

PREPARING NCOs

1998 Chase Prize Essay Contest: Honorable Mention

Squad Leaders Up!

by Capt Brendan B. McBreen

A look at improving our current system of producing small unit leaders.

Successful armies throughout history have shown that small units of well-led men are much more important than generous logistics, state-of-the-art equipment, excellent staff work, or brilliant commanders. The Marine Corps has always recognized this fact, has consistently fielded units of well-led men, and has always focused on infantry training for small unit leaders. The challenges that the Marine Corps will face in the next century will require even higher caliber small unit leaders. Who these men are, how they are selected, trained, and promoted will become even more important to the warfighting ability of our organization than they are today. The Marine Corps needs to examine and improve our current system for producing small unit infantry leaders.

Is There a Problem?

Are our infantry noncommissioned officers (NCOs) the best they can be? No. The current system for training and selecting infantry NCOs does not produce a consistently high quality infantry leader. Multiple career paths across multiple types of units result in infantrymen of the same rank and time in service with widely varying skill levels. When an infantry NCO walks through the hatch, no assumptions on his abilities can be made. His rank and his assignments have no correlation with his military occupational specialty (MOS) credibility. In no way is this the fault of the individual. The problem is a combina-

tion of promotion policies, school policies, assignment policies, and lack of infantry MOS standards.

Why Are Squad Leaders Important?

Infantry squad leaders are key links in the process of "Making Marines." Ideally, new infantry Marines are welcomed into the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) by squad leaders who are as competent and qualified as the NCOs that they trained under at the Marine Corps recruit depots and schools of infantry (SOI). Unfortunately, this is sometimes far from true. Improving the abilities of

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infantry squad leaders should be a primary objective of everyone responsible for the success of the Crucible and Cohesion Programs. Only with highly trained squad leaders can we achieve the ultimate goal of these programs—excellent squad leaders leading well-trained, tightly cohesive infantry squads.

Infantry squad leaders are key links to the challenges of the next century. The predicted trends—in doctrine, equipment, and conflict—all require high levels of competence at increasingly lower levels of command. The Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, in both HUNTER WARRIOR and URBAN WAR-

RIOR, has experimented with many future issues. One of the constant findings, however, has been the recognition of an age-old truth—that highly skilled small unit leadership is an essential ingredient for combat success. Equipment is not, communications and computers are not, doctrine is not, skilled staffs are not. The sergeant with the squad still makes the difference.

Infantry squad leaders are key links to training. NCOs are the primary trainers of Marines. The Marine Corps cannot afford to waste the time and talents of our young infantrymen by giving them less than first-class training. Poor training mortgages our future. NCOs who are well trained produce Marines who are well trained.

Infantry squad leaders are key links to the 0369 career progression. Staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs) who have been trained to be excellent squad leaders are better leaders in senior SNCO positions. Efforts at improving SNCO training and education would do well to start at the squad leader level.

How Can We Improve the Quality of Our Infantry NCOs?

Each and every day, commanders throughout the Marine Corps conduct quality unit training for Marines and NCOs. Each and every day hundreds of instructors, officers, and SNCOs, provide quality training for student NCOs. Long-term systemic improvements, how-

ever, will come only from new training and personnel policies that reinforce MOS credibility. The following policies are a starting point:

• **New Training Policies**

Publish a billet description for the infantry squad leader. A billet description would serve as the standard for all squad leader training. It would define school curriculums as well as personnel and promotion requirements. Isn't this already done? The answer is no. The current MOS manual fails to define NCO standards. The current individual training standard (ITS) order for infantrymen, *MCO 1510.35C*, fails to define standards. The billet description should reference the current ITS manual, as well as define the training ability of the NCO, his leadership ability, and his tactical decisionmaking ability. Other qualifications should reference other training orders: swim level III, call-for-fire level III, precise lightweight Global Positioning System receiver level II, communications level II.

Designate the Squad Leader Course at SOI as an MOS-producing school. This course, which trains Marines to meet the standards defined in the billet description, would award an 0368 MOS to graduates who pass the final evaluation. Prerequisites would be based on the rifleman and fire team leader billet descriptions. The product of the squad leader course should be a tactically educated combat decisionmaker, a leader, and a trainer.

Rewrite MCO 1510.35C, Individual Training Standard (ITS) for Infantry (Enlisted) Occupational Field (OccFld) 03. If the billet description references this order, it needs to be up to date and relevant, reflecting input from SOI and infantry units. Billet descriptions for all infantry billets should reference the baseline ITS order.

Put all Marine Corps Institute (MCI) courses on-line. Put all course evaluations on-line, with scores immediately posted back to the individual and the unit. Realistic professional military education requirements can then be written and enforced.



Photo by Randy Jolly

• **New Personnel Policies**

Establish the 0368 MOS: Infantry Squad Leader. Rewrite the MOS manual entry to reference the billet description. The SOI Squad Leader's Course would award the MOS. A separate MOS ensures that Marines will work hard to broaden their skills

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if these skills are then recognized. Infantry units will have squad leaders who are not 0368s, but the goal would be to maximize school-trained, MOS-certified squad leaders. Eventually, 0368 will become a prerequisite for SNCO billets in infantry units. The only path for OccFld 03 should be through the FMF and the Squad Leaders Course.

