

Marine Contracting Officers

Is the current force sufficient to support force development

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The world is changing at a rapid technological pace. This evolution presents complexities to the Marine Corps' organic capabilities, requiring increased commercial reliance. The need to evolve, grow, and adapt has shifted from being the first to react to the first to proactively act, which requires the acquisition of innovative new capabilities to put in the hands of our Nation's warfighters. More specifically, the rapid innovation, invention, and fielding of equipment to support the Marine Corps mission is without responsive and integrated commercial support. Marine Corps acquisition professionals and contracting officers are essential force multipliers to the future fight. However, because of the technical development process and limited number of MOSs, the procurement capability needs to expand and improve to support *Force Design 2030* and the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*. Experienced contracting leaders are constantly discussing the importance of the contracting capability to the Marine Corps future dominance. Is the current force sufficient to support Marine Corps' force development contracting requirements? Are Marine contracting officers worth the fight?

High Demand and Low-Density Community

In 2020, the Government Accountability Office reported that 121 major DOD programs cost \$1.8 trillion.¹ These staggering figures support the need for commercial solutions that require a technically competent workforce to engage industry. The Marine Corps

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possess less than 3,000 in the acquisition and contracting workforce; 438 Military and 1975 Civilians in Marine Corps Systems Command (MARCOR-SYSCOM).² In contrast, the robust acquisition structures of the Air Force and the Army each maintain over 8,000 contracting professionals as well as an established formal contracting and acquisition career progression model.³ In the Army, a captain transitions to an acquisition or contracting career field as their primary MOS. Army officers have the option to focus their career in systems acquisitions or non-acquisition operational contracting billets with a dedicated career path to the rank of colonel. There are opportunities in each Service to achieve the rank of major general as a program executive officer or command billet. This investment is required to maintain a competent acquisition community with a focus development.

Unlike the Army and Marine Corps, individuals can enter the Air Force in a Contracting MOS imme-

diately upon joining the service and spend their career in this field, rather than executing a lateral move from an outside specialty at a higher rank.⁴ The Air Force's acquisition managers provide a second lieutenant the MOS immediately after commissioning and completing initial training.⁵ Air Force acquisition managers and contracting officers (KO) have a dedicated force structure to the rank of colonel with opportunities to serve as program executive officers, with the rank of brigadier general and major general as the Air Force Installation Contracting Center commander.⁶ According to the Marine Corps Installation and Logistics, Head of Contracting Authority, contracting officers must learn their technical skill and repetitively execute contract actions in order to improve their efficiencies.⁷ The comparison with the other services reinforces the necessity for contracting Marines to establish a career path that allows for the continuous development of the contracting skill to best support the Marine Corps from a tactical level.

to an operational level, and even to a strategic level capability. According to USASpending.gov, the Marine Corps obligated just over \$2.9 billion on military construction, contracted supplies and services, asset acquisitions, and procurement appropriation requirements.⁸ The Marine Corps has just under 600 contracting professionals—consisting of civilian and military personnel—to support the increasing commercial requirements.⁹ The high demand for contingency contract support and limited number of military KOs creates a manning shortfall, as more experienced contracting officers are required to support the current structure.

However, there is a dedicated career path for both the enlisted 3044 Operational Contract Support Specialists as well as 8061 Ground Marine acquisition officers. To enter the contracting career field, enlisted Marines submit a lateral-move package as a sergeant. Once selected, 3044 becomes the Marine's primary MOS. Next, they complete two years of on-the-job and Level I Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act training. The Commandant's Career Level Education Board or the Commandant's Professional Intermediate Level Education Board selects officers to attend the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) to complete a Contract Management curriculum and graduate with a Master of Business Administration.

Officers obtain an additional MOS as a 3006. However, no formal career path exists for Marine KOs. There is one 3006 colonel-level billet in the Marine Corps. This, however, has historically been filled by lieutenant colonels. There are currently no colonels in a contracting billet to provide senior leader engagement in the Marine Corps. The contracting officer career progression is necessary for the Marine Corps tactical procurement capability, maintaining this technical skill is worth the fight Marine Corps operations.

