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# Age the Marine Corps for 2025

by LtCol Brendan B. McBreen

**The Marine Corps has too many 19-year-olds.** We need more 29-year-olds. Why? Because in the near future, the Marine Corps will execute a broader set of missions with a more capable force that will require more experienced and skilled Marines. Our future capabilities require changes to our current structure and personnel practices. To build a relevant force capable of meeting future requirements, we need to age the Marine Corps by increasing the number of Non-Commissioned Officers and decreasing the number of first-term Marines. A demographic shift to an older, more experienced organization is essential for the future Marine Corps.



## More Missions Require More Capabilities.

*Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025* describes the direction the Marine Corps will take to meet future military requirements.<sup>1</sup> By 2025, the Marine Corps will execute an expanded set of missions with a highly-skilled, multi-capable force.

*The Long War: Send In the Marines* describes our expanded forward presence missions.<sup>2</sup> To build partner nation capabilities, two new organizations, the Security Cooperation Marine Air Ground Task Force (SC MAGTF) and the Marine Corps Training and Advisor Group (MCTAG) will engage and train other militaries.

*A Concept for Enhanced Company Operations* focuses on improving intelligence, fires, information operations, and command and control capabilities at the company level.<sup>3</sup> This initiative builds on earlier *Distributed Operations* efforts aimed at improving the capabilities of small units on dispersed battlefields.

Our Marines, deployed around the world, are learning today the skills they need for the future. Fighting a sophisticated enemy in a complex environment, our small units now have tremendous responsibilities. Well-trained warriors are critical when operating among a civilian population in a counterinsurgency. More is expected from each of our Marines.

These new requirements expand our mission set. The Marine Corps will maintain our historical conventional capabilities, but proficiency in conventional operations does *not* provide the capabilities we now require. Executing more missions will

require fundamental changes to our organization.

## Who Are Our Future Marines?

The individual Marine is our most formidable weapon and our most important asset. New missions will require Marines to wield a wider set of skills. Marines will need:

- Language skills. Cultural skills. An understanding of peoples, tribes, and religions.
- Counterinsurgency skills. Advisor skills. Tools to build armies.
- Technical Skills. On global communications networks, weapons, and unmanned platforms.
- Tactical skills. Decentralized decision-making responsibility.
- Joint fires certification.
- Intelligence collection skills.
- Information operations tools.
- Civil affairs knowledge.
- Initiative. Problem-solving abilities. Cognitive skills to recognize and adapt to unknown situations.
- Expeditionary self-sufficiency.
- Trust. Of leaders, foreign soldiers, and civilians.
- Maturity. Experience. Competence. The ability to work with joint, interagency, foreign, multi-national and non-governmental organizations.

Our Marines will accomplish many difficult missions – observed

by a world-wide media – that we cannot fully predict today. They will need greater skills and flexibility, far broader experience, and operate at much farther distances than ever before.

### How Do We Train Our Future Marines?

Training alone will not meet our future needs. Our Marines require a training revolution. We will improve our training systems, organizations, and policies, and increase our training budget. But all these measures are incremental. If we are challenged today in providing sufficient pre-deployment training, how will we meet the increased *future* training needs that our expanded missions require?

The best solution to our training challenge is simply to keep more Marines who are already trained. Expanded training requirements can be met, our training investment can be retained, and our turnover issues can be minimized by focusing more of our training efforts and resources on career Marines.

### We Need More Non-Commissioned Officers.

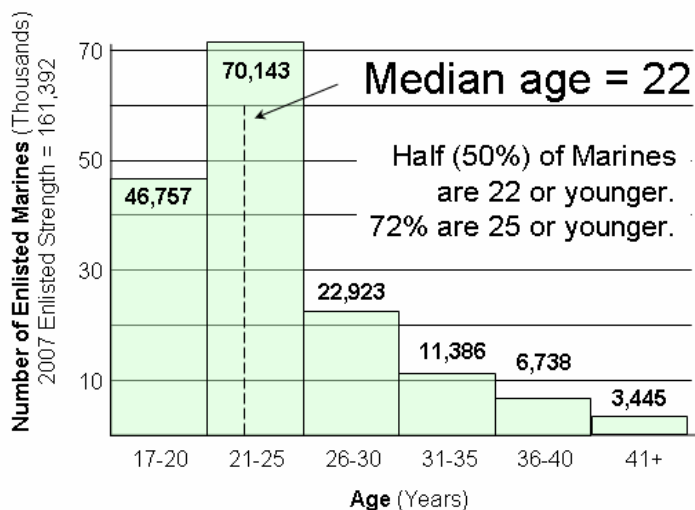
Skilled and experienced Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and Staff Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCOs) will be critical to mission success. **Table 1** shows the ages of our enlisted Marines in 2007.<sup>4</sup> Fully half are younger than 22 years old. These are our first-term Marines. They are tremendous: strong, brave, and enthusiastic. We need them, but not as the overwhelming majority of the force. Their first-term skill set is

insufficient for the requirements of our new missions.

