
Chapter 5.

Staff Noncommissioned Officers

Staff noncommissioned officers exemplify a heightened level of commitment that comes with multiple reenlistments and a long-term vision as a career Marine. A promotion to staff sergeant also brings a new level of engagement with Marine Corps leadership. Just as there is a separation between junior Marines and NCOs, the promotion to staff sergeant opens the door to a new peer group with new responsibilities. The primary role of senior enlisted leadership is to shape the future of the Corps. It is their responsibility to contribute to the betterment of the institution for the sake of the Marines around them. At the same time, they must continue improving themselves to remain current and retain their value. Some of the main areas of balancing personal advancement with servant leadership are investing sacrificially, avoiding the expectation of entitlement in their position, and supporting the institution.

BALANCE PERSONAL ADVANCEMENT WITH SERVANT LEADERSHIP

As Marines advance through the ranks, the balance of their focus gradually shifts. The scope of junior Marines is almost entirely directed on themselves—learning their job, improving their MOS

proficiency, and adapting to their new life as a Marine. While all Marines look out for the welfare of their fellow Marines, it is important for new Marines to focus on developing themselves and filling their roles within the team. The transition from junior Marine to NCO forces a division of time and effort between the newly promoted NCO and the Marines in their charge. Noncommissioned officers must spend a fair amount of time improving and growing individually, while also upholding the responsibilities of their new leadership role by allocating time and energy to other Marines. For SNCOs, the scale tips more heavily toward others and away from themselves, but they cannot abandon their own development and advancement entirely. Marines who focus too much on giving to the next generation without receiving will become depleted. Like water passing through a creek, learning must flow in to flow out; leaders must continually learn to be able to continually teach. Leaders who do not improve themselves will see that creek dry up. Although opportunities exist for SNCOs to create enterprise-level change, most SNCOs will find the greatest opportunities to mold the future of the Corps at the individual level—specifically in the routine interactions with their Marines.

Marines must find the right balance between taking care of themselves and taking care of others. While easy to view peers as being in competition, they are mutually supporting elements that work together as a team toward both individual and unit accomplishment. Personal and professional endeavors are continually overlapping, each reinforcing the other for better. Formal education helps Marines improve their writing, thereby improving their ability to convey orders and ideas to their

subordinate Marines and those in higher command. Athletic competitions feed into a Marine's health, longevity, and job performance. Leadership training that improves communication and conflict management between Marines can be taken home to improve those areas among family members. As a SNCO, taking a holistic approach to development allows for both personal advancement and servant leadership.

Most Marines can think back on a SNCO who shaped their career in some way. Drawing on that influence, SNCOs should also take the time to recognize the position of influence in which they now find themselves. It can be humbling to realize that they no longer look to "The Gunny" for motivation and *esprit de corps*, but instead they *are* The Gunny. As long as there are still years to serve, it is in the interest of the individual and the Corps that every Marine puts forth their best effort and is proactive with their time. This reduces complacency, it renews a motivated spirit, and it sets a positive example for young Marines just learning how to set their own goals.

Invest Sacrificially

A sacrifice is the act of giving up something of value for the sake of something else regarded as more important. An investment is the act of devoting time, effort, means, or energy to a particular undertaking with the expectation of a worthwhile result. To sacrificially invest in a Marine means to devote valuable time and energy into that Marine, expecting those efforts to pay off for both the individual and the Corps. Because of the transient nature of Marines, often the SNCO does not get to see the results first-

hand, but invests anyway. This can be seen when the SNCO takes time during off-duty hours to create a training plan for Marines who struggle with fitness, then meets them in the early morning hours to train. Another example is writing an award for a Marine who has performed above and beyond their peers. Gathering evidence and writing a summary of action requires substantial time and effort, but the recognition received by that Marine will make them feel appreciated and reinvigorated to continue working hard. Finally, leading Marines of different backgrounds, cultures, belief systems, and personalities is no easy task. The SNCO who reads books on leadership, communication, and psychology to better understand their Marines is selflessly setting the next generation up for success.

