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NOT  
UNSATIS-  
FACTORY  
BELOW  
AVERAGE  
ABOVE  
EXCEL-  
LENT

**FITNESS**

**REPORTS**

15. TO WHAT DEGREE HAS HE EXHIBITED THE FOLLOWING?

(A) LEADERSHIP, DEDICATION AND DUTY TO THE SERVICE  
 (B) MILITARY BEARING AND NEATNESS (DRESS)  
 (C) ATTITUDE TO DUTY, DEDICATION, DUTY TO THE SERVICE  
 (D) COOPERATION WITH OTHERS  
 (E) INITIATIVE, THE ABILITY TO MAKE DECISIONS  
 (F) JUDGMENT, THE ABILITY TO JUDGE SITUATIONS AND MAKE DECISIONS  
 (G) PRESENCE OF MIND (ABILITY TO JUDGE AND DECIDE IN AN EMERGENCY)  
 (H) PRACTICALLY UNIFORM AGREEMENT WITH STAFF AND SUBORDINATES  
 (I) MAINTAINING DUE CONTROL AND INFLUENCE OVER SUBORDINATES AND STAFF  
 (J) LOYALTY TO THE MARINE CORPS, MARINE CORPS LEADERSHIP AND MARINE CORPS TRADITIONS  
 (K) PERSONAL RELATIONS (Ability for establishing and maintaining cordial relations with military and civilian superiors)  
 (L) ECONOMY IN MANAGEMENT (Efficient utilization of men, money and materials)

16. Considering the possible requirements of service in war, indicate your attitude toward having this officer under your command.

Would you—

NOT OBSERVED       PREFER NOT TO HAVE!       BE WILLING TO HAVE!

17. Indicate your estimate of this officer's "General Value to the Service" by marking "X" in the appropriate space below.

SECTION D (To be completed by reporting senior.) (This space must not be left blank.) Received in this space a concise appraisal of the professional character of the officer reported on.

NOT OBSERVED	UNSATISFACTORY	BELOW AVERAGE	AVERAGE	ABOVE AVERAGE	EXCELLENT	OUTSTANDING
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BE GLAD TO HAVE!

*See attached sheet for more complete evaluation of this officer*

**ONLY A GENIUS NEED APPLY!**

We would be rather startled to read such an admonition applied to Marine officer procurement; yet, were an outsider privileged to read Marine officer fitness reports, he would swear that the statement is true. According to these reports, almost everyone is "Excellent," or "Excellent to Outstanding!" A few are merely "Above Average!" Merely above average! A moment's thought will tell us that the great bulk of officers in any particular group must be average when compared with each other. To say otherwise is an obvious contradiction in terms. Yet we find that no Marine officer (or only a few, perhaps, of the very worst grade) are "average." Something should be done about this state of affairs; but before we discuss possible solutions, let us look at some pertinent background facts.

Fitness reports on Marine officers have one primary purpose as I see it. That *raison d'être* is to provide a basis for selection of officers for promotion. The fact that they also provide a running account of the officer's performance of duty makes for a complete record on each individual and is of great assistance in assignment to duty; nevertheless, these functions are secondary.

If we agree that the fitness reports must provide a basis for selection for promotion, we next ask what is required to accomplish this objective. Obviously, the report must show an evaluation of current performance of duty, must describe the

character of the individual, and must give an appreciation of growth and promotion potential. The present fitness report provides a means of doing this.

This sounds very simple and uncomplicated; why, then, cannot each reporting senior simply mark down his judgments in accordance with the written directions for making out fitness reports? Primarily because the making out of the fitness report is a subjective process. It is unavoidable that the report is compounded of two ingredients, the characteristics of the person marked and the judgments, biases and enthusiasms of the marking senior. It is also a fact that unit loyalty and the ingrained leadership trait of loyalty to one's subordinates will in almost every case force a commanding officer to believe that his outfit is the best and that his officers are

**By Col R. E. Cushman, Jr.**

the finest. And, of course, we want hard chargers who are bursting with enthusiasm and pride in their unit and their officers. That is the only way to command a unit if it is to win battles. Furthermore, it is human nature to start each officer out at the top level and only lower his marking when he really goofs off. This forms sort of an equivalent, in the fitness-report field, to the precept that each man is considered innocent until proven guilty. On the other hand, ideally every officer should start out being considered average when he reports in to a new senior and then be lowered or raised in accordance with his demonstrated performance. To sum up then, we are faced with the problem that desirable leadership attributes in our commanding officers make it difficult for them to be objective and produce the undesirable byproduct of fitness reports indicating that about 90 per cent of all officers are in the upper 10 per cent of their group—a manifest absurdity.

