

# All-Volunteer (Recruited) Force

Then, now, future  
by Col Jeffery M. Morgan

*“Recruiting is where it all begins. Recruiting high-quality applicants for the Corps is terribly expensive, but the price of not doing it is disaster. We must be able to bear the pain of having to do without our best and brightest while they serve a tour on recruiting duty. Otherwise, we mortgage our future, with bankruptcy an eventual certainty.”<sup>1</sup>*

*—Gen Walt Boomer,  
Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps.*

To appreciate where we are and where we are going, it is necessary to understand the long, tough, and, at times, ugly road we have travelled. The story starts in 1973, when the country transitioned to the All-Volunteer Force. The United States had just emerged from the long Vietnam War with the government and military suffering a significant loss of public faith. The Marine Corps faced rampant drug use, racial tensions, and the worst disciplinary and absentee rates in history. There was substantial criticism of viability of the amphibious mission, a lack of training opportunities, and decreased readiness. The Marine Corps was unprepared; recruiting was under manned, under resourced, not considered a desirable duty, and had a recognized culture of malpractice.

Despite accessing applicants with the lowest quality standards in the DOD, in 1973, the Marine Corps barely made their accession mission, and by spring of 1974 when Congress passed law increasing the minimum accessions of high

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school graduates from 45 percent to 55 percent, then Commandant Cushman testified, requesting relief of the requirement. The entry-level training pipeline was challenged to turn convicted felons, high school dropouts, and low mental category recruits into Marines. In response, boot camp became increasingly brutal, where we instituted special motivational platoons and abuse was common. In 1974 and 1975, 360 Drill Instructors were punished for recruit mistreatment—three times the amount of other services combined. By 1975, the Marine Corps enlisted force consisted of only 50 percent high school graduates, 25 percent of which in the upper mental groups; 40 percent admitted drug use in last 30 days, and there were over 18,000 desertions. The recruiting moniker was, “If it walks and talks, test it and ship it.”

Commandant Louis Wilson (1975–1979) recognized the institutional crisis and was determined to win the long, tough fight. He started by assigning LtGen Robert Barrow (former Commanding General of Parris Island and later CMC) as Manpower Chief, who then immediately enacted reforms to recruiting and recruit training. Together, their leadership, influence, and interest would ultimately extend to every process of making Marines. They knew the core strength of the Marine Corps was, and would always remain, the quality of the individual Marine. To begin, an unbroken chain of accountability was established by organizing recruiting and recruit training under the same Commanding General, the only Service to do this. The accession goal was raised to 75 percent high school grads, while implementing aggressive actions to get rid of those who did not belong (~5000 discharges) with the intent to continually replace with better Marines. They knew these actions would improve institutional health, climate, and combat effectiveness and were ultimately required to save the very existence of the Marine Corps.

After recruit McClure was beat to death at Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) San Diego, Gen Wilson abolished motivation platoons, doubled the number of officers assigned to each company, increased drill instructor screening scrutiny, and established recruit personal interviews—all without any easing of standards. Just as significant, he aggressively pursued recruiting reforms, with none more substantial as hand picking BGen MacMillan as his director of personnel procurement, which then was responsible for

the recruiting mission. As the previous director of 1st Marine Corps District, MacMillan had developed the initial concepts of systematic recruiting. These concepts and other best practices were quickly published in 1977 as *Volume 1: Guidebook for Recruiters*. That summer, he sent a trusted team to every district, station, and substation in the Nation to personally install the components of systematic recruiting, forever standardizing processes across the Marine Corps.

To complement these efforts, manpower screening teams were sent to every major command to select quality NCOs and SNCOs with best fit for recruiting duty. A national training team was established to reinforce, train, and assist subordinate units in maintaining systematic recruiting discipline. The administrative oversight of reserve units was transferred from the recruiting districts to Marine Forces Reserves and a Recruiting Management Course was developed to teach officers, career recruiters, and sergeants major how to effectively lead at the recruiting station level.

As the commandant transitioned from Gen Wilson, Gen Barrow continued to shepherd these needed reforms. He instituted Service-wide mandatory drug testing, expedited discharges, challenged recruiters to access 100 percent high school graduates, and established the Commandant's Superior Achiever Award to personally recognize every recruiting station that met or exceeded all quality and quantity goals. Gen Barrow also focused on maintaining Service relevance by refining the Marine Corps' ability to operate as forward deployed crisis response force, and he knew he had to have the right Marines to do it.

