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Rethinking Marine Corps Officer Promotion and Retention

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States Marine Corps is the vanguard for many forward-thinking policies, but it has not demonstrated progressive thinking on officer promotions. Despite working under the same authorization and rules, there are vast differences between United States military services on their policies to promote their most competitive officers. Within the Marine Corps, current practice allows lieutenant colonels and colonels to stay longer than they are needed, which hinders promotion opportunities for junior officers. Due to the Marine Corps' handling of manpower selection and promotion, officers are leaving the service prematurely. This paper argues that the Marine Corps should adopt a merit-based promotion system instead of using the current seniority-based method.

Specifically, two changes should be made to ensure more effective promotion policies. First, the Marine Corps should make continuous use of the Selective Early Retirement Boards (SERB) and install a more effective performance evaluation system that clearly identifies the top 10 percent of performers. Second, the Marines Corps should create a system that forces Reviewing Officers (ROs) to identify promising leaders who should be promoted ahead of their peers by selecting them from the Below Zone (BZ).

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The United States Marine Corps is the vanguard for many forward-thinking policies, but it has not demonstrated progressive thinking on officer promotions. Despite working under the same authorization and rules, there are vast differences between United States military services on their policies to promote their most competitive officers. Within the Marine Corps, current practice allows lieutenant colonels and colonels to stay longer than they are needed, which slows down promotion opportunities for junior officers. Because of the way the Marine Corps handles manpower selection and promotion, Marine Corps officers are leaving the service prematurely. This paper argues that the Marine Corps should adopt a merit-based promotion system, instead of using the current seniority-based method.

Specifically, two changes should be made to ensure more effective promotion policies. First, the Marine Corps should make continuous use of the Selective Early Retirement Boards (SERB) and install a more effective performance evaluation system that clearly identifies the top 10 percent of performers. Second, the Marines Corps should create a system that forces Reviewing Officers to identify promising leaders who should be promoted ahead of their peers by selecting them from the Below Zone (BZ).

The U.S. military already has policies in place that allow the military services to promote promising leaders ahead of their peers, but the Marine Corps is not taking advantage of these initiatives. The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) authorizes selection of up to 10 percent of officer selectees ahead of their peers. The Army and Air Force have used this practice successfully for decades, while the Navy and Marine Corps have not and instead prefer to select more “seasoned” professionals. As U.S. fiscal austerity is imposed on the Marine Corps, as end-strength is reduced from 190,000 to 182,000-175,000 Marines, and as mission changes only allow for a two to one balance between home and deployed status for individuals, the current antiquated promotion methods do not optimize the best possible retention at all Officer ranks. Aggressive promotion from the BZ and continuous running of Selective Early Retirement Boards (SERB) are effective retention tools for the overall health of the Marine Corps. There is hesitation to incorporate progressive and aggressive measures for promotion and retention because it could “break faith” with lieutenant colonels and colonels. However, faith is already being broken, just not with the most senior officers.

As the Department of Defense (DOD) faces financial, equipment, and manpower challenges associated with budget cuts and future fiscal realities, it will confront a challenging manpower choice, specifically, how to retain the best, brightest, and most

qualified leaders when changes in strategy and policy tend toward a smaller military. This paper explores considerations for how to retain the most qualified personnel while reducing the size of the Marine Corps.

CHAPTER TWO

Retention

Retention is a high priority for the U.S. military's senior leadership. In October 2013, the Association of the United States Army held its annual exposition. The Strategic Landpower panel, which included General Raymond Odierno (USA), General John Paxton Jr. (USMC), and Admiral William McRaven (USN), focused on future challenges. They spent significant time discussing the relative importance of people versus technology as the United States military develops strategic landpower tactics, techniques, and procedures. All of the distinguished guests mentioned the importance of an intelligent drawdown, such as the importance of retaining the right people as military end-strength decreases. They also echoed points from the "Strategic Landpower: Winning the Clash of Wills" white paper, which emphasizes the human dimension of war and the influence of military personnel on national interests.¹

Officers at the ranks of captain, senior major, and senior lieutenant colonel are at the crossroads of their professional future: whether to continue service or transition to the civilian sector. Slow selection for promotion, and even slower promotions rates are a significant concern.

Bleeding Talent by Tim Kane captures many of the reasons why officers are leaving the Army.² Kane surveyed West Point graduates from the classes of 1989-2004 (the current Army's senior lieutenant colonels and newly promoted colonels) and found that two-thirds of officers surveyed believed that 68 percent of the promotion process is based on seniority. Only 32 percent of surveyed officers believed promotions are based on merit.³ Among the active duty survey respondents, "82 percent believed that half or more of the best officers are leaving the service,"⁴ and "90 percent agreed that the best officers would be more likely to stay if the military was more of a meritocracy."⁵ Perhaps *Bleeding Talent 2* should focus on the Marine Corps, since it is facing similar challenges to the Army's. And like the Army, the Marine Corps will bleed talent if the status quo is maintained.

