

Recruiting the Reserve Force

The Corps needs a different approach

by Maj Joseph Phippen

In summer 1956, Milton D. Graham was turning seventeen and was eager to join the Marine Corps. At that time, in a similar vein as today's delayed entry program (DEP), reserve commanders could swear in recruits at seventeen years old. The key difference is that instead of showing up to recruiters' poolee functions, the reserve commanders could actually allow them to immediately begin training in their units at weekly or monthly drills, as well as attend their two-week "summer camp" as it was called in those days (active duty for training, or just annual training as it is referred to today).

Milton's problem, however, was that he did not turn seventeen that summer until after the local unit left from home station to Camp Pendleton for their scheduled two weeks of training. Not to be deterred, the young man hitchhiked nearly 1700 miles from his home in Little Rock, AR, to catch up to his reserve unit at Camp Pendleton shortly after his seventeenth birthday. There he joined to the 6th Rifle Company, 8th Marine Corps Reserve and Recruiting District, was sworn in by company commander Maj Joseph T. Todd, completed the majority of the annual training, and returned as one of the Marines.¹

Today, an equally determined Milton Graham would not be able to accomplish this feat no matter his resolve. Of course, there are a host of reasons that we have become more regimented and process driven than the cavalier approach to joining the military of the past. Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS) ensure that recruits are fit for service academically, physically, and

>Maj Phippen served as the Inspector-Instructor for Company I, 3/23 Mar in North Little Rock, AR, from 2018–2020. He is now assigned to the UN Command, Military Armistice Commission in Korea.

clear of any criminal record; recruiters try to find those best suited for service in their disposition; and, in an ongoing effort, the DOD at large is wrestling with a sort of psychological screening for resiliency or mental and emotional fitness. All told, there is good reason to screen our recruits to ensure that our all-volunteer force is made up of the best that America has to offer rather than the compulsory service in the draft era.

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Even still, should we not reward the perseverance, bold action, and eagerness that Pvt Graham showed? Without upsetting the current system too much, we could bring back the ability to allow reserve Marine recruits to immediately begin drilling with their units upon swearing in at the MEPS. They would still be required to go through the entire entry-level pipeline at Marine Corps Recruit Depot followed by the School of Infantry and the MOS school when the boatspaces open up. But rather than waiting to ship off in the DEP

pool of mostly active duty recruits, they ought to simply be allowed to integrate into their contracted unit in a drilling status (albeit non-deployable and non-promotable until graduating all requisite entry-level schools). This action would have several positive effects on both the local reserve station and the individual recruit.

Understanding the Reserve Commitment

In my own company, a total of 87 percent of command legal action (CLA) packages were initiated for unsatisfactory participation in the reserves from 2011–19.² Most of those were separated with an other than honorable (OTH) characterization of service. For those who have not served with a reserve unit, this is initiated when a Marine accumulates unauthorized absences (UA) for nine drilling periods. Each drill period is roughly one half-day, so it usually takes an obligated Marine missing drills for three months before the CLA can be initiated—and that is assuming the command culture is one that drives this process. We have all seen lackluster enforcement of certain rules from time to time. Once the CLA is initiated, the process has usually taken three–six months to close out. This process accounts for reserve commanders/inspector-instructors at each echelon plus staff judge advocates to review, endorse, return for correction, re-route, and gain approval from the separation authority.

What is even more telling is that since 2011, the raw number averages eighteen–nineteen separations *annually*.³ This means an entire rifle company of

SMCR Expectations

The intent of this slide is to articulate that, in order to develop an effective SMCR organization, it is recommended that participants sustain the activities listed below between drills.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PT Self Education, Distance PME Communicating with your Fire Team, Squad or Section leadership Remain Medically/Dentally fit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PT Self Education, Distance PME Preparing to deliver training Communicating with your Fire Team, Squad, Section, or Company Leadership Remain Medically/Dentally fit Drafting Counseling and PRO/CON marks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PT Self Education, Distance PME Preparing to deliver training Communicating with your Squad, Section, Company, or BN Leadership Remain Medically/Dentally fit Reviewing/Certifying PRO/CON Marks Reviewing/Routing FITREPs Drafting Awards Reviewing LOIs, Training Plans, and Briefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PT Self Education, Distance PME Communicating with your Section, Company, Battalion or Regimental Leadership Evaluating the communication and training preparation of subordinate leaders Remain Medically/Dentally fit Reviewing/Certifying PRO/CON Marks Reviewing/Routing FITREPs Drafting Awards and Voting on Awards Boards Drafting LOIs, Amending Training Plans, Developing Briefs, conducting long-range planning

SMCR Expectations. (Graphic provided by author.)

