

# Does He Qualify?

“OF COURSE I’M READY FOR THAT PROMOTION! As a matter of fact I think that I’ve been stagnating for the last two years and they owe this one to me for faithful service during inflation.”

There is no doubt that at the present time those words represent the mental processes of any Marine officer who might find himself listed as among those selected for promotion to the next higher rank. The very word “selected” implies that the selectee has been found qualified. That

the fortunate officer thus picked for promotion considers himself qualified, no one would dispute. But does Headquarters, Marine Corps, know it? Ah, there’s the rub! They don’t—not for sure, anyway. And so for peacetime purposes, at least within the memory of many a living Marine officer, the ordeal of promotion examinations was instituted so that Headquarters *could* make sure.

This article proposes to examine, first, the necessity for promotion examinations and, second, the scope of such examinations if they are deemed necessary. It is believed that a couple of examples will serve to set the pace and illustrate why the old pre-war system needs overhauling.

First example:—The scene is San Diego and promotion examinations for the step up to first lieutenant are in progress. (The year is not important—suffice it to say that it was when second lieutenants saluted and said “sir” to first lieutenants.) The writer is a sweating participant in this test. He is currently involved in the “Administration Examination” for which he has been warned by official orders that he is not allowed to use any books or papers but is held responsible for a knowledge of the contents of the Marine Corps Manual, Navy Regulations, Uniform Regulations, Circular Letters, and Marine Corps Orders. He draws from the sealed envelope a slip

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asking for a complete exposition on the subject of the regulations regarding payrolls aboard ship. It so happens that this information is contained in a chapter of the Marine Corps Manual which an official letter received prior to the examination had euphemistically stated was to be conned for “general knowledge” only. The struggle continues. Over fifty men (or is that the governing number?) aboard ship for less than ninety days is one thing; under fifty men aboard ship for over fifty (or is it ninety) days is something

else. Or is it vice versa? Or are these the correct figures in the first place? At any rate the answer is hopelessly botched—a complete bust.

Was the writer “qualified” in respect to the preparation of muster rolls at sea? Apparently not—yet, some years later on sea duty where the question came up every month it was a simple matter to refer to the Marine Corps Manual to check the regulations—or rather to check the first sergeant, who had looked it up in the first place before ever sending the payroll in to the “skipper” for signature. The point is that the answer to any question based on regulations contained in a standard text which will always be available to every officer (except on the morning of the promotion examination) is certainly no test of that officer’s fitness for promotion. If he knows the answer, what does it prove? Perhaps that he would make a good first sergeant.

As an anticlimax to this episode it might be mentioned that although the answer described above was worth a complete “swab,” it was balanced by the correct answer to this question—a real toughie—“What is the regulation length of an enlisted man’s haircut?” Did knowing the answer to this prove fitness to advance one grade? I leave it to the reader.

The examination just referred to was by no

**Promotion examinations are necessary—not the administrative type, but thorough tests of skill in the practical handling of troops, supplies, and weapons. These examinations should test ability of officers to command in the field, not garrison**

means the only one. The list of subjects also included "Strategy and Tactics." Here we get to the meat of the military man's profession. If there was ever a subject about which a Marine officer should know the answers to prove qualified for promotion—this was it. And this leads to the second example. For there was a joker—contained in a footnote which explained that if an officer had completed Basic School or had been an instructor or student at any one of a number of service schools, he was exempt. For example, in this same examination mentioned earlier, the author was exempt from being tested on his knowledge of tactics because he had successfully completed Basic School by means of a correspondence course. On the other hand, a classmate who failed to finish this course within the prescribed time was made to take this test. As far as could be ascertained, he was probably the only Marine officer of his day who had ever taken such a test! Incidentally, it consisted principally of maneuvering a squad or two about in the formations of extended order drill on the parade ground of a Navy Yard.

It can be seen that that examination was more of a punishment than a true test of fitness for promotion. As a matter of fact it should be a *privilege*, not a punishment, to take and pass a real tactics examination and thus qualify for promotion and the next higher command.

This last example illustrates another important point—promotion examinations should test the ability of the individual to command in war time—not to administer a garrison detachment in peacetime.

¶ PERHAPS the immediate reaction to the above examples is that this is a different age—we don't need such promotion examinations now. Don't we have fitness reports and selection boards? The answer is that we do, but the perfect fitness report form and the perfect reporting senior have yet to be devised. However, fitness reports are all that selection boards have available to enable them to make their decisions. It becomes obvious that under this system it is possible for officers who make a career of doing nothing—nothing bad and nothing outstanding—and avoiding controversies, honest expressions of opinion, and the difficult job of making decisions—to be promoted whether they are qualified or not. The able, but outspoken, officer who has perhaps hit the jackpot several times but has also been wrong once or twice and reprimanded,