Commander Guy Snodgrass has similar concerns over poor officer retention in the Navy. In a post on the U.S. Naval Institute blog entitled "Keep a Weather Eye on the Horizon: A Navy Officer Retention Study," Snodgrass notes that 2013 marked the worst year in history for officer retention within the special warfare community, with record numbers of lieutenants declining to remain in active service for the next pay grade.⁶ Another troubling indicator is the exodus of post-command commanders leaving the Navy after successful tours. For example, "In fiscal year 2010, seven naval aviation commanders retired immediately following completion of their command tours, a

number that nearly doubled to 13 in 2011, before jumping to 20 in 2012. Additionally, a survey of 25 prospective executive officers revealed that no fewer than 70 percent were already preparing for their next career."⁷

Successful post-command commanders form the candidate pool for selection from the rank of Captain (O-6). When successful leaders depart before competing for a promotion, the result is "falling retention," which, in turn, "means lower selectivity."⁸ Service Chiefs could be misled because, quantitatively, they have the necessary number of officers in uniform when instead they would be well served by measuring who is staying or leaving in a more qualitative manner.

Notes

¹ James F. Amos, Raymond T. Odierno, and William H. McRaven, "Strategic Landpower, Winning the Clash of Wills," Strategic Landpower White Paper, 2013, <http://www.tradoc.army.mil/FrontPageContent/Docs/Strategic%Landpower%WhitePaper.pdf>.

² Tim Kane, *Bleeding Talent* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶ Guy Snodgrass, "Keep a Weather Eye on the Horizon: A Navy Officer Retention Study," *U.S. Naval Institute Blog* (blog), United States Naval Institute, March, 2014, <http://blog.usni.org/2014/03/20/keep-a-weather-eye-on-the-horizon-a-navy-officer-retention-study>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER THREE

Overpromotion

Within the Marine Corps, overpromotion at the senior ranks has caused cascading problems and is complicated by the Marine Corps' slow approach to culling the force. By 2010, it was clear that the Marine Corps was facing significant personnel cuts, but the Corps waited until 2013 to take strong measures to remedy the problem. Tim Kane posits, "The promise of culling weak leaders was utterly compromised for the last decade."¹ The challenges of fighting land wars in Afghanistan and Iraq presented unpleasant challenges to the Marine Corps' manpower planners. "Low retention rates forced the Army and Marines to 'overproduce' junior officers and then over promote those willing to continue."² As the requirement for officers rose across all services, promotion rates escalated and exceeded DOPMA guidelines.

DOPMA, which was enacted in 1980, standardized personnel management for all of the United States Armed Forces. For example, the promotion opportunity as defined in DOPMA provides a 50 percent opportunity to the rank of colonel (O-6). The Marine Corps promoted more than the 50 percent target designated by DOPMA every year between 2003 and 2013. DOPMA provides space to promote more or less than the 50 percent target based upon requirements and changing environments. The concern with overpromoting does not apply when the strategic environment requires increased promotion levels, such as when the Marine Corps surged to 202,000 to fight in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The concern is that the Marine Corps' plan to effectively draw down the force following the 2012 DOD Strategic Guidance has yet to normalize promotion rates.³ After nearly two years, very little tangible action has been taken to cull the force. As promotions to colonel have exceeded the targeted 50 percent DOPMA guideline for ten consecutive years, the Marine Corps has found itself with a surplus of senior officers and has taken a slow approach to correcting this problem. Because current policies allow colonels and lieutenant colonels to remain in active service longer than necessary, newly selected officer ranks are forced to wait longer for promotion. The waiting period is longer than targeted DOPMA timelines and discourages officers who must wait an unreasonably lengthy period before promotion opportunities.

Despite authorization to run a Selective Early Retirement Board (SERB) prior to FY13, the Marine Corps declined. SERBs function exactly as their title implies: selecting individuals for involuntary early retirement. When the Marine Corps convened the FY13 SERB for Colonels, the authorized level to selectively retire was 30 percent of a selected pool of individuals based upon time in grade. However, only 18 percent of the eligible population was selectively retired. FY14 experienced an even weaker selection rate, and it is questionable whether or not assembling the board was worthwhile. Of

the 75 colonels eligible for SERB, the board chose five for a selection rate of 6.6 percent. Of the 56 lieutenant colonels eligible for SERB, the board chose seven for a selection rate of 12.5 percent.⁴ Even more alarming is that some officers who were selected for SERB in FY14 had already been passed over for promotion multiple times.

When the SERB does not meet the authorized level of retirement, colloquially known as “SERBing,” senior leadership’s typical response is “we just don’t want to break faith.”⁵ But “faith” is absolutely being broken, just not with senior officers. Faith is broken with the captain who has to wait an extra two years to be in zone for promotion to major. Faith is broken with the major who has to wait 27 months to pin on his newly selected lieutenant colonel rank. Faith is broken with the major who is frocked to the rank of lieutenant colonel for the majority of his or her command tour. And faith is broken with the lieutenant colonel who has to wait 20 or more months to pin on the rank of colonel.

Delaying action will not resolve the promotion problem. The Commandant of the Marine Corps was recently quoted, “To date, we have managed the draw down mostly through routine attrition and early-out incentives.”⁶ From an end-user perspective, this plan is not working. Much more aggressive steps should be taken to ensure the best officers are retained and promotion opportunity is optimized.