Marines has “gone UA” over the past decade. The question to ask is why? While the answer cannot be sufficiently answered in a single brief point, one contributing factor is that reserve Marines often have only a *factual* understanding of their commitment rather than an *experiential* understanding. Eventually, many conclude that their time is worth simply taking the OTH discharge rather than fulfilling the demanding commitment required to be a Marine.

The Marine Corps, reserves included, tends to be jealous of our time. The demands placed on Marines is precisely what has made us the fighting force we are. Nevertheless, when Marines must balance a full-time civilian employment, school, and family, on top of being physically fit and lethal, it becomes a much larger commitment than simply “one weekend a month, two weeks a year” as the recruiting mantra states. While *factually* the mantra is true, there is plenty of homework between drills that we expect of all Marines, both active and reserve. This spans from the lowest private to prep his field gear, commute to the drill station (more on that below), and stay fit to leaders who are expected to come to drill ready to go, with counseling forms prepared,

training planned, and orders reviewed. While that preparation is aided greatly by full-time site support staff, there is no replacement for every Marine’s preparation before the on-deck time.

Allowing the Marine recruit to begin drilling immediately would enable him to get a taste of what that commitment means by *experiencing* it rather than just having it explained. No matter how many acknowledgements you sign and initial stating that you understand, experiencing it is something entirely else.

Indeed, some recruits may disappear before shipping to entry-level training because they find out the commitment is too much. While a naysayer might argue this is just the same attrition earlier, I say this is a good thing; the Marine Corps has not invested in the UA recruit’s entry-level training, the separations process is simplified, and the processing time for that separation is significantly curtailed. While the raw number of CLA packages may even increase, the wastage experienced *after* graduating recruit training and MOS school would certainly go down. As one of our core values, commitment is not something we can afford to compromise!

Having a Stable Chain of Command

Gen Dunford, in his initial guidance when he briefly served as our Commandant, described that “personnel turbulence affects our combat readiness and our ability to take care of Marines” and prescribed a focus that has “consistency of leadership, personnel stability, and sustained readiness.”⁴ While he was speaking mostly of the active duty phenomenon of re-assigning personnel just in time to make manpower metrics prior to deployment, the same thing affects reserve units—even if it is manifested in a slightly different way from time to time.

In a reserve recruit’s case, we know exactly what unit he is joining from the time he contracts—and usually well before that, too. Why do we have them bounce between leaders starting at the recruiting station, to their Marine Corps Recruit Depot chain of command, School of Infantry, MOS school, and then at journey’s end, finally their parent unit? Right from the get-go, a reserve recruit could easily be paired up with a *consistent mentor* from his own unit who he will be able to return to at the end of the process. This consistent mentor has a vested interest in the recruit’s success and can continue that mentorship well into, or even past, his first enlistment. The best place for this mentorship to start happening is not a command-directed program or assignment but rather from an organic relationship that develops naturally from when the recruit begins showing up at drill.

This stability can also be a boon to unit morale. Reserve units derive much pride in their local roots. While active duty units typically have a longer list of combat awards, decorations, and notable valorous Marines, local units have traditions as well. The nature of a reserve unit’s members is such that they are not saddled with permanent changes of station every two–three years. While there is some real risk and disadvantages to having less broadened Marines, there are untapped advantaged, too. Local chains of command having longer institutional memory, along with sustained relationships community groups, can instill longer standing traditions. The

advantages here lie beyond simply morale, but lead to unit cohesion and even can serve to build more resilient individual Marines through shared hardship with their more well-known associates in the unit.⁵ The current process of a MEPS largely detached from the local community, which sends away their young men and women, has less appeal to the type of people that seek to be citizen-Marines.

Perhaps more to the point of our young recruits, theirs is a generation of immediate gratification. We can leverage that appetite by allowing them join with Marines who have earned the title and begin their drilling commitment immediately. Join on Monday, begin training with the Marines this weekend!

Filling Manpower Shortfalls

Take a look at Little Rock’s historical manpower strength;⁶ take that graph in for a few minutes, and revisit it again after reading this article. What can you see? You will notice a few trends that match the assignments policy our 36th Commandant made mention of in the previous quotes. At each major inflection point to the strength, there was usually a concomitant mobilization to support a war effort. In a future mobilization with the model of being able to join *drilling* DEP recruits, the recruits awaiting their turn at entry-level schools could be granted front-line privileges to allow for that needed, quick buildup of force that is still in line with personnel stability concerns mentioned above.

