

Leading at One of the Corps' Hidden Excepted Commands

A command opportunity for field-grade officers and master sergeants

by U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command

Maj Fiducia turned around to see his operations officer, senior enlisted advisor (SEA), and senior operations civilian looking over a map of the hurricane-impacted areas. As the commander, he knew that he was responsible for the safety of all of the 49 joint service members and civilians assigned to his independent station, but his team had the additional challenge of ensuring that future combat power was delivered to nine locations, in support of all five of the DOD uniformed Services and the two National Guard units that he directly supported. As the on-scene national incident liaison for his joint command, Maj Fiducia's team was looking at the map, because they had to quickly determine how to continue operations, disperse key personnel to three other locations, assure combat power delivery, and finally maintain communications with his regimental commander, Col Brady, and the joint command commander, CAPT Kemp. It was the most chaotic event during his entire two-year command—and it was perfect! Marine leaders of all ranks thrive in chaos, and Maj Fiducia could not wait to do what Marines love to do—run towards the chaos, embrace the challenge, lead, support, dominate, and win. While he had enjoyed the 48 months of his tour, he could not have imagined a time when he had more fun as a military entrance processing station (MEPS) commander.

If that story was interesting and sounded like a command opportunity that you would like to experience, then

you should consider serving as a MEPS commander or E-8 SEA. The story was a summary of the scenario that Maj Fiducia, a 6002 Aviation Maintenance Officer, found himself in during Hurricane Maria. The uninterrupted combat power that he had to deliver to nine locations were over 377 future warrior applicants that had to be delivered to the nine Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard training locations. Additionally, the regimental and joint component commanders were the sector commander (a regimental level equivalent commander), Col Brady,

Majors and master sergeants that elect to serve at a MEPS lead a truly joint team charged with the mission to “evaluate applicant [suitability for service] using the DOD Standards.” USMEPCOM has 65 independent field stations across the United States that deliver future warfighters or combat power to all the Services. Each MEPS commander and SEA leads a station that conducts joint and special assessment entrance physicals, plans and executes a regional testing program, and directs a joint processing team that integrates products to qualify and eventually ship

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and the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command (USMEPCOM) Joint Activity to DOD Commander: CAPT Kemp. Service as an O-4 commander or E-8 SEA (a billet carried by first sergeants in the other Services) at 1 of the 65 MEPS is a tremendous training and development opportunity for an officer or staff non-commissioned officer (SNCO). You are in charge of an independent duty command, and as highlighted in the story—can be called upon to serve as a national incident commander during natural and man-made disasters.

applicants. Given the mission, today's MEPS commanders and SEAs are more joint and special entrance assessment commanders who oversee the entrance processing functions than simply officers in charge of enlistment processing.

However, despite the opportunities associated with serving at a MEPS, most officers and senior enlisted leaders pass on this opportunity mainly because they are not familiar with the advantages associated with the command and the joint leadership opportunities an O-4 level joint command presents. In the remainder of this article, I argue seven



Marine Corps-led MEPS and USMEPCOM Command Billets. (Adapted from the USMEPCOM Battalion Layout graphic.)

reasons to take command or SEA billet at one of the Nation's 65 Joint and Special Entrance Assessment Commands or MEPS.

You Are in Command and at an Excepted Command

Commanding or advising in the field at a MEPS means that you are in a billet doing what Marine leaders love to do—command. Marines assigned to command or advise at a MEPS are in incredible billets because they are leading in a key role at one of the Commandant of the Marine Corps excepted commands. Under *MCO 5320.16H*, MEPS stations are considered 1 of the 15 Commandant-directed priority commands—also called excepted commands—that fill a vital or mandated need and must be 100 percent manned. As a MEPS commander or SEA, you are charged with a key supporting establishment mission: deliver combat power or new warfighters to all of the DOD.

While the mission description alone is a great briefing point for your next promotion board, your role as a commander or SEA is noted as a legitimate time in command in a must-fill mission. "Now while you still need to perform well in that billet in order to be competitive for promotion; serving well at an excepted command is noted and briefed

appropriately," according to headquarters company monitor Maj Linn. As a major, commands are hard to find, and command at an excepted command is even rarer.

Joint Command Training Opportunities

As a newly assigned joint commander or SEA, you will have to complete mandated command, leadership, and management training. Every commander and SEA assuming command must complete the USMEPCOM Joint Commander/Senior Enlisted Advisor Course and will attend an annual joint leadership conference in a secluded off-site location. Both courses address joint

training and evaluation of other joint matters—topics not normally addressed at pre-command courses.

In addition to the mandated training described previously, officers and SEAs assigned to USMEPCOM have also attended other joint leadership training courses. These courses include the Senior Leader's Legal Course, the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute Conflict Management Course, the Human Resources Manager's Course, and the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute Leadership Training president for a multi-million-dollar business-to-business entity. You must become an expert at Department of the Army (DA) and corporate human-resources (HR) functions to manage your civilian workforce. As the lead for Career Exploration and Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery testing in your area of operations, you will build relationships with all of the uniformed recruiting services, business community partners like Microsoft and General Atomics, and schools and colleges. Marines who have separated from the military after serving at a MEPS have seen their initial job offers increased by as much as ten thousand dollars after adding their MEPS HR and project

Awareness Seminar, the Pre-Command Course (for battalion commanders), the Army's Battalion Pre-Command Course, and the Army's Company Commander/First Sergeant Course. All these courses mentioned earlier develop great joint knowledge



Marine Corps Sector (regimental level) Commander, Col Brady, and 8th Battalion Commander, LtCol Merrill, pose for an "All-Marine" photo with USMEPCOM Station Commanders and SEAs. (Photo courtesy of Maj T. Traylor.)

and enhance your promotion or program selection board brief.

