

Flip the Rank Pyramid

Majors as company commanders

by Col Mark Cancian

For decades, the Marine Corps has had the perverse notion that its most experienced officers should do staff work rather than lead troops. Thus, battalion and regimental staffs have lots of majors and senior captains, but captains and even first lieutenants command companies and batteries. The Marine Corps does this despite its rhetoric that troop command, especially at the company/battery level, is key to battlefield success. If the Marine Corps believes what it says, it should take the bold step of moving all those majors and senior captains into commands and reducing the influence of staffs. In fact, doing so may be the only way to make possible the distributed operations capabilities called for in the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*.¹

The proposal. Reorganize the infantry battalion as follows:

- Make the commanders of the three infantry line companies a major.
- Reduce the rank of the S-3 Operations officer to a captain.
- Leave the commander of weapons company as a captain. Although the function is important, during operations, the company operates dispersed, and the weapons company commander performs a staff function, fire support coordinator.
- Leave the commander of headquarters and service company as a captain because the functions, though important, are mostly administrative.

This article focuses on infantry units because they comprise the Marine Corps' major element of ground combat power, but the argument applies broadly. Every community would be better off putting more senior officers (and enlisted for that matter, though that is a separate issue) into line units.

The purpose of the change would be several-fold: to put experience where

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it is most likely to influence the fight, to decentralize decision making from staffs to the line commanders, to involve battalion commanders more directly in conducting operations, and to make widely distributed operations viable.

The Importance of Company Commanders

To begin, it is worth reviewing why company commanders are so important. First, command is important. It is the pinnacle of professional responsibility. A commander is responsible for everything the unit does or fails to do. Second, companies are particularly important because they are the lowest level that routinely coordinates multiple functions and owns battlespace, yet the commander still can interact directly with subordinates.² An illustration of this importance is the most challenging battle Marines have fought in the past decade—for Patrol Base Fires' survival in Afghanistan's bloody Sangin district. As Bing West makes painstakingly clear in his classic, *One Million Steps*, had it not been for the company commander's leadership at the decisive moment, Patrol Base Fires could have fallen into enemy hands.³

Company commanders will be increasingly important as Marine Corps operational doctrine evolves toward distributed operations—a move specifically called for in Gen Berger's guidance.⁴ When battlefield employment involved battalions/regiments/divisions, companies would always be closely overseen

by a higher headquarters that could provide the experience and expertise that a company commander lacked. Now, Marine Corps doctrine envisions moving toward distributed operations where smaller units like companies are distributed widely around the battlespace, including in day-to-day "grey zone" competition across the globe. That means that companies may no longer be under the immediate direction of a higher headquarters. Further, companies may have capabilities now resident only at battalion level and higher and, in the future, might have access to new capabilities such as intermediate range conventional missiles, loitering munitions, and tactical cyber fires. The resulting operations require more decision-making capacity at lower levels.⁵

Indeed, during counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, companies picked up rudimentary staffs for intelligence and fire support to help with the increased responsibilities.

There are Precedents

Marine officers today tend to view the assignment of captains as company commanders as akin to a natural law, an inevitable and unalterable practice. In fact, having majors as company commanders has a long history.

In the British Army (and many others) at the beginning of World War I, majors commanded companies (and batteries also). A shift from captain to major company commanders occurred

at the turn of the 20th century when infantry battalions were reorganized to have a smaller number of larger companies (200–250 men). Unfortunately, by the time the U.S. Army and Marine Corps consolidated their companies, they were in the midst of mobilization for World War I and just did not have enough officers. Captains were designated company commanders, not because they were the right rank but because there were not enough majors available.⁶

Ironically, the Marine Corps Reserve does this today, though it is rarely discussed. In theory, reserve infantry battalions have the same rank structure as active duty battalions. However, because the average reserve officer comes off active duty with six years of experience, platoon commanders tend to be captains, and company commanders tend to be majors.⁷

