

Words Have Meaning

Are you aware of what you are writing?

by LtCol Winston S. Tierney

The catalyst for the following stems from a previously submitted article I stumbled upon in the *Marine Corps Gazette* (Sept18) by LtCol Antonio L. Borrego. The article is entitled “Quantico, We Have a Problem,” and it focused principally on the unacceptable yet very real problem the Marine Corps has with failing to meet required, timely fitness report (FITREP) submission requirements in accordance with HQMC directive. I intend to take the discussion further.

I applaud LtCol Borrego for his courage to address the sensitive issue of officer delinquency regarding the timely or, as he points out with the reference to *MARADMIN 234/18, Reinforcing Guidance with Regard to Timely Fitness Report Submissions*, the untimely submission of one of the most critical elements to any sergeant’s and above career: the FITREP. LtCol Borrego does an excellent job of highlighting the problem early in his piece with the stunning and tremendously unfortunate statistic of officers’ failure to meet required FITREP submission timelines approximately 50 percent of the time during the year assessed. My guess is that March 2017 to March 2018 was no anomaly, and this delinquency is a longer standing issue. Compounding the tragedy of late submission, which obviously has a direct impact on the career of the Marine, is another equally concerning problem that—when coupled with late submission—can be a kiss of death. The problem is that we, the officer corps, still have a systemic problem in understanding how to write meaningful, useful, and helpful reports that clearly articulate a Marine’s value for continued service and increased responsibilities. I know I am not the first person to address this issue; however,

>LtCol Tierney is currently assigned to the Africa Exercise Division, U.S. Marine Forces Europe and Africa.

the problem continues, and the discussion requires some reinvigoration.

I served as the senior active duty officer on the Fiscal Year 2017 Reserve Staff Non-Commissioned Officer Selection Board. For anyone uncertain, let me clarify that there is no difference—in terms of the products seen and reviewed—between an active duty selection board and a Reserve selection board. Over the course of eight weeks, our collective board noted some incredibly simple to identify, yet potentially detrimental, trends in FITREP writing that frequently placed us in difficult positions when determining a Marine’s potential for promotion. Ultimately, FITREPs need to properly demonstrate a Marine’s qualitative and quantitative value to the Corps. The best way to this value is through objective, substantive examples. Unfortunately, we observed a majority of reports that clearly suggested that reporting seniors (RS) and reviewing officers (RO) did not know their Marines either personally or professionally, had gross misunderstandings of how to write a value added report for the Marine, and frequently wrote reports in a manner that left us feeling as though the author procrastinated until the last minute before hastily throwing something on paper to satisfy the requirement (echoing LtCol Borrego’s concerns). Eight weeks of reviewing FITREPs exposed that I was equally guilty of many of the trends we noted, and I left feeling very disappointed in that fact. The following observations proved problematic.

Trends

A few particulars jumped out at us during the board. We were amazed that many of these issues were things we had heard of for years, decades even (for us older guys), and yet they remained a problem. With that, I respectfully request that the reader allow me an opportunity to dissect some writing trends and what those trends suggested to most of our board. Though I can only speak to our board, and within that I must acknowledge that not all 21 members saw things exactly the same, the reader can know with confidence that these collective trends were definitively noted and were the subject of discussion and debate daily. I am also aware that there will be readers who disagree with my opinions; I look forward to meaningful discussion that might help us all improve collectively.

It is important to note that the following quoted comments came directly from FITREPs we reviewed and are recounted from my notes. They are painfully obvious, yet these and other nearly identically articulated comments appeared with such frequency it was troubling. Further, actual report examples to follow are from reports not reviewed by the board but have been used to further illustrate trends we observed. Those examples have been used with the owner’s consent. Thus, let us review some bad trends.

“Concur with RS.” How many times have you seen it from an RO? How many times have you used it as a RO? With many younger Marine’s reports, we found that a comment like this from ROs is typically followed by other routine comments such as, “Promote and retain.” That is it: two lines, six words. While it can be argued that it is good to see mutual agreement between RS’ and ROs, and that commentary to the

effect of promotion and retention is necessary, the use of *only* these comments is not helpful in terms of the board's need to know why—or with what—the RO specifically concurred with. As we shall see momentarily, RS commentary is frequently challenging to understand. Without something a little more specific, the board member was often left guessing if whether the RO concurred with some of it or all of it?

The board would rather know, more extensively, *how* the RO concurred with the RS, or on what in terms of qualitative and quantitative value of the Marine and their performance. The board was certainly aware that the use of such words and simplicity are sometimes meant to send a particular message: generally, a negative one. Of course, there is sometimes a place for that, and one hopes it would not be a surprise to the Marine to find this out; but in the grand scheme of the evaluations we observed, these missed opportunities to expound on a Marine's value appeared to be disproportionately more the result of RO failure to spend the time or take an interest in writing about the Marine than about sending a vanilla message to the board. Bear this in mind ROs, if all you can muster is "concur with RS," and as it turns out, the RS cannot write a value added FITREP either, but you have not identified that because you failed to give the correct level of attention a report should deserve, you

may be sending more of a message than you intended—and it might not be the MRO its reflecting.