By nature of their years of service, multiple duty stations, deployments, special duty assignments, PME certifications, and other additional training events, SNCOs' knowledge of how the Marine Corps operates as an institution allows them to teach from a position of broader understanding. For example, an NCO may be able to teach a junior Marine how to perform a task more efficiently or more accurately, but a SNCO may be able to tell that Marine of a time when being able to perform that task saved their life or the life of a fellow Marine. Marines do not need to wait for the war stories of veterans to be published in books to learn from each other's experiences. Staff noncommissioned officers' experiences may not be thrilling or award-worthy but can be used to teach and train the next generation. This is a vital role that the SNCO fills for their Marines, but they must be willing to give their time and energy to passing on those lessons. Investing in a better Marine Corps will almost always require sacrifice.

Avoid the Expectation of Entitlement

Marines at every rank are familiar with training events for “staff and officers,” or social events for “SNCOs only,” or billets available to “E-6 and up.” Staff noncommissioned officers have an increased expectation of responsibility and accountability, as well as increased access to privileges. Whether it’s front-of-line privileges in certain lines or being able to transport a weapon in a personally owned vehicle to the range, there is potential for a sense of entitlement to creep in. Entitlement, the belief that one is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment, is the antithesis of the selfless leadership expected from Marines. With the wrong attitude, certain privileges that have been granted due to a blanket expectation of trust and respect have the potential to be abused. It is important for SNCOs to understand that the authority, privileges, and allowances entrusted to them are about exactly that—trust. The organization believes they can be trusted because of their proven years of service. It is incumbent upon each individual Marine to continue to validate this trust every day. If they develop a sense of entitlement associated with the privileges, they degrade the rank they wear and the respect of their peers, seniors, and juniors alike. Those SNCOs who continue to sustain their transformation will draw the line between responsibility and entitlement.

Support the Institution

As NCOs, Marines begin to see the bigger picture of how their unit fits into the organization. That awareness lays the groundwork for their promotion to the SNCO ranks, where they

will see how the Marine Corps fits in to the global picture. A healthy appreciation for the Corps' worldwide influence brings a sense of custodial responsibility. Adhering to expectations, requirements, and standards, not just as a Marine but as a SNCO, supports the entire institution from top to bottom and takes the initiative to make improvements when opportunities arise. The SNCOs who regularly sustain their transformation understand the potential positive and negative implications of their actions.

*I carry myself with
military grace, unbowed
by the weight of
command, unflinching in
the execution of lawful
orders, and unwavering
in my dedication to the
most complete success of
my assigned mission.*

—SNCO Creed

An example of this sustainment is Gunnery Sergeant Bill Miller. In 1956, he implemented the first martial arts training plan at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, SC, and taught it to all new recruits. Years later, Master Sergeant Jim Advincula combined his adolescent martial arts training with his experiences in Vietnam to teach lethal and non-lethal hand-to-hand fighting techniques.

Together, these SNCOs created the foundational elements of today's MCMAP. While they may not have been able to predict their work becoming an official training curriculum in 2001, they knew the importance of Marines being able to fight with and without weapons. As leaders, they recognized a gap in training and took the initiative to close it.



Recruiting Duty



Drill Instructor Duty



**Marine Security
Guard/Embassy Duty**

Special Duty Assignments

SPECIAL DUTY

Most Marines who rededicate and commit themselves to multiple reenlistments, regardless of MOS, will complete a special duty assignment. This is another way SNCOs help shape the Marine Corps. Special duty assignments, often times referred to as independent duties, require high levels of moral, mental, and physical resilience. The three special duty assignments in the Marine Corps are recruiting duty, drill instructor duty, and Marine security guard.