The Change in Staff/Line Dynamics

Infantry battalion staffs have been growing in size and influence over time. Back in 1914, on the eve of World War I, an Army battalion staff had only one officer, the adjutant, now a junior officer in the S-1 personnel section. (That is why the adjutant has certain ceremonial roles that are much more important than the current position would imply.) The Marine Corps had no equivalent units at the time, being organized by barracks and ship detachments. By the end of World War I, the Marine Corps had followed the Army example, growing to three staff officers in addition to the battalion commander. In the 1920s, the wartime goal for the battalion staff had grown to five, but except the major XO, the staff officers were first lieutenants, all junior to the company commanders. At the beginning of World War II, the “D” series Table of Organization kept the battalion staff at five but with the operations officer now a captain. By the end of the war (“G” series Table of Organization), the staff had grown to six, with the operations officer now a major and the logistics officer a captain. To be fair, the battalion had become more complicated over time, with a wider variety of weapons and capabilities. It had not, however, become any larger, with the World War II battalion (996

Marines/Sailors) being slightly smaller than the World War I battalion (1,040 Marines/Sailors).⁸

Today, battalion staffs are smaller versions of regimental and division staffs. Battalion staffs have grown to 11 officers, even though the battalion-size (965 Marines/Sailors) is slightly smaller than the World War I and World War II equivalents. Six staff officers are senior or equal in rank to company commanders.⁹

Infantry battalion staffs have been growing in size and influence over time.

This expansion of staff size and seniority has changed the way that line units relate to the commander. In effect, a staff has been interposed between them. The section below, quoted at length because of its relevance, comes from a study of infantry organization. Although the analysis focuses on the Army, the Marine Corps followed Army practice:

The Army expanded its infantry battalion headquarters from just four officers in May 1945 to seven in 1948 ... increased the rank of a battalion operations officer (S-3) from captain to major and gave him a lieutenant to act as his assistant. Although these changes seem minor on paper, in practice, their effect was profound. Not only had battalion staff officers increased in number, they had increased in rank as well. The S-1, S-2, and S-4 were now all captains and thus equal in rank to the company commanders. In practice (after 1948) all three (especially the S-4) were usually senior to the company commanders because the U.S. Army preferred (and still prefers) to use junior captains as company commanders and senior ones as staff officers.

Of more significance was that, as a major, the S-3 outranked all the company commanders. He was also of the same rank as the battalion executive

officer. While this smoothed out the “rank pyramid” somewhat by ensuring that the battalion had another major to balance its lieutenant colonel, it also meant that the executive officer could no longer be the battalion’s *de facto* operations officer. The S-3 would now be the real S-3, and the executive officer became more of a chief of staff and gatekeeper who controlled access to the battalion commander.

This practice was in sharp contrast to the norm in European Armies. In French and German battalions, the company commanders outranked everyone except the battalion commander himself. In British and Soviet battalions, the commander did have an executive officer (the Soviets called him a chief of staff), but the company commanders outranked all the other officers. (British company commanders were actually majors; captains did all the staff work.) The Marines, however, sided with the U.S. Army in that they authorized majors as battalion S-3 officers as early as March 1944.¹⁰

The rapid expansion of the Marine Corps (and Army) during World War II was a major reason why this change occurred. The Marine Corps expanded twenty-fold between 1939 and its peak in 1944. (The Army expanded 30-fold.) Therefore, a World War II infantry company had only a handful of personnel, maybe just the first sergeant, who had been in the military before wartime mobilization began. The U.S. military believed that strong staffs were needed to compensate for this lack of experience. While the wisdom of that decision can be debated for World War II, it clearly does not apply today.

As the discussion above implies, a perverse aspect of this system is that company commanders answer to several bosses because there are so many senior officers on staff. This is particularly true regarding the operations officer who often operates as a deputy commander, but it can also occur with other staff officers because they are equal in rank and often senior to the company commander. Battalion commanders may argue that in their battalion there was only one person in charge: the commander. They have clearly forgotten what it is like to be a company com-

mander and receive a radio order from a senior battalion staff officer. It has all the force of an order from the battalion commander—and company commanders get many such calls.

Thus, the purpose in reducing the rank of the operations officer S-3 from major to captain is not just to reduce the number of additional majors needed to implement this proposal but also to change the dynamic between staff and line—giving company commanders more voice and reducing the influence of the staff.

Commanders Favor Staffs

Another reason for this staff/line balance is that commanders focus on their staffs. This is a hard thing to say because most commanders rightfully think of themselves as warfighters who focus on combat. However, the human inclination is to favor nearby activities and ensure that they operate smoothly day-to-day. More distant activities get less attention. Thus, commanders want smooth staff operations and will put their best people on staffs to ensure this smooth functioning. Distant activities—the line companies—then get what is left.

