

# Keeping Fire from Private Prometheus

The future of entry level training

by CWO3 Andrew Parker & Maj Joshua Waddell

Alexander the Great is credited with the saying, “I am not afraid of an Army of lions led by sheep; I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion.” We do not concur that this is a necessary choice. In fact, we greatly prefer the possibility of an army of lions led by better lions. As the Corps goes through this period of transformation, led by the *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance (CPG)*, much of the discussion has rightly centered on the ability of the Corps to recruit, train, and retain the Marines necessary for this new vision. We have no doubt that Marines will continue to rise to the challenge as they have always done. However, anticipated reductions in total end-strength and cost-savings because of legacy equipment divestiture provide a unique opportunity to re-examine the most foundational element of the Corps’ character: the nature of entry level training (ELT).

Our Corps’ history is replete with inspiring stories of young Marines fresh from basic training performing heroic acts on the battlefield. In many cases, these Marines were undertrained, as was the case in Korea and Vietnam where only basic ELT was provided prior to combat deployments. The uncomfortable truth is these Marines often achieved success through heroic actions and unnecessary loss of life vice technical and tactical proficiency. Leaders must acknowledge that it is not sufficient to throw another generation of similar heroic amateurs into the cauldron of great power conflict; the Marine Corps needs professionals and its past time we started making them.

This article seeks to address the problem of force generation through

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ELT for the Marine Corps’ infantry envisioned by the 2019 *CPG*. We will limit our scope to recommendations for the infantry, but we argue that certain aspects of these recommendations could be applied to other warfighting functional areas as well. As many long-held assumptions of force design and structure of the Marine Corps are updated, it is only proper to apply this willingness for radical change to the training of our most valuable resource: our Marines. The capability requirements implicated by the *CPG* envision a level of tactical and technical proficiency that is currently not produced in our ELT schoolhouses, specifically with regard to enlisted training.

We challenge anyone claiming the opposite to examine the current performance of basic infantry skills such as land navigation and patrolling in newly minted privates with the average non-infantry officer in Phase 2 of The Basic School or any graduate of the British Royal Marine Commandoes. We submit that there are effective models for rectifying this problem through integrating the training of enlisted and officers and properly manning this combined ELT pipeline.

## Diagnosis

Working groups focused on ELT

and in support of the *CPG* are ongoing. Well-meaning phraseology abounds in variations on the themes of: “change the training and education continuum from an industrial age model, to an information age one;” “improve initial proficiency and skills;” “better quality, more mature, and possess more capability;” and “produce multi-disciplinary, multi domain competence across ranks and echelons.”<sup>1</sup> Assessments of the root problem are varied and incomplete. Common responses include: low GT scores of infantry Marines, age and maturity of Marines, content of training (“reps and sets”), length of training, and designating instructor staffing of ELTs as special-duty assignments.

We do not debate that providing more time for training will lead to increased proficiency. We also agree that a smarter Marine will learn faster, retain more information, and make better decisions. No doubt, making the ELTs a special-duty assignment will attract more high performers wanting to make a career out of our Corps and will likely be more dedicated to the assignment.

Upon further examination, these anecdotal assessments fall apart. The average GT score of an active duty infantry Marine ranges from 104.7 to 116.71, depending on MOS. These scores exclude reconnaissance Marines

and critical skills operators who have average GT scores of 118 and 116, respectively. Demanding a GT Score of 100 for infantrymen will not be the panacea that most believe. Our average infantryman already has the GT score of what the Corps is considering requiring. Our Marines are actually pretty bright; it is our training methodologies that stifle intellect, eliminate initiative, and make them appear less intelligent than they are. Additionally, ELT schoolhouses were SDAs for several years. Experience with the quality of Marine produced then versus now shows no measurable degradation in the final product of the ELT pipeline. The SDA alone is insufficient and failed to attract the appropriate level of instructors and leadership required for the important mission of training our Nation's premiere warfighting force.

Further extending entry-level training to six months (as anticipated), the Marines (regardless of intellect) *might* be better at patrolling, marksmanship, and whichever other key skills get sufficient repetition. But in no way will those Marines be better decision makers than those we currently produce. By failing to effectively address instructor selection and development as well as training methodologies, we guarantee that we will continue to treat them like a recruit for six months vice a few weeks.