"Belt fed Marine. Fire and forget weapon." We considered these to be generally useless comments that took up valuable space where a more appropriate quantitative or qualitative assessment of the Marine may have been presented. What are you really telling us with comments like these? For example, this 01XX Administrative Marine who is trying to become a SNCO is "belt fed, fire and forget." As an infantry officer sitting on the board, I am trying to decipher the author's intent here. I can infer generalities; the Marine is motivated. The Marine can type really fast. The Marine can maneuver through 3270 (an Administrative program that contains virtually every bit of information known on a Marine) quickly. But then again, maybe my assumptions here about your meaning are absurd and that is not what you, as an RS, are saying with your comment. But here is the problem; I do not know, and you missed an opportunity to better inform me—the board member—of what you really meant. You left me to make assumptions because of your lack of clarity.

During a recent PME on this topic, I was asked if there is ever a place for these one-liner "motivator" statements. I suggest there certainly can be, but they must be incorporated into a report that follows up with quantitative and quali-

tative examples of the Marine's value. Further in this commentary, I provide examples of where these sorts of comments are the only comments used in a section I or K. When this sort of flowery, motivated type of language is all we are reading, the board is left with little.

"SNM has a great personality. Always has a smile on his face." It is great to know the Marine is nice, but who are you writing this for? As a board member, I am attempting to determine this Marine's value for increased responsibility to our Corps. You, the RS, have sincerely flattered the Marine. I have no doubt (in this example) he left the FITREP counseling feeling good about himself. But while you were complimenting his character, you were not telling the board whether he was any good at his MOS, whether he still had value to our Corps, or whether we should promote him to grade and positions of increased responsibility. We wondered if the Marine left the counseling realizing the reality of these comments? I can offer that having spoken to dozens of Marines since I sat on the board, and having given a PME on this very subject several times since, most of the young Marines (enlisted and junior officer) are frequently un-aware that these sorts of comments are perceived as less than helpful by the board and may have adverse effects on their future.

Take the example below (Figure 1.) and let us dissect and determine what

1. Marine Reported On:				2. Occasion and Period Covered:		
a. Last Name	b. First Name	c. MI	d. ID	a. OCC	b. From	To
██████████	██████████	████	██████████	████	██████████	██████████
I. DIRECTED AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTS						
Sgt ██████ is a dependable and resourceful NCO. Competent and mature; he can be counted on to handle any task assigned. He actively seeks responsibility and produced quality results. He handles Marines very effectively; securing their complete cooperation and respect. ██████ is always working to improve himself and his section. He displays a significant amount of energy and initiative in training and supervising his Marines. He takes personal pride in his section and will not allow mediocrity from his subordinates. His professional and technical knowledge has made him a valuable asset to this ██████ Office. SNM has completed the Sgt non-resident program. Highly recommended for retention and program.						

Figure 1. (Figure provided by author.)

we can about the Marine's quantitative and qualitative value in his MOS from this board member's perspective.

The first read on this report is that the MRO seems solid. There is certainly a nice grouping of flattering adjectives that might give the Marine the impression everything is good to go. But what is not being said?

"Dependable and resourceful NCO." Ok, but how? This is a great opportunity for a quantitative or qualitative example to follow. How is this Marine dependable? Did you trust him with expensive gear? What was that gear valued at? Such a value might give me a better appreciation for his level of responsibility and dependability. Was he dependable in meeting scheduled timelines? Why not provide an example like: "MRO consistently ensures all of the ten subordinate Marines in his charge are at morning formation in the proper uniform of the day, ready to train," or "His timeliness and accountability directly contributes to the unit's overall readiness as witnessed during the recent IG inspection where his section scored a (insert score number)." What is it about his resourcefulness? From the report example above, I am left to guess how this resourcefulness is to be defined, when the RS could have clarified for me.

"Competent and mature." Here again, we see personally flattering adjectives that are open ended. Is the MRO competent at their job, being a Marine, or at playing Fortnite? Do not assume that we, as the board members, will easily sort this seemingly simple consideration out during week five of our eight-week board experience. We might just miss it. How is the MRO competent?

"Actively seeks responsibility and produces quality results." This reads like another way of saying "dependable and resourceful NCO." It reads as though the author could not decide what to say about the Marine and simply changed the semantics. It is quite possible the author did not even realize it. But what we wanted to know were the results of their work. Why not insert a quantitative or qualitative example here like, "MRO saved the command \$2 million in overtime expenses by streamlining the

unit's reconciliation process for ammunition expenditures." With something like this, we can denote the individual effort, intellectual rigor, resourcefulness, and competence of the Marine with a substantive monetary value attached to an accomplishment.

"Displays a significant amount of energy and initiative in training and supervising his Marines." Great! But how specifically do they do this? What did he train his Marines in of value? How did his direct supervision improve those Marines? Did his training improve their fitness wherein their collective PFT scores rose by 30 points in the second half of the calendar year? Did they all complete non-resident PME with a passing average of 95 percent or better? Did the MRO help three previous Marksman shooters improve to Expert due to the MRO spending time and teaching the Marines marksmanship? How was the MRO's energy spent of value?

"Will not allow mediocrity from his subordinates." This is a concerning statement altogether.

"His professional and technical knowledge has made him a valuable asset to this office." Nice comment, but this is still a missed opportunity. You are making me—the board member—guess what this comment might be referencing. Why leave it up to chance? Do the MRO a favor and tell us about him. Written more effectively, a reader should have been able to glean what this Marine does or is directly associated with in his daily activity. This word picture above is so generic it could be recycled over and over again. This does not necessarily help a Marine.

