. Since there are so many Marines involved such as commanders, platoon sergeants, first sergeants, clerks and many others, the chances are ripe that the process can break down some-

where along the line. Unfortunately, there are still some in the Corps who are in responsible positions but lack a deep commitment to the group and the individuals who make up the group."

"I'll be damned if I can understand those jerks!" Mike growled. "Being a Marine puts you in the people business. That's the name of the game."

"Right, Mike," Johnny laughed. "Everyone has a role in a reception or assimilation plan whatever you call it. COs, NCOs, staff officers should look at the plan and ask themselves—do we really have a plan? how am I contributing to our overall plan? does my space look appealing to a new Marine? how can I improve my effort?"

"Yes, and there are some more questions," Tex interrupted. "What do we do when a Marine reports in after hours? Are we prepared to receive him, and can he or she be billeted without a hassle?"

"What we're really stressing here is the importance of the command interest

in seeing that the system works from platoon commander up the chain to the commanding general," Dusty pointed out.

"Or to put it another way," Johnny said, "every command should strive for a single, integrated, program that begins the first day the new Marine reports aboard and doesn't end until he sees himself as one of his unit's 'Old timers'."

As Johnny started to stand Dusty said, "To summarize, a good reception program should set standards, demonstrate sincerity, and establish a rare combination of the qualities embracing friendship/band of brothers feelings, and professional sustenance."

"That's right!" Johnny waved a hand in leaving and said, "The bottom line is—they're your Marines, take care of 'em."



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