

# The Permanent Military Professor Program

And other ways to build a more technically minded Service

by Maj Michael Shuman

The Marine Corps is at a crossroads. We are undergoing the most significant restructuring in several decades. Our Corps is reimagining everything from our force structure to the methods we will employ to support the joint force. Leadership has been vocal that this will require many challenging changes from top-to-bottom integration with the Navy, increased reliance on training and education, and small unit leaders acting autonomously in dispersed environments. We will need technically savvy planners and operators at all levels of the force to turn these concepts into an executable reality. However, questions arise as to whether or not the Corps has done enough to become a more technically proficient Service, galvanize our partnership with the Navy, and attract people with talent in technical areas. Relying on our indomitable spirit to will ourselves toward success is not going to be sufficient during this transformational change. It is time that the Marine Corps takes positive steps toward recruiting, retaining, and growing a more technically minded Service. If the Service can create upward mobility into desirable technical opportunities via graduate school, over time, we could tap into a whole new sect of the recruiting population that we likely are not currently touching. I offer two solutions: join our sister Service in the Permanent Military Professor Program or modify the technical PhD Program to make it more attractive.

The Permanent Military Professor (PMP) Program places operation-

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ally relevant and experienced leaders in the naval service's higher learning institutions: the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA), Naval War College, and Naval Postgraduate School. PMPs complete a doctoral degree in their field of study and then remain in the academic world until their statutory retirement, promotable for the duration.

Of the many reasons the PMP Program would serve the Corps well, the most significant reason is that the program is in line with several of the tenets of Gen Berger's vision. The *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG)* spells out the necessary changes the Commandant seeks for our Service to be postured and relevant for tomorrow's battles. One of the overarching themes of the *CPG* is that the Corps must return to its naval roots by partnering with our sister Service, the Navy, from the flag officer level down to the tactical unit level. The Navy-Marine Corps team is our bid for success. Why not partner with our sister Service at all our higher learning institutions, where critical thought and cutting-edge research are incubated? The *CPG* spells out a priority for attracting and retaining the most talented individuals possible. The Commandant noticed the trend that many Marines' interests and career

aspirations change over time, and the Service, if it wants to hold on to people, must allow officers to grow in different directions according to their interests. The *CPG* states that current policies

drive increased PCS costs, throw away talent at the point it is most productive and highly trained, and discourage performers who would like to continue serving, but may be less interested in promotion or constant disruptive moves of questionable personal and professional value.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, "Primary occupational fields are set early in a career and Marines are essentially stuck either accepting it for an entire career or choosing separation. Even talented, high-performing officers have changing interests over time. Additionally, the lack of incentives for self-improvement through education and personal development discourages those inclined to learn, think, and innovate."<sup>2</sup> Additional calls for change include modifying fitness reports to capture which individuals have a special aptitude for training, educating, mentoring, technical skills, and planning.<sup>3</sup> All of these initiatives align nicely with the PMP program. It is time for a viable career path that allows talented individuals an opportunity to remain in technical fields of vital importance

to the Marine Corps, while conducting valuable research and allowing their experience to shape the next generation of Marines. The *CPG* states, “The National Defense Strategy has directed us to focus in new areas, and this requires us to think, innovate, and change.”<sup>4</sup> The PMP Program can help us attract and retain the best personnel, and they can help us solve our institution’s most challenging problems.

The thought of putting combat-hardened Marines into a permanent academic role is counter-cultural for the Corps. We are the Service of deploying operationally at every rank, unlike the other Services that are heavily invested in research and list scientist and engineer as occupational specialties. Should it be that way? Maybe it is time we revisit our approach to education and graduate school. Looking at recent history, the Marine Corps enacted the Commandant’s Career Level Education Board in 2011. To ensure the Corps did not leave empty seats in higher level education opportunities, the Service began compelling participation. Programs and fields of study are assigned based on eligibility and career timing, with little care for the individual’s interests. We are asking officers to be fully committed, as their full-time job, to attaining a degree in which they expressed no interest.