The Marine Corps' story of making Marines begins with recruiting duty. Recruiters return to the civilian environment from which they enlisted and are tasked to integrate with and become a trusted member of the community. Recruiting requires the Marine

to interact with the civilian population in various settings and be faced with many different situations. During this duty they may interact with a veteran who regrets leaving the service, a neighbor who respects their commitment to duty, an outspoken individual who insults the Marine's service, or any other number of individuals' beliefs and backgrounds. While these experiences may challenge or bolster the Marine's commitment to service, the Marine is required to always uphold the core values and respond professionally to any interaction. The one consistent experience for all recruiters is that of speaking to a young adult about potentially becoming a Marine; they can be reminded of their own recruitment experience. Recruiters typically recall the fears and concerns, the excitement and anticipation, and the pride and confidence that comes throughout the process. It is impossible for a recruiter to not feel a shared sense of pride when they see an individual earn the title of Marine and know they played an integral part in that new Marine's transformation. Simultaneously, their own transformation is sustained by that experience. Three years as a recruiter will bring countless expected and unexpected ways for a Marine's transformation to be sustained.

The drill instructor takes over the duties from the recruiters in shaping and molding civilians in their transition to Marine. Their efforts shape the Marine Corps by creating a trained Marine through discipline and direction. Although a recruiter is responsible for screening and evaluating individuals to ensure they meet the requirements for recruit training, drill instructors cannot screen or choose the members of their platoon. They must work with the individuals sent to them from across the country. In

a platoon of 65 individual personalities, backgrounds, belief systems, physical and mental capabilities, and motivations, the Marine drill instructor must find a way to impart everything it means to be a Marine. One of the primary ways they do this is through their own conduct. They are expected and required to set the example for the recruits. Their physical appearance, the way they speak, and the character they present create an ideal for the recruit to emulate.

For Marine drill instructors, these factors can challenge their own transformations. A Marine who was a top performer at a previous duty assignment may find a renewed sense of pride and satisfaction in seeing recruits emulate them, and a mediocre performer may realize the impact of their conduct when they see the same conduct from their platoon. Every 13 weeks, the drill instructor is faced with a new set of recruits who bring unique challenges. With each training cycle, the Marine drill instructors sustain the transformation within themselves while creating transformation in the Marines they train. The drill instructor's influence resonates throughout Marines' service and lifetimes. The story, *First Salute*, on page 5-10, exemplifies one drill instructor's unique impact.

Embassy duty is unique to the Marine Corps because Marines are the only service entrusted with guarding US embassies and consulates around the world. The Marines selected to this duty are afforded the opportunity to serve in various countries around the world. By the nature of their work, they could be the only Marine an individual outside the United States interacts within their lifetime. By their conduct, one Marine can shape a person's

First Salute



SSgt Ebony Tatum (l) and 2ndLt Christina Valentine

Newly appointed 2ndLt Christina Valentine chose to receive her first salute from one of her sergeant instructors, SSgt Ebony Tatum. It is common for new lieutenants to ask one of their sergeant instructors to render them their first salute, in recognition of the impression that instructor had on them during their training. However, Tatum’s influence on Valentine didn’t begin during the 10 weeks at Officer Candidate School—it began nearly three years earlier, when Tatum was one of Valentine’s drill instructors at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina. Valentine said that Tatum’s unique training style during recruit training prepared her to make the transition to become an officer. “Something that is very important about SSgt Tatum is her ability to force you to figure things out,” Valentine said. “That’s something that really stuck with me throughout my career.”²⁶

perception of the entire Marine Corps, the US military, and the United States as a whole. This is a tremendous responsibility to bear, and it must be taken seriously. SNCOs, as detachment commanders, are responsible for the training and conduct of their watch standers. It is up to them to reinforce the importance of these interactions, as small as they may seem.