Martin van Creveld discussed this line/staff dynamic in *Fighting Power*, his classic study of the U.S. and German personnel systems in World War II:

[The German army] systematically and consistently sent its best men forward to the front, consciously and deliberately weakening the rear ... German commanders at all levels were to select essentials and concentrate on them while leaving the details to subordinates to work out. The U.S. Army aimed at confronting the enemy with the greatest possible firepower ... To deploy all resources as well as possible, to put every man and screw in their proper place, a centralized organization, and vast amounts of detail information were needed ... Far too many officers had soft jobs in the rear, far too few commanded at the front.¹¹

Thus, an important element of this reorganization would be to change command dynamics. Battalion commanders would need to be more personally involved in operations rather than

leaving that to the staff, and especially the S-3. Orders to the line companies would more often come directly from the battalion commander rather than from the staff since the company commanders would now outrank the staff. This will be a difficult change for many battalion commanders who have become accustomed to the role of oversight rather than one of direct command.

Further, the change would push battalions to implement more fully the maneuver warfare concept of mission tactics; that is, giving the line units a mission and letting them figure out how to accomplish that mission. *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, praises such an approach:

Mission tactics are just as the name implies: the tactics of assigning a subordinate mission without specifying how the mission must be accomplished. We leave the manner of accomplishing the mission to the subordinate, thereby allowing the freedom—and establishing the duty—for the subordinate to take whatever steps deemed necessary based on the situation. Mission tactics rely on a subordinate's exercise of initiative framed by proper guidance and understanding ... It is this freedom for initiative that permits the high tempo of operations that we desire. Uninhibited by excessive restrictions from above, subordinates can adapt their actions to the changing situation.¹²

However, the existence of large and intrusive staffs makes implementation of mission tactics difficult because such staffs enable the opposite: direct control by central authority.

Career Progression Comes First

One perverse practice built into the current organizational structure and personnel system is that as soon as a captain company commander is promoted major, that person is whisked out of command and put on a staff even if there is no good spot for them. Commanders do this because it is considered harmful for careers to stay in a billet that is lower than one's rank. Thus, being a major in a captain's billet would not be "career enhancing." This shift has even happened on deployments when the need for experience is greatest because of real-world operations, and any

career damage might be small. Career progression for individual officers is apparently more important to the Marine Corps than unit combat effectiveness.

Although majors are rarely seen as company commanders, it is common to see first lieutenants in these billets because they may be the only officer available (after the staff positions are filled). Often one hears the argument that this is not a problem because a good first lieutenant makes a fine company commander. While it is true that some first lieutenants do make good company commanders, the argument is delusional when applied broadly. If first lieutenants are just as good company commanders as captains or majors, what is the point of all that training and experience that more senior officers get? The implication is that it is worthless because it does not produce a better company commander. Yet, the Marine Corps as an organization does not believe that because every year it sends so many officers to advanced training.

This line of argument does raise the point that organizations must be designed for personnel averages rather than the extraordinary. That means that tables of organization must be constructed based on the average performance of personnel. Thus, having a major as a company commander will, on average, result in better performance than a captain or first lieutenant. Building tables of organization that can only be executed successfully by extraordinary personnel is a recipe for failure.

There are Enough Majors

A fair question is whether there are enough majors to fill all the proposed company commander spots. After all, personnel become scarcer at higher rank levels so the Marine Corps may need to use captains just because it doesn't have enough majors. Fortunately, this is not a problem.

The first reason is that making this change requires only a few majors. Today, there are 72 infantry line companies in the active duty Marine Corps (24 infantry battalions x 3 companies [excluding headquarters and service and weapons] per battalion = 72), and if the S-3 billet is downgraded, then only

