

The Case for Below-Zone Promotions

Optimizing advancement for a performance-based culture

by Maj Brian J. Hensarling

Strong field-grade leaders are the hallmark of the Marine officer corps. As battalion and squadron commanders, lieutenant colonels (O-5s) orchestrate operations and directly influence the Marines under their charge. Similarly, colonels (O-6s) selected to serve as Air Group or regimental commanders guide and mentor their subordinate commanders, and their daily decisions impact the professional and personal lives of the hundreds or thousands of Marines serving in their units. Even when not in positions of command, these senior leaders provide the driving force behind staffs and Operational Planning Teams. Given the strength of our lieutenant colonels and colonels and the continued success of the Corps, it may be tempting to assume that the way we currently develop our officer cadre is sufficient to guarantee future successes. However, just as individual Marines are taught to “know themselves and seek self-improvement,” there remains room for improvement in the way our Corps manages its officer population. Specifically, incorporating accelerated promotions to the ranks of O-5 and O-6 would reap outsized benefits and encourage more of our best Marines to stay in uniform for the 17 to 23 years required for selection to lieutenant colonel or colonel.

As factors external to the Marine Corps place mounting pressure on officer retention, active efforts to retain our senior leaders become ever more important. Our most talented officers

>Maj Hensarling is a Huey pilot assigned to the Office of Naval Intelligence.

have an expanding array of career options as they approach the mid-career mark of service as Marines. A healthy job market and civilian educational opportunities are but two tempting alternatives to remaining in uniform. Both offer monetary incentives, geographic stability, and opportunities for merit-based advancement that can be difficult for the Marine Corps to match. This is not a new phenomenon, but pressures on retention are increasing. Designing strategies to counter them requires creativity and strategic thinking. Attacking the challenge of optimizing promotions by fine-tuning the method and timing of officer advancement is an area ripe for exploitation. Done correctly, changes to the promotion system carry no financial burden and fall squarely within the executive responsibility of Marine colonels and general officers.

At present, officer promotions lack the competitive nature that is one of the most attractive characteristics of the civilian job market: a seemingly meritocratic system that rewards hard work and talent. As Gen Berger’s recent *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* explains, “the only way to attract and retain Marines capable of winning on the new battlefield is to compete with the tools and incentives available to them in the

marketplace.”¹ The drive to excel and compete are the bedrock of our shared Marine Corps culture, but currently that drive is insufficiently reflected in the management of our most valuable resources: our people. The immediate implementation of limited “below-zone” promotion to the ranks of lieutenant colonel and colonel is a straightforward change that would net significant benefits. Accelerated promotion as a concept has been long debated, but the time has come to put it into practice. Instituting a limited program of accelerated officer promotions would reinforce our core values, require minimal administrative adjustment, and make our already strong officer cadre even stronger.

Steel Sharpens Steel

Embracing accelerated promotions would yield multiple benefits. First, it would optimize selection for promotion in a way that strengthens the collective officer corps. Healthy, productive competition is fundamental to our warrior ethos. From the very beginning, Marine officer training at The Basic School incorporates pugil stick bouts, the challenge of the obstacle course, tactical decision games, and written examinations—instilling in each Marine the notion that continuous competition is the most fundamental characteristic of our trade. From the outset, we teach our officers to strive to exceed the high standards set by their predecessors, their colleagues, and themselves.

Moderate usage of below-zone promotions reflects this principle. It would

serve as a rising tide that lifts all boats, reinvigorating a sense of competition and increasing the overall quality of leaders in an already impressive group. Today, this effect is manifest in the Marine enlisted ranks, where meritorious promotions are used to good effect and the quality of our non-commissioned officers is legendary. Selecting a handful of the best and brightest from the below-zone reinforces the idea that Marine officers are an elite group that values competence, talent, and dedication, not merely time in service (TIS). The Commandant's clear-eyed assessment in his latest planning guidance would seem to agree: "our manpower model is based primarily on time and experience, not talent or performance or potential future performance."² If we are to recruit and retain the leaders we need to face increasingly complicated conflicts worldwide, our promotions system must adapt to this new reality. To be clear, the vast majority of officer promotion selections will continue to come from the in-zone population. But the increased competition implicit in below-zone promotion will emphasize the identity of the Marine Corps as an organization that values results and potential, not tenure.