Marine KOs must return to their primary MOS to remain competitive for promotion; many never return to the contracting career field following the initial utilization tour. The limitation of the 3006 community is the requirement to remain technically proficient

in contracting and maintain primary MOS creditability essential for lieutenant colonel promotion with peers. The lack of force structure, command opportunities, promotion potential, and career progression deters Marines from serving multiple tours in the MOS 3006 to obtain technical expertise.

Therefore, increasing the awareness of ground acquisition officer opportunities support the Marine Corps' desire to retain a highly qualified diverse talent to support *Force Design 2030*. The operational contract support officer develops unique skills, from developing requirements to engaging multiple key stakeholders. These officers ensure

significantly degrade the operational contracting capability, contracting officer professional development, and the accurate reporting of regulatory requirements.

The cost-benefit analysis (CBA) outlines the resource-intensive nature of the lateral move process for contracting specialists/officers in the Marine Corps. Assigning one sergeant to an infantry battalion ineffectively places that sergeant in a subject matter expert-level position with no operational experience and without completing the required training to obtain a contract writing warrant authority. Furthermore, this construct isolates the sergeant from the

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a mission meets cost, performance, and schedule, oftentimes without the luxury of a contracting warrant. Operational contract support officers also possess the resourcefulness, technical expertise, and leadership needed to continue serving in Marine Corps acquisition programs. Retaining acquisition skills are worth the fight to support development.

Force Design 2030 and the Marine Littoral Regiment

Force Design 2030 will affect the Contracting Officer (3006) and Contracting Specialist (3044) MOSs. This redesign is intended to support and facilitate the new Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) to meet the complex logistical and operational demands of today's environment. In response, the contracting career field Authorized Strength Report is set to increase the number of enlisted KOs, with limited increases to the officer ranks.

One theoretical construct considered is assigning a sergeant 3044 to each infantry battalion. The MLR will then receive one captain and two SNCOs. The overwhelming opinion of the Marine Corps contracting community is that the contracting restructure will

supportive establishment provided by the Expeditionary Contracting Platoon (ECP).

Placing a captain at the Combat Logistics Battalion (CLB) results in the same situation as described above: the captain graduates from NPS and is placed in a subject matter expert-level position with minimal experience and support. The captain and two SNCO's assigned to the MLR lack the reach-back support, experience, leadership, and oversight currently provided by the ECP. The infantry battalion and MLR lack the resident technical expertise to prioritize training and employment of KOs.

The *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* states, "contracting matters must be accounted for at the level of command possessing the required authorities to influence them."¹⁰ The challenge is this regard is to define whether operational command or acquisition authority is appropriate in a given scenario. The result will lead to suboptimal support to operating forces and a degraded contracting capability. The effective management of contracting personnel requires senior leadership and oversight within a dedicated con-

struct, like the Marine Acquisition Officer Career field.

The Marine Corps provides a path for Marines with contracting experience to excel beyond the rank of lieutenant colonel as Marine Ground Acquisition Officers (MOS 8061) and expand their acquisition knowledge beyond contracting. The application process requires Marine Corps field grade officers to submit a package to the MARCORSYSCOM Acquisition Board, in accordance with the annual board message. Lateral move eligibility includes unrestricted officers, less than 24 years of service, 36 months of acquisition experience working in a program office or Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act Level II certification.

The Marine Corps Acquisition Officer has a dedicated force structure and career path to the rank of major general, including command billets, as the MARCORSYSCOM commander (see Figure 1). While force structure, career progression, and opportunities for advancement within the command exist, the Marine Corps acquisition community is not retaining enough officers to prevent manning shortfalls. The acquisition occupational field manager has cited a critical Marine Acquisition Officer Ground Colonel shortage.

The critical gap with the contracting community and the acquisition community is retaining uniformed technical expertise. One solution is to deliberately recruit and mentor operational contract support officers to shape follow-on acquisition assignments. After the completion of 24 months of acquisition experience and level II certification in any career field, Marines with the 3006 Additional MOS are eligible for the Ground Acquisition MOS 8061. Based on Figure 1, career timing is critical to a successful transition. In the past two years, the acquisition board selected five experienced Marine officers with an additional MOS 3006 to the ground acquisition workforce.

