

Why the 0203 MOS is Broken

How to fix it and make ground intelligence great again

by 1stLts John H. Boger & Austin J. Dahmer

Young officers at TBS are often drawn to the 0203 ground intelligence officer MOS for what appears to be a unique blend of brains and brawn. They see an opportunity to attend the IOC (Infantry Officer Course) and serve as platoon commanders while also doing interesting and challenging intelligence work. Unfortunately, the harsh reality of 0203 officer assignments often fails to live up to these dreams. A newly-minted 0203 is just as likely to be doing security management at a logistics unit as he is to be leading scout snipers. The current system creates expensive inefficiencies for the Marine Corps, frustrates young officers, and produces intelligence officers who are often ill-prepared for service in a non-infantry unit. The 0203 MOS is too widely spread throughout the Operating Forces to achieve the quality of officer needed to be effective, resulting more often than not in misuse or underemployment. To address this issue, the 0203 MOS should either be reformed, have its manning significantly cut, or be eliminated altogether.

Some historical perspective is necessary to understand the current state of Marine Corps ground intelligence. The 0203 MOS, along with the other company grade intelligence officer MOSs—including 0204: counterintelligence/human source intelligence officer, 0206: signals intelligence/ground electronic warfare officer, and 0207: air intelligence officer—was initially developed as part of the so-called “Van Riper Plan” in 1995. Then-MajGen Paul K. Van Riper, the Director of Intelligence, restructured the Marine Corps intelligence community in the wake of perceived tactical intelligence shortcom-

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Gen Paul K. Van Riper restructured the intelligence community in 1995. (Official Marine Corps photo.)

ings in Operation DESERT STORM.¹ In the implementing document, *ALMAR 100/95, Program to Improve Marine Corps Intelligence*, new ground intelligence officers were directed to be assigned to billets “located within each infantry battalion (scout/sniper platoon commander) and regimental

and division reconnaissance platoons (platoon commanders).² This platoon command time came early in a ground intelligence officer’s career, coupled with the requisite graduation from the IOC (Infantry Officer Course), would provide credibility and practical knowledge when serving as staff officers later on.

In 2017, over two decades removed from the initial implementation of the Van Riper Plan, these directives are not being followed. New 0203s are just as likely to sit on the staff of a logistics or artillery unit as they are to lead scout snipers or reconnaissance Marines. This misallocation frustrates the individual officers, wastes taxpayer dollars through unnecessary and unused training (e.g., IOC and SSULC (Scout Sniper Unit Leaders Course)), and deprives non-infantry units of intelligence officers who are trained in the considerations specific to their mission, be it combat service support, fire support, or otherwise.

At approximately 15 months in the most efficient scenario, 0203s have the longest pipeline of any ground MOS. Once injuries, on-the-job training, and wait times for schools are factored in, it can take over 18 months to produce a new ground intelligence officer. The erratic nature of contemporary 0203



0203 ground intelligence officers may be scout sniper platoon commanders. (Photo by PFC Abrey Liggins.)

career progression and assignments highlights the need for change to this lengthy process. Too many 0203s currently sit in LCE or non-infantry billets that have no need for the intensive training that they have received. The case of 2ndLt Justin White illustrates this misalignment. After graduating on the Commanding General's honor roll at TBS and at the top of his class at GIOC (Ground Intelligence Officer Course), he received orders to CLR-2 (Combat Logistics Regiment 2), where he served as regimental intelligence officer as a second lieutenant. A year later, 2ndLt White executed PCA (permanent change of assignment) orders to CLB-8 (Combat Logistics Battalion 8) and deployed with SPMAGTF-Crisis Response-Africa.

Lieutenant White and others like him certainly benefited in various ways by serving with the LCE, but the core of MOS credibility for the 0203 is intelligence support to the infantry and ground reconnaissance and surveillance. Unfortunately, Lieutenant White will most likely never be afforded the opportunity to practice his MOS as it was intended. His path is not unique, and at least he was fortunate to have a deployment opportunity. We could relate countless cases of other ground intelligence officers with volatile lieu-

tenancies, all competing for operational experience, a coveted Sea Service Deployment Ribbon, and the holy grail of the 0203 community: platoon command at an infantry or reconnaissance battalion. We consider ourselves lucky to have deployed as platoon commanders but also have the perspective of lieutenants who are currently serving as staff officers in captain's billets. Having seen both sides of the coin, we firmly believe that a standardization of the process is required to create a more effective product.