Despite clear inefficiencies with the SERB, Marine Corps manpower managers still insist that when a SERB is conducted, the results are successful. The managers argue that the SERB has had the desired effect and has achieved additional objectives, such as enticing individuals to leave before being forced out.⁷ If an officer is selected for SERB, his or her retirement date is set by regulations, approximately seven months after notification. However, an officer can choose his or her own retirement and enjoy a more flexible timeline (up to 14 month delay) if he or she voluntarily retires. Those who are eligible for SERB know, based upon their own performance evaluation record, if they are competitive for retention. Many have chosen to retire of their own volition, clearing much needed promotion space. However, the Marine Corps could have avoided much of the personnel surplus if they had run the SERB boards when they were authorized. This issue was made worse because the Marine Corps waited at least two years before taking action.

The Marine Corps uses the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) Status Report, generated monthly by Manpower Plans & Policy, Officer Plans (MPP-30), to track the manning strength for the majority of unrestricted officer MOSs from the rank of O-1 (2ndLt) through O-6 (Colonel). MOS health is the ratio of the number of personnel required to fill the billets of that MOS to the actual number of personnel on hand the day the report is generated. Three years on from the Budget Control Act of 2011, which sounded the first warnings about the Marine Corps’ size and outlined a significantly smaller force, the service currently retains 159 percent of its targeted inventory for aviation colonels. At the rank of lieutenant colonel, there are even more sensational

personnel overages: 210 percent of targeted AH-1W Cobra pilots; 156 percent of the targeted CH-53 pilots; 133 percent of the targeted AV-8B pilots; 143 percent of the targeted FA-18 pilots; 112 percent of targeted Infantry Officers; 130 percent of targeted Artillery Officers; 140 percent of targeted Tank officers, and; 191 percent of targeted Assault Amphibian Vehicle Officers.

While there is excess retention for unrestricted officer MOSs, combat service support MOSs experience too little retention. For example, targeted Military Police Officers and Adjutants have retention rates of 42 percent and 61 percent, respectively.⁸

Problems associated with Marine Corps retention will likely get worse before getting better. The Marine Corps overpromoted for ten years, failed to aggressively choose individuals for selective retirement, and still maintains a pool of senior officers well above the targeted inventory levels for the majority of military occupational specialties. "Faith" will continue to be broken with junior ranking officers, and the backlog of personnel held captive in the system will only exacerbate the problem. This issue will likely cause many officers, who would have otherwise stayed, to leave the active forces.

Notes

¹ Kane, *Bleeding Talent*, 124.

² Ibid.

³ Leon Panetta, "Sustaining US Global Leadership; Priorities for 21st Century Defense," U.S. Department of Defense, last modified January 05, 2012, http://www.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf, accessed March 2014.

⁴ United States Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel from Manpower and Reserve Affairs, phone interview with the author, Washington, DC, January 2014.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ James F. Amos, "Resourceful Force Design," *Marine Corps Gazette* 97, no. 12 (2013).

⁷ Colonel Tosick William, United States Marine Corps, interview with the author, Quantico, Virginia, January 2014.

⁸ United States Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel from Manpower and Reserve Affairs, phone interview with the author, Washington, DC, January 2014.

CHAPTER FOUR

Meritocracy Versus Seniority

The Marine Corps continues to problematic decisions regarding officer promotion, and discussion on this matter needs to be furthered. A key question will be whether the amount of time spent in service or performance reviews should be the primary criteria for promotions moving forward. Other services successfully choose merit over seniority when selecting their next generation of leaders.

Officer Rank	DOPMA Promotion Opportunity	Promotion (in years)	USMC current
0-4	80%	10+/-1	11 yrs, 75%
0-5	70%	16+/-1	16 yrs, 10 mos 68%
0-6	50%	22+/-1	22 yrs, 48%

TABLE 1. Due-Course Officer Promotion and Marine Corps Standards

At first glance, Table 1 does not paint a skewed picture. The Marine Corps is meeting its legal obligations to DOPMA, which has strict rules governing promotions. However, the Marine Corps is at the high end of the time limits with a bow wave of difficult decisions on the horizon as it rapidly draws down personnel from 190,000 to the 175,000-182,000 range as outlined in the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review.

The RAND Corporation studied the effects of military personnel growth and drawdowns on the manpower system in 1993. The report, *The DOPMA of 1980: a retrospective assessment*, notes, “Probably the most important test of the adequacies of DOPMA is how well it allows the services to manage their officer corps during periods of rapid change. DOPMA is insensitive to the cyclical nature of personnel flows. During periods of decline, DOPMA provides personnel managers with fewer tools to draw down the force.”¹

The effect of fewer tools to help facilitate the drawdown results in overpopulation and is evident when Officers spend a significant amount of their time as Commanding Officers in a frocked rank status. In some cases, they wait almost two years to pin on the rank they have earned. In addition, these effects are felt when the Marine Corps eliminates entire year groups (FY13 specifically) from command selection opportunities because it was ineffective at managing its senior officer corps and did not have room to promote those who had been selected for promotion. These examples of overpopulation challenges have resulted in mismanagement of progression and have caused confusion in the ranks. The best leaders – ones who are indeed recession proof – will not put up with barriers to advancement and promotion. The Marine Corps should

ensure that the pools of officers eligible for promotions are not negatively affected by something as fixable as slow promotions.