Require 2-year additional service in an infantry battalion upon MOS qualification. This would give incentive to infantry units to “grow their own” NCOs.

Assign meritorious graduates of the Squad Leader's Course to return after their FMF tour as instructors. Eventually, all instructors will be former meritorious graduates.

Establish a new career path for infantry leaders. Use the 0368 MOS as a discriminating factor in promotion, assignment, and other personnel policies for infantry SNCOs. Ultimately, 0368 becomes the avenue to 0369. A gunnery sergeant with little infantry experience and no 0368 qualification would then remain an 0311.

• **New Promotion Policies**

Abolish automatic time-in-service promotions for infantrymen. Promotion through corporal should be done at the battalion level. Place the responsibility for developing infantry NCOs on the infantry units. Published billet descriptions will serve as promotion guidance. Commander's recommendations based on billet-specific performance will then be the most important factor in promotion. Billet assignments are already made in this manner, why not rank?

Award meritorious sergeant for honor graduates of the Squad Leader's Course. Increase the promotion opportunities of ordinary graduates by granting 100 point bonuses to their cutting scores. Promotion incentives linked to MOS credibility would strongly encourage infantrymen to work at their profession. The fastest path for an infantryman to make sergeant should be through the FMF and the billet of squad leader. If the infantry squad leader is indeed a valued member of the organization, then the organization needs to demonstrate his worth, and in doing so encourage other able Marines to work toward this goal.

The Proposed "New Model" Infantry NCO

Here is an example of how the proposal might work in an infantry battalion: LCpl R. D. White was a squad automatic weapon gunner with 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. One afternoon, his platoon sergeant pulled him aside and told him that he was one of only three Marines from the platoon that had been recommended by their squad leaders to pursue NCO training. Sgt Reza, LCpl White's squad leader, had spent hours on float with White, ensuring he could perform the skills defined in the billet descriptions, and then escorting him to the platoon sergeant for evaluations. Some of his peers, he knew, would never meet the strict requirement of the billet they currently held and would finish their enlistment's as lance corporals. White knew from Reza what striking for NCO would entail, and volunteered for the NCO training regimen.

It took LCpl White 7 months to complete the four-part NCO prerequisites. During that time, he was made a fire team leader. He completed section A of the prerequisites, the four online MCI courses, on his own time. Section B, the billet description ITSS for fire team leader, took longer as it had to be coordinated with company training. Each time the unit was in the field, LCpl White was evaluated on a different skill, and the platoon commander would initial his prep book. For Section C, the tactics and leadership portion, there were additional online courses as well as work with his squad leader, platoon sergeant, and platoon commander. Section D, the NCO evaluation, was administered in the field by the battalion.

By June, LCpl White had been certified in every one of the 67 skills defined in the fire team leader billet description. He had completed Sections A, B, C, and D of the infantry Squad Leader's Prep Book, and in the process, his leaders had learned a great deal about his abilities. On recommendation from his platoon commander and company commander,

he was promoted to corporal by the battalion commander, and made a squad leader in his platoon.

Only one of the three squad leaders in 2d Platoon, a sergeant with 7 years of service, was a certified 0368. Cpl White requested through his platoon commander to attend the Squad Leader's Course.

The Squad Leader's Course was a tough, challenging, but rewarding curriculum. Cpl White discovered that some of his peers, corporals and sergeants alike, suffered if their unit had been too lenient in their preparation. Two Marines had failed to pass the entry inventory practical application evaluation. At graduation, 10 weeks later, 31 of 37 graduates were certified as 0368. The six Marines who were not certi-

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fied were given credit for completing the course and handed the dates for the certification evaluations during the following year. Three Marines were recognized as honor graduates and meritoriously promoted to sergeant.

Cpl White returned to his unit, the only corporal 0368 in the battalion. He was reenlisted that afternoon, with the condition that he would serve for a minimum of 2 more years with the battalion. The sergeant major shook his hand, informed Cpl White that he would probably make sergeant by the end of the year, and asked him what he was going to do to celebrate. Cpl White responded, "I'm going down tomorrow morning and check out the Platoon Sergeant's Prep Book!"

What Needs to Be Done?

The Marine Corps needs to implement new training and personnel policies to produce infantry squad leaders without peer:

1. Publish a billet description for the infantry squad leader.
2. Establish the 0368 MOS: Infantry Squad Leader.
3. Designate the Squad Leader's Course at SOI as an MOS-producing program.

From these three key policy changes, other issues and policies, especially those dealing with promotion, selection, and sustainment, will follow.

Conclusion

If the challenges of the next century are as wide and varied as predicted, then the need for competent small unit leadership will be very great. Individual Marine leaders have a tradition of overcoming organizational defects and rising to meet

the challenges of combat, but the organization can and should do so much more. We owe our young Marines the very finest in small unit training, leadership, and mentorship. We need infantry squad leaders who are groomed, selected, and trained to very high standards—

leaders with self-confidence borne of independent decisionmaking, tactical ability, and hard skills well learned. The personnel system is the true hub of combat readiness. We should ensure that the selection, assignment, and training of our infantry squad leaders is the best we can possibly make it, thereby ensuring our relevance on the battlefields of tomorrow.

US  MC

>Capt McBreen, a former member of the Gazette Editorial Board, is currently assigned to 2d Battalion, 5th Marines at Camp Pendleton.