This leads us to a more detailed consideration of our present difficulties. It can readily be seen that this continuing shift of marks into the upper part of the scale has very bad end results. First, of course, is the fact that almost everyone is at the top and that this poses an almost impossible task for selection boards. They can pick out the very few that have straight "Outstanding." They find it is easy to spot the few who have had disciplinary action or very low fitness reports. At that point the boards probably find that perhaps 90 per cent of all the group is left, and they are all marked "Excellent," and the boards have to select a portion of these and pass over a portion. Solomon himself could not separate sheep from goats when all bear the same outward marking. Personal knowledge by members of the board may work in the rarified atmosphere of selecting a few colonels for general officer rank, but it cannot substitute for adequate fitness report markings when the selection involves scores or hundreds, as in the lower ranks.

Second, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that reporting seniors soon become aware of the artificially high markings in vogue and know that to mark an officer

literally, in accordance with the directions and the actual meanings of the rating words, is to sign his death warrant. When everyone else is getting "Excellent," it becomes a real blow to mark a man as "Above average." Yet according to the literal meaning of the words, the phrase "Above Average" constitutes a kudo and ought to be received with pride! As a consequence, even those reporting seniors who are aware of the trouble and would like to correct it, dare not, lest they injure some fine subordinate officer.

Third, as more and more markings are crowded into the upper bracket, it becomes impossible for the marking senior to differentiate between his officers. On a small scale, he runs into the same difficulty the selection boards have on a big scale. I am afraid that, faced by this problem, a good many marking officers tend to take the easy way out. Just mark good old Joe Blow straight "Excellent." And John Doe? Well, actually, he is just a shade better than Blow, but since it cannot be shown on the fitness report—why, just mark him straight "Excellent," too. Finally, the feeling grows up that paragraphs 16 and 17 of the fitness report (those portions to be marked with an "x" to show performance of duty and character traits) are useless. This puts the load on Section D to actually differentiate between officers to any degree at all. Section D is the portion which is to be filled in by written description. I fully believe that this part of the report is now carrying the *whole* load; that selection boards probably rely almost exclusively upon it. (I am guessing, never having been on a board, but logic indicates it could not be otherwise.) Yet it is a space of only 2 x 8 inches, and the writing must be by hand. This is the medium through which the destiny of each officer is decided!

Finally, among the troubles encountered with the present report is the fact that it is almost impossible to evaluate the *marker*. As mentioned earlier, one of the two important ingredients of the report is the subjective feeling of the reporting senior. Some are "tough" markers, some are "easy." In earlier days in the Corps, members of selection boards knew the reporting seniors,

and of their own knowledge had the tough and easy ones tabbed. They could compensate accordingly. And, of course, this compensation *must be made*. For if officers are in competition with each other for promotion, great injustice can result if the standards of the marking seniors are not equated. Now, what method of marking gives no inkling of the feelings of the marker? The check off list where the marker simply checks opposite words which approximate his judgment of the junior. Yet this is the system used for paragraphs 16 and 17—the bulk of our fitness report. The only way in which one can obtain an insight into the mental processes of the marker is to read his written word. Only the pitifully small Section D now provides this opportunity.

There is another problem sometimes encountered in marking which I would like to mention. The process of evaluation is inherently one of comparison. The question is, comparison with whom? Obviously it must be with officers of the individual's rank, approximate time in grade, and, in some respects, functional field. But is this comparison to be with those officers whom the reporting senior knows throughout the Corps, with just those in his own command, or with some hypothetical ideal? I think that the answer is, it must be the first and last of these. We all have formulated our opinions of what an ideal Marine officer should be, particularly with respect to those leadership and character traits that are common to all good officers of whatever rank. This opinion is bound to be mixed up inextricably with our comparison of any particular officer to all of those in his group whom we know within the Corps. We must avoid, I feel, restricting our comparison solely to those officers of the same group within the reporting senior's command except in special cases such as the marking of students. To do so means that we will have too small a group for good comparison; in a small group of only 3 or 4 officers, for example, it is easily possible that all might be way above or way below average. Comparison just within this small group would result in distorted markings. This may seem obvious, but I have heard the oppo-

site seriously argued: that the *only* comparison which should be made is with the officer's immediate colleagues in the reporting senior's command!