Recent statistics do not show great success with educating our force. According to the 2018 DOD survey, the percentage of service members with a graduate degree is as follows: Army 8.7 percent, Navy 7 percent, Marine Corps 2.4 percent, Air Force 12.4 percent, and DOD average 8.3 percent. Those numbers unflatteringly reinforce the crayon-eating stereotype for Marines. So how do we flip the script on education within our Service? We get away from thinking of education as a transaction where a Marine obtains a degree in order to execute a given utilization tour according to a monitor’s spreadsheet. We view education not as a transaction but as an investment in people. In a Service known for being highly exacting with budget allocations, we acknowledge that what we *do not* pay for says as much about who we are as what we *do* pay for. Do we expect to



**The Naval Academy and the Naval War College could benefit from a cadre of Marine instructors with doctorates in technical disciplines.** (Photo by Cpl Lauren Whitney.)

produce the next John Lejeune when we pay for less graduate school than the other Services? We acknowledge that education and a graduate degree is more than a “fitrep bullet.” We consider that the three letters after your name are as important as the rank before your name. No Service engages more with its propaganda than the Corps, and we must consider the messaging that we could achieve in recruiting and retention if we are openly willing to invest in our people for their benefit. If we are eager to spend a quarter of a million dollars to lock an aviator into continued service for a career, why not put that investment into education and lock an operationally-seasoned thinker into a career of shaping the next generation?

The PMP Program would offer downstream benefits to higher level institutions and individuals, which would cycle back to benefit the Corps. We must remember that year after year, we are competing to get the best and brightest midshipmen to choose us. The talent-pull from the Naval Academy varies from year to year, sometimes easily filling quotas and sometimes struggling to generate enough interest. Improving accessions from the Naval Academy, in both volume and quality, is highly desirable and beneficial to the Corps since a disproportionately high

number of higher education seats, especially in technical areas, are filled by USNA graduates because of required pre-requisites for technical master’s degrees. Establishing more pathways to master’s degrees and PhDs would also enhance recruiting for NROTC and OCS. Observing the USNA faculty, it is obvious, even as a midshipman, that there are differences between the civilian professors, the active duty Navy instructors, and the Marines. All of the PhDs are composed of civilians and the Navy. The Marine instructors are rotating crop on three-year orders and teaching with a master’s degree. The Marine has most likely been removed from academia for about a decade, then completes a two-year master’s degree and teaches students who have been in school for the last fifteen years and may have been in their field of study for three years. By the time the Marine is finally getting comfortable enough to have command of the curriculum and the material, it is time to rotate out. I recall a Marine professor of mine, beloved as he was, who openly admitted that he was about a half day ahead of the midshipmen on the material he was teaching. I compare that to a Navy PMP and active duty captain who was widely revered as one of the geniuses and leaders of the Aerospace Engineering De-

partment. He was absolutely everything I aspired to become as a man: a test pilot, a former commanding officer, a PhD, and widely respected. Seven years after departing USNA when I was forward deployed and contemplating life decisions, he was the faculty member I reached back to for mentorship. He was the expert; he had done it all. Sadly, the Marine Corps offers no parallel. The Marine Corps could be a direct investor in this process. Rather than contribute faculty who are never there long enough to help shape the curriculum and be a long-term participant, the Corps is in a passive role.

The Instruction that outlines the PMP Program for the Navy has capacity for up to 50 PMPs and 40 Junior PMPs at USNA, plus allocations for the Naval Postgraduate School and the Naval War College.<sup>5</sup> Given a Navy allotment that large, there should be an allotment for five to fifteen Marines to be PMPs at USNA, thus teaching with varsity credentials and being a more dedicated part of the team. Since the Marine Corps would likely not be interested in staffing PMPs at the O-5 and O-6 level like the Navy, the Marine Corps could focus its PMP Program on the O-4 to O-5 paygrades. The Marine Corps offering a PMP Program is beneficial because it shows prospective candidates an attractive career path, plus it attracts young hopeful midshipmen who would like to join a Service that has potential for future academic pursuits after they have satisfied desires to be a field operator. The Service could tap into a whole new cadre of strong technical candidates, who today only see the Navy as offering technical paths. Today, a midshipman who is majoring in cyber studies is being actively recruited by Navy Cyber PMPs. The Marine Corps will likely lose that contest for talent.

