

Strengthening Marine Forces Reserve

Requiring Honor, Courage, and also Commitment

by LtCol Charles C. Larson III

In 2011, Marine Wing Support Squadron 471 (MWSS-571) mobilized a company-sized element in support of (ISO) Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. Based in Minneapolis, MN, this Reserve unit manned its deploying table of organization from within its headquarters element first, followed by Marines from across the entire squadron. When those efforts failed to produce the required Marines, the squadron then sought volunteers from its group and wing levels. Ultimately merged with an element from 4th Marine Logistics Group, the collective result produced a motor transport company comprised of 230 Marines and Sailors from 35 different home training centers (HTC) and active commands.¹

A few years earlier, Company E, 2d Bn, 24th Marines, celebrated its Birthday Ball in Des Moines, IA. Attending that celebration were Marines from several Reserve and active units located throughout the United States who voluntarily joined Company E in advance of its 2008 deployment ISO Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. In both instances, those units successfully manned and deployed without organic structure.

These scenarios are not unique to Midwest Reserve units. Throughout Marine Forces Reserve (MarForRes), units struggle to maintain consistent structure and stable leadership throughout the drill year, a challenging manpower process further exacerbated when mustering Marines for extended training exercises or mobilizations.² Unit control over manpower is limited because many Reserve Marines are non-obligated. Ultimately, their service is at-will. These Reserve Marines can voluntarily quit at any time and for any

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reason. MarForRes requires honor and courage, but it does not require commitment from each member.

Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) affiliates more than 3,600 prior service Marines into MarForRes each fiscal year (FY), placing nearly 3,000 into the Selected Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR).³ This number remains relatively steady each FY because more than half of those non-obligated Marines quit.⁴ This unrestricted option to quit exists because the great preponderance of prior service affiliation into the SMCR is non-obligated.⁵

While the reasons for prior service attrition are broad, no reason is required to voluntarily separate from MarForRes. Non-obligation produces fast affiliation, but the effects of non-obligated service are significant. Reserve structure lacks month-to-month continuity, MarForRes lacks the legal authority to physically deploy its forces when needed, and prior service recruiting (PSR) operates at an unsustainable production rate. MarForRes should instead make long-term investments and require 24-months of contracted obligation for all Reserve service. This change will slow recruitment and lower overall SMCR manpower up front, but—over time—this change will produce a stronger MarForRes.

In PSR, attrition is the most-common complaint received from supported SMCR units. Because of non-

obligation, Reserve units are unable to properly forecast manning levels from month-to-month and expend sizable administrative and logistical efforts to affiliate a Marine who will likely not last. More importantly, non-obligation threatens the ability of MarForRes to augment the Active Component. Recognizing the ability of the President to activate any service member⁶, obligated or not, many Reserve exercises and mobilizations are comprised of volunteers.

The inability of MarForRes to legally require mobilization outside presidential proclamation threatens the ability of MarForRes to accomplish its mission. A largely non-obligated force may satisfy mission requirements during peacetime or amid slow operational tempos; but during large-scale extended conflicts, relying upon non-obligated Marines reduces the capability of MarForRes to meet its mission. MarForRes may possess the correct quantity of Marines, but it does not possess the authority to force those Marines into combat.

Since Reserve service is generally a third or fourth priority for non-obligated Marines, quitting when those higher priorities collide with the drill schedule is not unusual. Reserve culture is another real attrition factor. MarForRes is different than the Active Component and foreign to prior service Marines. Reserve Marines can also participate for extended periods of time in the same unit. Over time, these long-standing individual relationships create a certain unit identity that is challenging for prior service Marines to assimilate into. These are not derogatory comments; MarForRes satisfies a unique role in national security. But the transition from active service into drill weekends produces an

immediate culture shock most prior service Marines do not survive.

Non-obligation also affects recruiting because PSR recruits the same individuals into the same billets each FY. Each year, PSR pours 3,000 Marines into the SMCR only to see 50 percent of those efforts fall out the bottom. New missions are then comprised of missions previously accomplished to maintain desired end strength. But if this end strength is not obligated, then it is not a strength. This process creates a vicious recruiting cycle that produces high annual production rates (APR) across MCRC. For example, over the past three FYs, each recruiter in Prior Service Recruiting Station 1 (PSRS 1) needed to affiliate four Marines per month to merely make mission.