Millennials

When discussing manpower concerns and opportunities, it is important to discuss the millennial generation (also known as Generation Y) and how it will affect the workplace of the future. The rigid timelines associated with traditional military promotion progression is not agreeable to millennials (those individuals born between 1980 and 1999). The Baby Boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) is retiring at a rapid rate, and the resulting employment vacuum created by boomers' exit creates opportunities for the millennial generation. The military should pay attention to the wants and needs of the millennial generation in order to attract and retain the most qualified individuals. The millennial generation wants to serve in the military, but the stodgy DOPMA promotion plans laid out in 1980 will not retain the most talented officers.

Paul Light, professor at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service, states, "Today, there is very little stated interest in spending 30 years in any one organization. Generation Y workers expect to shift jobs often, and they look forward to it."² Sally Selden, a nationally respected workforce planning scholar, noted when discussing millennials, "the biggest mistake you can make is not providing performance based pay."³ Joanne G. Sujansky and Jan Ferri-Reed, in their book *Keeping the Millennials*, write, "Millennials are interested in promotions based on merit, not longevity,"⁴ and state, "Millennials expected to be promoted when they are ready, not when they are tenured enough."⁵ Current lieutenants, senior lieutenants, and captains are the future of the Marine Corps, and they are all millennials.

It would be unwise and risky to assume that millennials will adjust to ancient promotion policies. The current promotion system promotes on merit but only after an officer has spent enough time in the service. It is time to change this aging promotion mindset.

Notes

¹ Bernard Rostker et al, "The Defense Officer Personnel Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment," RAND, 1993, <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/1993/R4246.pdf>.

² Zach Patton. "The Young and the Restless," *Public Workforce*, August 31, 2007, accessed January 15, 2014, <http://www.governing.com/topics/public-workforce/The-Young-and-the.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Joanne Genova Sujansky and Jan Ferri-Reed, *Keeping the Millennials* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 53.

⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

An Age Old Problem/Solution

The Marine Corps' manpower management, specifically the promotion of selectees in a timely manner, should be called into question. The Marine Corps promotes to vacancies, meaning that resigning or retiring officers create space for promotable officers. For example, one officer retires at the top of the pyramid creating a vacancy for another officer to be promoted, and this shift results in a vacancy at that rank for someone to move into, and so forth down the pyramid. However, when vacancies are not created because more senior officers do not leave for one reason or another (the economy, not being forced out, etc.), the system backs up. The Marine Corps has failed to create vacancies by not telling senior officers to leave the service. If the manpower management systems operated correctly, selectees would pin on their new rank within the fiscal year corresponding to their promotion board. For example, an officer selected by an FY15 board should expect to pin his new rank on between 1 Oct 2014 and 30 Sep 2015. The Marine Corps is on schedule to accomplish this in FY15, but this target may only be reached through sleight of hand – unusually small promotion zones. While there is no established size for promotion zones, they generally include an entire year group and normally encompass about 12 months. Officers can expect to be promoted the fiscal year following their selection, but this promotion goal has not been met in years and, based upon trends and best estimates from the professional manpower planners, will not be achieved in the foreseeable future.

A senior officer within the Marine Corps manpower establishment stated that the one year desired goal for the period between selection and promotion can only be improved after the Marine Corps' end-strength number is officially decided.¹ Once the end-strength number is decided, it is projected to take up to four years of promotion cycles to return to the desired corresponding FY selection to promotion practice.² Currently with 193,400 active Marines, the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review states that the Marine Corps will plan for an end-strength of 182,000 active personnel. This paper has already highlighted the challenges of drawing down from 202,000 active personnel to the current 193,400, and the Marine Corps has not even thinned the forces by 10,000 people. These manpower issues will only be exacerbated when the Marine Corps is forced to trim another 10,000 Marines to bring the final number of active duty personnel down to 182,000.

Significant challenges must be overcome if the Marine Corps' is going to reform its promotions systems and retain its most talented individuals. What can the Marine Corps do? One option is a different promotion philosophy: a simple approach that promotes the best officers in uniform ahead of their peers. This recommendation does

not require any legislative or policy changes and has been used successfully by sister military branches. However, it would require a very significant cultural change within the Marine Corps.

Along these lines, I recommend the aggressive use of the BZ promotion zone. Per DOPMA regulations, up to 10 percent of the promotable population can be selected from the BZ, which includes those who are normally one year away from eligibility for an In Zone (IZ) selection. In essence, this option entails reaching below the IZ population and promoting individuals ahead of their peers based on demonstrated excellence.