Note the fact that a third of this Section I's available writing space was left blank. There was ample room to have expounded on the Marine with quantitative or qualitative value commentary. This was a missed opportunity to discuss MRO's fitness, volunteer work, technical competence, additional education, or any manner of other items that could have assisted the board. This report was likely flattering to the recipient. It reads that this MRO is a seemingly good person who concerns himself with, at a minimum, ensuring his Marines are not mediocre.

The take-away from these examples is this: do not miss an opportunity to include something quantitative or qualitative, with objective examples or statistics when available, to show a Marine's value. Generic writing to fill space becomes as obvious to the board as not filling space at all.

Additional Examples of Fitrep Writing Party Fouls

Restating generic billet accomplishments. Using billet accomplishments in the Section I comments gave the impression that the author was just trying to fill space and had nothing else to write. Unfortunately, this trend occurred disproportionately when writing on younger NCOs, suggesting to the board that RS and ROs did not place as much emphasis on writing about these Marines. This may have been perhaps because these were early, entry, or first of new rank FITREPs incorrectly assumed to be of little value by the author; or they were considered by the author as reports able to be overcome as the Marine grew in experience. Such assumptions may have disastrous outcomes for the Marine. The bottom line is that we read the billet accomplishment in Section B. Restating them in Section I was of little value unless the RS expounded on a certain aspect of the accomplishment in greater detail, showing qualitative or quantitative value in what the Marine did with that accomplishment.

Conversely, an equally dangerous pitfall with the "billet accomplishments" section is to assume that since something important *is* in that section, it is not worth expounding on later in Section I. As relevant, an RS should not miss the opportunity to discuss (not just cut and paste) the accomplishment in Section I with greater fidelity if it is noteworthy.

Cut and Paste of previously used RS or RO comments. This activity did a complete and total disservice to the Marine. It was an inexcusable, missed opportunity. So frequent is this issue that the board began to note and identify certain RSs and ROs during the reading of comments portion of the brief before even knowing they had actually written the report. Over 180,000 Ma-

1. Marine Reported On:				2. Occasion and Period Covered:		
a. Last Name	b. First Name	c. MI	d. ID	a. OCC	b. From	To
██████	██████	██	██████████	██	██████████	██████████
I. DIRECTED AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTS						
<p>Staff Sergeant ██████ has demonstrated the ability to perform on recruiting duty. During <u>her</u> tour, <u>she</u> contributed to the success of <u>his</u> team and fostered a positive Marine Corps image within the community. <u>She</u> is recommended for retention and promotion with <u>his</u> peers. Directed Comment, Sect A, Item 8C: MRO was prevented from conducting a CFT due to <u>her</u> post-delivery recovery time and <u>maternity leave</u>.</p>						

Figure 2. (Figure provided by author.)

rines and we were actually able to pick you out by name from your FITREPs. Additionally, when the case reviewing board member encountered the exact same spelling errors in the exact same comments across several different Marine’s reports with the same RS or RO, all we could do is shake our heads.

Gender pronoun failure. When you are referring to the success of your female staff sergeant, but you keep referring to her as him, his, or he, you have told the board more than you wanted. Think this does not happen? See Figure 2.

Gender pronoun failure was a regular and unfortunate occurrence on reports reviewed by the board and only served to suggest a lack of interest on behalf of the RS or RO. The fact that two sets of leadership eyes saw this report and it still ended up in the system was concerning.

Assuming the reader of the FITREP knows what you, the report’s RS or RO, are talking about in terms of the Marine and his MOS. Bottom line, we do not. There are 21 board members from all walks of Marine Corps life, but we are not subject matter experts in every occupational field. Many of your acronyms and MOS characterizations

are non-doctrinal; if you leave it up to us to figure out, the Marine will likely suffer. Your use of the acronym “AA” to mean assessment agent will definitely be confused by my infantry-based understanding of “AA” to mean assembly area. If you clarify from the start, I will not consume time trying to understand what you are talking about or why you are talking infantry tactics in an administrator’s report. I could better use that time trying to find ways to promote the Marine.

Gender pronoun failure was a regular and unfortunate occurrence ...

Ensuring B-billet Fitreps help and do not inadvertently harm a Marine. B-billet reports can be an inadvertent pitfall. When it is all said and done, Marines are promoted in their MOS first and foremost, not because of what they did in a B-billet. While a B-billet may help to “round” the Marine in a general sense, it is imperative that evaluation writers remember the grander scheme of the impact of the report on the Marine’s future. Here again, for younger NCOs or Marines who may be in MOS’ that might be critical and potentially have an accelerated promo-

tion opportunities, as well as Marines who might be in MOSs that are slow to promote, the specificity of what is written can make the difference for the Marine’s future.