Throughout the remaining 1980s and early 1990s, recruiting received quality support from subsequent commandants to implement these changes, with the next substantial recruiting innovations coming under Commandant's Mundy and Krulak. In 1994, Gen Mundy directed the formation of Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC), which would report directly to the Commandant and provide a



Shortly after Pvt McClure is beaten to death at MCRD SD. (Cartoon from Los Angeles Times 2 May 1976.)

**Gen Mundy directed the formation of Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) ...**

unity of effort, facilitate standardization of a one Corps approach, and propel steady improvement. In 1995, he established the recruiting ribbon to recognize, "the only regiment in the Corps that is in constant contact with its objective 30 days a month, without let up."<sup>2</sup> The ribbon remains prestigious today and referred to by some as the CONUS combat action ribbon.

As the international landscape changed, Gen Krulak, now Commandant, recognized the need for a "Strategic Corporal" to succeed in his operational concept of the "Three-Block War," and he too understood that it all starts with recruiting. In 1995, while all the Services were struggling to meet accession goals and lowering standards, Gen Krulak raised them. He required 95 percent high school graduates (DOD standard 90 percent), 63 percent Mental Group I-III Alphas (DOD Standard 60 percent), and no more than 1 percent CAT IVs (DOD standard up to 10 percent). He then created the Recruiting Warrant Officer MOS of 4810 modeled after the Infantry Battalion Gunner Program to incentivize MCRC's best enlisted leaders to apply

AFQT Category	Score Range	
I	93-99	"Alphas"
II	65-92	
IIIA	50-64	
IIIB	31-49	"Bravos"
IVA	21-30	"CAT IV's" ...the Marine Corps did not access any last FY and will not access any this FY.
IVB	16-20	
IVC	10-15	
V	1-9	

Figure 1. USVAB chart.

Enlisted Accessions			
	Category	DOD Standard	USMC 5-Yr Avg
Males	I-III A %	60%	69.94%
	Tier I %	90%	99.75%
Females	III-III A %	60%	70.85%
	Tier I %	90%	99.85%
Combined	I-III A %	60%	70.05%
	Tier I %	90%	99.76%

Figure 2.

and support the need to build more career recruiters (8412 MOS created by Gen Wilson). Finally, and perhaps most significant, Gen Krulak directed Manpower to implement a formal command screening process to select Recruiting Station Commanding Officers. This would instantly transform recruiting duty from a career ender to a sought after and professionally rewarded duty for our most competitive majors (top four percent selected).

Although, Gens Wilson and Barrow recognized the need for systematic focus on quality high school seniors and placing them in a pool for development, from 1987 to 1995, the Marine Corps consistently failed to make its level-loaded accessions strategy in the second trimester (February, March, April, May-FMAM). This was partially because of dependency on the direct market (enlist and ship) resulting in shifting portions of the FMAM mission into June, July, August, and September. Therefore, another significant Gen Krulak contribution to *Making Marines* success, was directing a transition to trimester phasing in FY1996. This decision reinforced the high school as the primary market, which produces applicants who score in the higher mental categories, have lower incidents of moral disqualifications, and have the lowest attrition. It is also where the Marine Corps maintains a competitive advantage over other Services and remains the bedrock of systematic recruiting.

**Now**

For the purpose of this article, “Now” is defined as the period from 2005 (the

last time MCRC missed contracting mission) to present day. The before mentioned reforms and institutional commitment cemented a simple but proven recruiting formula for success. A quality recruiting force + systematically trained + adequate funding for operations and advertising = mission success (high quality Marines).

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Although simple, it can be difficult to remain institutionally disciplined to this formula. As operating environments change, budgets get challenged, and competing requirements emerge, leaders with the best intentions may make risk decisions that negatively impact the recruiting mission. Recruiting struggles are predictable and cyclic. A Service that makes mission for years may decide to cut endstrength and subsequently reduce recruiters and advertising funding.

ally, MCRC was authorized 600 more recruiters to support an endstrength increase of ~15,000 to 202,000.

In 2009, when 202k was realized, the recruiter drawdown began. This time with appropriate analysis and institutional support, the Service decided to only recoup 400 of the 600 Marines and ultimately right size the recruiter force to sustain the predictable annual 36k–38k Total Force quality accessions mission at 95 percent high school graduates and 63

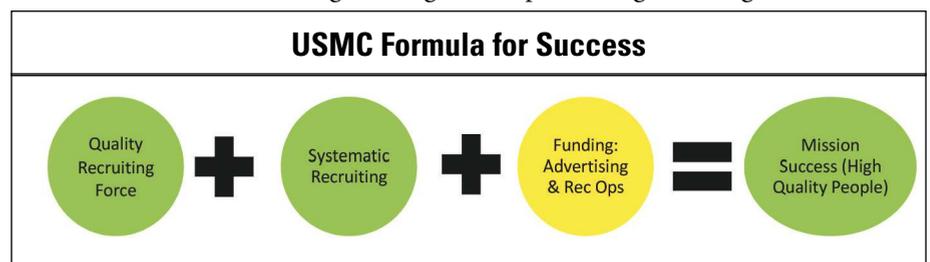


Figure 3.