We submit the root problem is that when it comes to infantry training, the enlisted eat last. History and data shows that the Marine Corps will invest heavily in the training of the officer corps while only providing the minimum investment required to prevent failure in the enlisted training sites. This is also evident in the education disparities between ranks. As part of resident PME, officers are offered advanced degrees at DOD schoolhouses and other programs. This is offered at the Command and Staff College, Naval War College, National Defense University, and among other similar institutions. Meanwhile, no such opportunity or requirement exists for enlisted. Higher ranking officers have the opportunity to leave the Corps with advanced degrees, whereas senior enlisted Marines advance through to retirement without being afforded an in-

stitutional opportunity to further their education beyond the basic requirements for enlistment. By continuing to segregate officer and enlisted training, we ensure we will not effectively address or reform instructor selection and development, as well as training methodologies. This lack of parity in training guarantees our Marines will never develop to their potential or the requirements of future force design.

The tragedy of the current system is it squanders the hard-won victories made by our recruiters. With recent recruiting shortfalls in other Services, studies have revealed the grim reality that roughly only 25 percent of young Americans

blush, we subject these young people to abuse at the hands of the first Marine leaders they meet: drill instructors trained in a culture that pushes them to perform their duties as if they hate their recruits. We then have the gall to wonder where our current problem of hazing comes from.

Detractors may claim that the discipline learned at Recruit Training is fundamental to the future success of young, enlisted Marines. We are in violent agreement that the Corps' tradition of discipline is fundamental to our success. However, we argue that the discipline demonstrated through a well-executed night patrol or by prepar-

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qualify for joining the armed Services. Our Marines all possess high school diplomas or GEDs in a time when our major cities are seeing graduation rates similar to the rate of 73 percent in Chicago and lower in many other small towns.<sup>2</sup> We require our Marines to abstain from illicit substances in a time when half of all young people claim to have used over their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> We lose another potential batch of recruits because of an overly restrictive tattoo policy that is out of step with what is deemed acceptable to contemporary culture. The Services also demand baseline physical ability in an era where one in six adolescents and one in three adults are obese, which when combined with other physical problems, results in over half the eligible young adult age group being unqualified for military service.<sup>4</sup>

This data tells us that, on the aggregate, the military recruits from a pool of some of the most highly qualified and driven young people the Nation has to offer. This exceptional population is then fed into a recruit training process that was designed to turn last century's draftees into obedient shooters at scale. Then, in a social experiment that would make the Stanford Prison Experiment

ing defensive positions to the correct standard is far more relevant than discipline demonstrated in a crisp about-face. Instead, these talented young Marines become effectively lobotomized through a process that seeks to develop instant, unquestioning obedience to orders. This training mentality persists through secondary schools, and Marines arrive to their units as minimally trained automatons who then must be re-trained in the deploying unit by over-tasked veterans and who also typically lack proficiency.

Meanwhile, we take a young person who had the good fortune of being a college graduate—with no regard to what degree was actually obtained—and assign them a completely different training pipeline that puts a premium on critical thinking and leadership almost immediately. These officer candidates are then sent to the finest ELT money can buy and the end result, particularly in the infantry, is predictable. A new infantry lieutenant arrives to his unit with ten weeks of Officers' Candidate School, six months of basic infantry skills and leadership training at The Basic School (TBS), then another four months of advanced infantry training

in combined arms skills at Infantry Officer's Course. In contrast to this, his platoon, which will likely sustain 4 out of 5 combat deaths compared to other specialties, is manned with talented young Americans who have had only 43 days of actual infantry training and 13 weeks of Napoleonic close-order drill training.<sup>5</sup>

We argue that the source of the proficiency gap is the Marine Corps' system for ELT is rooted in a de-facto tiered system that overwhelmingly and unjustifiably preferences the training

of officers. To illustrate this fact, the below table from the 25 September 2019 Marine Corps Training and Education for the Future Operating Environment Phase 1 Report demonstrates the staffing and materiel differences between TBS and the Schools of Infantry (SOI):

It is worth mentioning that this table fails to capture intangibles regarding the quality disparity of personnel *SELECTED* for duty at TBS vice those *assigned* duty at the SOIs. In summary, the same report also notes:

The SOIs are built on an enlisted training model aimed at filling six divisions with high casualty rates; a legacy system from World War II. An industrial age system, the SOIs were not designed to produce the thinking, independent, technical experts the CPG describes. The facilities, instructor-to-student ratio, teaching methods, production level requirements, and length of courses are all decades behind what is needed for the information age.

