

Commentary on the Corps

Our personnel admin is sick

By Capt Oscar De La Garza, Jr.

Marine Corps personnel administration is beginning to show signs of senility, a reluctance or inability to recognize reality and a dogged determination to cling to procedures which may have achieved a useful purpose in the past but have long become unnecessary, inefficient and wasteful. Even the soundest technological body can't survive without the full use of its management brain. Marine Corp personnel administration may soon cease to provide effectively for the recording, processing and maintaining of military personnel and pay data on a timely basis.

Several symptoms of the impending administrative tragedy have surfaced in recent years:

The Marine Corp has armed itself with sophisticated management systems, including the Manpower Management System (MMS), Joint Military Pay System (JUMPS), Source Data Automation (SDA) and in the Dear future, the Real Finance and Manpower Management System (REAL FAMMIS). But where are the Marines to manage the management systems? Where are the professional officers administrators and aggressive Staff NCO's to supervise? Quite simply they don't exist, because unit table of organization don't reflect the appropriate number of personnel by rank and military occupational specialty. Further, when a T/O is reduced to manning level and manpower shortages also are considered, units are forced to work on a shoestring, to improvise - certainly a challenge, but highly inefficient and often ineffective. The old homily, "I have done so much for so long with so little, that now I can do anything with nothing," bantered about in jest has become, it seems, a way of life for Marine personnel administration.

Unfortunately, something cannot be gotten for nothing. The Marine Corps has been overextended since its entry into Southeast Asia in the mid-1960's. It has been trying to do so much with so little, and consequently, has ended doing a lot of things poorly instead of a few things well. Private Enterprise could not survive financially under such circumstances and would take steps to rectify the situation. The fact that the Marine Corps is a government agency and doesn't have to show a profit doesn't mean that it can afford to operate so inefficiently.

Furnishing units with sufficient personnel by number, as well as by MOS and rank, is only a first step. Once a Marine is assigned as a unit diary clerk or a service record book clerk, then he or she must be allowed to do the job. That Marine should not be sent to learn how to disarm booby-traps or differentiate various types of nuclear burst. It is doubtful that the infantry would improve its efficiency by sending its troops to classes on preparation of a unit diary.

While accepting the fact that all Marines must know how to defend themselves, is it really necessary that every Marine be rifleman first? By trying to accomplish this we end up with an administrative section composed of riflemen of doubtful technical skills and administrators who have little skill or knowledge in their primary task. Also accepting that every Marine should be in superior physical condition, is it really necessary that a Marine, who does little wading in combat boots, walk 25 to 50 miles in a day or less to demonstrate superior physical condition. Such a requirement sounds more like a sadistic grandstand play for

publicity instead of a real effort to produce physical fitness. This is especially true for those who work at relatively sedentary jobs. An additional consideration is the work time lost in preparing for such a folly, as well as its execution and again during recuperation.

Add to the above time lost for guard duty, mess duty and special details such as NBC defense teams, driver training, rifle range and flag pageants. Too often administrative types are left with only about 50 per cent of their time to perform the demanding job of recording, processing, and maintaining military personnel and pay data on the timely and continuing basis so necessary to ensure the welfare of other Marines. Thus million-dollar systems sit idle, guarded efficiently by sharp-shooting, safe-driving mess men who know how to get all with each other in the case of nuclear, biological or chemical attack.

An additional problem lies in the use of the computerized systems themselves. Some commanders seem more concerned with the error rate on the Statistical Transaction Analysis Report (STAR) than they are with the prime objective of helping Marines with their problems. In addition, to retrieve information from these systems often requires dealing with justifications in writing and meeting the requirements of law (Privacy Act) as well as local regulations. It often appears that we are working for the system rather than the intended reverse.

Whenever reports are required from the system, they are generally needed immediately. Because of the bureaucratic structure, however, the system cannot cope with this requirement. A question asked whenever a report is received from the system is, "is it accurate?" The answer is probably "no" because the personnel responsible for putting information into the system either have not done so properly or have not done so at all, because of the problems noted earlier.

Realizing that the forgoing contains many generalities and over-simplifications, the fact remains that steps must be taken to reverse the trend toward senility symptomatic of an overbureaucratized, tradition-burdened institution. The solution is self-evident. Let's begin to deal with the specialized world as it is today. Specialization is the key, and we must abandon procedures, which are no longer applicable. T/O's should be adjusted to reflect the present and future specialized roles, as well as being flexible enough to provide for temporary readjustments in mission. The traditional basic training of Marines should be accomplished during boot camp, before assignment to a unit and upon transfer.

Let's examine Marine personnel administration and decide whether it has improved or whether it has become a "tradition unhindered by progress." The symptoms are present and must be treated. But the basic underlying malady also must be treated, before it becomes incurable.