

# Who is the Real Thief in the Marine Corps?

Recapturing the investments in missing or stolen Stock List 3 items

by Capt Christian Thiessen & Capt Ben Cohen

**A**midst changing operational environments and budget shortfalls, the Marine Corps prides itself on doing more with less. However, there is a downside to this can-do attitude. One such downside is the outdated process by which non-serialized equipment is issued and accounted for. To be more specific, we estimate that every year, each Marine infantry battalion spends \$150,000-to-\$250,000 on missing, stolen, or lost Stock List 3 (SL-3) equipment such as magazines and slings. Extrapolate this number across each infantry battalion and the Marine Corps sees an average annual net loss of \$3.15–5.25 million in operations and maintenance (O&M) funds.<sup>1</sup> While a sizable portion of the equipment is, and should be, considered expendable, a noteworthy amount of materiel is lost because of outdated and non-standardized accountability processes. Therefore, the Headquarters Marine Corps Deputy Commandant for Installations and Logistics (DC I&L) should commission students at the Naval Postgraduate School to analyze this process and make recommendations to improve current accountability methods.

## Why are SL-3 Inventories Important?

SL-3 items are issued to Marines and sailors to ensure that a principal end item (PEI), such as a weapon or vehicle, can function properly.<sup>2</sup> Without SL-3, the PEI may be useless, or at a minimum, less effective. The Infantry Automatic Rifle (IAR) is one such PEI and its SL-3 inventory includes magazines, blank-firing adapters, slings, and bipods—all of which are non-serialized,

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## ***The process for issuing serialized and non-serialized equipment is inefficient.***

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yet integral to the proper operation of the IAR. The process for issuing serialized and non-serialized equipment is inefficient. Currently, to track SL-3, Marines use physical paperwork that is filed and held at the company level.



**Figure 1. Typical SL-3 issue for Marines.**  
(Source: Armslist.com.)

For instance, when a Marine is issued an IAR, it remains in the armory unless checked out by the Marine specified on the paperwork. The SL-3, however, remains in the user's possession. Throughout this process, neither the PEI (e.g., the IAR) nor the SL-3 are tied to a Marine's digital ID (e.g., Common Access Card).

Headquarters Marine Corps considers SL-3 to be ancillary equipment that is required for Marines to successfully carry out their mission. This requires units to provide the appropriate SL-3 for each PEI to Marines and sailors, and considering the current accounting methods, this is basically a guessing game. Although DC I&L does not directly account for SL-3, it is an inspectable item in the Field Supply and Maintenance Analysis Office inspection program which DC I&L oversees.<sup>2</sup> This program carries significant weight and can cause commanders to be relieved if the battalion fails the inspection. Although SL-3 is ancillary equipment, if there are no appropriate quantities for each PEI, it can end careers. Thus, it is incumbent upon the individual battalions to determine when and how to keep their SL-3 fully stocked, which leads to repeated SL-3 inventories where

Marines and sailors conduct time-consuming and redundant inspections.

### How does the *Status Quo* Impact Operations?

When an infantry battalion replaces over \$150,000 in SL-3 equipment, the money comes directly out of O&M funds, the same funding line which pays for training equipment and ammunition. This expenditure results in lackluster training because there are not enough O&M funds available to purchase extra ammunition or materials. Ultimately, this wasted money fails to prepare Marines and sailors for the rigors of combat. To rectify this, many battalions adopt procedures to limit “lost” SL-3 items, but in doing so, they fail to address the real problem. The paperwork process is outdated, which wastes time, money, and effort. Additionally, the misfiling of paperwork allows Marines to (intentionally or unintentionally) misplace government property without recourse. Currently, the money spent on missing or stolen SL-3 items only accounts for the paper losses to purchasing new SL-3. We estimate this loss at up to \$5.25 million per year for all infantry battalions. However, when factoring in the non-infantry battalions across the Marine Corps and the manpower costs associated with searching for missing and stolen SL-3, we estimate that the Marine Corps could be losing 100 million dollars per year on SL-3.