We noted trends of what might loosely reflect systematic or pre-fabricated FITREP structure that very appropriately gave certain specific detail about a Marine’s accomplishments within the B-billet field of responsibility, but at the same time left us wondering about the Marine as a whole. For example, reports from within the recruiting duty B-billet all began to look the same. “SNM Marine effectively used the steps of the Marine Consultative Communications (MC3) package;” “MRO had an APR (Accessions per Recruiter) of (insert statistic)” or “MRO retained a MCRD attrition rate of (insert statistic).” Progressively, the board began to understand what some of these acronyms meant and what you might have been trying to accentuate about the Marine’s performance. Board member requirement to interpret what they meant and apply to the total value of the Marine took additional time. The amount of time a board member focused on one thing that may have resulted in missing another, more important thing. As indicated above, assuming we, the board, will effectively translate your writing could potentially be a risky proposition.

For example, if you are a sergeant looking to be a 0369 Infantry SNCO, as

*Author’s Note: “Maternity leave” was only circled in this example to ensure there was no lack of clarity on which gender this Marine was supposed to be considered by.

infantry is my MOS, I am scrutinizing billets, deployments, schools, and leadership. Suppose you left the fleet after four years and midway through that B-billet you became a newly promoted sergeant. Your only observed time as a FITREP receiving NCO includes a year and a half of recruiting and perhaps two to three FITREPs as an infantry Marine after returning to the fleet from the B-billet. I really do not have a lot of MOS credibility reporting to make your potential selection easy. If I default to the B-billet reporting and those recruiting duty reports that are written such that they are filled with systematic cut and paste comments, and the author has not translated statistics into meaningful information about the Marine's potential for increased responsibility or reflect on the Marine's intangible qualities demonstrated by those achievements, it may have a direct impact on that Marine's future.

Not writing the FITREP to the board, but writing to the Marine. Do not worry so much about flattering him, worry more about convincing us! Consider the example below, Figure 3.

A report like this likely made the Marine feel good, but it ultimately told us nothing. There is nothing about MOS proficiency, nothing quantitative, and the report is riddled with missed opportunities—not including the 50 percent of the writing area that was not touched that could have helped us understand

this Marine. This report fell into a category of which we saw an alarming number of other reports fall into. That category was RSs who were in love with their own writing style, but their writing style did not work. Tragically, when this sort of wasted opportunity comes at the end of an annual reporting period, or a reporting period that makes a difference (read six months or more), it can be devastating.

Velvet daggers. Not wanting to deal with the confrontation of a substandard performer. Did you mean them, or were your remarks unintentional and perhaps your writing style needs evaluation? Comments such as “Capable Marine,”

NCO—or even a junior officer—then quite possibly the Marine has not fully developed his expertise and ability, and to label him as “capable” may be well within the wheel house given their time and grade. It can be an acceptable adjective, but if it is not meant to potentially be considered a shot across the bow, there might be a requirement for you to give other supporting information to assist the board in determining how you meant the comment. For example, instead of just “Capable Marine,” an additive or amplifying comment could be made like, “Despite only being in his current billet for six months, displays aptitude and technical understand-

Velvet daggers. Not wanting to deal with the confrontation of a substandard performer. Did you mean them, or were your remarks unintentional and perhaps your writing style needs evaluation?

“Promote,” “Promote with peers,” or “Retain” suggest to us that the Marine was average and maybe less than average. When a finite number of promotion allocations were on the line, this could have made things terminal for a Marine. The board, however, can be challenged to determine what exactly the message is here. If the Marine is a brand new

ing of a more seasoned Marine in this MOS... With sustained opportunity to excel, MRO could (insert subject's potential).” Otherwise, given the human dynamic of interpretation and no other quantitative or qualitative substantiating evidence, it may very well carry the weight of an unintended, yet given velvet dagger. (See Figure 4.)

1. Marine Reported On:				2. Occasion and Period Covered:		
a. Last Name	b. First Name	c. MI	d. ID	a. OCC	b. From	To
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
I. DIRECTED AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTS						
The phrase, sustained superior performance, describes Sergeant [REDACTED] during this reporting period. The first impression has proven to reveal the actual depth of his character and work ethic. Motivated, he does not back down from any challenge. A pace setter, sets extremely high standards for his Marines, and guides them to the mark. He always presents a professional demeanor. He has been thrown into the most demanding and sensitive situations and performed magnificently. Promote soonest.						

Figure 3. (Figure provided by author.)

1. Marine Reported On:				2. Occasion and Period Covered:		
a. Last Name	b. First Name	c. MI	d. ID	a. OCC	b. From	To
██████	██████	██████	██████	██████	██████	██████
I. DIRECTED AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTS						
<p>Sergeant ██████ is a thoughtful and patient recruiter who possesses a unique ability to truly listen to ██████ applicants and their needs; <u>this, a skill that has the potential to make ██████ a very effective leader in subsequent assignment.</u> ██████ employs a calm but direct approach to the mission accomplishment, utilizing the steps of the Marine Corps Consultative Communication (MC3) package like a seasoned veteran. Provides an effective balance with ██████ fellow recruiters when working in the office or representing our Corps with influencers or in the community. Recommended for retention and assignment to appropriate level PME.</p> <p>Direct Comment: Sect A, Item 6a: MRO received a Certificate of Commendation for recruiting excellence during ██████ recruiting campaign, ██████.</p>						

Figure 4. (Figure provided by author.)

