

Rifle Squad Leader Staffing

Time for change
by LtCol Jim Lively

Service-level concepts, directives, and unit operational tempo continue to increase the demands on the 648 Active Component rifle squad leaders. Rifle squads are our most vital echelon of close combat, and the squad leader is the first line of defense and the “moral anchor” to protect our institutional core values. Rifle squads are the critical echelon of human interface and small unit leadership as well as individual and unit readiness. In spite of the criticality of this billet, only 20 to 25 percent of rifle squads are currently staffed by an Infantry Small Unit Leader Course (ISULC)-trained sergeant squad leader. The infantry community has observed, discussed,

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written about, and studied the issue of rifle squad staffing for over a decade. The Infantry Operational Advisory Group, GCE Conference, Ground Board, and multiple Service-initiated studies, academic papers, and articles have examined this gap and offered numerous solutions. The current and future operating environments, as well as our own operating concepts, demand a change.

Change Is Coming

The Deputy Commandant for PP&O (Plans, Policies, and Operations) and the Ground Board recently endorsed an initiative, in concert with Deputy Commandants for M&RA (Manpower and Reserve Affairs) and CD&I (Combat Development and Integration), to implement a series of policy changes to ensure our rifle squads are more consistently staffed with a mature, educated, and trained sergeant squad leader. This is the Ground Board’s number one priority.

Why the Change?

The Marine Corps demands more of its rifle squad leaders than ever before. However, we are systemically unable to staff our rifle squads with the qualified sergeant squad leaders necessary to achieve the desired levels of readiness and performance. This problem is not new. There has been progress in professionalizing our infantry small unit leaders and some important successes with programs like the SLDP (Squad Leader Development Program). However, the fundamental problem of consistently staffing rifle squads with the right type of leader is unresolved. The current system is not designed to get a school-trained sergeant with five to seven years’ experience in front of rifle squads.

The imperative to better staff rifle squads with mature, educated, and trained sergeants is driven by the increasing demands on the Marine rifle squad. A 2007 Center for Naval Analysis study, commissioned by then-CG, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, LtGen James N. Mattis,



Figure 1. Expectations of an infantry rifle squad leader.



The potential exists for the sergeant squad leader to have between five and seven years of service. (Photo by Cpl Andrew Kuppers.)

reported that “the small unit leader—in this case, the sergeant Rifle Squad Leader—will require skills and experiences that the average squad leader today does not possess.”¹ A decade later, this statement still rings true. Figure 1 depicts graphically what we “ask” of the rifle squad leader—the paradigm or model for what squad leaders should be able to do for the institution. Collectively, these “expectations” are captured in our requirements, documents, doctrine, manuals, orders, and directives. Everything on the chart competes with the mission of the Marine rifle squad and places ever-increasing demands on the rifle squad leader.

The Way Ahead

PP&O, M&RA, and CD&I are analyzing two policy frameworks aimed at improving rifle squad leader staffing. The goal is a progressive approach to change what we can now, under existing authorities and policies, while simultaneously exploring costs, risks, and benefits to making deeper improvements. The scope of potential change demands that we understand the second and third order effects on important manpower and training pillars, such as grade shaping, promotion opportunities, school throughput, unit stabilization, and other critical levers. A Service-level planning team will assess two frameworks. One includes the op-

tion to create a perpetual inventory of squad leaders so that we can staff rifle squads with a five-to-seven year, school-trained sergeant “24/7/365.” The other staffs squads with sergeants, who meet the same requirements, one year prior to a battalion’s deployment. Both of these models would be dramatic improvements over current staffing but need full review to ensure policies and costs are understood over the long term. While a detailed review of those two frameworks is underway, M&RA (Integration Branch) initiated an effort to staff certain infantry battalions *now* with its required five-to-seven year, trained sergeant squad leaders. During fiscal

year 2018, four infantry battalions will be staffed with their required sergeant squad leaders one year prior to their deployment. This effort not only makes an immediate positive impact on those four units, but it will also inform possible solutions going forward.

High Performer Track

Other efforts are being considered to develop world-class sergeant squad leaders. While reviewing squad leader staffing, HQMC also plans to re-energize an initiative that dates back to 2009. The High Performer Program, often referred to as the “Ender Track” (named after the character made famous in Orson Scott Card’s famous book, *Ender’s Game*), would essentially identify high-quality infantry Marines at the two to two-and-a-half year mark, offer them a mid-term reenlistment option for another four to five years, then send them to a two-year training, education, and development track prior to sending them back to the Operating Forces to serve as a sergeant squad leader. This program would recognize early potential, further refine those Marines selected, give them advanced training, and then give them an opportunity to lead a rifle squad. There are many details to be refined; however, the track shows great promise in helping to early identify quality leaders and put them on a maturing track that sets them up for service as a squad leader. Figure 2 is pre-decisional, but it gives an example of