Additionally, plans call for lower accessions, which do not fully materialize, leading to lower quality and less diverse accessions. Lower quality accessions increase MCRD and premature first term attrition. Eventually the Service responds by re-doubling resources and repeating the cycle, which costs significantly more in the long run.

Current successes in diversity, gender, and reduced attrition are related to the sustained recruiting of a higher quality force, a stable trimester shipping model, preparation time in the Delayed Entry Program (DEP), which all stems from institutional commitments in recruiting (people and money) since 2009. As mentioned, the Marine Corps missed its annual contracting mission in 2005, and a contributing factor was the significant underfunding of the advertising budget for the previous decade. This compelled Gen Hagee to nearly double MCRC's advertising budget. Addition-

percent MG I-III A. Additionally, and although not fully funded, advertising received moderate support. All of which in the last decade has led to historic lows in MCRD attrition, sustained quality (99 percent graduates and 70 percent MG I-III A), increased diversity (33 percent to 43 percent of enlisted accessions), as well as increased female accessions (7 percent to 14 percent for officers). All of which are contributing factors to reduced first-term attrition and ultimately saves the institution countless workhours and millions in replacement, retraining, and retention costs.

Another, often overlooked, institutional savings gained by our service approach to recruiting is enlistment bonuses. Since we focus on the younger high school market and sell intangibles, like pride of belonging, challenge, and commitment to service vice tangible benefits like specific jobs and money for education, the Marine Corps saves millions in enlistment bonuses. For example, last year, we spent ~\$9M, while the Army and the Navy spent ~\$260M and ~\$400M, respectively. Additionally, this method creates a culture of belonging vice service as a job opportunity, which improves retention and produces a more prideful veteran population.

The institutional commitment since 2009 has not only yielded the above mentioned historic achievements, but it also created a momentum that has optimized the time in Delayed Entry Program to better prepare applicants for recruit training and produce quality shippers year round, which was previously unheard of during FMAM. This momentum was absolutely necessary to weather the perfect storm of COVID, political turmoil, generational change, civil unrest, and natural disasters starting in 2020 and continuing today. In 2019, it was normal for MCRC to close out the contracting mission in the first two weeks of the month and having the majority of next month's mission accumulated for assessing on the first day of the following month. A struggling station may take the contracting mission into the third week of the month, but even then, those new accessions were being placed in the pool to develop and ship 90 to 180 days later.

Although the Marine Corps survived the brunt of the proverbial storm, the sustained impacts are taking their toll. With school and community closings, we have lost access to a more disinterested market and reduced support programs like boot leave and recruiter's assistance. Previously accumulated contracts for future month's success have disintegrated. CDC safety guidelines have reduced throughput capacity at the recruit depots, which has forced a flattened shipping model, driving stations into the direct market to accommodate increased shipping requirements in FMAM. All of which has manifested in more recruiting stations missing their monthly contracting and shipping missions while facing modernization challenges and potential budget and personnel cuts. Regardless, Marine recruiters continue to accomplish the mission and exceed all DOD quality standards, but we must not take anything for granted.

#### Future

Comparable to Gen Krulak's recognition of the need for a strategic corporal, Gen Berger recently identified Talent Management Reform as his Second Priority in order to support *Force Design 2030*. In his *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, Gen Berger wrote, "Our desired endstate also requires elite warriors with physical and mental toughness, tenacity, initiative, and aggressiveness to innovate, adapt, and win in a rapidly changing operating environment."<sup>3</sup> This vision requires total Service effort across the accession, training, education, and retention continuum, but unlike previous commandants, improving accession "quality" cannot be just about more high school graduates or raising test score requirements, as we already top the market capacity in these areas. Similar to the Wilson-Barrow mandate, CMC challenged MCRC to find, attract, and recruit the "most talented" individuals and replace them with even "more talented" Marines.