Enacting the PMP Program would offer several benefits—but so would modifying the existing technical PhD Program. The challenge with the current program is how to remain promotable. Though the MARADMIN description of the program says a utilization tour follows the completion of the degree, career timing will always have its say, and the individual's mon-

itor will likely send him back to his primary MOS to check the wickets at every paygrade and remain promotable. Thus, a Marine with a PhD has one foot in his primary MOS and one foot in his cutting-edge research in a technical field. The Marine Corps is sending a mixed message that says it values higher education but does not support the Marine who pursues that path. In areas like computer science, one cannot remain on the forefront of a technical field if required to be committed to his Primary MOS. Earning a PhD should not be a mere fitrep bullet, where the Marine returns to the Marine Corps' general population after checking his graduate degree box. If a Marine is going to spend three to five years to acquire the degree, and if the Marine Corps is going to fund it, both parties

completing a utilization tour at Fort Meade (MARFORCYBER) followed by teaching at the Naval Academy. Both opportunities are within the allotted distance for permanent change of assignment orders. There are several three-letter agencies within the National Capital Region that technical Marines could partner with to do research that benefits the Marine Corps. They could also be utilized at high horsepower institutions within the Marine Corps to help with computing, modeling, simulation, and cost-cutting. Institutions might include the Warfighting Lab, elsewhere in Combat Development and Integration, or a MEF staff. An aerospace engineer could partner with NAVAIR in Patuxent River. Working with these other institutions could be full-time for several years, it could be research PMPs

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should be interested in that member permanently remaining in the technical field. The sort of individual who is willing to go through this grueling educational process will probably not be interested in straddling two competing priorities, and thus, the quantity of interested candidates for such a program decreases.

One solution that the PMP program or the existing PhD program could offer would be to treat program graduates similar to the Acquisitions MOS. The individual laterally moves into the community and competes against his peers in that community for promotion, without being tied to requirements in a previous Primary MOS. There could be a progression within the PMP MOS. For some degree fields, there may be other work in the research field that would benefit the Marine Corps. The field of cyber comes to mind. There is an increasing need for innovative, technically capable people to solve cyber problems in the Marine Corps, and there could be a progression from

complete during their summers at the Naval Academy, or it could be projects that midshipmen participate in with the close mentorship of the PMP. Not only would the PMPs enhance long-term vision and recruiting while at the Naval Academy, but they could also pay it forward in other ways. Being creative with different opportunities within different technical fields could potentially offer varied, purpose-built career paths within the PMP MOS.

To implement these changes, the Corps needs to modify the current system. Marines are already competitively screened and selected at the right career time by the Commandant's Professional Intermediate-Level Education (CPIB) board. Based on interest expressed from the individual, the board could also offer tentative spots to the PMP program. Individuals would have to compete, or at least perform, in their CPIB master's degree to be selected to continue on their PhD after their master's degree. A Marine who already has a master's degree or who already has completed

an instructing tour at USNA would also make a great candidate. The board could select one to three Marines per year for the program, and then gradually build the population over time, since Marines would be remaining in this MOS until the end of their careers. If a candidate who is conducting research for his degree at NPS is providing sufficient value to both the Marine Corps and the faculty at NPS, he could remain in place at the completion of his degree and be a PMP at NPS.

The PMP Program is not the only solution to the Marine Corps' challenges, but it is a solution that can help the service bridge the gap from where we are now to where we are trying to go in the future. Challenges ahead abound, and arguably, no Service has been as forward thinking and willing to take risks to pivot toward a more relevant warfighting capability. The road ahead will demand the best ingenuity we can find, and we must enhance our methods for recruiting talent. We must create

attractive career paths for thinkers who want to strategize future warfighting concepts and are willing and able to grind through a challenging academic curriculum. The PMP Program is in line with the Commandant's initiatives. It is an investment that serves a purpose. It will propel the Corps toward decades of relevancy and help us to serve our nation by fighting and winning wars. We may reflect upon the words of one of our institution's favorite warrior scholars, James Mattis: "I have been fortunate that the American people funded my forty years of education, and some of the lessons I learned might prove helpful to others."<sup>6</sup> Extracting years of extra service from operationally relevant warriors and using them to shape the minds of our Naval Service is an investment that would keep on giving.

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**Notes**

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Department of the Navy, *OPNAV INST 1520.40B*, (Washington, DC: May 2013).
6. James Mattis and Bing West, *Callsign Chaos*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2019).