In October 1986, United States Marine Corps Captain Joseph V. Medina made the case for using the BZ for purposes of retaining truly exceptional young officers.³ His perception in 1986 was that his peers were departing the Marine Corps because their abilities were not properly recognized in a timely manner, as evidenced by promotion statistics. Captain Medina's research showed that "less than .2 percent of the officers selected (1983-1985) for promotion to major through colonel during this period were from the below-zone category."⁴ Some readers may recognize the name of the author; Medina endured the promotion system and later became Brigadier General Joseph V. Medina. In an interview with BGen Medina, I asked whether his opinions and recommendations about use of the BZ remained the same even as he became a general. He explained how his experience on promotion boards and command slate boards as a senior officer later in his career helped him better understand how important it is to attain a certain level of experience and serve in significant billets before consideration to the most competitive spots as a lieutenant colonel and colonel. The General advised that he stands by the recommendation he made in 1986 and that there should be "an opportunity for top quality officers to advance more rapidly than average or mediocre officers if the best possible officers are to be retained in the Corps."⁵

Based on the Army's and Air Force's successful use of BZ promotions for years, the dangers associated with promoting people ahead of their peers are minimal. Officers who are promoted early rate within the top 10 percent of performers and can certainly handle the rigors and responsibilities associated with the next rank. Moreover, these officers would only be promoted approximately one year ahead of their peers. The benefits to retaining the most qualified individuals by advanced promotions outweigh any risks associated with experience and/or seniority. Marines flourish when given an opportunity to prove they can manage the responsibilities and authorities of their superior officer. Marines of every rank are routinely placed into billets that are designed to be filled by the next senior rank.

While the other military services have taken advantage of the opportunity to increase retention by early promotion ability, the Marine Corps is stuck in the past. According to a 2006 RAND study, "The United States no longer has a cold war enemy but still has a cold war-era personnel system designed largely to develop and apply

military personnel to meet a known and relatively unchanging threat.”⁶ The study compared time-based promotion and retirement models, including a number of policies dating back to the Civil War, with competency-based models. In the end, it supported longer careers, individual mid-career assignments, and initiatives that encourage and reward more expertise in particular skills.

Indeed, the Marine Corps’ Cold War era personnel system needs to be rewritten. However, the RAND study erroneously generalizes observations from other services and applies them to the Marine Corps. The study argues that, within the competency-based program, “officers with greater potential and a record of excellent job performance are more likely to be slated for command, to have in-residence Professional Military Education, and to be given other valued assignments, just as joint assignments. They are also promoted most quickly. Arguably this already occurs today via BZ promotions.”⁷ The RAND authors are correct when referring to the use of the BZ for the Army and Air Force, and to a certain extent for the Navy, but they incorrectly assume that the Marine Corps’ use of the BZ for promotion follows the same pattern. Rather, the different United States military services have substantially different uses of promotion zones.

Notes

¹ United States Marine Corps Colonel, interview with the author, Quantico, VA, January 2014.

² Ibid.

³ Joseph V. Medina, "Increasing Below-Zone Selections," *Marine Corps Gazette* 70, no. 10 (October 1986), 48-50.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Peter Shimer et al, “Challenging Time in DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Military Officer Management,” RAND, 2006,

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG451.pdf.

⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER SIX

The Below Zone

Charts 1 through 3 below depict the use of the BZ over a ten-year period between FY04 and FY13 to the ranks of O-5 and O-6 for all of the armed services. A quick review of the diagrams indicates that the Army and the Air Force use the BZ as a means to promote officers of exceptional quality ahead of their peers, the Navy hardly uses the BZ, and the Marine Corps' use of the BZ is only .02 percent.

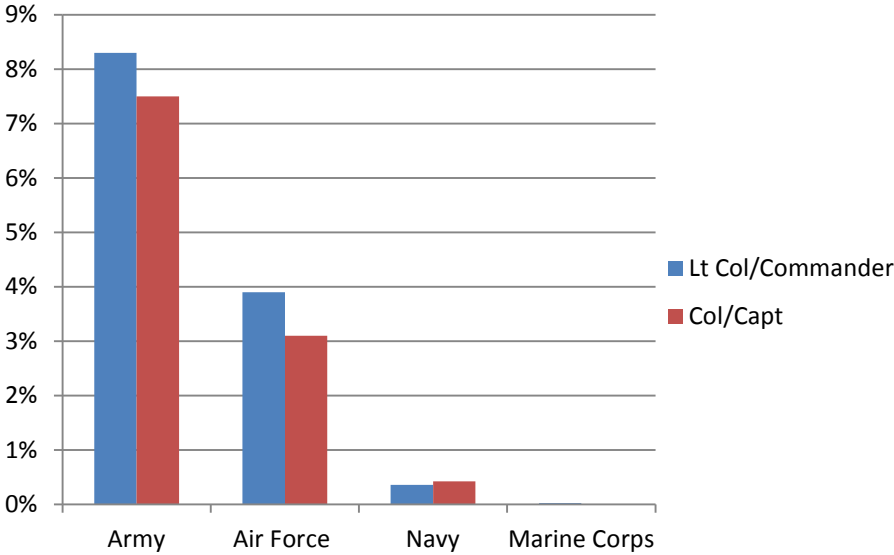


CHART 1. Percentage of Service Population Promoted from the Below Zone, FY04-FY13

Chart 1 depicts the percentage of officers promoted from the BZ population for each of the services.¹ Every service is authorized to promote up to 10 percent of their selectees from the BZ. For example, Chart 1 shows that 7.5 percent of those selected to the rank of colonel in the Army were chosen from the BZ over the last ten years.

As evidenced from Charts 2 and 3 below, the military branches each have very different uses of the BZ for promotion. These variations are quite significant. The Army and the Air Force make use of the ability to select from the BZ, while the Naval services do not.