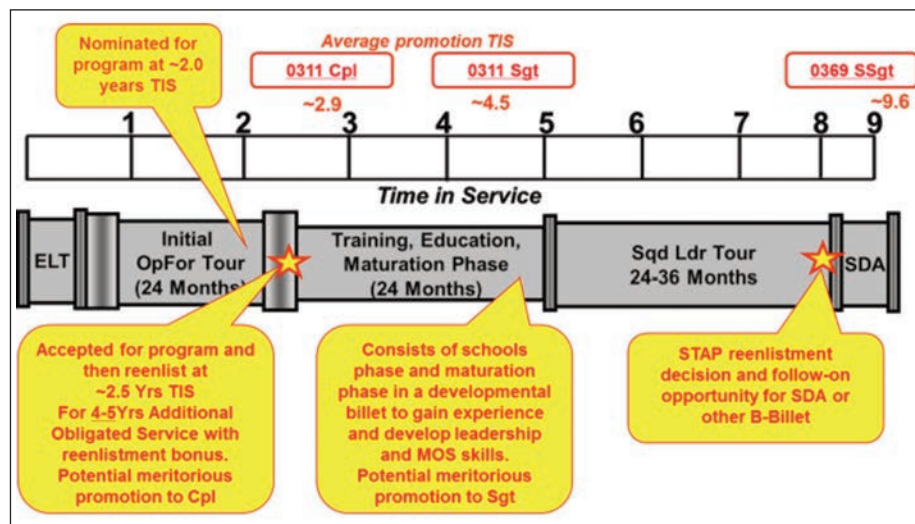


Figure 2. Example of the High Performer Track. (Figure provided by author.)



Sergeant squad leaders will require more skills and experience than today's squad leader.
 (Photo by Cpl Andrew Kuppers.)

what the High Performer Track might look like.

Not Just “Manpower’s Problem”

It is critical to highlight that this is an enterprise-wide problem that will require changes across the infantry community. Units must do a better job of billet identification code management, ensuring they have good plans at the battalion, regiment, and division levels to get squad leaders to required schools. All echelons must improve how they manage the Corps’ critical inventory of 0311 sergeants. This includes a full review of long-standing practices and policies within the Operating Forces and at the institutional level that contribute to lower staffing levels and squad leader stabilization.

Secretary of Defense’s Close Combat Study

In May 2017, Secretary of Defense Mattis initiated a Close Combat Strategic Portfolio Review. The two-phased study, run by the Office of the Secretary of Defense Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation, focused on Service and department-level investments in both materiel and non-materiel solutions to improve close combat capabilities. The study included multiple blue ribbon panels that emphasized the need to address personnel management, training, and force generation policies

that limit unit cohesion and the stabilization of key leaders. In February, Secretary Mattis ended the Strategic Portfolio Review and established a standing Close Combat Lethality Task Force that will continue to focus on all aspects of infantry lethality and readiness. The Ground Board’s squad leader staffing initiative nests well with Secretary Mattis’ study. PP&O and M&RA are working closely with the Office of the Secretary of Defense staffers as they look to implement policy changes that improve squad leader staffing and the overall readiness of our close combat formations.

What About the SLDP?

The SLDP made great strides in professionalizing our infantry small unit leaders. It recognized excellence and, most importantly, kept the spotlight on this critical billet. In the program’s four years, it has yielded over 300 quality squad leaders; however, the fundamental problem of consistently staffing rifle squads with the aforementioned mature, educated, and trained sergeant remains unresolved. PP&O, M&RA, and Training and Education Command are reviewing all aspects of the SLDP and its role in the two frameworks previously described. It is likely that the SLDP and future policy changes will converge in such a way that many components of SLDP may perhaps give

way to further overall improvements in squad leader staffing and training.

Innovation Includes How We Manage Talent

The Commandant challenged us in the November edition of the *Marine Corps Gazette*:

“I don’t want to lose to learn,” he said, quoting New Zealand’s national rugby team head coach, and continued that

modernizing the force is going to require every Marine to be smarter, more cognitive, more adaptive, more fit, more disciplined, more sober, industrious, and willing to commit like we always have been, but I think the degree that it’s going to take for us to do this will need more from all of us.²

The *Marine Corps Operating Concept* identifies the development of the future force as a critical task and emphasizes that “superior infantry is a Marine Corps asymmetric advantage.”³ Perhaps one of the single greatest areas for innovation for the infantry community is how the institution develops and staffs its rifle squads and, more broadly, how we manage the critical population of 0311 sergeants. The Ground Board remains committed to these improvements and welcomes the input, ideas, and help of the broader infantry community to address this longstanding challenge.

Notes

1. Lewis G. Lee and Aline O. Quester, *Distributed Operations: Manpower Policies for Developing Small Unit Leaders*, (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, March 2007).
2. Gen Robert B. Neller, “Learning Without Losing,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: November 2017).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *The Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

