

COMMENTARY

We Were All Once Captains

by Gen James L. Jones

' . . . strength of character does not consist solely in having powerful feelings, but in maintaining one's balance in spite of them.'

—MajGen Carl von Clausewitz, On War

It is refreshing to read the focused dialogue that is taking place in many of our professional journals. In recent issues of the *Gazette* I've followed closely the discussions on leadership, force structure, doctrinal changes, and various other topics that relate to our warfighting readiness or our Service culture. Many offer insightful viewpoints while others propose innovative solutions to problems—real or perceived. In every case these articles are proof positive that good ideas do, in fact, come from the bottom up. We should salute these collective efforts to draw attention to these matters by fueling the debates with original ideas. Debates that result from differing perspectives are healthy for our Corps and should always be welcome.

Among the many themes currently being discussed, those relating to manpower understandably attract a large part of our interest. Because manpower issues and policies directly affect us all, it is important that perceptions and facts should be periodically adjusted. This is particularly true if we want to help Marines make good decisions. With this thought in mind, I address this article to the leaders of tomorrow's Marine Corps—our captains. More than at any other rank, the captain holds the key to our future in his, or her, hands. For this reason, and because this rank is where intensely personal decisions regarding making the Corps a career are made, I want to add my voice to those who want to assist our company grade officers in making informed career decisions. I



do so in the context of my own experiences, as well as those of my Basic School (TBS 5-67) classmates.

Perception vs. Reality

While the subject of officer retention in each of the Services has recently captured national attention, it has for some time been a topic of conversation in ready rooms, wardrooms, and officer's clubs throughout our Corps. There may exist a sense that our Corps is also experiencing a "mass exodus" of company grade officers and that, as a result, we also are being forced to augment and promote less qualified officers to meet our staffing goals. Consequently, as the perception goes, by retaining and advancing "unseasoned" officers, we may be encouraging mediocrity and degrading the overall leadership quality in the officer ranks. While this may be the perception, the reality is, in fact, quite different.

We are not experiencing a mass exodus at any rank—to include that of our company grade. The mere existence of such perceptions, however, can be just as debilitating to the health of our Corps as though the perceived conditions actually existed. Yes, there are some technical MOS [military occupational specialty] groups that have had higher turnover than desired but, in the main, we are adequately staffed to meet our mission, and the quality of our officer corps—especially within our company grade—remains strong and vibrant. Some recent changes in our manpower policies will ensure that this will remain the case.

Recent Manpower Policy Changes

The enactment of legislation conferring reserve officer status to graduates of Service academies and NROTC [Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps] programs has influenced how many of us perceive the augmentation rates in the Marine Corps. It is important to understand that the resultant increase in the percentage of officers being selected for augmentation is not tied to any "exodus" of junior officers, but rather to recent steps required for the Corps to be in compliance with DOPMA (Defense Officer Personnel Management Act) grade table relief requirements. We are all very proud of the quality and numbers of company grade officers who decide to remain on active duty. The selection rates of our promotion boards are positive proof that we are doing things correctly in this regard.

In 1995 we requested temporary increases to our field grade officer end strength authorizations in order to meet increasing joint and external staffing requirements. In 1998 we received a permanent addition of 801 field grade authorizations. This increased both promotion opportunities and augmentation requirements. Even if the voluntary attrition rate were to be reduced to the level of our lowest attrition years, we would still need to augment and eventually promote more company grade officers than we have in the past. Yet, despite this increase, our "fill-rate" for both joint and external billets remains at less than 90 percent.

With regard to advancement, equity issues, not officer attrition, justifies our migration to the requirement for a "fully qualified" criterion for the captain selection board. Under the previous criterion of "best and fully qualified," lieutenants historically had a 95 percent selection opportunity. Under the new fully qualified criterion—which does *not* dictate 100 percent selection—the selection rates are only slightly higher. In any case, only those officers who meet the standard, as evidenced by their performance, are advanced in grade. This change to the captain selection process was also prompted by the fact that the presidents of three previous captain selection boards have each stated that, had they been allowed, their boards would have selected additional captains. This is reflective of the talent and high caliber resident in our pool of lieutenants.

Lastly, in combining the promotion and augmentation boards, we reduce the number of "selection knotholes" through which we have increasingly required our officer corps to pass. The sheer number of selection boards has tilted us unnecessarily toward a "have/have not" culture in our officer corps. In turn, this gives rise to perceptions of exclusion at an early stage of one's career. Combining these boards alleviates some of the anxieties that come from having too many career stress points, and allows our officers to maintain their focus on leading

Marines, accomplishing their mission, and taking care of their families.

We've All Been There

It is said that captain is our best officer rank. I do not dispute this claim. If I could reverse the sands of time, I would willingly be a captain again. We recognize that company grade officers make up one of the Corps' most essential leadership communities. As young officers, all of us experienced circumstances similar to those that confront today's lieutenants and captains. Accordingly, we can—and do—understand the difficult choices facing our company grade officers. "Been there, done that"—to put it in a contemporary phrase.

In the late 1960s, at a similar point in our careers, many of my peers and I struggled with both the times we

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lived in and the difficulty of making a career decision within those times. I recall many of the "perceptions" that were rampant at the time; perceptions that, left unchanged, could have resulted in our making uninformed decisions. One of these was our perception of a "gap" in the communications between our junior and senior officers; sentiments that some may also be experiencing today. However, with history and years of hindsight behind me, I view this as being a fairly constant perception. The challenge for us is how to provide the best and most honest information to all Marines in order to assist them in making decisions based on fact rather than on perceptions, half truths, or rumors.