This problem also manifests itself in the outdated account turnover process commanders undergo. The current process dictates that commanders go line-by-line with a highlighter through hundreds of pages of serial numbers, which is simply not a valid way of doing inventory in the 21st century. Under the current process, new commanders spend days and even sometimes weeks inspecting equipment from the outgoing commander. Additionally, the lack of standardized accountability programs leads to serial numbers being scratched onto equipment or written in faded sharpie, making the numbers nearly impossible to read. Because they are bogged down by the lack of useful technology and outdated paper processes for SL-3 account turnover, company



**Figure 2. The “Gunny Locker.”** (Figure provided by author.)

and battalion commanders ultimately lose the precious time that should be devoted to training their Marines for war.



**Figure 3. A typical storage container for Field Supply and Maintenance Analysis Office or account turnover.** (Figure provided by author.)

### Who Benefits from Technological Innovation?

It is time for the Marine Corps to adopt new technologies and practices to augment the antiquated SL-3 issuing and accountability processes. As an example, the Marine Corps could implement QR codes or scannable stickers that are linked to a master database. The Marine Corps already implements these types of procedures at the warehouses where Marines receive their individual gear issues (i.e., individual issue facilities). While the current information

system used by the individual issue facilities may not be an exact fit for the battalions, we argue it could provide a model for SL-3 accountability at the battalion and company levels.

Units in the FMF and Training Command would benefit from a technological solution to this challenge. The most immediate beneficiaries of a solution to this problem are the infantry battalion commanders. Infantry battalions must issue significant quantities of SL-3 to individual Marines because of the sheer number of weapon systems. Implementing a digital accountability system would immediately save money and time, allowing battalions to reallocate O&M funds for mission-essential training. Additionally, small-unit leaders to battalion commanders would benefit by reducing the number of man-hours wasted discussing, or searching for, missing SL-3. By using a digital solution to catalog SL-3, leaders could enforce better equipment accountability and spend less time on unnecessary paperwork. Beyond the battalion level, a digital solution would benefit DC I&L and Marine Corps Logistics Command through cost and material savings and ease the burden on local supply warehouses. Lastly, the Marine Corps, with the potential to save approximately \$100 million per year, can reinvest these cost savings into other warfighter-centric

programs that directly enhance FMF readiness.

### The Way Forward

In summary, the Deputy Commandant for Installations and Logistics should commission a working group to study (in greater detail than we have here) how the Marine Corps tracks its SL-3 equipment. As the functional advocate for logistics-related information systems, DC I&L can enable the acquisition of technologies and systems that are effective in tracking ancillary equipment.<sup>3</sup> This working group can begin with students at the Naval Postgraduate School to capture the O&M and opportunity costs associated with missing and stolen SL-3 items. A student thesis could identify the amount of money the Marine Corps loses in O&M funds on an annualized basis. Another student thesis could develop an atlas (i.e., roadmap) for solution adoption

to streamline the Marine Corps' current processes.<sup>4</sup> In his initial planning guidance, the 38th CMC spoke of leveraging technology to improve the Marine Corps' readiness through the

MAGTF to conduct realistic training more frequently by fully leveraging their limited funding.

### Notes

1. LtGen F. Panter, *MARADMIN 363/12, Equipment Accountability and Visibility: Class VII Principal End Item Management*, (Washington, DC: July 2012).

2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 4400.201-V-3: Retail Supply Management*, (Washington, DC: June 2016).

3. Ibid.

4. John D. Schmaltz Jr. and Benjamin T. Cohen, "An Atlas for Navigating the Innovation Ecosystem: Hybrid Airships as a Use Case to Engage the Commercial Sector," (thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2022).

5. Gen David Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).



modernization of both processes and technology.<sup>5</sup> Modernizing how the Marine Corps accounts for SL-3 would not only save money but would enable the

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