Perhaps more interesting, there are three other significant increases in the manpower graphic not tied to a national emergency. Each of those has a specific reason. The surge in the 1950s and the 1980s both were a result of high levels of community integration.

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In the early 1950s, the unit was altogether disbanded after mobilizing for the Korean War, to then be broken up into combat replacements for the already-existing 1st MarDiv units. Nevertheless, the sitting Arkansas Governor, Sid McMath, was also a reserve Marine officer (and later retired a major general). As a result, his network was highly effective at integrating the Marine Reserves into Little Rock culture, and the rifle company, when re-established in early 1952, was commanded by a Little Rock native, Capt Yancey: battlefield commissioned and a two-time Navy Cross recipient in World War II and Korea by that point. This manpower surge waned in the years after Governor McMath lost re-election in 1953, which also coincided with the end of hostilities on the Korean peninsula.

Historical documents from Arkansas newspapers, base records, and command chronologies the 1980s do not show the

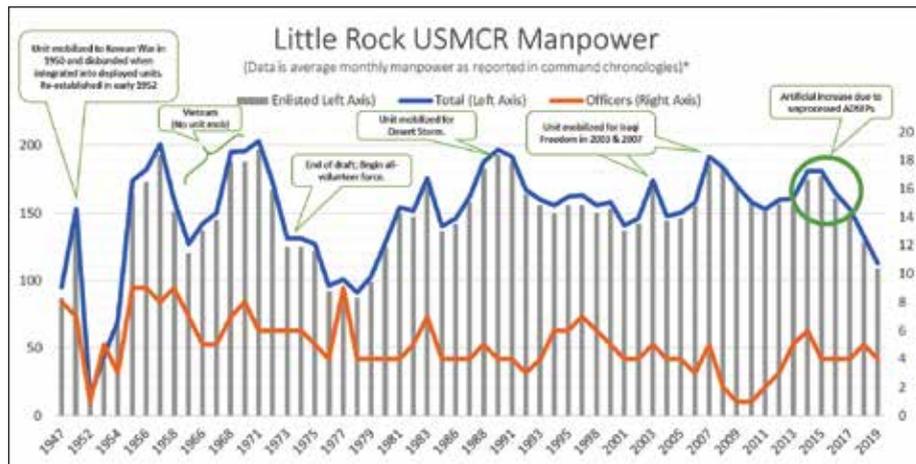
outsized affect of specific individuals like Governor/MajGen McMath of the 1950s; however, the command chronologies note that in just two years the unit and I&I staff provided 67 *successful* referrals to the recruiting station who became Marines.⁷ How much easier would a recruiter’s life be if their local reserve unit found one–two contracts per month for two years? This does not happen by chance. It is a concerted effort by ordinary Marines in a local community in middle America. Later in this time period, a native Arkansas Marine returned home to welcome arms after the Iranian hostage crisis, undoubtedly giving the Marine Corps a boost in central Arkansas.

The last and most recent surge, however, was merely artificial. A large number of (approximately 30–50) Marines, with excesses well over 9 drills of unauthorized absences, were retained on the rolls.⁸ As stated above, enforcement of specific policies are pursued more or less vigorously by different commanders. This is not an indictment of those commands. It is simply the reality of different commander’s priorities at specific points in time. In the Vietnam era and into the early 1980s, drug abuse was treated far differently than it is today. Different times call for different approaches.

Today, we should look to the past experiences of our reserve policies and seek to implement parts of the past that are relevant yet again.

Officer Recruiting

One last piece of consideration should be made when recruiting the reserve force. We ought to seek to keep officers drilling closer to home. Currently, the MOS-assignment policy for reserve officers only nominally considers geographic factors while at The Basic School (TBS). This allows for the “quality spread” policy to reach the reserve force, but it nearly prohibits local company grade officers from being assigned units in their locale. While the 150-mile geographic limitation on candidates shipping to OCS and TBS has the goal of commissioning and keeping officers near home, the guarantee offered in that contract is



Little Rock Marine Corps manpower. (Graphic provided by author.)

easily circumvented. It only requires the candidate or officer to voluntarily waive it. Interests and desires in the minds of young officers change rapidly, and once the officer waives their geographic requirement, the assignments process is then free fill *any* projected vacancy. When asked at OCS how many of us in 2008 were seeking the infantry MOS, nearly every hand went up; fast forward to Phase II in TBS a few months later, this desire was down to only about twenty percent. The Marine Corps goes to great lengths to accommodate individual preferences, aptitudes, and capabilities; however, at its base, the MOS selection model serves Marine Corps needs first (as it should) at the macro level; it begins by looking at pools of available assignments to be filled with spreadsheet efficiency. The geographic reality of reserve officer billets is often physically separated by hundreds of miles and not mere pixels between cells on a spreadsheet.