This high APR then reinforces attrition. Faced with an average requirement of one Marine per week, PSRs will affiliate nearly any prior service Marine, regardless of individual commitment, because attrition is not a factor in mission accomplishment. In fact, a PSRS would make mission even if every non-obligated Marine who joined during a FY quit that same year. Although the station may have accomplished its mission on paper, it did not affect the overall end strength of MarForRes.⁷

Outside of obligating a Marine through a lateral move or a bonus programs that include obligated time but constitute only 20 percent of the PSR SMCR mission⁸, PSR does not have a mechanism to legally require the remaining 80 percent of its SMCR mission to participate.

For the 81 MCRC PSRs, selling a non-obligated product creates an ethical dilemma. The Guidebook for PSR Operations states, “Under no circumstances shall the recruiter suggest to the applicant they join with the SMCR and transfer to the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) if not satisfied.”⁹ The volume then directs a PSR to request a six-month commitment in order to acclimate the Marine to Reserve culture.¹⁰ This is good in theory but difficult in practice because every applicant inquires about commitment. The recruiter is then faced with the challenge of truthfully articulating non-obligation



The transition from active service to drill weekends can be a culture shock. (Photo by Sgt Andy Martinez.)

while still driving for a commitment. Even if the prior service Marine agrees to this six-month period, that oral commitment is not enforceable.

Arguments for obligation are clear. Obligated Marines will provide immediate stability throughout MarForRes and facilitate accurate manpower planning. MarForRes will know what personnel it possesses, and—most importantly—it will obtain the legal authority to mobilize those forces. The arguments against obligation are also clear. Both Reserve Affairs Policy (RAP) and MCRC conclude that PSR is unable to recruit a healthy number of obligated prior service Marines into the SMCR. Reserve end strength would then suffer because obligating prior service Marines into MarForRes is simply too hard.

On its face, that reason appears sound. PSR is—at this time and with its resources—unable to recruit 3,000 obligated prior service Marines into the SMCR. Non-obligation is a key component of each sales presentation and mitigates a key obstacle to affiliation: a new contract. But from a recruiting perspective, selling obligated service is not impossible. In fact, selling non-obligated service is a challenge because a Marine Corps without commitment is foreign. Certainly, not all

prior service Marines would obligate themselves, but most already consider commitment an obvious component to any type of continued service. And as previously mentioned, PSR already sells obligated service through its lateral move and bonus programs as well as when recruiting Marines into the Active Reserve Program. These numbers do not equal 3,000 Marines, but these numbers do indicate that selling obligation already occurs.

Additionally, requiring 24-months of obligated service does not contractually obligate a Marine to 730 complete and consecutive days. An annual Reserve year is comprised of 24 days of drill and a 14-day annual training period. When boiled down to its basic commitment, the obligation would only equal 76 days over a 2-year period. This is hardly a massive time commitment and with drill schedules populated a year in advance, those 76 days are often known well before scheduling conflicts.

Moreover, MarForRes exists to work in conjunction with a civilian career. A Marine can remain in uniform while pursuing civilian goals and MarForRes is built to accommodate civilian pursuits in tandem with Reserve service. The service is part-time, generally on weekends, and includes only minor or no requirements outside those defined

periods. Although not absolute, when conflicts do arise, SMCR units can provide flexibility through rescheduled training and alternative annual training exercises. Congress has likewise enacted strict anti-discrimination laws for its Reserve service members, alleviating many employment concerns.¹²

Ultimately, PSR would not sell a 730-day contract, it would sell 76 days. Requiring a 76-day commitment is harder than no commitment, but it is not impossible. Requiring commitment is not a surprise to prior service Marines because every Marine understands this uniform requires commitment. While this sell includes the possibility of an involuntary mobilization, that possibility already exists for each Marine with remaining contractual time residing in the IRR.

Though MarForRes end strength will dip in the short term, a non-obligated end strength is not a strength, it is a weakness. Over time, as PSR affiliates an obligated quantity, structure and recruiting missions will stabilize. Even if this change never reaches a desired MarForRes end strength, this lower number does not spell the destruction of MarForRes. MarForRes total force structure will remain the same because it still owns these non-participating and non-obligated individuals, albeit in a different component.

The argument that the IRR is ready and able to deploy is accurate, but an SMCR unit is likewise not able and ready to cross the line of departure from its HTC. Reserve units, upon mobilization, rendezvous for a detailed pre-deployment training plan (PTP). During this process, the unit stabilizes its structure and prepares for its mission. Recognizing the value in SMCR participation to technical and tactical proficiency, this value is likely overstated. Thirty-eight days in uniform per drill year does not produce a technically and tactically proficient Marine; the true refinement of a Reservist's ability to operate is honed during the PTP.