This model is insufficient for producing warriors who are capable of executing the missions our planning guidance and warfighting concepts assign to them. Without major changes to this process, the responsibility for the most basic elements of combat training will continue to disproportionately fall on deploying units, with no guarantee of deployment cycles allowing for this necessary training. As a force-in-readiness, we must ensure that our Marines are ready for their assigned mission the day they join their unit. Crises will not wait, and the enemy will not oblige us to delay until we complete a full pre-deployment cycle before a conflict begins.

### Comparative Models

The basic assumption behind pursuing a new training paradigm for our ground combat element lays behind the fundamental purpose of the Marine Corps. In the 82d Congress, that purpose was defined as:

*American history, recent as well as remote, has fully demonstrated the vital need for the existence of a strong force-in-readiness. Such a force, versatile, fast moving, and hard-hitting, can prevent the growth of potentially large conflagrations by prompt and vigorous action during their incipient stages. The nation's shock troops must be the most ready when the nation is least ready ... to provide a balanced force-in-readiness for a naval campaign and, at the same time, a ground and air striking force ready to suppress or contain international disturbances short of large scale war.*

This directive assumes that the Nation invests in the Marine Corps in order to maintain a unique capability, not simply one that could be considered as

Training Production Comparison			
	TBS	SOI-E	SOI-W
Annual Throughput	Approx. 2,000	Approx. 19,000	Approx. 20,000
POI Actively Managed	9	19	38
Facilities Comparison			
	TBS	SOI-E	SOI-W
Berthing Facilities	All built or renovated since 2015	16 of 18 barracks built 1954 (2 built 2005)	6 of 9 barracks built prior to 1975 (newest in 2013)
Facilities Management Personnel	28	1	1
Dining Facility	Complete renovation 2005	Built 1975 with no renovation	Built 1973 with no renovation
Food Service Representative	1 per 2,500 Marines	0 for 20,000	1 for 22,000
Wireless Classroom	Yes	No	No
Staffing Comparison			
	TBS	SOI-E	SOI-W
Company Staffing	1 Maj & 6 Capt per Co	1 Capt per Company	1 Capt per Company
S-3 Officers	1 LtCol & 2 Captains	1 Maj	1 LtCol
S3 Ops NCO	6 (not instructors)	3 (all instructors)	3 (all instructors)
S4	Maj	Capt	Capt
Protocol	1 Maj & 1 Civ	0	0
Academics	15 Civ	5 Civ	7 Civ
Fitness	1 Maj, 5 Civ, 1 MSgt, & 26-28 NCO/Marines	0 to T/O	3 Personnel
Motor Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1stLt OIC</li> <li>CW02 Maint Officer</li> <li>20 Mechs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No MT Officer</li> <li>No Maint Officer</li> <li>6 Mechs (1:15 veh)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No MT Officer</li> <li>No Maint Officer</li> <li>6 Mechs (1:22 veh)</li> </ul>
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 1stLt, 4 SNCO</li> <li>51 NCO/Marines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 MSgt, 1 SNCO</li> <li>5 Marines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Capt, 7 SNCO</li> <li>26 NCO/Marines</li> </ul>
Medical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 LT MO</li> <li>29 Corpsmen (1/70 students)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 LT MO</li> <li>21 Corpsmen (1/900 students)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 LT MO</li> <li>29 Corpsmen (1/700 students)</li> </ul>
Athletic Trainers	6 (1 per 330 students)	4 (1 per 5000 students)	3 (1 per 7000 students)

Figure 1.

interchangeable with standard Army infantry formations. It is unreasonable bordering on laughable to believe that “shock troops” can be trained in 43 days of basic infantry training.