Alternately, there are comments that *absolutely* are perceived as velvet daggers. Consider the example of this recruiter who learns they possess a “unique ability to truly listen to applicants and their needs; this, a skill that has the potential to make [MRO] a very effective leader in a *subsequent* assignment.” But are they not capable in *this* particular assignment? As if to imply this skill is not needed here, and while the MRO might be capable of being a very effective leader somewhere else, between the lines we read that they are not an effective leader here in this assignment. Of course, this is confusing altogether as we read the remainder of the report which talks about the Marine’s ability to provide effective balance with other recruiters, utilizes the steps of the MC3 package like a seasoned veteran, and received a Certificate of Commendation. So, what are we to understand here? Well, here again, it is board member dependent, timing within the board dependent, condition (read mood, alertness, physical health, etc.) of the board member at the time of reading and interpretation dependent, and all manner of other things dependent. Unfortunately, the reality is that this comment appears to be a velvet dagger. From experience, as the board goes on, I can assure you it will first be read as such. This is the human interpretation dynamic. What is the point? A writing approach that balances clarity, quantitative and qualitative value added com-

mentaries, simplicity, and no message mixing makes our job easier and prevents unfortunate outcomes that may not have been the actual desire of the RS or RO. Consider word usage creativity. No one is looking for you to break out the thesaurus, but I can assure you that, by example, we came across the word “capable” approximately three hundred eleven million times during the board. It has almost become a staple of Marine FITREPs. This is not necessarily a good thing.

Making sure the Math (Block scores) and the English (Sect I/K comments) match. Painting an inconsistent picture will only confuse the board member and hurt the MRO. If you tell us the Marine is number one in your organization and has your “highest recommendation for promotion,” but then the Marine’s numeric relative and cumulative value average for your report is an 87 and is the lowest in your profile, there is a serious issue.

Wasted space. Countless FITREPs we encountered had less than 50 percent of the available writing space in either the Section I or Section K actually utilized. While there is no formal requirement to fill the space entirely, there is equally an opportunity for the RS or RO to truly help the Marine and the board by expounding on the Marine’s value to the Corps. To be sure, this failure to use available space was not an issue found strictly reflective of average to below average performing Marines. Even top

tier relative value Marines from RS or RO profiles were frequently the victims of minimal commentary. This trend gave some members of the board cause to believe that the RSs and ROs must have thought the Marine’s successful future was a given and that a lot of detail, or as importantly, the right detail was not required. There seems to be a stigma about the use of the addendum page. It happened so infrequently; and the board was often left wondering “Why?” Failure to use the addendum page had interesting trends associated with it. If the RS did not desire to move on to the addendum page, it frequently appeared as though their writing was erratic, potentially in an effort to get a few key phrases in, with no particular order, before running out of space in Section I. Along with seemingly required comments about promotability and retention, or generic comments about “send to resident PME,” this really only left the author with two thirds of the Section I for quantitative or qualitative value added writing. As addressed earlier, in the cases of apparent prefabricated report formats (recruiting, drill field, School of Infantry, etc.), this left even less space to tell us about the Marine. The result was board members scratching their heads trying to figure out what was really being said about the Marine. Why not click a box, drop to the addendum page, and tell us about the MRO?

It is not lost on me that within many professional communities, and among

senior leadership, brevity is more often favored in communication style and content. All I can suggest is that an RS or RO must know the environment. Twenty-one Marines are determining the fate of your Marine. There are thousands of others competing against him. Those 21 Marines on the board are a cross section of our Corps, but may not be resident experts on your Marine's MOS. Under allocation, our ability to choose not to promote all of the allocations is real. If we are not convinced, we will not promote. If that leaves slots on the table, that is unfortunate—but it happens. Competition is steep, and a whole lot of Marines are qualified. What will make the one you wrote on different? Given all of these considerations, I argue an RS, or an RO, might be better suited to give us a little more to work with, as opposed to a lot less on account of brevity. This is not a response to a co-worker's email; it is a Marine's future and life.

The Reality of the Process Explained

Let me briefly explain what happens with the board over any duration, but in our case, an eight-week process wherein some 2,000 plus packages were reviewed for potential promotability. Over the course of eight weeks, each board member, minus the President, prepped over 100 cases. A board member spends on average approximately 45 minutes to 1 full hour in "brief prep" time. This means that I took about an hour to comb through everything the Marine Corps had on file about you and your professional career to include DD214s (where applicable), NJPs, counseling's, where you are from, whether you have family or not, how you did in your formal education, and how you performed in your professional military education.

Let me say, with respect, the comment captured in Figure 5 from a former Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps is dead wrong. I study your photo including whether you are wearing your uniform appropriately and whether it fits, or whether you look like chewed bubblegum in it. I am noting the fact that you are up for SNCO and are still wearing the same Service "C" shirt you got from

boot camp for your professional picture. While you are technically authorized to do this, it might be sending a message if that shirt or blouse is clinging to its last moment of serviceability. Ladies, be warned, when you wear this thin shirt from boot camp and you have on brightly colored undergarments that show through, you are wrong and it is noted. I am looking at your ribbons. Do you have the right ones? Did you know there was a difference between the NATO ribbon for participation in Kosovo versus the NATO ribbon for participation in Afghanistan? Are you possibly wearing something you do not rate? If you think this did not happen, think again. We actually observed the most egregious violation: wearing combat decorations not earned!

I am studying your tattoos and checking your "grandfathered in" photo. Do they match, or have you slipped in a new tattoo that no one has noticed yet. I am studying your low regulation haircut or your eccentric hair color.

