

The Commandant's Perspective

## Command Screening

by Gen Charles C. Krulak

*In this article the Commandant discusses an issue that generates strong emotion among the officer corps.*

The Marine Corps thrives on the spirit of competition. Early on, even as we teach teamwork, we also teach Marines to be competitive in whatever they set out to do, in each level of our training system, and within our units. We freely use the term "competitive" in describing certain billets; in rankings assigned on fitness reports, we foster competition (sometimes to a fault); and we equate selection for promotion or any other fitness report-based process with "surviving" a competition.

For the last 4 years, we have had a process in place which some believe unfairly removes officers from competition. Marine lieutenant colonels and colonels are selected for promotion and then, before receiving a fitness report in their new rank, are screened for command. Some are not chosen. Others are, but then are not slated to command. In both cases, it is hard for Marines not to feel a sense of "losing," that somehow they have fallen by the wayside, even though it is a mathematical certainty that most will *not* command. Nevertheless, both these groups are expected—indeed, are desperately needed—to remain loyal and hard working for years to come. We reassure those who don't screen and who don't slate with the promise of "next time," even though *no one seems to be able to tell them exactly why "next time" will be any different than "this time."*

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As I noted in my Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG), "I expect that our assignment and promotion system will recognize the contributions and the sacrifices *every* Marine makes to ensure the security of our nation." Indeed, that's what every Marine expects, but some feel this isn't happening today. Indeed, there are few other manpower issues in our Corps that generate stronger emotions among the officer corps than command screening.

I also noted in the CPG that I am aware that the command screening program can have (and has had) a negative effect on individuals and, by extension, on our Corps. I asked you, collectively and individually, to look around the Corps and answer three

questions: What aren't we doing now that we should be doing; what are we doing now that we should be doing differently; and, what are we doing now that we shouldn't be doing at all?

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Many of your answers to these questions have addressed command screening. You have expressed your frustrations and made the suggestion that we need to have a better dialog within the Corps on this issue. I think you are absolutely right, because at least one of your ideas was discussed at the General Officers Symposium and implemented. (ALMAR 384/95 decoupled command screening from top-level school selection.) To continue that dialog and our search for a better system, let me summarize some ideas we might consider:

- Keeping the board process, but bring it closer to the approach we currently have with top-level school selection.
- Reducing the numbers screened each year, and the number of billets for which we screen.
- Publishing only the slate of assignments to command.
- Allowing the force commanders to select a certain number of commanders—perhaps 20–25 percent—to make assignments that are strongly warranted and preserve an opportunity for those performing superbly on the staff, but not screened to be assigned to command.
- Assigning a larger number of officers who have not been screened for command to the Fleet Marine Force and giving them full length tours on the staff. We will never have the level of continuity and stability we need if the staffs remain “parking lots” for slated commanders or post-command officers awaiting orders. This is not a problem of command screening per se, but it is related closely to the perceived problems surrounding the command screening program.

On balance, I think command screening has done much of what it was intended to do. It ensures that we assign the best qualified from among all the available officers of the Corps, not just those who are fortunate to be in the right place at the right time or know someone who could put them there. The general officers in the Fleet Marine Force have all agreed that the screening process has placed outstanding officers in command. Our Marines deserve no less. It codifies a process that used to happen only with great mystery within the halls of Headquarters Marine Corps and the division, wing, and force service support group headquarters, and perhaps most importantly, it broadens consideration.

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Are these ideas the perfect fix? No, but they attempt to address the worst effects of the current system on the individual. That said, I want to strongly encourage all hands to think hard about the problem, and I look forward to hearing your ideas on what we should be doing to recognize the contributions and sacrifices made by every Marine officer. I anticipate announcing further details concerning the next command screening board by ALMAR in May.