Producing a unique capability requires unique investments in training. Fortunately, undergoing this change should be considered similar to an “open book test” for force planners. Long-running successful examples of the kind of integrated and specialized training we propose currently exist both resident to the Marine Corps and in similar units among our allies. Officer-enlisted integrated training can be found in the British Royal Marines, SEAL BUDS, Army Ranger Regiment, Marine Reconnaissance, and MARSOC.

The most successful naval infantry abroad is arguably the British Royal Marine Commandoes (BRMC). This storied force currently utilizes a partially integrated training model in which officers and enlisted both undergo the same basic commando training. Enlisted ranks undergo a 4-week recruit orientation phase followed by a 32-week commando course. The training has rigorous standards but is augmented by what they name “Hunter Company” which takes recruits that do not pass key test gates or were injured during training and rehabilitates them through additional training, mentoring, and physical therapy. The officer course is much longer, at 65 weeks, and includes much of the basic training in leadership and officer tasks prior to beginning the commando phase of the course. These portions of the officer program could be interchanged with existing infrastructure at our TBS, allowing officers to move straight into the commando phase along with the enlisted ranks. A key feature of this training is the concept of “same test, different standards” wherein officers and enlisted undergo the same basic training events and evaluations, but officers are held to the higher standard that accompanies their responsibilities as leaders. This has an effect of demonstrating to the enlisted that their officers have undergone the same trials as them and have been forced to lead from the front, in front of recruits who could fill their platoons, from day one.



*To generate the future force required, we must radically redesign the training pipeline. (Photo by Cpl Aaron Patterson.)*

The Marine Corps has a resident model worth examining as well. The MARSOC Individual Training Course has been successful in preparing basically trained teams of special operators despite drawing from across the force and not just from the GCE. After the competitive selection process at A&S, these trainees undergo 36 weeks of training with phases dedicated to basic skills, light infantry tactics, direct action operations, special reconnaissance, and unconventional warfare. As with the BRMC course, officers take the same tests as the enlisted but are expected to perform to a higher standard. Unlike the BRMC training pipeline, there is no need to separate officers for large portions of basic officer training. Instead, officers and enlisted train alongside each other from day one in units patterned after the special operations teams they will be assigned to in the future. As with the BRMC, MARSOC aggressively employs physical training staff in order to prevent injury and improve physical performance along the progression of the course.

Critics will rightfully point out that there are other characteristics that make these courses successful. First among these is the low throughput requirement. Roughly speaking the Royal Marines only produce around 890 enlisted and 30 officers a year, supplying overall total force structure of between 7,000 to 8,000 (roughly 12 percent replacement

rate). MARSOC’s Individual Training Course also only produces 115 operators per year, supplying a total force structure of 1,512 authorized (7.6 percent replacement rate).<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the current SOI pipeline generates approximately 8,100 per year against a total infantry force structure of nearly 29,100 infantry Marines (28 percent replacement rate). This does not consider the pending reductions to the infantry approximating 16 percent of the structure, which would roughly bring the required number of new infantry Marines produced per year to around 6,800. This also assumes our abysmal infantry retention problem does not begin to improve, as we deduce it will, with the longer contracts and improved morale as a result of our subsequent proposed solution.

The instructor to student ratios at these schoolhouses are not the magic ingredient they may be perceived to be as well. Training for the Royal Marines is generally conducted between a 1:10 to 1:16 ratio with live fire staffed at a 1:4 ratio for day and 1:2 for night. MARSOC uses a higher variance of instruction staffing but retains a 1:5 ratio for high-risk training. Current SOI instructor ratios hover near 1:15 but maintain similar low ratios for high-risk training such as live fire. These numbers demonstrate that in terms of manning, the existing quantity of instructors in our ELT is likely sufficient. This demonstrates that our enlisted

training problems do not stem from a lack of instructor quantity. If numbers are not the problem, instructor quality and development is at least a partial factor. The instructor cadre must be institutionally professionalized as the requirements from ELT develop.