While it can be easy to become complacent in holding high standards or to be unprofessional during an irritating interaction, Marines must understand it is not about them. They maintain their personal appearance to project an image of trustworthiness and confidence to those who rely on them. They treat everyone with respect and courtesy because the United States relies on the alliance of nations around the world for support and cooperation. As a Marine security guard, there is a higher expectation and scrutiny in the job because there are far-reaching consequences for failing to meet those standards. These posts offer an opportunity for a Marine to experience foreign cultures, gain insight into how Marines are perceived, and realize they either help or hinder that reputation by their individual actions. Additionally, they gain a greater appreciation for other cultures which can shape their conduct in future combat, noncombat, or humanitarian missions. Ultimately, Marines who fill this SDA sustain their transformation by gaining a global perspective of the title they have earned.

Marines filling special duty assignments are the gatekeepers of the Corps' core values. No matter which SDA a Marine fills, such duties will uniquely challenge their own transformation. As representatives of the entire Marine Corps, Marines serving in

these assignments must uphold the highest standards of personal conduct, morality, and professional skill.

SUSTAINING SELF

The SNCO ranks create a gradual progression toward retirement. The journey through the ranks, MOS advancement, and continuous self-improvement in the early years gives way to concluding a career, which means transitioning to civilian life. Whether that be a second career, a focus on family, or genuine retirement, it is only natural for senior Marines to start considering their transition out of the Corps. Continuous development not only reinvigorates the SNCO, but it also sets them up for success in their post-Corps life.

Advanced and Higher Education

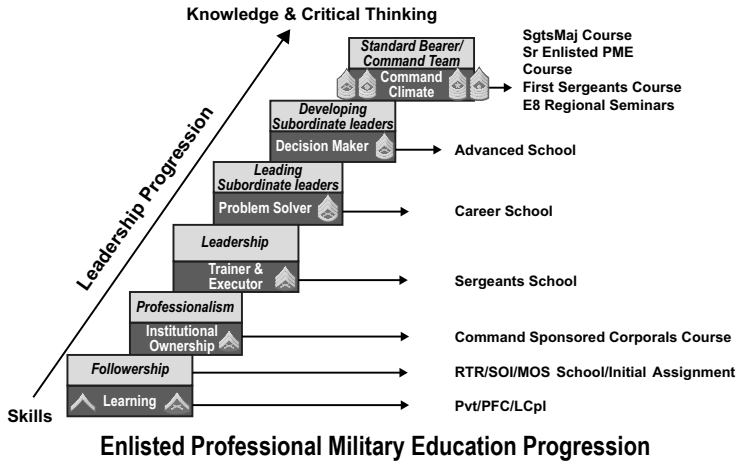
While many Marines take advantage of the education benefits attached to their service, not every Marine does. Some plan to use their benefits after they leave the service, but those who remain committed through multiple enlistments should not put it off. By pursuing on- and off-duty education Marines sustain their own transformation in various ways. Using the education benefits of tuition assistance, scholarships, waived fees, and more, allows the Service member to reap the rewards of the sacrifices they have made over the years. Not using these benefits is akin to depositing money in an account and never taking it out. Education also contributes to their ability to mentor Marines. By expanding their knowledge base, they are better able to relate to

others up and down the chain of command. An effective SNCO intellectually matches or surpasses those who look to them as an example and are therefore better able to mentor junior enlisted Marines and help advise junior officers to start on the right foot. With every instance of helping others, one finds purpose and fulfillment. The knowledge gained through formal education can also help them become more effective in their jobs, accomplish the mission more efficiently, or solve problems before they arise. Advanced education, at every level, is important to pursue.

Professional Military Education

There is no point, personally or professionally, where one “knows it all.” Professional military education continues through every rank and is purposefully designed to challenge and teach Marines at their respective levels. The progression of education by rank is depicted in the figure on page 5-14. As Marines mature in the force, increasing both their understanding and influence, professional military education courses will give them the tools they need to lead.