Acquisition Facilitation

Operational Contract Support (OCS) is the prime platform that separates the capability of the uniformed KO with civilian counterparts. Accord-



Afghanistan 2010: Capt Young and financial management and engineer officer conduct a construction site survey. (Photo provided by author.)

ing to the Marine Corps Acquisition Policy Procedures supplement, the requirement to provide this level of support is highlighted in the table below.¹¹

The lack of a designated career development path limits the retention of experienced contracting Marines. A focus on dedicated technical development throughout a Marine's career fosters a more educated and trained acquisition community, especially one geared towards creating acquisition professionals with a background in contracting (3006 MOS).

For example, LtCol Young's career path from a ground supply officer (MOS 3002) included two tours billeted as a forward deployed MOS 3006, two non-contracting deployments, and a third 3006 assignment as HQMC OCS Section Head (LPS-4). Based on a mentor's guidance and career counseling, LtCol Young applied for the Marine Ground Acquisition Professional (MOS 8061) Board. She is currently serving with MARCORSYSCOM as a Marine Ground Acquisition Officer assigned to Program Management Office Wargaming Capability. Her path highlights an opportunity for the Marine Corps to leverage the MOS 3006 experience to provide the acquisition community with trained contracting officers. There are currently eight

Marine Ground Acquisition Officers with contingency contracting experience. Each Marine officer career path includes diversity of billets from primary MOS, NPS, and Secondary MOS 3006 assignments.

Col Luis Lara, Program Manager Training Systems, is another example. His career includes the vast experience of a logistics officer (MOS 0402) to his NPS graduation and subsequent contracting billet at Marine Corps Blount Island Command. He deployed in 2005 as a contracting officer before returning to his primary MOS. In 2007, he applied for the Ground Acquisition MOS, and completed the training and certification process as one of the first contracting officers to be certified in the Program Management Competency. Col Lara recommends shaping the contracting officer's career development with continuous acquisition education/training and returning to their primary MOS, before completing a follow-on MOS 3006 tour.¹² The second tour provides health for the MOS 3006 billets, encouraging Marines to support the emerging contingency contracting requirements. This path allows Marine officers to experience diverse billets which will benefit their future selection to Ground Acquisition Community.

Can We Afford Our Recommendations?

Technical Development. Operational Contract Support Officers continually receive educational investment throughout their development. This investment consists of opportunities for various certifications and required continuous educational goals. It is difficult to monetize all costs and benefits of creating a Marine Corps Contracting Officer. The CBA value illustrates the major milestones of the career path. The goal is to provide insight on estimated costs of force structure expansion, to inform Future Force 2030 and surpass critical vulnerabilities in the Contracting Community. The cost of training and maintaining an experienced enlisted KO is upward of \$862,000 (based on a sergeant or above pay scale). The cost of a 3006, Officer KO is \$1,109,000 (based on a progression from first lieutenant).

The baseline assumptions used could be exponentially higher because of additional training and education demands. LtCol Young developed and proposed a career path, featured in Ashley McCabe, Pavenna Ritthaworn, and Darian Wilder's thesis, which served as a guide to create the CBA as seen in Figure 2.¹³

The proposed path requires coordination with the monitor and career timing, with an expectation to excel in every assignment. Francois Melese,

Anke Richter, and Binyam Solomon recognized the difficulty of navigating the political pressures to acknowledge an honest assessment of the CBA's allocative value.¹⁴ It is hard to determine how the acquisition corps can compensate those units who may lose structure due to our force design realignment. However, Contracting is a critical acquisition skill and that all acquisition coded billets at O4-O6 should be managed collectively. Contracting Community needs to identify O5 Acquisition Command billets and competitively source the billets via Marine Corps Acquisition Screening Board process, which M&RA recognizes for Acquisition Command or Command Equivalent. That said, senior Marine Corps leadership recognizes the need for our expansion. In the *National Defense Strategy 2018*, Gen Mattis describes the acquisition as a means, to leverage the scale of our operations to drive greater efficiency in procurement of materiel and services while pursuing opportunities to consolidate and streamline contracts in areas such as logistics, information technology, and support services.¹⁵