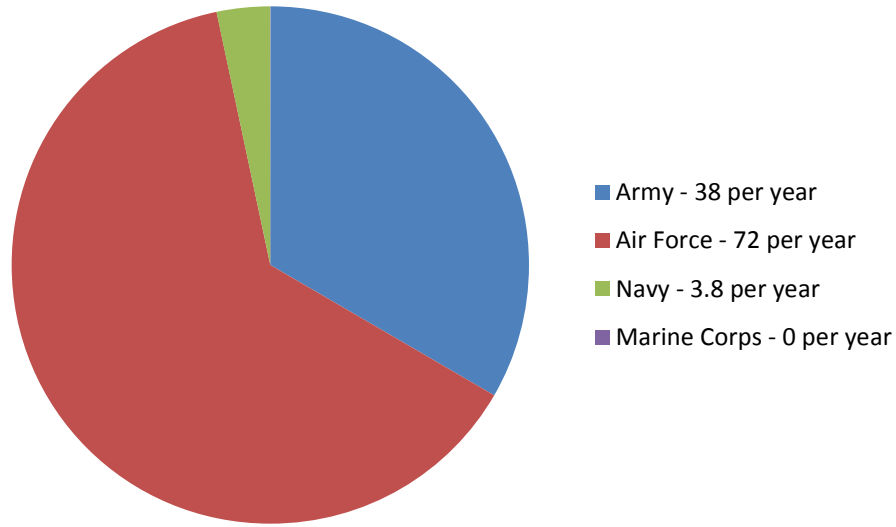


CHART 2. Colonels and Navy Captains Selected from the Below Zone for Promotion, FY04-FY13

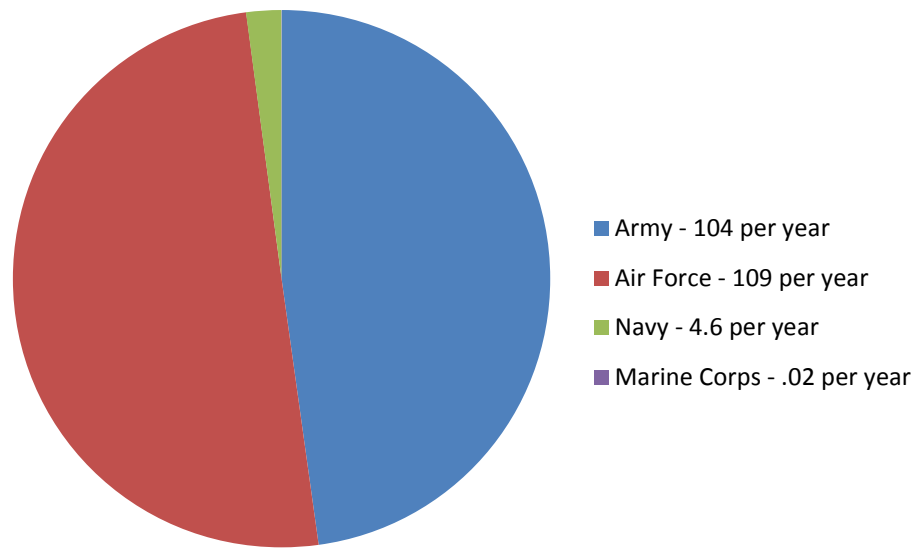


CHART 3. Lieutenant Colonels and Navy Commanders Selected from the Below Zone for Promotion, FY04-FY13

Below Zones By Service

The information provided below is based upon multiple interviews with senior officers from within each branch of service. At least one interview was conducted with a representative from their manpower establishments in order to understand why the services use (or do not use) the BZ.

Air Force

The Air Force consistently utilizes around 4 percent of its BZ promotion ability to the ranks of lieutenant colonel and colonel. The Air Force has also implemented a deliberate process to groom General Officers by providing an opportunity to serve two full tours as an O-10. A senior Air Force officer/Colonel and colleague from War College stated that the driving milestone on the Air Force officer promotion timeline occurs at 24 years in service, or the “pole year.”² At the “pole year,” officers meet their primary consideration for promotion to brigadier general. The Air Force rarely promotes officers to brigadier general after 24 years of service, compared to the Marine Corps, which primarily promotes officers to brigadier general only after 24 years of service. This promotion system suggests that in order to promote an individual to Brigadier General at the 24-year mark, the service has to promote individuals from the Below Zone to the ranks of lieutenant colonel and colonel. The most recent Air Force brigadier general promotion demographics highlight that the average time in service for their selectees was 23.72 years, and the average time in grade was 5.11 years. By comparison, the most recent Marine Corps brigadier general selectees averaged 25.7 years in service and averaged 4.4 years in grade.

Army

The United States Army takes great advantage of the BZ selection opportunity by consistently selecting 8-9 percent from the BZ for both lieutenant colonels and colonels. An Army Colonel who had worked at the Army’s Human Resource Command explained, “The primary objective of any promotion selection board is to choose the best and most qualified officers from among the eligible population, sometimes those individuals are found in the Below Zone category. Army officers selected early have demonstrated clear potential for future service beyond that of their peers which is an inherent trait of a merit-based system. The Army’s early promotion selection process is among several career enhancing tools we use to achieve this objective. Advanced degree programs, fellowships, and bonuses are among others to name a few.”³

Navy

The charts above illustrate that over the last ten years, an average of four to five people are selected from the BZ to the ranks of O-5 and O-6 each year. A Navy Commander and Officer Promotions planner advised how the Navy generally targets those for deep selection.⁴ Naval BZ promotees are selected primarily due to unexpected manpower shortages, where a critical need in a Military Occupational Specialty is identified at the senior ranks and there are simply not enough officers to fill the required positions. In this exceptional case, the Navy draws from the BZ population to fill these vacancies. These vacancies are rare but, when necessary, the Navy uses the DOPMA-authorized ability to promote from the BZ.