Marines are life-long learners, expected to continue accruing education regardless of years of service or rank. These courses, schools, and symposiums are not checks in the box for promotion or retention, they offer an opportunity for Marines to reassess their own performance and interact with their peers. With every interaction, there is the potential for renewed motivation, new insight to an old problem, or a reinvigorated love of the Corps. Every Marine at every rank should remain open to these interactions. Novelist Amelia Barr said, “There are no little



events in life, those we think of no consequence may be full of fate, and it is at our own risk if we neglect the acquaintances and opportunities that seem to be casually offered, and of small importance.”²⁷

Through continued education of any kind, each Marine becomes a better leader, a better mentor, and a better teacher to the Marines in their charge. In this way they are able to sustain their own transformation, but also the transformation of their Marines. This is emphasized in Gunnery Sergeant Jose Flores’ education journey, as told on pages 5-15 through 5-16.

Training is Continuous; So is Education

How feasible is getting a college education in the military? According to Gunnery Sergeant Jose Flores, chief drill instructor for Fox Company, 2nd Recruit Training Battalion, not only is it possible, but doing so will benefit Marines in and out of the Marine Corps. Flores has been pursuing higher education for more than 10 years now, because when he was 17, his mother signed his enlistment paperwork on the promise that he would get a degree.

After earning his bachelor's degree, Flores didn't stop pursuing an education. He went back and enrolled in his first class toward a Master's degree. "I fell in love with it," said Flores, "The Marine Corps [gave] me all the tools I needed, and the lessons learned allowed me to get smarter over time." While taking classes on-line, Flores served as a recruiter in New York from 2013-2017. Despite the demanding recruiter's schedule, Flores earned his Master's degree in business in 2014. "I used that as my best selling point—utilize the Marine Corps as that stepping stone to get that education, minus all the debt that normally comes with it," said Flores.

Flores became a drill instructor in 2019. While making Marines, Flores took on-line and on-campus classes to earn his Doctorate in education. "At the end of the day, you are physically exhausted, and the first thing you want to do is rest," said Flores. "I would dedicate another two hours toward my studies...every day that I did stay up and do assignments, I knew I was getting that much closer to my degree."

Continued...



Gunnery Sergeant Jose Flores

College has also helped Flores with professional writing, to his subordinates, his peers, and his superiors. “[Marines] do a lot of writing; it has helped me articulate, communicate, write, take care of the Marines under me, and help guide those above me,” said Flores.

Flores’ advice for those who are thinking of getting a college education is to get started, even if you don’t know how or where to start. He said admissions personnel know some people have been out of school for a while. “They are going to build you up gradually. Get started, take that first step.”

He also recommends developing good time management. “If you were to eliminate Marines’ excuses and break down their time, you could see how much time they are on their phone or on social media, or watching TV...” He encourages reflecting on how to better use that time wisely. College while serving can be intimidating, but the Marine Corps offers many resources to help better each individual.

“Ultimately, the mission of the Marine Corps is to return quality citizens back to society,” said Flores.²⁸

Develop Quality Goals

Staff noncommissioned officers are in a position to have tremendous impact on the organization while also planning for their eventual transition to civilian life. As they mature personally and professionally, their goals must follow suit. If their short-, mid-, and long-term goals resemble the goals set by their junior Marines, it would benefit the SNCO to reach out to a mentor to help them develop goals more aligned to their roles.

For example, a junior Marine might set a goal to read one book from the Professional Reading List every other month. The SNCO should have already created a habit of reading and set a more mature goal like, “write an article for submission to a Marine Corps publication.” This would mean taking the books they read a step further into the realm of analytical thought and idea development. As another example, a junior Marine might set a goal to increase their annual PFT and combat fitness test score by 10 points. The SNCO should already have developed a habit of keeping physically fit and set a more mature goal such as, “reduce my platoon’s rate of training injuries by 10 percent.” This taps into the bigger picture of increasing mission readiness and decreasing risk. It can also have broader effects than merely within their local unit. If every SNCO aimed to reduce their Marines’ rates of injury by 10 percent it could reduce injuries across the organization. Regardless of the goals, they should all be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time based.