Perhaps most importantly, below-zone promotions would recognize hard work and talent in Marines that have already proven themselves ready for the challenges of the next rank. For a given rank and MOS, the successful execution of specific billets is customarily required for promotion. If they have met these benchmarks with above average results, it is time to move the Marine on to the next challenge. Promotion should not be withheld until an arbitrary date at which Blue Book entries above them are cleared. Our most capable officers expect that the reward for talent, hard work, and exemplary performance will be increasingly challenging billets and additional responsibility. Once a Marine has accomplished the work required and gained the requisite experience at a given rank, it is best for the Marine and the Corps that he advances.

Merit-based reordered promotion, as implemented for the Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21) Active Unrestricted Colonel

through Major Promotion Boards, is an encouraging initial step but is ultimately inadequate.³ Selection for reordered promotion does recognize an officer's superior performance and as such is beneficial. On the other hand, the acceleration of a given officer's promotion date under this system will vary depending on that officer's relative location in the lineal list selections for promotion during that year and could result in relatively minor changes to date of rank. FY21 promotions to O-5 provide a ready example. Officers selected for reordering began promotions on 1 June 2020, and by 1 August, all reordered promotions were authorized to pin on O-5. According to projections, as of 1 November fully 54 percent of FY21 O-5 selections will be promoted.⁴ Promoting first among their cohort is certainly beneficial for reordered officers, but how much this changes their date of rank depends on their lineal ranking prior to that reordering. Officers that would have been near the top of the list without the change may promote as little as two months early. In fact, even an officer that would have fallen in the middle of the promotion cohort without reordering could expect to pin on O-5 as little as three months early. The emphasis that reordered promotions place on incentivizing "officers of a particular merit" for sustained superior performance is welcome, but without a correspondingly dramatic change to promotion date, it is ultimately a minor change.⁶ Accelerated promotions, by comparison, would decrease date of rank by at least a year, wielding a much greater impact for individuals and the overall officer corps.

Adopting merit reordering of the entire selection population on future promotion boards would carry far more impact. According to a recent study

commissioned by Secretary Mattis and conducted by the RAND Corporation, senior Marine leaders show interest in applying merit reordering to entire promotion populations on future promotion boards.⁷ Despite that interest, however, FY21 promotion boards did not incorporate merit reordering across the board, limiting both the breadth and weight of its impact.

Despite the potential benefits of widespread application of merit reordering, below-zone has another crucial advantage: it clears space for other talented Marines. As below-zone promotees move to the next rank, key billets open up for other competitive officers. Talented leaders are under-utilized when they serve in a subsequent key billet at the same rank. As a major, for example, billets such as Executive Officer, Operations Officer, or Maintenance Officer (in Aviation units) are always in short supply. Because of the scarcity of those billets, unfortunate career timing can sometimes mean that deserving officers find themselves without an opportunity to fill them. Below-zone promotions help to alleviate this concern. Promoting a select few Marines early puts their talents to use in positions of increased responsibility and creates additional opportunities for others to prove themselves.

Best Practices

Other Services within the DOD routinely promote officers below-zone and with good results. The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) states that each Service may select up to ten percent of officers from the below-zone on a given promotion board.⁸ According to a 2014 study conducted by Marine LtCol Aaron Marx (Ret) during his tour as an Executive Fellow with the Brookings Institution, from

FY21 PROMOTIONS TO O-5 BY MONTH (ALL 2020) ⁵					
JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER (projected)
1-17	18-46	47-59*	60-98	99-189	190-215
*Promotions 001 through 053 consisted of reordered promotions.					

FY04–FY13, the Air Force promoted four percent of lieutenant colonels and three percent of colonels below-zone, while the Army promoted over eight percent and over seven percent, respectively.⁹ The Navy utilizes early promotions infrequently, yet still selected nearly half a percent of the total population below-zone during that same period. Each of our sister Services has found value by integrating early promotions into their officer development and retention. Today, the Marine Corps is alone in choosing not to make use of accelerated officer promotions for O-5s and O-6s.