Joint and Cross-Functional Skill Development that Sets You Apart from Your Peers

As a Marine, you are always a Marine and expected to be proficient at Marine things (physical training, shooting, and Marine administration for example); however, as a joint commander or SEA, you will become proficient in Army, Navy, Air Force, civil servant, civilian, and Coast Guard administrative matters; DOD Entrance Examination standards; and state-specific hiring processes. As a field-station commander, you will be in charge of the development of at least 27 full-time equivalent

or HR management experience, business knowledge, a strategic mindset supported by tactical decision-making experience, and relationship-building skills.¹ As a MEPS commander or SEA, you are the de facto CEO or regional vice management experience to their resumes. The skills developed here translate well for promotion boards and the corporate world.

High Quality of Life, Civilian Education, and Professional Certification Opportunities.

Serving at a MEPS provides Marines assigned to a station with an opportunity to reconnect with their families and advance themselves academically and professionally. Most stations are lo-

of Human Resources Management and Project Management Professional certifications by simply documenting their work hours, completing the training on Marinenet/Skillport, and passing the examination. Finally, officers from technical career fields have also earned industry-specific certifications such as Security+, Certified Ethical Hacker, Cisco Certified Route and Switch, Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert certifications, and financial industry certifications like the Financial Modeling and Valuation Analyst certification while assigned to MEPS within the last two years.

A Chance to Contribute to the Good Fight

As a MEPS commander or SEA, you are in charge of what the USMEPCOM Commander calls, “Freedom’s Front Door.” You are responsible for every applicant that is qualified at your station and leaves to start initial entry training. Each MEPS provides a business-to-business support function between the recruiters on the streets and the Services’ boot camps. As the senior leaders at your stations, you have the ability to positively impact how much combat power is delivered to all of the DOD. If you are an aggressive and supportive commander or SEA, the recruiting partners (especially your fellow Marines) will see this and flow business through your station. If you neglect your responsibilities or perform poorly, then you have become a roadblock to Freedom’s Front Door and your recruiting partners will find a way around your station. Ultimately, leading a MEPS means that you have a chance to help your partners identify, screen, and deliver now warfighters to the fight—an honor or privilege for any commander or enlisted advisor from any Service.

Competitive Promotion Rates

This is probably what most of the readers wanted to review when they started reading this article. Promotion rates for officers who have fleet MOS credibility when they arrive and desire to remain on active duty have been promising. Four of the last five captains

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DA civilian/military personnel and 18 temporary employees. You will master six other evaluation systems, interact with local representatives as well as state elected/appointed leaders, and—as stated in the opening vignette—serve as an on-scene incident commander when natural or manmade disasters occur. All this will require you to exercise due diligence with respect to joint matters and sharpen your skills as a civilian leader/manager, which brings up the next item on the seven reasons to serve at the unknown command opportunity: general management and C-Suite Skill Development.

You Develop Sought After General Management and C-Suite Transferable Skills

Polishing or developing solid general management and future corporate chief or “C-Suite” skills is one of the most advantageous but least known benefits associated with leading and serving at a MEPS. According to a recent corporate leadership development article in *Forbes Magazine*, the four skills aspiring C-Suite executives must have are people

cated in major metropolitan areas with acceptable home-to-station commute times. When the station closes, you head home and most stations close no later than 1900 hours, which allows Marines assigned to reconnect with their wives and kids if they have been recently forward deployed.

Because most MEPSs are located in major cities, commanders and SEAs are also able to finish post-baccalaureate degrees or professional certifications while assigned to a MEPS. On average, 89 percent of the Marines (enlisted and officer) assigned to the command enroll in off-duty education or certification training; 100 percent of the officers assigned either already had an advanced degree (MS, JD, or PhD) or were enrolled in an advanced-degree training program while assigned to a station. Marines with special skills have also earned civilian industry certifications. In fact, another lesser-known advantage associated with serving at a MEPS is that because the field station billets fulfill general management and HR functions officers and enlisted personnel assigned can easily earn the Society

that have served at USMEPCOM were promoted to major, and 90 percent of the majors who desired to remain on active duty were promoted to lieutenant colonel. Now while those are not bad promotion selection rates for the officers, the SNCOs have not fared as well. A little over 65 percent of the sergeants that desired to remain on active duty were promoted to staff sergeant and only X of the Y SNCOs that desired to remain on active duty were promoted to the rank of master gunnery sergeant. All that being said, the enlisted Marines that desire to remain on active duty have found other ways to become more competitive. Marines have earned their martial arts instructor belts while assigned to MEPS and volunteered and qualified as National Incident On-Scene team leaders to improve their chances for promotion.

In closing, volunteering to serve at a MEPS is an honor, privilege, and op-



Fargo Marines and officer candidates conducting MCMAP training under SSgt R. Moreno. (Photo courtesy of SSgt R. Moreno.)

portunity. As a MEPS commander or SEA, you are the face of the active-duty component of the DOD within your area of operations, and you are always a big deal in your community.

MEPS commanders and SEAs serve a vital supporting establishment function and master executive-level joint matters skills while leading a station. Being the leader responsible for enabling access to Freedom's Front Door is a great opportunity, and if you are up to the challenge, volunteer to command or advise a MEPS.

Note

1. Sally Blount, "4 Skills Aspiring C-Suite Execs Must Have," *Forbes Magazine*, (May 2018), available at <https://www.forbes.com>.