I study your deployment history, the time you have in your MOS, what you have actually done with that time, and who you did it with. Did you know that in 2016, specific annotation about "combat" was still being noted in the process? Does this put those of you who have not yet been to combat at a disadvantage? Well, that could be personal-

ity dependent with regard to your case preparer and the board, but well-written FITREPs addressing a Marine's deployment history might offset this.

Ultimately, I am studying every, and I stress everything I can about you and your potential for increased responsibility. All of that, including your FITREP review, is done *in about an hour*.

Early in the process, we are learning how to be more efficient so we can get through your life and career in a manner allowing us to be ready for briefing. As the board goes on, the fact of the matter is we streamline. Each board member's personality leads to the development of priorities during the preparation.

When directed, the briefer will be given—in the case of this board—three minutes to brief the Marine. In reality, that is 2 and a half minutes, at which point the briefer is informed he or she has 30 seconds left to summarize and rate the Marine. Consider this; by example, we loosely calculated how many hours of their human life a Marine gunnery sergeant with sixteen years of service had actually given to the Corps. Hasty and generalized math calculations put this Marine at having expended nearly 140,000 hours of his life serving our beloved Corps and our Nation. God bless them for that. But now, those 140,000 hours will be summarized by highlights pertaining

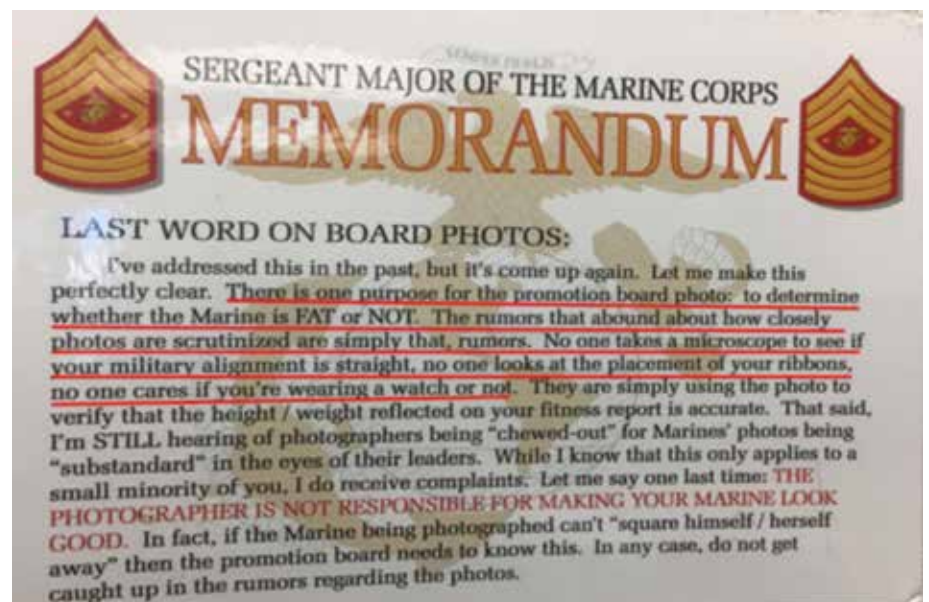


Figure 5. (Figure provided by author.)

to about fourteen areas of interest regarding the Marine. Those highlights will be briefed (read) to the board in the format example below. Want to know what the board hears? Try this—set your timer on your phone or watch for 1 and a half minutes and read the next 14 lines verbatim as fast as you can.

Gunnery Sergeant X- 0321-0311/0331/0323/ 0317

1. *PME Complete for grade: Yes*
2. *Letter to the board: Yes. Letters from two colonels and a general. See me after brief if you care. (That is right reader, these might not mean what you think they do ... keep reading, you are running out of time!)*
3. *Photo: Yes- Current, Yes- May 2019?*
 - *Squared away, Yes*
 - *Within height and weight standards, yes- 71/200 - 9 percent BF*
 - *Exceeds weight: Yes- three pounds, but meets BF standard.*
 - *History Weight control, No*
4. *Training:*
 - *Rifle: Expert, March 2018 - 320*
 - *Pistol: Expert, August 2017 - 396*
 - *PFT: 1st class, 291, June 2018*
 - *CFT: 1st class, 297, December 2018*
5. *Education: Military - SOI Basic Infantryman, Advanced Machine gun leader, Corporals Course, Basic Reconnaissance Course, Basic Airborne, SERE, Army Ranger, Scout Sniper Basic, High Risk Personnel, Anti-Terrorist Driving/EVAS, EOTG Close Quarters Battle, Sergeant's Course, non-resident; Sergeants Course, resident; Staff NCO Career Residence, Advance Course non-resident, MCMAP Instructor Black Belt.*
Civilian: BA Philosophy, master's in strategic leadership
6. *Awards: Bronze Star (OIF 2006), Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Meritorious Service Medal x three, Navy Commendation Medal, Army Achievement Medal, NMCAM. Combat Action Ribbon*
7. *Combat: Yes (OIF 2006,07,09,10)*
**Deployments: OIR 2015, Iraq five times, Mediterranean float, UDP-Okinawa, Guantanamo Bay twice.*
8. *Joint Qual: Yes 2007-2010 Special Operation capable, Combined Joint Forces Command*