In 1970, when it came time for my Basic School class to make our career choices, it was my perception, as well as that of my peers, that virtually none of us was "staying in," or "augmenting" as it was then called. The allure of life's promises "on the outside" was

a powerfully tempting force, and the stampede toward the exit was almost irresistible. Peer pressure was very strong. As a result, I almost waited too long before I realized that I was about to make a decision that was not based on the best information available. I was going to leave active duty without fully considering that I was, in fact, thoroughly enjoying what I was doing at the time (commanding a company). Fortunately, some "slightly more senior" officers cared enough to provide me a more complete picture of the facts. I applied for augmentation and shortly after accepting a "regular commission," I was pleased to discover that many of my TBS classmates, scattered throughout the Corps, had also elected to remain on active duty. During the past 30 years, these Marines and their families have become our lifelong friends. We have shared a great adventure together. My wife, Diane, and I are profoundly grateful for the privilege of having been part of the Marine family for as long as we have.

I share this story to illustrate the similarity of key moments in our lives; different times,

same decisions. Most of us have walked down a similar path at one time or another. It is quite apparent that having access to good information is what makes the difference in the decisions that we sometimes make.

I think I have a fairly good perspective from which to judge—not only because of my current position as Commandant, but because of 34 years of hindsight. In the more than three decades that have passed since I was commissioned, I have seen our Corps undergo a series of changes that has enhanced our warfighting readiness and raised the esteem in which our Corps is held by this Nation. During this period, the Corps has been downsized by about 38,000 Marines; we have had to operate within the limits of very constrained budgets; we have weathered divisive racial tensions; and we have endured a drug epidemic that threatened to shred the very fabric of our culture. At any

time during that period, it would have been quite easy for any of us to find a reason to pursue another career. As we know, it has never been, nor is it now, characteristic of Marines to walk away from challenges. So we stuck it out, knowing that the most effective and long-lasting changes are instituted from within. The tides eventually turned due to the strength of will of senior leadership, the unbridled commitment to improvement on the part of our junior officers, and the post-Vietnam resurgence of our staff noncommissioned officer corps.

Over the years, the service of our junior officers has been characterized by the same level of professionalism and dedication to duty that saw us through the difficult period of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, by your extraordinary service, you are making the Corps what it is destined to become in the 21st century. You are indeed our future.

As a direct result of your efforts and commitment, the Marine Corps is secure in its identity, its purpose, and its missions. Leadership at the small unit level remains visionary, committed, and focused. No external factor can detract from our capabilities, and our internal reforms will only increase the level of excellence for which we are already known. Our Corps' reputation is based on proven performance on the battlefield and on a 225-year legacy, both of which are important to the Nation. As a result of the direct influence of junior officers on our enlisted Marines, we remain the best fighting force in the world.

A Very Personal Decision

The future holds great promise for the Corps and you can be a part of it in anyway you choose. When I look toward our future, I am very optimistic. One reason is that we have great Marines who make us all so very proud in all that we do. Another is that we are comprehensively modernizing the Corps with programs that will begin converging in 2008. Today's captains will inherit and lead what, in a very few years, will be the most modern and capable Marine Corps we have ever seen.

In the air, Marines can look forward to flying technologically advanced aircraft such as the V-22 and the Joint Strike Fighter. Additionally, we will "reinvent" the AH-1 and UH-1 gunships with the 4BN/4BW program. Our C-130s will be modernized, as they have been, incrementally and regularly. We will continue

to lead in the development of unmanned aviation technology.

On land, we will field the lightweight 155 howitzer that will shore up our critically deficient ground-based fire support capability. We are now acquiring the HIMARS (high-mobility artillery rocket system) for the 4th Marine Division. We will also improve the equipment carried by the individual Marine, from service rifle to uniform.

At sea, the AAV [advanced amphibious assault vehicle], the LCAC SLEP [service life extension program], the LHD 8, the LPD 17, precision naval fire support from the DD 21, and many other programs currently in existence will give us a uniquely valuable capability for the Nation. Ashore, our bases and stations—the indispensable 5th Element of our MAGTF—will be continuously modernized to reflect our unwavering commitment to our families and to the quality of life for all who live, work, and train aboard our installations.

And in the End . . .

Let me simply conclude by thanking you, our captains, for who you are and what you do for your Corps. You are the vital link between the officer and enlisted ranks, and what you do really does matter. The intent of this article is not to convince you to stay on active duty so much as it is to provide some insights based on "a few years" of experience, and to give you a brief glimpse into the future



Then-Lt Jones and his radio operator, LCpl David Regal, pause for a photograph while serving in the Republic of Vietnam, late 1967.

Photo by Chief David Regal, Chief of Police, Elizabeth, N.J.

direction of the Marine Corps. Further, this article does not aim to suggest that our Corps is a perfect organization; we know that such an ideal is impossible to achieve. It should be, nonetheless, our collective goal, regardless of rank, to make the Corps better today than it was yesterday. Through such commitment we can ensure that tomorrow it will be even better for all of our efforts.

In the final analysis, all that we do comes down to personal choices. Whatever you do in life, all Marines hope that your experience in having worn this proud uniform has been an important part in your development as an individual and as a citizen of this wonderful Nation that we are all privileged to serve. Know that we are all better for your service.

Semper Fidelis.