Although historical total force structure data is not available before fiscal year 2009, we believe that the number of active duty 0203 billets in the first years of the implementation of the Van Riper Plan was around 35 to 40 based on our research. In the 20-plus years since, the number of billets for active duty 0203 lieutenants has grown by roughly 265 percent to 146, this despite a net reduction in the number of infantry battalions over this time frame.³ Of the 146 billets on the current fiscal year 2017 tables of organization, 111 are in the Marine divisions. The other 35 billets are in intelligence battalions and Marine logistics groups. Of these 111, 64 are in infantry or reconnaissance battalions, and just 40 of those are scout sniper or reconnaissance platoon commander billets.⁴

With at most 27 percent of current billets (40 of 146) aligning with the original Van Riper Plan directives, the Marine Corps needs to reassess its requirement for officers with the training that the ground intelligence officer pipeline provides. Does the intelligence officer for an amphibious assault battalion really need to be a graduate of the IOC, and why should the intelligence officer for a transportation support battalion require training in scout sniper and reconnaissance unit employment?

Matthew Collins, a former ground intelligence officer who served with 2d Reconnaissance Battalion, the British Army, and the Defense Intelligence Agency, wrote about this phenomenon in these pages in 2006:

With too many lieutenants competing for too few command positions, new positions were created ... Since many of these units are not employed en masse as maneuver units, few staff officers knew what to do with these lieutenants. Instead of gaining operational experience and credibility, they were put in a lengthy holding pattern waiting for platoon commands and occupying their time with the many collateral duties with which they were often saddled. Many made captain having never commanded anything.⁵

Little seems to have changed in the decade since Capt Collins composed his article. When managing the assignment of intelligence officers to the Operating Forces, 0203s are not necessarily the right fit for a non-infantry ground unit just because "ground" is in their MOS title. There are several reasons for this. Not only are these ground intelligence officers not employed in accordance with their capabilities, but supporting units are also not well-served by having an intelligence officer with little to no understanding of the functions or operations of their respective units.⁶ Then-Capt Gregory McSween described this frustration in a 2009 Command and Staff College thesis. He noted that

a disconnect exists between the type of GCE-focused training that 0203s receive, and the type of tasks they will be required to perform once assigned to the LCE ... Associated LCE intelligence tasks include conducting



The 0203 should be employed solely in infantry units. (Photo by Cpl Timothy Valero.)

route studies and trafficability analysis. Training for one task, then being expected to perform another is illogical. Conversely, should a Marine trained in ‘logistics intelligence’ then be placed in a unit whose mission required him to employ snipers, gather information on the enemy, and lead Marines in combat, problems would arise.⁷

We would extend this analogy further to include ground combat arms units other than infantry or reconnaissance battalions, such as artillery, combat engineer, assault amphibian, tank, and light armored reconnaissance units.

The necessity of any intelligence officer at most of these units is debatable, with the possible exception of armor (tank and light armored reconnaissance) and potentially artillery units, as they could be employed as independent maneuver units. Many non-infantry units recognize this fact and assign a glut of collateral duties or even other primary billets, like headquarters company executive officer, to their 0203s. As a result, ground intelligence officers in most non-infantry units are overqualified at best and irrelevant at worst.