Once we decide to do so, implementing accelerated field grade promotions will be simple and straightforward. Our current Performance Evaluation System provides a primary (if often imperfectly understood or executed) means of rating individual performance. Additionally, the convening message for each board clearly defines which officers fall into each promotion zone. Official promotion board precepts are equally clear that all eligible officers should be considered for selection, including those in the below-zone.¹⁰ According to the Manpower and Reserve Affairs website, “upon completion of [review of] the in-zone cases, board members review all above-zone cases, then below-zone cases.”¹¹ The promotion precepts from the FY21 O-5 and O-6 boards reflect this same intent, stating that

the officers selected will be those officers whom a majority of the members of each board considers best qualified for promotion to meet the needs of the Marine Corps ... This standard applies to all eligible officers, including those above- and below-zone.¹²

Official directives authorizing accelerated promotion are already in place and have been for many years.

The Current Situation

The question remains: if statutes, precepts, and official language authorize and encourage both above- and below-zone promotions, why are above-zone promotions utilized while below-zone promotions are not? The primary reason is simply that the Marine Corps has an institutional and cultural bias



The Marine Corps has an institutional resistance to accelerated promotions for officers and also takes a guarded approach to meritorious promotions for enlisted Marines. (Photo by LCpl Dangelo Yanez.)

against accelerated promotions for officers, and the individual Marines who sit on promotion boards share this bias. That is not a condemnation of promotion board members; it is a reflection of our institutional history and the conservative culture of the Marine Corps. Today’s senior Marine leaders were not promoted below-zone and neither were

... promotion board precepts are equally clear that all eligible officers should be considered for selection ...

their mentors or former commanders, so it can be expected that “[promotion board] members’ experiences and expectations will manifest in the officers who are selected for promotion.”¹³ Yet, most would also agree that there are undoubtedly a handful of Marines in the below-zone who should be seriously considered among the “best qualified” officers called for each year in the precepts. Every Marine can point to at least one officer whose talents and accom-

plishments prove that, even if promoted a year early, he would be prepared for the challenges of the next rank. The hesitance to promote below the zone does not exist when selecting enlisted Marines and seems to be changing even in recent promotions to O-4.¹⁴ Despite that openness at junior ranks, institutional memory, cultural inertia, and personal anecdotes continue to be the greatest hurdles standing in the way of the benefits of incorporating accelerated promotions for Marine lieutenant colonels and colonels.

Potential Pitfalls

When introduced in conversations with senior leaders, the topic of accelerated promotions evokes two main complaints. The first objection often hinges on the perceived lack of experience held by Air Force colonels or generals when compared with their Marine equivalents. This perspective explains that because of excessive use of early promotions and the resulting lack of TIS, Air Force officers on the Joint Staff, at selective fellowships, or in similarly competitive billets, speak with less authority and credibility than their Marine, Navy, and Army colleagues. According to this line of thinking, accelerated promotion robbed those of-

officers of critical leadership experience. While this criticism of extreme below-zone promotions may have some merits (and boosters within even the Air Force itself), it is important to note that the Air Force accelerated promotion scheme is far more aggressive than anything most commentators recommend for the Marine Corps.¹⁵ In addition to selecting officers in the below-zone, the Air Force also selects some of its officers fully two years ahead of schedule in the double below-zone, beginning in rare cases with the rank of major. That trend of accelerated promotion continues as Air Force officers rise in the ranks. While Marines selected for brigadier general in FY21 averaged 26.3 years TIS, 90 percent of their Air Force counterparts select with less than 23 years TIS.¹⁶ In fact, Marines selected on the FY21 colonel promotion board averaged 23.3 years TIS (slightly more TIS than their brigadier general counterparts in the Air Force), illustrating the stark difference between the two Services' approaches to promotion.¹⁷

Below-zone promotions in the Marine Corps need not be this extreme. The Army serves as a case in point. As mentioned earlier, the Army embraces accelerated promotions perhaps more than any other branch in terms of the number of early promotees. Yet, because of an aversion to double below-zone promotions and a hesitance to promote below-zone to both O-5 and O-6, Army O-7s average only slightly less TIS than their Marine equivalents (25.7 vs. 26.3 years).¹⁸ The Air Force accelerated promotions scheme represents an extreme implementation of selection from the below-zone. The Army approach, however, is workable, reasonable, and easily implemented for Marines.