Marine Corps

After speaking with multiple senior Marine Corps officers and generals, both active and retired, I concluded that the Marine Corps does not use the BZ because of institutional inertia. The main cause is not that promotion boards discriminate; it is the fact that the Marine Corps has barely used the BZ throughout its history. Promoting from the BZ is rarely considered by members of promotion boards. Although authorization is, in theory, written into the precept messages for the promotion boards, the Marine Corps does not see value in using the BZ. Therefore, despite its availability, the Corps rarely utilizes this option. Senior leaders prefer officers who are more “seasoned” and well rounded, although the only qualitative measurement for this variable is time in service. One officer noted that in his experience, “when serving with colonels from other services who had been deep-selected for promotion from the BZ, it showed,”⁵ but this individual could not define or elaborate on the differences in expertise or performance that “showed.”

Promotion boards know selecting from the BZ is a viable option, but they seem to believe that the quality of the IZ population has been strong enough and there is no need to reach into the BZ for qualified candidates for promotion to the ranks of O-5 and O-6. Size and scale is also a consideration: the Marine Corps is much smaller than the other services, and the “10% authorization to promote from the BZ would not make a significant impact.”⁶ For example, the most recent Marine Corps O-5 and O-6 selection boards only promoted 260 officers to the rank of O-5 and 82 officers to the rank of O-6. If the Marine Corps selected up to the maximum 10 percent from the BZ, only 26 individuals would be selected to O-5 and eight to the rank of O-6. Even at these low numbers, the Marine Corps could still send a strong positive message by properly awarding excellence through early recognition and promotion.

Notes

¹ All promotion statistics for each service were provided via e-mail with the author by senior officers working within the respective manpower management department of their organization, December 2013 – February 2014.

² United States Air Force Colonel, interview with the author, Washington, DC, January 2014.

³ United States Army Colonel, e-mail with the author, Washington, DC, November 2013.

⁴ United States Navy Commander and Head Officer Promotions planner, phone interview with the author, Washington, DC, January 2014.

⁵ United States Marine Corps Colonel, phone conversation with the author, Washington, DC, December 2013.

⁶ United States Marine Corps Major General (retired), phone conversation with the author, Washington, DC, December 2013.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Options to Rectify the Problem

Two recommendations discussed below would be an effective measure if implemented alone, but if used together, would actively cull the force and demonstrate to the next generation of rising officers that the Marine Corps has a progressive promotions system.

Effective Use of the Below Zone

The Marine Corps should use the BZ to ensure it keeps the best and brightest on active duty. The Marine Corps is authorized to select up to 10 percent of the promoted population from the BZ and should take advantage of this flexibility. While no policy changes are required, a major shift in ideology will be needed to adopt effective use of the BZ. There are officers out there who deserve to be pushed to the front of the line and promoted ahead of their peers. The Army, Air Force, and Navy all use the BZ for specific reasons, and the Marine Corps should use the BZ simply because it can function as a force multiplying retention tool.

There will certainly be obstacles to overcome during implementation. Many officers within the ranks will not like change. However, under the current system, the most talented officers are categorized and financially compensated on the same scale as average performers. Some of these rising individuals may decide not to continue service due to their nonselection for early promotion, and that is okay; the Corps needs more rather than fewer culling opportunities. Officers who are selected for command and excel in command billets, are chosen for and excel in joint assignments, and are selected for and excel at top level school equivalents or senior fellowship positions should not have to wait in the same line with the rest of their peers who did not command, did not complete joint duty, and were not selected for or did not complete top level school.

Effective Use of the SERB and Enhanced Selective Early Retirement Boards (E-SERB)

If the Marine Corps is too hesitant about promoting from the BZ to ensure the most competitive officers are retained, there should be more effective use of selective retirement to create a predictable promotion process. Waiting two more years than the other services to run a SERB and then not maximizing SERB potential sends the wrong message to company grade and junior field grade officers. An alternative method for promotion is the E-SERB (title 10 Code 638A), which the other military services are using to trim their ranks. When an officer's record is reviewed for SERB but retained,

he or she gains four years of sanctuary before potentially being submitted for another SERB. E-SERB does away with that sanctuary and allows for continuous retention review on an annual basis. The Air Force is running an E-SERB for FY14. Through this process, the most outstanding officers will rise to the top during the SERB/E-SERB process and will not be selected for forced retirement. Just because an individual successfully endures the SERB process once does not mean he or she should be guaranteed another four years of service at the O-5 or O-6 ranks. There is discussion in the Marine Corps of not using the SERB process in the future to address these manpower challenges. This potential outcome would send the wrong message to the officer ranks.