Understanding the nuances of Generation Z (see Devine article), the competition for talent, and the Commandant's goal for force design, MCRC broadened our assessment in order to enhance our contribution to the Ma-

rine Corps' long-term success. A Marine only reaches this desired endstate by going through a transformation process that includes training, education, leadership, and experience, but it all starts with a young man or woman with the potential to become that person. Our current system has proven effective but remains limited in scope. Accepting this reality, we set out to identify measurable attributes, which may help detect young men and women with the most talent and potential to become the leaders of *Force 2030*. Those attributes are Physical Tenacity, Competitive Spirit, Memory, Processing Speed, Pattern Recognition, Problem Solving, Flexibility, and Adaptability. MCRC then devised a plan to operationalize a method for finding and attracting this talent.

Although not yet fully funded or realized, the idea is to transition prospecting, information technology, and human performance strategies into the modern age with Artificial Intelligence/ Machine Learning, Cognitive Gaming, Mobile Applications, and augmented reality platforms. We intend to use the talent attributes as determinants in algorithms tied to games that will cue players to measure their abilities. This will help focus our prospecting efforts on those who demonstrate the greatest potential to become the 21st Century Warriors.

Additionally, a personally tailored advertising approach, similar to those used in consumer markets, requires expanded legal authorities in which we are working with the other Services and the Office of Secretary of Defense to lobby Congress. In the meantime, we have fully embraced available social media and digital communications methods to engage applicants in the space they occupy. This played to our advantage and was further accelerated out of necessity during the pandemic.

To synergize the personal approach to marketing, cognitive gaming, and pool development, MCRC developed a new mobile application called Squad Bay as a tool for recruiters to initially track applicants, develop poolees, manage referrals, and provide applicants with a personalized recruiting and pool ex-

perience. Future versions will expand Squad Bay’s capabilities to fuse all these efforts to include prospecting, as it will electronically tie applicants directly into digitally connected recruiting events and potentially measure improvements in the aforementioned attributes.

Equally complex, the Commandant’s desire to “mature the force” simply cannot be higher rank structure or age, which is cost prohibitive. Therefore, is it possible to accelerate the maturity of the individual Marine by using these technologies and attributes to better develop the cognitive abilities of our pool-ees prior to shipping to boot camp or Officer Candidate School? Obviously, we prepare those in the pool today, but success is dependent on available pre-ship time and focused on entry-level training. With the intent of jump-starting the transformation process and emphasizing their responsibilities as a professional Marine, we will employ modern technology to expand cognitive abilities by having pool-ees conduct daily scientifically-based, individualized learning games to develop those identified attributes and gain the intellectual edge we desire over our adversaries. Taken further, we can use these concepts to instill a competitive warfighting spirit by increasing the level of competition on two levels: against self and against others in both the cognitive and physical spaces. Finally, certain aspects will assist recruiters mentor pool-ees on the meaning of the Oath of Office, Values Based Training, and Core Values—all designed to accelerate understanding and long-term success.

Additionally, we are working closely with other HQMC agencies in developing analytic and predictive analysis tools that will help to increase the effectiveness and efficiencies of the recruiting force. For example, the Enhanced Shipping Model is being designed to better match a pool-ees ship date with the expected start date of their MOS producing school. We are exploring a new tool called the Marine Corps Occupational Specialty Matching tool used to match an applicant with the MOS they are best suited. Both show tremendous promise for significant cost savings by reducing attrition, reducing

Marines awaiting training, increasing performance, and improving retention.

Finally, we also believe MCRC can assist the Marine Corps’ total force retention efforts. MCRC is adapting the mindset from one of “recruit to access” to “recruit to retain” for both the active and reserve components. We are working with Career Planner’s Course to develop a systematic retention approach, creating sales tools for commanders and providing training on the Direct Affiliation Program so Marines can immediately transfer from active to reserves while maintaining certain personal and professional benefits.

It is difficult, yet exciting times in MCRC. We are now and will always remain challenged to recruit the most talented men and women our country can provide. While it is incumbent upon the Marine Corps to remain relevant in the ever-changing operational world landscape, it is equally critical on the streets, in the schools, and the hearts of America. The recent institutional commitment to recruiting is appreciated but being challenged in the current environment. *Force Design 2030*, as well as these exciting modernization efforts, cannot be realized without stable and adequate resources. The price of recruiting high-quality applicants is expensive but necessary to the long-term institutional health of the Corps.

#### Notes

1. Gen Walter E. Boomer, “Smaller and Better in the 1990s,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: October 1992).
2. Joseph A. Bushner, *Winning the Recruiting War*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Recruiting Command).
3. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).



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