While accelerated promotion carries many benefits, it also means a reduction in experience in grade—a fact that should not be overlooked. By instituting below-zone promotions only to the ranks of lieutenant colonel and colonel, however, a Marine officer could lose a maximum of two years of experience between promotions from O-5 to O-7. To see how this would work in practice, look again at the FY21 promotion statistics. Marines selected in-zone for

lieutenant colonel on the FY21 board averaged 16.1 years TIS, and the average Marine selected for O-7 had 26.3 years TIS.¹⁹ An officer progressing from O-5 to O-7 selection can therefore expect roughly ten years of experience between the two boards. For the right officer, losing one year of experience over that ten-year span presents no great challenge. Even the loss of two years is surmountable given proper career timing. Perhaps most importantly, below-zone promotion to lieutenant colonel would be a sign of success as a major but would not guarantee a future below-zone promotion to colonel. Competition for promotion would continue to be fierce and based on performance. Selection would depend solely on individual officers demonstrating the capability to perform “the duties normally associated with the next higher grade.”²⁰ Only a select few officers would promote below-zone, and an even smaller number would promote below-zone twice in a career.

The second argument against institutionalizing accelerated field grade promotions for Marine officers is that each promotion from the below-zone means one fewer promotion is available for Marines in the above- or in-zone. This is true of course, and while it might seem unfortunate that a few Marines will not select for their next rank, the benefits for the Corps as a whole far outweigh the costs to the individuals affected. Every promotion board is competitive by design, selecting only a certain percentage of the total potential promotees. Between FY17–FY21, overall O-5 promotion opportunity averaged 67.2 percent (i.e. the total number of officers promoted to O-5 equaled 67.2 percent of the in-zone population).²¹ Of that total, above-zone promotions represented on average 4.8 percent of O-5 promotion opportunity. Subtracting above-zone promotions from the total leaves roughly 62 percent of promotion opportunity for selection from the in- and below-zones. On a board in which no Marines select from the below-zone, this translates to promotion of the entire top-third, as well as nearly the entire middle-third of the in-zone population. It is difficult to imagine that high-performers in the top five to

ten percent of the below-zone would not compare favorably with the in-zone population placing near the bottom of the middle third. Both the below and in-zone Marines have likely held similarly challenging billets, but standouts from the below-zone delivered far better results. There is no guarantee that an extra year of experience for the Marines in-zone has given them an intangible benefit that appears only in their greater TIS, which is absent in the Relative Value of their fitness reports. While their service is admirable, the Marine Corps is not breaking faith with the bottom of the in-zone by selecting a limited number of their more competitive and highly accomplished near-peers instead. One additional year TIS should not be the tiebreaker for a lopsided matchup between a “water-walker” in the below-zone and a Marine on the cusp of non-selection in his year group.

After deciding to implement accelerated promotions, the final question is how many officers to select from the below-zone on each board. While there is no perfect template provided by the other Services, beginning with even a small number of officers is likely to deliver a substantial impact throughout the officer corps. The Marine Corps is a conservative organization, so any change to a system as fundamental as officer promotions should naturally be incremental. With that in mind, selecting two percent of the total promotion opportunity from the below-zone would be reasonable. What would this look like in practice? In FY21, this would have meant the early promotion of eight lieutenant colonels (of 366 total selected) and two colonels (of 110 total selected).²² Although those are small numbers in absolute terms, the impact on overall officer culture of the selection of O-5s and O-6s from below the zone would be immense up and down the rank structure.

Time to Execute

All the institutional tools are in place; the last hurdle is convincing members of the promotion board to execute. Adding stronger, more specific wording to the promotion board precept may be required to encourage members to move

deserving below-zone officers from “eligible” to “selected.” Since the Assistant Secretary of the Navy releases promotion board precepts, advocacy by the Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs would likely be required to make the change. This signal from the upper echelons of Marine leadership may help to catalyze execution, but by itself, it is unlikely to lead to whole-hearted implementation. A change of this degree will also require real buy-in and visible efforts by our most senior leaders to socialize the benefits and adoption of accelerated promotions for Marine officers. Without clear and compelling guidance, promotion board presidents will be understandably hesitant to be the first to select from the below-zone. Overcoming cultural hurdles to get to accelerated promotions may not be quick or easy, but it will have lasting benefits, and the active engagement of our senior leaders can make it happen.