For the individual officer, the geographic separation from their drill site is not a big issue. Modern air travel and roads has interconnected the whole world, and the relatively cheap travel is further offset with MFR's policy to reimburse travel to monthly drills. However, it does not *and cannot* compensate for loss of leadership from within a reserve unit's local area. There is powerful strength in networking among individuals. But the company grade reserve officer who is also a prominent young businessman in the community is almost completely extinct in our world of relatively cheap and easy air travel. Moreover, this ease of modern travel continues down through all the ranks; the figure in North Little Rock has steadily increased over the last few years and by early 2020 over 55 percent of drilling reservists assigned there live over 50 miles from the home training center. Nearly ten percent of the same population lives over 300 miles away near Recruit Station (RS) Dallas, which is the headquarters responsible to recruit to I Co, 3/23 Mar in Little Rock.

In this regard, the reserve unit in Little Rock is especially disadvantaged because of RS boundaries and recruiting quotas that are not aligned well with

the target unit. With RS Dallas situated some five hours driving distance Little Rock, closer population centers in Jonesboro, AR (one hour); Fayetteville, AR (two hours); and Memphis, TN (two-three hours). While each of those cities has a Recruiting Sub-Station (RSS), each one belongs to different parent RS, *and even a different Recruiting District (RD)*, that all receives zero quotas to fill Little Rock. The in-practice affect is that the entire northern

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half of the Arkansas cannot join the unit in Little Rock because the RSS's there have no mission to do so. While agreements between RSS's could be achieved in theory, it would be much easier for Sgt Recruiter to simply tell Poolee Youngman "no" to the reserves and try to sell the active duty quota to him rather ask his higher headquarter to cross-deck a quota between RS (O-4 level) and District (O-6 level) boundaries.

Caveats

There are a couple of caveats that are worth mentioning in my argument. First, all of the data used in my arguments are highly localized. Second, the data actually represent different unit designations for the Little Rock unit with varying manpower authorizations over the time period covered. Nevertheless, there has been a drilling unit in central Arkansas since 1947, with the exception of only one year and an infantry unit specifically for all but four.¹⁰ While there is an extensive history of data herein, other locations and units may depart from these same trends. Admittedly, that is a possibility, but I suspect the reality is more of the same. I challenge an officer or Marine to find the data that not just contradicts but becomes statistically significant to show otherwise.

Examples of such further analysis might be: What are the leading causes for command legal action across Marine Forces Reserve units? Do the historical trends of "getting fat" for deployment show true in other units? When are the exceptions and why? What about reserve units that are also stationed aboard sister-service (or even Marine Corps) installations? Do they hurt for manpower differently than those isolated training centers that have to bus tens to hundreds of miles away to conduct collective-level training and readiness tasks? What about similarly "gerrymandered" recruiting boundaries?



Illustrating the "complex battlespace" of recruiting districts in the state of Arkansas. (Photo provided by author.)



Over half of these Marines travel great distances to start their drill weekend with a forced march or other rigorous training. (Photo provided by author.)

While it might be easy to causally poke holes in the arguments above, it would be harder to refute them with similar data. This qualitative case study of the reserve unit in Little Rock may be the anomaly, but from my dealings and conversations from both peer and senior counterparts, I am led to believe that most units are the same.

The main obstacle to implementation of these concepts is probably institutional inertia. It is much easier to maintain the status quo. However, the Marine Corps is full of dilemmas where the easy answer is almost always

nation to write an article and that is actually read by a few hundred other Marines if he is lucky. Subscription does not equal readership, not all readers will agree, and even fewer readers that do agree will act. The challenge here is large.

Conclusion

Our current balance of active-to-reserve personnel is roughly where it has been since the implementation of the all-volunteer force.¹¹ However, the mobility and temperament of our population has changed significantly, and

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the wrong one. These changes could be tested in smaller units, but whether the sample size is large or small, this policy would need several years to truly bear fruit—long-term focus being something our 36-month assignments policy usually detracts from.