may be passed over in favor of the officer who has never done anything positive—hence nothing wrong—in his life. It is not claimed that this is occurring, or has occurred—but it *could* happen, which is the important thing. While it is not maintained that proper promotion examinations can entirely correct this possible evil, certainly such examinations of the proper scope can do much to alleviate the situation. A further beneficial effect of such tests would be that it would force each officer selected for promotion to study the given subjects. In fact, this was the principal recommendation for the old type promotion exam—it forced the officers to study administration, Naval law, ordnance, and kindred subjects. But we have grown up now. Officers must be ready, in this fast-moving age, to be always ready for combat and to assume command and staff positions from Battalion up to Corps and even Expeditionary Troops. To face such a prospect officers must be qualified, through the medium of proper promotion examinations, to perform the command and staff duties of their rank, and even of the next higher rank, in combat organizations. This means that such examinations must test the officer's ability to perform these staff and command functions in combat, not his excellence in checking muster rolls in peacetime detachments. And it further shows that such examinations are necessary, else how, in peace, are we ever to know that any particular officer is qualified for these duties?

It is believed for these reasons that promotion examinations are necessary. It remains to examine the subject matter required in order to obtain the objective we have set for such examinations.

It is not proposed here to go into the details of all the various subjects, but rather to explore and state the principles and most important subjects upon which such examination should be based. Perhaps a good point of departure is to repeat a principle given earlier and show what should *not* be included: namely, those subjects of a purely administrative and routine nature whose tenets are a matter of reference and leisurely reflection such as Naval law, administration, ordnance, etc. Examinations in these subjects should normally take place in service schools.

What, then, shall we include? Another principle stated earlier helps us here—the examination should test the ability of the officer concerned to perform staff and command duties in

a combat organization in time of war or battle.

To implement these general statements we need a few concrete subjects. The old "Strategy and Tactics" leaps to the mind. Granting that the Commandant should be a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and thus versed in strategy, it is not suggested that he be given an examination in this subject. However, the Commandant is just about the only Marine officer who does have to be a strategist, and it is submitted that practically all other officers act as part of an attack force in an amphibious operation and hence are required to know tactics, not strategy. It is believed that the most important single examination should be in that subject—tactics—and that there should be *no* exemptions for any cause. The test should be mainly in the field, with troops, and involve some situations requiring decisions, as well as others requiring the application of tactical principles to outlined situations in which the decision is already made and the test is one of execution. Officers not already serving with Fleet Marine Force units could be ordered to the nearest one for this purpose. This test in tactics will thus embrace certain elements of a test in command and leadership as well. In addition, questions concerning staff functioning can be worked into the situation. Thus a comprehensive examination covering tactics, leadership, and staff functioning could be given, both in written form and in practical form in the field. Furthermore (taking our life in our hands), it is believed that examinations, at least in written form should be given for promotion up to the rank of major general. Up to colonel was the limit in the old days but the fact remains that general officers, and general officers only, command our basic unit of combined arms—the Marine Division—and promotion examinations should cover this fact.

For the above reasons it is believed that the principal examinations should be in tactics, and command and staff functioning, embracing requirements demanding both field and classroom work.

¶ THESE subjects are important. Equally important is leadership. Can ability to lead be determined by examination? Other than the examination of war itself, the answer must be no. Failures in leadership stem from a lack of moral or physical courage, not from ignorance of the principles which are clearly expressed in many books and manuals. It is believed that qualifica-

tion in this field must be left to the fitness report and to the secondary results of the field examination in tactics described above.

¶ SO FAR we have only two principal subjects to offer: tactics, and command and staff functioning. However, these two subjects alone will permit examinations of almost any length and scope desired. Offensive tactics, defensive tactics, amphibious operations, training, motor movements, security, shore party—the list is endless and these are but a few of the detailed subjects which might be used and with which every officer should be familiar to be qualified for promotion. In addition, if it is considered that there is merit in testing the proficiency of officers in certain subjects in which a working everyday knowledge is required, even though there may be few specific applications of these routine subjects in combat, such examinations could be included. The suggestion in this case is to use such as are deemed desirable but to pattern the examination after the old probationary examinations—namely, to provide the references to the officer during the test and to place the emphasis on the time required to find the correct answers in that reference. Thus no premium is placed upon ability to memorize such texts as the Marine Corps Manual—a futile task at best, but one which was formerly required of all aspiring applicants for the next higher rank.

To arrive at the best solution to the problem of ascertaining the fitness of selected officers for promotion, it is submitted that the weight of any professional examination must be on the tactical side, not the administrative side, and that these tests must be stringent, with failure to advance, not reexamination, the penalty for not passing the examination. (In connection with the above it should be noted that "tactics" should be construed to include problems of logistics, personnel, etc., and is not to be given its narrow schoolbook definition.)

This is the day of a Marine Corps prepared to operate in terms of divisions—not "jury-rig" detachments. We must have officers who measure up to the new standards. There is no room in this Marine Corps for deadwood. An adequate and comprehensive, yet realistic, system of promotion examinations will help to furnish a young, alert, professionally qualified officer group attuned to operate in the outfit that is "First to Fight."

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