9. *Adverse Material: page 11, 2002 as PFC drinking in barracks.*

10. *From the RS:*

- *at processing the majority of FITREPS are in the upper third at 79.6 percent.*
- *cumulatively, the majority of FITREPS are in the upper third at 61 percent*

11. *From the RO:*

- *at processing the majority of Marines are marked below MRO at 67.9 percent*
- *umulatively, the majority of Marines are marked below MRO at 61.0 percent*

12. *Remarks from RS (cut and paste from Fitreps):*

RS 2009 Combat Deployment: As Assistant Team Leader, Sergeant X did a superb job from start to finish of this deployment cycle, insuring every tactical and non-tactical training requirement was not only met but maximized at every turn. He was the key component in bringing together the Mojave Viper training evolution from all aspects, and insuring maximum training value was acquired. Once in theatre, his 0321 expertise was essential to the success of virtually every mission conducted by the Team. His personal initiative and passion for excellence drove his "non directed" taking on of ATEP [anti-terrorism. Force protection] issues while conducting operations in the City of Hit, constructing improved fighting positions IVO two degraded Firm Bases and improving overall force protection for the Army unit serving concurrently on site. Acts as a Staff Sergeant already. RS 2014: Tremendous performance as the operations chief. Serving in a billet normally held by a more senior ranking SNCO, SSgt X consistently demonstrated a mature and balanced approach to mission accomplishment and was never satisfied with status quo. He views issues through a MAGTF lens. His oversight of all enlisted operations staff functions and continuous coordination with higher and adjacent headquarters helped ensure unit was always postured to support tasking. Communications skills, both written and verbally, are marked by poise and clarity and exceptional for this young SNCO. Has an unrivaled ability to bal-

ance the many competing priorities and tasks and think on his feet even in the most stressful circumstances.

13. *Remarks from RO (cut and paste from Fitreps):*

From RO 2013: Tremendous performance as Platoon Sergeant. Hard working, detail oriented, team player. MAGTF approach to solving issues; works exceptionally close with adjacent and higher commands to resolve contentious issues. An experienced and proven leader who possesses the temperament, character, balance, and maturity the Corps seeks in its SNCO ranks. Eminently qualified for selection to Gunnery Sergeant and ready for significant increased responsibility. Give this Marine your hardest task and he will not disappoint. RO 2010: Mature, bright, and highly professional. Thorough and proficient SNCO. On short notice, built and trained an effective operational team from disparate Reserve and active duty Marines. Results significantly and positively impacted counterinsurgency operations across area of operations X (Al Anbar Province).

As Team Leader, demonstrated exceptional versatility and dedication across a myriad of missions; often simultaneously. Results led to removal of area of operations mid-level Al-Qaeda in Iraq/ JTJ leadership.

14. *Recommendation: I recommend this Marine a 5. Strong RS/RO profile. Strong Section I comments. Strong PT. Excellent showing in terms of PME outlook both personal as well as professional. Page 11 anomaly is obviously an issue. I put that to the board to decide, but his career outlook suggests he has matured and moved on.*

Well, did you finish before the timer went off?

Those 140,000 hours will be presented in 2 and a half minutes, as you just read, to the board as we determine the Marine's potential for promotion. While there will be a voting process that takes place later, and cases can be made for Marines resulting in additional discussion and consideration, the hard truth is that 99 percent of the decision on whether to promote that Marine or not is made during those 2 and a half minutes. Yes, we look at the

entirety of the Marine, not just what the Marine has done lately. Enter the human dynamic and its effect on board members. Over the course of the first few weeks of the board, the board members are sharp, firing on all cylinders, and are able to absorb the substantive elements of the package. But as the board moves into weeks four, five, and six, it must be conceded that the grind of the process may give cause for a board member to possibly miss something of value in that two minutes and thirty seconds. For a board member who has limited experience with a specific MOS being briefed, it is entirely possible for the two and a half minute brief to sound something like reading a Doctor Seuss book as fast as you can. All of us give our very best effort for each and every single Marine, but to suggest that the human dynamic might not be applicable is naive and simply unreasonable. Not the least of which, it is Quantico in the winter. This is why it is vital to ensure that quantitative and qualitative substance is available. We are waiting for the “so what” factor. We need it.

There are two considerations that principally drive the majority of the final determination for the Marine; their numerically driven relative value, the “hour glass,” and additional comments taken directly from Sections I and K. Reality check, the numeric relative value outweighs the comments pretty significantly. This was something many board members came to be disillusioned with because of the many factors that affect the numbers and the incredible impact the numbers had overall. There is certainly a discussion that could be had regarding how much value HQMC places on this portion of the evaluation and whether it challenges relevance of other portions of the evaluation; or does it truly give us an overall assessment of the Marine. Nevertheless, the significance of the relative and cumulative value is certain. One might ask then, if this is so, why bother with this article? While it is true that the numbers seemingly outweigh the comments, the comments are in play and may potentially edge a borderline vote. Where Marines may be considered “in the hunt,” that is to say retaining a relative and cumulative value

that is not quite optimal—but not a lost cause either—the comments written by RS’s and RO’s become more relevant in helping paint a more rounded picture of the Marine’s potential. If it comes down to a re-vote, or an under-allocation discussion, a briefer may have to rely on a comment to make a convincing argument one way or the other.