### Proposed Integrated Model

We argue, based on our concepts and planning guidance, future Marines will operate semi-independently by squads, platoons, and companies dispersed across vast distances. They will be employed as integrated teams, requiring advanced communications capabilities while actively enabling complex joint and naval operations. They will have to conduct advanced patrols, collect, and transmit information from multiple sources and make a host of complex decisions every day *under the watchful eye of our potential adversaries*. They will conduct theater security cooperation missions and operations with partner forces while being capable of conducting limited offensive operations such as raids and the seizure of key terrain in the context of a larger naval campaign. They must be able to act as a ship's company on distributed surface combatants, capable of boarding and seizing ships up to and including hostile warships, as well as conducting shipboard security. This is a bold departure from our traditional training goals of executing combined arms breaches in vast deserts as the peak evolution of our Service-level training exercises. Our ELT schoolhouse should be based on these new assumed missions and structure itself to produce naval infantrymen capable of fulfilling the Commandant's vision. It is insufficient to pursue incremental improvements to training at a time of transformation in both the threat and operating environment. As Henry Ford is quoted as saying, "If I'd asked people what they wanted, they'd have said 'faster horses.'" The final goal of the Marine Corps should be creating a capability that is relevant to these new environments and missions and whose utility justifies the risk of their employment to the joint force's combatant commanders. This would start to reverse the trend of the

Corps slipping into irrelevance as its market share of mission sets is further eroded by SOCOM and, increasingly, the Army. It is not uncommon today for Marines to be displaced from their own ships in order to make way for SOCOM elements. Reinvesting in the basic units of employment of the force is the foundational step to reverse this sad state of affairs.

In order to generate the force required to tackle the missions forecasted in the 38th Commandant's Guidance as well as in our own Service concepts, we must radically redesign our training pipeline. We propose two complementary lines of effort in re-designing our infantry training pipeline. First, we must properly staff a future schoolhouse with competitive and talented officers and NCOs. Currently, officer instructors are drawn from candidates submitted to TBS with the highest recommendations from battalions returning from deployment. This creates a sort of informal board process in which highly talented officers are sent to TBS and later to IOC. To formalize this process, officer instructors should be drawn from the pool of Commandant's Career Level Education Board candidates, specifically those chosen for Expeditionary Warfare School or other career-level school assignment. These officers would return to train the next generation of Marines upon the completion of their school assignment. A system similar to how officers are selected for assignment to TBS today should be applied to NCO/SNCO ranks, with battalions returning from deployment identifying top infantry performers and submitting them with the commander's recommendation for assignment to ELT.

As the Commandant notes in his planning guidance:

we need to determine the best way to effect the desired change, which includes the way we select, train and evaluate instructors throughout the continuum.

We argue this is best accomplished by privileging the selection of leaders in ELT. The commander at the schoolhouse should be a post-command infantry battalion commander of the caliber reserved for current candidates

for top level schools. Future promotion board precepts should include briefings that identify these officers and NCOs/SNCOs as highly competitive. *In the end, the quality of personnel at ELT will drive the overall success or failure of the schoolhouse and these Marines will have outsized impacts on the force as a whole.* We highly recommend that this new training structure is located at one central site in order to ensure it is economical and efficient while providing a standardized set of conditions for the program of instruction.

Secondly, we must create an entirely new training course for our officer and enlisted infantry. The Marine Corps already sends officers to train with the British Royal Marines through the personnel exchange program. Alongside Recon, MARSOC, and IOC personnel, a working group should be convened to design a 32–36 week naval commando course, initially overseen by the director of IOC and his staff as well as the Gunner for Plans, Policy, and Operations. This development team should be directly answerable to the Commandant and Commanding General for Training and Education Command. This course should culminate with producing small units that are trained for distributed operations in complex terrain to include small boat raids and assault support operations. This effort will require a brief reduction in capacity at our schoolhouses. It is fortuitous, therefore, that the Marine Corps forecasts a ~sixteen percent reduction in infantry personnel in the coming years. Efforts should be made to reduce throughput in line with force shaping measures while simultaneously designing a new training pipeline for future recruits. The key characteristics of this course should include:

- Officers would enter the commando course upon completion of TBS. This would put their total training time in line with what is currently executed for the British Royal Marines. This also places the Officer in a dominant position having previously completed a more in-depth and relevant training pipeline, fostering an immediate coach/player relationship that can span careers.