Another option for the Marine Corps is to implement a policy similar to the United States Coast Guard's Title 14 USC 289. Since its implementation in 1966, the Coast Guard has incorporated a continuation board every year.¹ All officers who have obtained the rank of captain (O-6) and have completed three years in service are compared against their peers for continuation decisions. Title 14 USC 289 states that "no less than 50 percent of the number considered" can be continued. Essentially, 50 percent of the eligible population of O-6s has retirement decisions made for them every year in the Coast Guard. This is an aggressive policy that forces senior leaders to make room at the top for the next generation and to identify those who should be allowed to stay until the 30-year mark. This policy would serve the Corps well by keeping the lines of promotion appropriately open for junior officers.

By challenging the Marine Corps' traditional promotion methods and comparing them with the other services' approaches, this paper proposes ways to stop the acute loss of talent currently occurring in the Marine Corp. Many a colonel whose name has been submitted for SERB review, or a captain who has waited two years for his next earned rank, would agree that there is a problem. The problem could be defined as overpromotion or as hesitation to forcibly retire individuals for fear of breaking faith. There are too many individuals in the system, promotions are taking too long, and the problem is only going to grow worse as the Marine Corps shrinks to 182,000 active Marines or less. The Marine Corps must also contend with the QDR-designed two to one deployment to dwell ratio, meaning that for every day an average Marine is deployed, he will only spend two days at home.² "Home" is certainly relative; all of the normal workup requirements and Professional Military Education demands will still be in place. Marine leaders acknowledge that the two to one ratio is a force multiplier as far as recruiting and retention for younger Marines, but it will also have a negative impact on the career force.

A key challenge for adopting the BZ basis for promotion is to identify who is truly superior. As one officer put it, "The Air Force is much better than us at identifying their thoroughbreds."³ The Marine Corps measures relative value on fitness reports, but there is minimal accountability for those who serve as Reviewing Officers (ROs). If ROs measure everybody equally, call everybody "the best," or do not use the full spectrum

of the evaluation tree, it becomes impossible to single out excellence in officers eligible for promotion. Many fitness report ROs are lethargic or have little knowledge on how to maximize the evaluations of their subordinates to clearly delineate who are the most qualified and competitive leaders. The fitness report system should force ROs to clearly select the top and bottom 10 percent of officers using evaluation systems that quantify a quality array of individuals.

In one way, the Marine Corps holds its own service back by not identifying its most talented individuals. Colonel Tosick from Marine Corps Manpower Management and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) provided an astute observation when he contended that, "There is a system in place via the Performance Evaluation System (PES), but nobody uses it. Senior leaders can single an individual out that should be considered for early selection. This process takes time, thought, extra writing on an addendum page, and he's seen very few of these during his entire career."⁴ Hopefully, other senior leaders will be educated by this research and become motivated to take the appropriate, extra steps necessary to identify excellence among the officer corps.

To M&RA's defense, this "ship" cannot be turned on a dime. M&RA is constantly fighting the close fight and is working with an organization that is global, employs over 190,000 personnel, is subject to congressional budget challenges and constantly changing laws and regulations, receives specific direction from the service chief, and cannot predict human nature. One of M&RA's most pressing challenges is the total officer end-strength numbers. M&RA is predicting that it will be within end-strength number limits for FY15, and perhaps this is the most important challenge at hand. Despite imbalances at specific ranks, complying with overall end-strength numbers could be considered a positive development.

Notes

¹ United States Coast Guard Lieutenant Commander, Office of Personnel Management Division, phone interview with the author, Washington, DC, March 2014.

² James F. Amos, "Resourceful Force Design."

³ United States Marine Corps Colonel, phone conversation with the author, Washington, DC, December 2013.

⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

The Marine Corps is progressive on most issues but is not progressive at effectively using the promotion and retention tools at its disposal. Marine Corps manpower planners frequently use the law as an excuse for failing to trim its ranks, knowing full well that Title 10 provides measures that allow aggressive culling of the force. The Marine Corps has a tough choice: retain the older generation at the expense of the young or; thin the herd at the top to allow predictable promotions for the next generation of combat-proven leaders. By failing to ensure a predictable promotion model, the Marine Corps has broken faith with young officers.

On the basis of my interviews, I have identified a distinct problem regarding retention that is larger than senior leadership within the Marine Corps would like to admit. There is great confusion in the ranks over the promotion zone and promotion timeline issue, and urgent action is needed. The Marine Corps must become more adept at showing officers the door when necessary in order to free up promotion spots, or the Corps must consider progressive measures like use of the BZ for promotion in order to retain the most talented individuals. Aggressive steps should be taken to continue to cull the force and ensure that junior officers observe a predictable promotion timeline. A healthy debate should be encouraged on the subject of promotions based on seniority versus promotions based upon merit. The Marine Corps must use all of its available tools to retain its brightest leaders. I highly recommend using the BZ and continuing aggressive use of the SERB and/or continuation board for O-5s and O-6s as concrete measures to address this issue.

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Marx graduated from DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana with a B.A. in psychology. He attended National Defense University's Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy (formally the Industrial College of the Armed Forces), earning a M.S. in national resource strategy and a graduate certificate from completing the Supply Chain Management concentration program. For his last assignment, he was posted to the Brookings Institution as the Commandant of the Marine Corps' senior fellow.

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