FITREPS that valued a Marine’s individual growth professionally and personally, with substantive examples, gave a Marine the best chance. If you, as an RS or RO, did not care about the FITREP writing process, it showed, and the Marine paid for it. Each and every FITREP has potentially incredible value. During the conduct of our board, there were Marines up for promotion who may have only had three or four observed reports in grade. If these reports had little to no value as discussed above, the results could have been significant.

All of this seems like it should be well known and adhered to already, right? We officer’s all have training on FITREP writing, right? We sit down and have PME’s on this sort of thing all the time, no? So, it begs the question: how have late or poorly written FITREP’s even become an issue?

In informally polling many of my peers since my time on the board, we agree that the only formal period of instruction we had on fitness report writing came at TBS as well as when the new A-PES (Automated-Personnel Evaluation System) reporting procedures came along. For my peer group, that was a long time ago, and herein is a large portion of the problem. There are ever changing guidelines to the FITREP system that frequently gets overlooked in high operational tempo environments. Marine administrative messages and subsequent email distribution from the office of the unit’s G-1 regarding changes to reporting procedures, updates, and changes clearly have had less impact on the writing process than desired. If this statement were not true, I offer we would not have seen what we did on the board. While FITREP writing has significant author individuality to it, authors need to know what is important to write and what information

not to write. But who is the keeper of that information and what, in terms of regular professional development, is being done to push, teach, and mentor that information to younger RSs and ROs? How seriously do we take Section H of the report? If an RS or RO is writing on another FITREP writing responsible MRO, has there been any rigor put in to assess whether the subordinate Marine is really putting forth the effort to write value added, quantitative, and qualitative assessments of their direct reports? How often have we glossed over Section H with a standard mid-level marking, “Not observed,” or worse yet, used it as a balancing marking as a way to make sure said Marine either inches just slightly up the RS’s profile, or down so as not to challenge the stratification of the RS or jeopardize one of the RS’s other star Marines? Admittedly, some FITREP writing techniques I learned over the years came from others who did not write well either. Collectively, we just did not know it. This is not an excuse; it is an unfortunate reality that now must be used as a learning lesson. I argue that as I have gotten older in this industry and been around to build an experience base, I have gradually evolved as a FITREP writer, but would that evolution have benefitted from some professional and focused writing and evaluation instruction along the way? I absolutely would have. Would it have benefitted from better knowing how my reports were scrutinized by a board, and what the impact of certain words I used might have on the future of one of my Marines? Yes, I would have benefitted from this too. Did I own some of that personally? Yes, we all do. Having seen a cross section of Marine FITREP writing in tremendous detail, I can say I have not been alone in missing the point.

Options

The system continues to have room for improvement. As stated, our current evaluation process ultimately can be reduced to relative and cumulative value as well as select comments at the digression of the board member: a single board member charged with evaluating the promotable Marine, and giving

his *interpretation* on that Marine. The board member tries to be as impartial as possible and a tie usually goes to the Marine, but the human dynamic cannot be understated or overlooked. True, there are 21 board members who can think and evaluate for themselves, but do not underestimate the power of how that board member speaks to sway the decision, especially as the board duration continues. Given what LtCol Borrego says about the problems of timeliness, writing technique, and style that become painfully clear to anyone who has had an opportunity to serve on a selection board, perhaps it is time the Corps considers a professional development course on how to write and submit reports in the best interest of our Marines. Attaching such a period of instruction to other PME programs like Expeditionary Warfare School, Command and Staff College, all non-resident versions of the same, as well as having a potential mobile training team available are options. There may also be value in HQMC looking at alternative assessment techniques. If you have ever participated in a 360-degree evaluation, you are aware of how eye opening it is. Such an evaluation, for

those who are not familiar, opens the aperture of assessment by placing opportunity to comment on a person's performance in the hands of many, versus the hands of one. An evaluation form is made available to multiple members of the individual's organization, and those members are asked a series of questions that can be curtailed to the organization's needs, which then evaluate the individual within the program. The more participants involved, the more inputs about the individual being assessed—which gives a fuller picture of the individual's strengths and weaknesses. This concept is not to be confused with the old "spear evals" of OCS or squad leader school. Access to such a program as the 360-degree evaluation demonstrates the professionalism and very specific and directed approach it takes.

One way or another, between the concerns regarding timeliness and the additional challenges mentioned previously, it is clear that action is required. Fifty percent delinquency and poorly written reports can have terminal consequences to the future of a Marine. Consider this. Under allocation, our board left promotions on the table, lots

of them. That may have been you, the reader, who failed promotion that year. When we could not find value added in promoting certain Marines, they were not promoted, and slots went unfilled. While there were many potential other factors to why that may have happened, a key factor was that we often had nothing to go on because your FITREPs were not convincing. You may have owned a portion of that, but so did your evaluators.

I heard many senior officers suggest that while our reporting process and promotion boards are not perfect, they are pretty fair and good. That may be so, but since when did Marines rest on "pretty fair and good?" We officers need to re-evaluate what we have to say about our Marines. If we can ask them to potentially place themselves in harm's way, or demonstrate the full measure of devotion by possibly giving the ultimate sacrifice, do we not owe them our best efforts to take care of their careers as long as we are lucky to have these wonderful, self-sacrificing warriors in our ranks?