- Enlisted would complete basic recruit training and enter into a four-week pre-commando course. Preparation courses like this have been correlated with higher performance both in the British Royal Marines as well as in SEAL BUDS training.
- Officers will train alongside enlisted for the vast majority of the course. All trainees will accomplish the same training events and evaluations. Officers will have additional “breakout sessions” to focus on combat leadership tasks such as quick fire planning and command and control while the enlisted are provided further technical training in weaponry and communications.

and should be given the chance to succeed. Recoverable injuries should be treated by qualified physical trainers and Marines returned to training.

- In contrast to the above point, institute a system of peer-review informed attrition in order to divest of potential trainees with character flaws or lack of drive. This currently exists at TBS and IOC and should be extended to the entirety of the training population. These Marines would be reassigned to service the needs of the Corps much like drops from BUDS.

- Require six-year time-in-service contracts from all trainees in order to ensure the Marine Corps reaps sufficient return on investment from

napoleon Bonaparte was quoted as saying: “Give me enough ribbons to place on the tunics of my soldiers and I can conquer the world.” It is common for military units with unique capabilities to distinguish themselves with symbols to display a camaraderie through recognition of a shared standard of professionalism. This new Marine commando should be no different (although to start with, we would simply be happy for a combat utility uniform that has utility in combat).

As it currently stands, the Marine Corps is making the conscious choice to withhold the best training from the Marines most likely to be killed or injured in coming conflicts. We recognize we are suggesting a foundational change not just to the infantry’s training but to the overall shared identity and culture of the Marine Corps. Unique conditions exist in this moment that could enable these radical changes and allow us to become more lethal and effective than we ever have been and to secure our place in history as “soldiers from the sea” for coming generations. As the article’s title suggests, let us give our enlisted the fire we have been withholding and see what they can do with it. We argue it could be something transformational.

**Notes**

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Thomas Spoehr and Bridget Handy, “The Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Serve in the Military,” *The Heritage Foundation*, (February 2018), available at <https://www.heritage.org>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Robert Scales, *Scales on War*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016).
6. Shawn Snow, “Officers Are More Successful during Raider Selection, but MARSOC Is Fielding Marines at a Steady Rate,” *Marine Corps Times*, (April 2019), available at <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com>.



***We recognize we are suggesting a foundational change not just to the infantry’s training but to the overall shared identity and culture of the Marine Corps.***

- Focus on producing infantry that is relevant in the context of a FMF and capable of conducting missions in the context of distributed naval operations.
- Inclusion of professional physical trainers for the development of high-quality physical performance in order to develop habits of action for new Marines. Physical training should be seen as professional development, not punishment.
- Inclusion of survival and field craft as a core component of each Marine Commando. Marines should be confident in their ability to survive and live off the land, particularly when fighting against enemies that can hold our supply lines at risk. Teach discipline through aggressively-enforced high standards for combat field craft.
- Include a “Hunter Company” equivalent where Marines are coached to rectify any mistakes or training deficiencies. As stated earlier, each Marine that arrives to training represents the best of what the Nation has to offer

the Marine Commandoes it trains. Recruiting Command continually succeeds in its mission of six-year contract assignments and we are confident that this will allow the Service to gain maximum return on investment from each trainee.

It is not enough that our new inductees be trained to this new standard. Once the course is certified by the Commandant, all commanders in the existing FMF should be given a calendar year to bring their units in line with the same physical fitness and training standards. Much as in the 75th Ranger Regiment, this would then become an inspectable training standard for all ranks, certified by representatives of the new school-house itself. Once complete, all trainees and existing structure would be awarded a shared warfighting device to signify a shared level of warfighting capability and mutual training standard. Those unable to meet this standard should be reassigned in keeping with force shaping requirements. We recognize that awarding a physical warfighting device to infantry is controversial, but as Na-