With this change, PSR can recruit quality over quantity and deliver to the SMCR an applicant willing to participate for an extended period of time. PSR will sell honor, courage, and commit-

ment and, as it does so, the PSR APR will decrease, leading to a more sustainable recruiting mission and stronger MarForRes.

Commitment is a defining characteristic of the Marine Corps. Demanding commitment from every Marine—future Marine enlisting, current Marine reenlisting, or prior service Marine affiliating—is not novel. Allowing non-obligated prior service Marines to affiliate into the SMCR and then quit for no reason decreases the ability of MarForRes to accomplish its mission and generates unsustainable PSR production rates. MarForRes should instead think long-term and require 24-months of contracted obligation for each of its participants. This is a hard, but not impossible, sell. Even if SMCR manpower suffers, at least that lower number will be comprised of obligated Marines. Unit structure will solidify, MarForRes will possess the legal authority to mobilize and deploy its forces, and PSR will operate at a more-sustainable level, affiliating quality over quantity.

Notes

1. Charles Larson, "Leading Reserve Marines," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 2014). For lessons learned from this deployment and a discussion of the real and artificial liabilities associated with MarForRes.

2. Leadership refers to squad, platoon, and company positions not Marine Corps slated positions such as company first sergeants and battalion and squadron sergeants major and commanders.

3. Manpower and Reserve Affairs tasked MCRC with FY15-18 PSR missions of 3,629, 3,879, 3,784, and 3,760 total Marines, of which 2,726, 2,960, 2,989, and 2,844 were SMCR affiliations, respectively.

4. Pinpoint attrition data is not maintained. According to RAP, in FY17, the SMCR lost 8,274 Marines with an end strength of 30,672; and in FY18, RAP anticipates the SMCR will lose 7,972 Marines with an end strength of 30,873. But these losses include all forms of attrition: retirement, completion of obligated service, and administrative separation, amongst other reasons. When PSRS-1 examined its FY15-17 non-obligated affiliations, 53.3 percent of those Marines did not remain a full year in the SMCR, or 567 of 1,062. During FY15, 53.1 percent, or

237 of 446 Marines, did not last an entire year. Of those, 14.1 percent did not last 90 days while 32.0 percent did not last 6 months. During FY16, 54.6 percent, or 267 of 489 Marines, did not last an entire year. Of those, 12.2 percent did not last 90 days while 30.6 percent did not last 6 months. During FY17, 41.1 percent, or 199 of 484 Marines, did not last an entire year. Of those, 12.1 percent did not last 90 days while 32.8 percent did not last 6 months. FY17 data is lower because it includes all Marines joined during FY17. When only those FY17 Marines joined one full year ago are considered, 49.6 percent did not last an entire year, or 63 of 127.

5. Certain types of affiliation require commitment: receiving a lateral move or an affiliation bonus both require obligated service.

6. U.S. House of Representatives, 10 U.S. Code § 12302, (Washington, DC: January 2012.) When the President declares a national emergency the Secretary of Defense may recall up to 1,000,000 IRR members for not more than 24 months.

7. Attrition is a factor in quality. MCRC holds PSRSs to a seven percent attrition standard in order to receive the Commandant's Superior Achievement Award. But this 7 percent standard is only calculated against 90 days. And this seven percent standard is held against all forms of join credit to include those Marines who cannot quit such as lateral moves, bonuses, and AR Marines. Seven percent is therefore not an accurate picture of real attrition.

8. In FY15, MCRC used 205 of its 320 lateral move allocations, obligating 7.5 percent of its SMCR mission. In FY16, MCRC used 215 of its 320 lateral move allocations, obligating 7.2 percent of its SMCR mission. In FY17, MCRC used 178 of its 320 lateral move allocations, obligating 5.9 percent of its SMCR mission. RAP also offers SMCR affiliation bonuses through several programs. In FY17, RAP offered 312 enlisted and officer bonuses and in FY18, RAP will offer 313 enlisted and officer bonuses. Between lateral moves and bonuses, MCRC can obligate only 22.2 percent of its FY18 SMCR mission, or 633 Marines.

9. Marine Corps Recruiting Command, *MCRC Volume VIII*, (Quantico, VA: April 2011.)

10. Ibid.

11. U.S. House of Representatives, Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Act of 1994, 28 U.S. Code §§ 4301-4335, (Washington, DC: 1994).