Conclusion

The primary recommendation to strengthen the contracting officer career path to align an acquisition development road map, which will align a critically low density MOS with the

appropriate opportunities to develop technical skills coupled with a diverse MOS experiences. This would require coordination with MOS Monitors and MCSC's Ground Acquisition leaders to develop a continuous education path and properly designated career opportunities with contracting, primary MOS, and MOS 3006. The KO's unique skills set is an asset to the Marine Corps, but they currently lack deliberate shaping to support technical development and exploit available assignments.

Second, employ senior OCS Marines operationally via a liaison officer's concept. LtCol Robin Walther suggested the liaison officer's role recognizes that individual contracting Marines assigned to non-contracting units function most effectively as conduits between the supported unit (e.g., an infantry battalion) and the supporting contracting activity (e.g., an ECP) not as a stand-alone contracting officer. In these roles, KOs can leverage the full array of contract and procurement vehicles to support forces.¹⁶ Currently, first tour KO's fill this billet at the Marine Expeditionary Forces. We highly recommend that more experienced KOs fill this billet.

Third, OCS planners must be included during all phases of the planning cycle. This includes Operational Plans, Concept of Operation Plans, and Exercise Planning. Contracting officers are uniquely qualified to identify and fore-

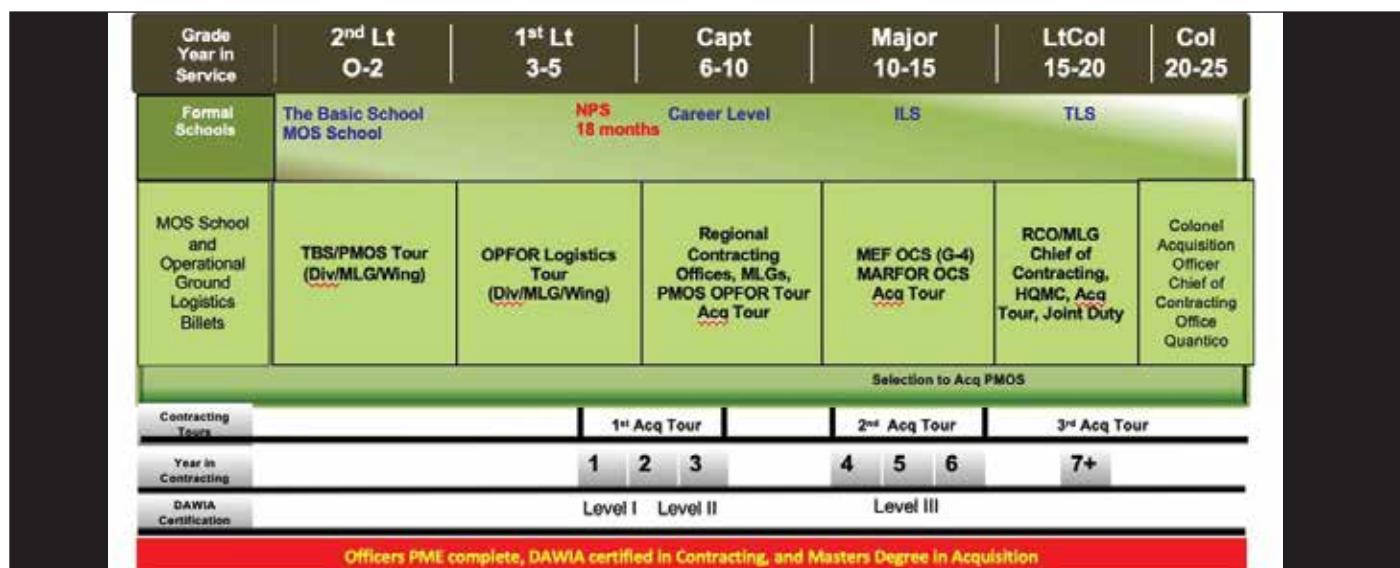
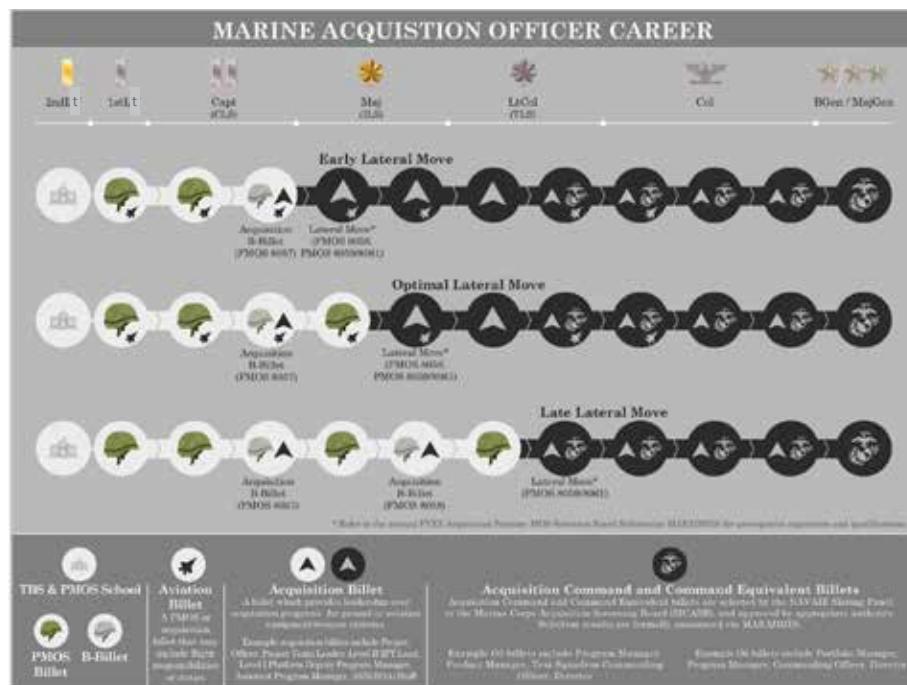