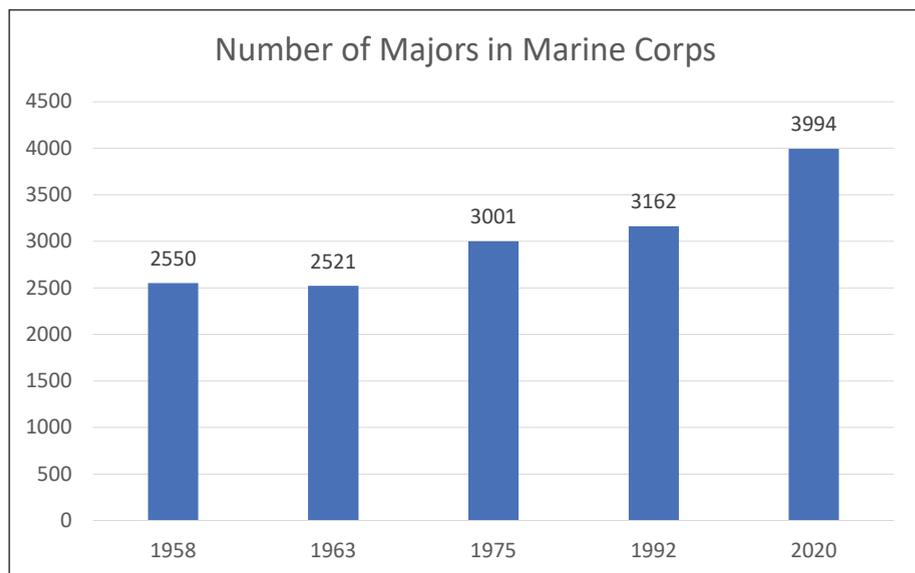


Figure 1.

48 additional majors are needed (54 if the three battalions of MARSOC are included).

The second reason is that there are a lot of majors in the Marine Corps (3,914). The chart below shows the number of majors in the Marine Corps at four times in the past when the Marine Corps was approximately the same size that it is today (186,000). Since 1958, the number of majors has grown by 1,364, or 53 percent. This reflects the increasing importance of staffs and a change in command philosophy to more centralized direction.

Test the Concept by Conducting an Experiment

Implementing this proposal involves breaking many long-standing habits and tables of organization. Therefore, the Marine Corps should first conduct an experiment to see whether it works. In this experiment, the Marine Corps should organize a single battalion along the lines described as the battalion is getting ready to deploy. Then independent evaluators should observe that the battalion's performance during training and deployment and compare the performance to that of a standard battalion. Does the improvement in field performance of the companies as a result of having more experienced leadership make up for the loss of staff functioning because of having less experienced

personnel? This experiment needs to be measured carefully because the inclination will be to focus on smooth operations of staff functions because these are easier to measure.

One could imagine sister battalions complaining about the higher performance of the restructured battalion. Of course, they performed better; they had majors in key billets. But that is the point: if the performance improves, then the change is worth making.

Aligning Doctrine and Organization

It is time for the Marine Corps to align its organization with its doctrine. It claims to value company command but puts its most experienced officers on the staff. It claims to believe in decentralized tactical operations but centralizes control with the staff. It claims to follow the precepts of maneuver warfare and mission command but does not trust lower echelons enough to let them make decisions.

This proposal will reverse, in a modest way, the long-term expansion of battalion staffs and the centralization of authority that they represent. It puts higher levels of training and experience on the front line in contact with the enemy and therefore enhances the Marine Corps' reason for existence: victory on the field of battle.

Notes

1. Gen David Berger, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 20190).
2. John English, *A Perspective on Infantry*, (New York, NY: Praeger, 1991).
3. Bing West, *One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2014).
4. *Commandant's Planning Guidance*.
5. For a concept about what such a company might look like, see Jeff Comings, Scott Cuomo, Olivia Garand, and Noah Spataro, "Marine Warbot Companies: Where Naval Warfare, the U.S. National Defense Strategy, and Close Combat Lethality Task Force Intersect," *War on the Rocks*, (June 2018), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.
6. For discussion of this transition, see "Battalion Organization," Brigadier-General Frederick Ivor Maxse, reproduced in *The Tactical Notebook*, (Quantico, VA: November 1993).
7. For a discussion of the reserve officer structure, see LtCol Mark F. Cancian, USMCR, "Marine Corps Reserve Forces in Southwest Asia," *Marine Corps Battle Assessment Team*, (September 1991).
8. All figures from John Sayen, *Battalion: An Organizational Study of the United States Infantry*, unpublished monograph, Appendix, tables 1.3, 2.6, 3.25, 5.31, 5.36.
9. How to count staff officers gets tricky as the number of special staff increases. This count excludes special staff who primarily oversee support sections, such as the supply officer, the communications officer, and the battalion surgeon. It counts those officers whose primary function is to provide staff support to the commander.
10. *Battalion*.
11. Martin Van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).
12. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1 Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: June 1997).