Promoting Marine officers from the below-zone has been a topic of discussion for years, but it is an idea whose time has come. In accordance with Gen Berger’s guidance, it is time to take an unflinching look at ways to optimize our manpower structure, returning to first principles and reinvesting in the future health of our officer corps. As Gen Berger explains,

While we must accept an environment characterized by uncertainty, we cannot ignore strong signals of change nor be complacent when it comes to designing and preparing the force for the future.²³

At the same time, we must face the reality that our field grade officers remain very much in demand by other prospective employers, and that it is prudent to provide them with multiple incentives to remain in uniform. Companies from Silicon Valley to Wall Street value the experience, dedication, and talent of our Marines, and they prove it with a menu of incentives. Within our Corps, promising young officers draw strength from our Corps values, apply them through fierce competition, and look to the careers of their senior mentors as guides to their own future potential. Accelerated officer promotions provide a ready and actionable means to conserve resources

while simultaneously strengthening our officer corps and our “performance-based culture.”²⁴ The plans and tools are already in place. Now, it’s time to execute.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
2. Ibid.
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 168/19, FY21 U.S. Marine Corps Officer Promotion Selection Boards*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMINs 304/20, Officer Promotions for June 2020 and Projected Officer Promotions for July 2020*, (Washington, DC: 2020); Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMINs 372/20, Officer Promotions for July 2020 and Projected Officer Promotions for August 2020*, (Washington, DC: 2020); Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMINs 421/20, Officer Promotions for August 2020 and Projected Officer Promotions for September 2020*, (Washington, DC: 2020); Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMINs 489/20, Officer Promotions for September 2020 and Projected Officer Promotions for October 2020*, (Washington, DC: 2020); and Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMINs 563/20, Officer Promotions for October 2020 and Projected Officer Promotions for November 2020*, (Washington, DC: 2020).
5. Ibid.
6. Department of the Navy, “Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2021 U.S. Marine Corps Unrestricted Lieutenant Colonel Promotion Selection Board and Unrestricted Major Continuation Selection Board,” (Washington, DC: 2019).
7. Albert A. Robbert, Katherine L. Kidder, Caitlin Lee, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, and William H. Waggy II, *Officer Career Management: Steps Toward Modernization in the 2018 and 2019 National Defense Authorization Acts*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).
8. Staff, “DOPMA/ROPMA Reference,” RAND Corporation, available at dopma-ropma.rand.org.
9. Aaron Marx, “Rethinking Marine Corps Officer Promotion and Retention,” *Brookings*, (August 2014), available at www.brookings.edu.
10. “Precept Convening The Fiscal Year 2021 U.S. Marine Corps Unrestricted Lieutenant

Colonel Promotion Selection Board”; and Department of the Navy, “Precept Convening The Fiscal Year 2021 U.S. Marine Corps Unrestricted Colonel Promotion Selection Board and Unrestricted Lieutenant Colonel Continuation Selection Board,” (Washington, DC: 2019).

11. Staff, “During Board,” Manpower & Reserve Affairs, available at www.manpower.usmc.mil.
12. “Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2021 U.S. Marine Corps Unrestricted Lieutenant Colonel Promotion Selection Board”; and “Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2021 U.S. Marine Corps Unrestricted Colonel Promotion Selection Board.”
13. *Officer Career Management*.
14. Marine Corps Manpower and Reserve Affairs, “FY 2020 USMC Major Promotion Board Statistics,” (Quantico, VA: 2020); and Marine Corps Manpower and Reserve Affairs, “FY 2021 USMC Major Promotion Board Statistics,” (Quantico, VA: 2020).
15. Travis D. Rex, “Speed Trap: The USAF 24-Year Pole to General Officer,” (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College, 2015).
16. “FY 2021 USMC Brigadier General Promotion Board Statistics,” and “Rethinking Marine Corps Officer Promotion and Retention.”
17. “FY 2020 USMC Colonel Promotion Board Statistics.”
18. “Rethinking Marine Corps Officer Promotion and Retention”; and “FY 2021 USMC Brigadier General Promotion Board Statistics.”
19. “FY 2021 USMC Lieutenant Colonel Promotion Board Statistics.”
20. “Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2021 U.S. Marine Corps Unrestricted Colonel Promotion Selection Board.”
21. “FY 2017–21 USMC Lieutenant Colonel Promotion Board Statistics.”
22. “FY 2021 USMC Lieutenant Colonel Promotion Board Statistics,” and “FY 2021 USMC Colonel Promotion Board Statistics.”
23. *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*.
24. *Officer Career Management*.