And now the question is—what should be done about all this? My remedy is relatively simple and can be put into effect by each marking senior on his own initiative.

First, Section D should be greatly expanded. I believe that Headquarters, Marine Corps, should require that a 300-500 word description be written about each officer reported on. This amounts to between one and 2 pages of double-spaced typewriting. Is this too much to ask of a reporting senior; that he devote this much attention to what is one of the most vital functions of any senior officer—and to what is the most vital concern of each individual reported on? In lieu of a new form, or a requirement by HQMC, I know of nothing to prevent this enlargement of Section D by the simple expedient of attaching the expanded remarks. It seems to me that this suggestion is worth serious consideration by all commanding officers.

Second, instead of the very few little boxes now available for checking off words which represent the marking officer's judgment, there should be a scale of at least 25 gradations reaching from "Unsatisfactory" through "Outstanding" (it is not necessary to have degrees of failure so the scale need not extend through "Unsatisfactory"). It will then be possible to differentiate among officers in a command who would appear to be exactly the same if marked

in accordance with the present system. Once again, in lieu of a new form, there seems to be no reason a marking senior cannot place his markings in the squares as though a scale were there and state in a note in the space between paragraphs 16 and 17 that he has done so. It is strongly recommended, however, that a new form be devised with more width allotted to the space for these markings and a scale printed across it.

Third and last, I believe that HQMC should periodically re-emphasize that fitness reports are to be marked literally and redirect attention to the literal meanings of the descriptive words employed, and order that they be used accordingly. It would help greatly if the meanings of these words were placed upon the fitness report form itself; at present, one must refer to the PRAM to review these definitions. How many of us do that faithfully each time we make our fitness reports? If we did, we would find this meaning given for "Excellent," in which category I am convinced most officers are placed: "Exceptionally efficient; qualified to a degree *seldom achieved by others in his grade.*" (Italics are mine.) And here is what is said about "Above Average," a category which now induces despair among officers so marked: "Highly qualified and efficient."

Here again each marking officer can do something on his own. He must not let loyalty to his subordinates and unit transcend loyalty to the Marine Corps as a whole. His day-to-day enthusiasm for his sub-

ordinates must be transformed at fitness report time into a painstaking evaluation on as objective a basis as possible. I recommend that he mark his fitness reports literally and append a statement to the effect that this has been done, emphasizing it by quoting the approved definition of the word used to describe the officer's "General Value to the Service" (paragraph 19 of the form). Complete the statement by requesting that markings be equated as appropriate. For example:

"I have marked this officer in the full literal sense of the instructions in paragraph 3018, PRAM, and find his 'General Value to the Service' to be 'Excellent,' meaning 'Exceptionally efficient; qualified to a degree seldom achieved by others in his grade.' I have carefully weighed this marking. It should be considered in equating these marks with those of others."

I believe that this statement, coupled with a sincere and lengthy written appreciation of the officer, would not only protect his interests but would single him out and place him *above* the unfortunate officers who have all received a straight "Excellent" by a reporting senior who has fallen into the present strait jacket method.

While my statistics are strictly guesswork, I truly believe that we must do something along the lines recommended above if we are to prevent our fitness reports from becoming meaningless, risking the morale of those being marked—and that includes all of us!

USMC



### Medal Miscellany

As a GEM AMONG LITTLE KNOWN FACTS about our US decorations, the now extinct *Military and Naval Digest* of March 1937 had this interesting item under "Professional Notes."

#### PURPLE HEART AUTHORIZED FOR CCC

"Recently published changes to AR600-45 provided eligibility to officers and enlisted men who have served, or are serving with the Civilian Conservation Corps for award of the Purple Heart and Soldiers' Medal. Under War Department interpretation, the Purple Heart decoration will be considered as a junior Distinguished Service Medal and will be awarded for distinguished service in time of peace or war. The Soldiers' Medal will be awarded for outstanding acts of heroism on the part of military personnel not in actual conflict with the enemy."

The next month, this same magazine had this in print on the same subject:

#### PURPLE HEART

"In response to a protest by the World War veterans who are holders of the Purple Heart, the War Department has announced that the recently published changes to AR600-45 which provided eligibility to officers and enlisted men who have served or are serving with the Civilian Conservation Corps will be rescinded. As this action will leave the Army without a junior Distinguished Service Award, which has been considered desirable, it is probable that a study will be made of a new decoration to fill the need."

Col H. Nickerson, Jr.

(The GAZETTE will pay \$10.00 for each anecdote published. Submissions should be short and pointed.)