Coupled with attrition at IOC, the proliferation of 0203 lieutenant billets in the Operating Forces, has led to a manpower challenge in the MOS. As of 1 February, 0203 lieutenants are at 70 percent of target inventory, according

to the MAC-2331 website (02XX and 2602 company grade/warrant officer monitor). Contrast this with 97 percent for 0204s, 82 percent for 0206s, 78 percent for 0207s, and 85 percent for 0202 captains.⁸ We believe that the issue stems from both the challenging pipeline and career retention. The 0203 MOS requires an officer with both the physical ability to graduate from IOC as well as the mental aptitude to pass the rigorous GIOC curriculum. Additionally, the type of officer who gravitates to the MOS typically wants to put their extensive training in infantry tactics,

... the current 0203 pipeline causes significant delays and attrition ...

reconnaissance, surveillance, and intelligence to good use. The Marine Corps currently fails to properly employ many of these officers in accordance with their capabilities, resulting in widespread frustration by the individual and a diminished product for the units to which they are assigned. While we do not have access to career designation acceptance rates specific to our MOS, the enduring presence of the 0203 and

0202 MOSs on officer retention board precepts, calling specific attention to these MOSs for “due consideration” on the return to active duty sub-board, indicates a structural issue. Additionally, anecdotal evidence suggests that many young 0203s are voting with their feet and declining to remain in the Marine Corps, further contributing to manning issues.

In order to combat these challenges, we contend that the Marine Corps must reform the MOS or consider the nuclear option of eliminating it entirely. A return to the spirit of the Van Riper Plan—making ground intelligence great again—offers what we believe to be the best way forward. This would entail a decrease in the number of 0203s produced, with a higher quality product to be solely employed in infantry units. Additionally, young 0203s would have the opportunity to screen for duty with the reconnaissance battalions. Ultimately, these would be the only two places in the Marine Corps that 0203s could serve.

The other billets currently held by 0203s might then be replaced by a new intelligence MOS altogether. Such “military intelligence officers” would only attend an intelligence MOS school such as GIOC, which could be amended or broadened to include logistics, artillery, and armor considerations. These officers then would serve with non-infantry ground units and could effectively be assigned as junior MAGTF intelligence officers.

While deeply unappealing to us as proud members of the ground intelligence officer “tribe,” eliminating the MOS offers the Marine Corps a time and money saving way to streamline the intelligence officer community. As we have previously discussed, the current 0203 pipeline causes significant delays and attrition and produces officers with training that often does not align with their employment. Given this, 0203s might be replaced wholesale by the previously discussed military intelligence MOS. Scout sniper platoons could be commanded by senior 0302 lieutenants who attend SSULC, much as the other weapons company platoon commanders attend advanced training such as

the Army's Cavalry Leaders Course or Mortar Leaders Course.

The Marine Corps Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance Enterprise⁹ faces substantial challenges, and 0203 satisfaction and retention is far from being most significant. The situation we have discussed, however, is relatively low-hanging fruit and could be easily remedied with negligible time and monetary expenditure. Whether the answer lies in shrinking and refocusing the MOS, creating a new pipeline for service in non-infantry units, or executing the nuclear option of doing away with 0203s altogether, the Marine Corps is well-equipped to solve this issue and make ground intelligence great again.

Note

1. MajGen Paul Van Riper, "Observations During Operation Desert Storm," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 1991), 55.
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 100/95, Program to Improve Marine Corps Intelligence*, (Washington, DC: 24 March 1995).
3. Twenty-five infantry battalions (including 1/9) grew to 27 (as 9th Marines was reactivated with 2/9 and 3/9) at the height of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They have since declined to 24.
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Total Force Structure Management System*, (Washington, DC), available at <https://tfsms.mceits.usmc.mil>.
5. Capt Matthew Collins, "Beyond the Van Riper Plan," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: October 2006), 24–25.

6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines*, (Washington, DC: 2016).

7. Gregory McSween. "A Misallocation of Resources: Assigning Second Lieutenant 0203s to the Logistics Combat Element (LCE)," (Quantico VA: thesis, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2009), 12.

8. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MAC 2331 (02XX and 2602)*, (Washington, DC: Manpower and Reserve Affairs, 11 January 2017), available at <https://www.manpower.usmc.mil>.

9. The Marine Corps Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance Enterprise here is not referring to a specific publication, such as the *MCISRE Roadmap* or *MCISRE Plan 2015-2020*, but rather to the enterprise itself. More information available at <http://hqmc.marines.mil/intelligence>.



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