Figure 2. Proposed career path. (Figure provided by author.)



The career path for Acquisition Professionals changes based on when the lateral move into the field occurs. (Image provided by author.)

cast critical vulnerabilities. The OCS planners' ability to assess organic capability gaps, establish business relationships with vendors, and both plan and execute non-organic support pays dividends to a planning cell. The HQMC Installations and Logistics, Director of Contracts, Senior Executive Service Mr. Thompson, espouses that we should use existing resources such as Government Commercial Purchase Card, Field Ordering Officer, Acquisition Crossing Service Agreement, Naval Supply Systems Command, and the Worldwide Expeditionary Multiple Award Contract efficiently. He goes on to explain that doing so while keeping contract professionals in the planning cycle effectively "shortens the procurement kill chain."¹⁷ Implementing these recommendations will reduce the Marine Corps' reliance on other services, thereby giving better prioritization to Marine Corps requirements while concurrently building our contracting and acquisition force to support the flexible and expeditionary environment the Marine Corps must operate. The following recommendations accomplish the optimal mix. Two senior Marine Corps contracting leaders endorsed the second and third recom-

mentations during informal interviews. Lastly, the Marine Corps will benefit from the initial contracting officer investment at NPS and the Marines follow-on contracting experiences. As mentioned before, over ten percent of the acquisition workforce, who have served previously in warranted contracting billets, now serve in 8061 billets. That benefit is magnified when these KO's transition to Ground Acquisition opportunities, attaining the education and experiences to produce a competitive acquisition package. The Marine Corps' small, yet a technically proficient acquisition force, will benefit from employing experienced contracting officers to the support mission accomplishment. This commitment to develop Marine Officers enhances the acquisition critical capability and the commercial reliance to support the Marine Corps Force Development.

Notes

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15. Department of Defense, *National Security Strategy*, (Washington DC: 2018).

16. Interview between Capt Pearl Winston and LtCol Robin Walther on 5 May 2021.

17. Interview between author and Thompson Elwyn with Senior Executive Service on 5 May 2021.