Goal setting provides an opportunity to communicate with one’s command. Communicating personal and professional goals to

ones' leaders opens the door for them to provide support. A staff sergeant, by informing the platoon commander of a goal to reduce the platoon's injury rate, might inspire that leader to recommend sending the Marine to attend the Force Fitness Instructor Course. Similarly, if a master sergeant is pursuing a degree in business administration with a focus in organizational leadership, their command can dedicate space in the training, exercise, and evaluation plan for that Marine to attend Lean Six Sigma courses on base. Counseling sessions are perfect for reassessing goal progress, asking for recommendations on achieving next career steps, and requesting support for steps along the way.

SUSTAINING OTHERS

Mentorship and Instruction

The journey does not end when the deed is complete, but after sharing lessons learned along the way. The burden falls upon the senior enlisted ranks to pass along their lessons learned and allow others to benefit from their journey in the hopes that the same fight need not be fought twice. Staff noncommissioned officers are the only ranks called upon to mentor junior enlisted Marines, NCOs, and new junior officers. This creates mentorship up and down the chain of command, and also highlights the tremendous impact one SNCO can have—good or bad. Their knowledge, wisdom, and experience will be drawn upon to help a majority of the force.

Newly enlisted Marines will look to their leaders as examples and come to them for guidance and support as they navigate their careers. As SNCOs engage with new Marines, it is particularly

important to be the Marine they needed as a mentor when they were young. This is not the time to dismiss Marines with remarks of generational differences. While there may be a decade or more of time between their positions, there are timeless truths that can be referenced as needed. Some of these include the need for structure and discipline, empathy and understanding, and safety and trust. Noncommissioned officers will look to them for personal and professional advice about reenlistments, relationships, and other major life events. While still young, NCOs seeking mentorship are more seasoned than junior Marines and may need guidance with more complex issues. Staff noncommissioned officers should keep themselves well-informed of the resources available to assist Marines, as well as any relevant changes in policy or regulations.

Newly commissioned officers will rely on SNCOs' seasoned professionalism to help guide them to make the right decisions as new leaders. The officers they mentor bear accountability for the decisions they make and should be provided with relevant written orders and policies, whenever possible. The SNCOs should use their personal experience and wisdom to amplify rather than replace official policy and doctrine.

Staff noncommissioned officers who are not prepared to meet the needs of those who depend on them create a ripple effect of negativity. By contrast, SNCOs who effectively mentor Marines through all stages of their careers sustain generations of Marines to come. Mentorship is an abstract relationship predicated on personal development and growth. Mentors do not teach, train, or instruct as much as they inspire, motivate, and encourage.

The mentor/mentee relationship is a personal one and SNCOs cannot mentor every single Marine they meet. However, they may take on a formal teaching position in a schoolhouse, PME course, or other Marine Corps educational program. They may volunteer to teach informal classes and seminars within their unit. They may take advantage of ad hoc teaching moments as they arise during other training. Regardless of the setting, SNCOs can sustain the transformation of other Marines by teaching and instructing them wherever needed. An adaptation of Loren Eisley's essay, *The Star Thrower*, tells the story of a young girl throwing starfish into the ocean after a storm has washed them up on the sand. The narrator looked up and down the shore, seeing hundreds of scattered star-shaped bodies. He told her she will not be able to return them all to the water before they die, as there are too many starfish to make a difference. The little girl replies, "It makes a difference to that one."

So it is with opportunities to teach other Marines. There are far too many teachable moments to be able to use them all, and no one Marine will be able to teach every Marine in the Corps. However, a SNCO who takes a single Marine or a classroom full of them and imparts wisdom honed from years of experience will make a lasting impact on those Marines. It will make a difference to them.