In 2008, almost 70% of our Marines held the first four grades.<sup>5</sup> Our units have had the same billets, in the same ages and grades, in the

experienced Marines walk away from the Marine Corps every year. A more capable and mature force is a benefit even for conventional missions.

To engage in the future, we need



**Table 1. Ages of Enlisted Marines, 2007.**

Source: *Marine Corps Concepts & Programs 2007*, page 231.

same proportion since World War II. Our mission requirements, however, have changed significantly.

An infantry company, assigned a security cooperation mission, will have over 150 first-term Marines trying to build a foreign army while simultaneously still learning about the Marine Corps.

The Marine Corps is not the Special Operations Command (SOCOM). We are not building small, top-heavy teams of specialists. But we cannot remain an Iwo-Jima-era force. Expeditionary ground combat is a young man's fight, but we cannot engage around the world with an overly inexperienced force. We cannot mistake enthusiasm for capability. Age does not guarantee wisdom or ability. But we should not let thousands of well-trained and

to enlist *less* new Marines, and retain *more* mature, experienced, and knowledgeable NCOs and SNCOs.

Our vision must address demographics. The 2025 Marine Corps should have a smaller percentage of first-term Marines.

### Demographic Changes Require Organizational Changes.

A demographic shift to a more experienced force will challenge some long-standing practices. It is not just a simple change to the tables of organization. A different force structure requires different training and personnel policies. Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership and Education, Personnel, and Facilities (DOTMLPF) issues require parallel vision and long-term planning.

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A significant percentage of our current training effort is entry-level training. With less new Marines, resources can shift to train an older force. Training policies and organizations will change. Many of our training practices still reflect a time when skills were not complex, student numbers were large, and replacements were abundant.

How much of our Trainees, Transients, Patients, and Prisoners (T2P2) overhead is entry-level training? We can increase assignable Marines if we reduce entry-level T2P2. We can reduce entry-level attrition and its costs.

An older force, with more dependents, requires increased housing, medical, and other family support efforts. An older force costs more in pay and benefits. Can we afford 200,000 older Marines?

New personnel practices and longer tours will aid long-term skill development and retention. Individual assignments must match expertise to deliver the right Marines to the right organizations. Each Marine's regional expertise must be balanced against his global deployability.

What skills should the organization most value? Who is promoted? Most importantly: who is retained?

### **What is to be Done?**

In 2025, the Marine Corps will execute a broad range of complex missions with a skilled force of

experienced Marines. For this uncertain future, our people are our best investment.

In 2025, the rank structure of the Marine Corps will not be a flattened pyramid, with one-hundred thousand Marines at the bottom. It will be an arrowhead, with more Marines in the middle.

**Age the force.** Set annual goals to increase our median age. Change our tables of organization. Slow down promotion rates. Increase NCO pay. Recruit less new Marines.

**Train the force.** Increase training standards. Expand training organizations and funding. Align promotion with modern warfighting skills. Establish language requirements. Train more effectively. Evaluate Marines' skills more comprehensively.

**Support the force.** Fund the infrastructure needed to support a more mature force. Expand recent family support initiatives. Implement personnel policies to manage and retain a more experienced force.

### **A Force in Readiness**

The size, composition, and capabilities of the Marine Corps are fundamental national decisions. Our vision documents need to address the demographics of who we are and what Marines are needed to best serve our nation. The Marine Corps is preparing well for the future. Our Marines have gained priceless experience in this long war.

That experience cannot be replicated by training new Marines. Retaining our experienced leaders is a critical path to our future capabilities. Our current force size increase should retain the relevant Marines we need for our future missions.

The Commandant has stated "It is our obligation...to prepare for tomorrow's challenges today."<sup>6</sup> Demographic changes require long-term plans. Tomorrow's force depends on decisions we make today to insure a future more competent, experienced, better-trained, and more relevant Marine Corps.

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### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> *Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 3 July 2008).
- <sup>2</sup> *The Long War: Send in the Marines* (Washington, DC: HQMC, January 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> *A Concept for Enhanced Company Operations* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 28 August 2008).
- <sup>4</sup> *Marine Corps Concepts & Programs 2007* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 2007) 231.
- <sup>5</sup> *2008 United States Marine Corps Concepts & Programs* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 2008) 276.
- <sup>6</sup> *Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025*, 1.

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