The amount of analysis and effort to implement these changes are indeed great—far beyond one officer’s incli-

we must adapt our policies so that the Selected Marine Corps Reserve can continue to apply surge capacity of forces in readiness when our Nation needs it. To simply restate, we should re-calibrate our reserve recruiting in the following ways:

- Allow Reserve DEP members attend all IDT and ADT periods with their contracted unit immediately upon

contracting. They should be afforded all regular pay/benefits as an E-1 while in a drilling status.

- These Marines are held in a non-promotable, non-deployable status until they complete entry-level training.
- Their separations process would undergo a simplified (i.e. faster) process should they make unsatisfactory participation in the reserves.
- Their attendance at regular drills could account for time in service, making satisfactory reserve retirement points, and/or even be credited towards the completion of their drilling obligation.
- Reserve recruiting missions should be aligned with quotas assigned down to the recruiter sub-station level, regardless of RS and District boundaries.
- Reserve officers should be given the option to contract to a specific billet identification code, and MOS, that matches their locality.

It may come as a surprise that the most dramatic of these proposed “changes” is actually available through existing policy. Marine Corps Order 1500R.36G describes Category P as a program that allows reserve recruits to begin drilling in a paid status before recruit training. However, the 1999 order is valid in print only; the administrative levers to actually implement this are either non-existent or so rarely used that it cannot be achieved. The order needs dusting off and the online systems adjusted to allow it. After the better part of two years of attempting this with coordination of my local recruiters, we were ultimately unsuccessful in implementing this supposedly valid policy.

Again, both our policies and practices should seek to reward the commitment, resolve, and determination of our young Americans who seek to be Marines like Pvt Graham showed many years ago. The reserve force has an important part to play in supporting operational commitments worldwide and can further “at-home” missions such as funeral honors, Toys for Tots, recruiting, and local community relations where other Marine Corps presence is very few and far between. Furthermore, I challenge those who disagree to publish their re-

buttals and those who agree to do so with their actions!

Notes

1. Staff, "Reserve Roundup," *Pendleton Scout*, (Camp Pendleton, CA: August 1956).
2. Marine Corps Total Force System (MCTFS), *Command Legal Action Data for I Co, 3/23 Mar, 22 Aug 2019*, distributed by Marine OnLine. <https://mcors.tfs.usmc.mil/cla/>. These figures do not account for any Marine Corps Enlisted Admin Separation (MCEAS) packages processed outside the Marine OnLine CLA module during the transition period of using the online system.
3. Ibid.
4. Gen Joseph F. Dunford, *36th Commandant's Initial Planning Guidance: Innovate Adapt Win*, (Washington, DC: February 2015).
5. Paul Bartone, Bjorn Helge Johnsen, Jarle Eid, Wibecke Brun, and Jon Laberg, "Factors Influencing Small-Unit Cohesion in Norwegian Navy Officer Cadets," *Military Psychology*, (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, January 2002).
6. Graph data is taken from Unit Diary records (pre-1965), and Command Chronologies (1965–1976) from the National Archives. Command Chronologies from 1976–present are on file at the Marine Corps History Department and 3/23 Mar databases.
7. Command Chronologies of the Company M and Company I, 3/23 Mar, North Little Rock, AR covering calendar years 1980 and 1982, respectively. Of note, the 1981 chronology is missing from records. As a result, this figure is in all likelihood an underrepresentation of reserve and recruiting station coordination.
8. Personal e-mail correspondence between previous company inspector-instructor and higher headquarters regarding manpower strength of the unit.
9. MCTFS Reporting Data.
10. Exceptions being one year deactivated and four years as a military police company. Compiling records already mentioned above, central Arkansas has been home to the following units: H&S Company and Company C, 15th Infantry Battalion (1947–1950); 6th Rifle Company 8th Marine Corps Reserve and Recruiting District (1952–1975); Company D(-), 4th Military Police Battalion (1971–1974); Company M, 3/23 Mar (1975–1980); and finally Company I, 3/23 Mar (1981–present).
11. VanHorne, R.F., et. Al, *History of the 4th Marine Division 1943–1996*, (New Orleans, LA: The Division, 1996). Compared with current manpower reporting in the Headquarter Marine Corps, Plans Policy & Operations, "Weekly Current Operations Brief," (Washington, DC: September 2019).

