

## **Career Decisions – 1stSgt / MSgt route**

Recent severe weather systems throughout the United States, as well as catastrophic events such as the major 5.8 earthquake that originated in Virginia on October 20<sup>th</sup>, have affected millions of people that reside within the multiple hurricanes, tropical storms, tornadoes and earthquakes destructive paths. One specific example is Hurricane Irene. This hurricane unfortunately killed over 40 people and also caused damage across its path leaving millions of people without power, in some cases for multiple days. This is only one recent example of a situation that has affected many thousands of people, and for some altering their future with the loss of loved ones, homes and businesses. When word of the eminent hurricane began circulating, some people were prepared, and others were not. Most people in the hurricanes path were able to get to safety or stay inside to ride the storm out, due to weather experts being able to forecast the hurricanes path and timing. In contrast, another, more extreme situation, from our country's past, is the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. There is really no comparison of these two events; however, with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9-11 attacks recently past, it is something that changed the way the American people live today. Over 3,000 people killed on that day were mostly unaware of the plan that was being played out in front of them, having no time to prepare for the events that took place. Whereas pre-empting a hurricanes path, there is time for at least some preparation. Preparation is a key element in the many differences between these two events. There really is no way to compare these two events to an individual Marines career, but preparations in helping to set a Marines career up for success is essential, just as it is in planning for the worst case scenarios of a major weather system or even a dreaded terrorist attack.

This article is intended to focus on the 1stSgt/MSgt career path that GySgt's seek throughout their time in-grade, which ultimately falls within the selection boards hands. With the convening of the FY12 SgtMaj through MSgt selection board fast approaching and convening on October 18, 2011; all GySgt's annual fitness reports should already be processed at Headquarters Marines Corps (HQMC), ending on June 30, 2011 (for those that it effects). Since that is the case, this article is intended to discuss future decisions concerning this critical venture in a Marines career towards 1stSgt or MSgt, with the focus of making the decision early on in a Marines career. A note of clarification for those Sergeants and Staff Sergeants that have not yet been designating the 1stSgt/MSgt preference in the status box (8h) on the fitness report or who do not know what the status designators are, (F) is for 1stSgt and (M) is for MSgt, which all GySgt's must select on their fitness reports. Also, it is imperative to understand that all Marine GySgt's that meet the promotion zone Junior Date of Rank (JDOR) are screened for 1stSgt, but only those Marines that select (F) on their last fitness report prior to the convening date of the board will be considered on that specific board. Again, that is as long as they are in the primary zone for 1stSgt. We will discuss various topics that need to be considered in

preparation for this critical decision such as: reasons for selecting (F) or (M), key factors to setup your career path for that route, the dual eligible quandary, as well as switching from (F) to (M) and vice versa. Finally we will present recent year's statistics to wrap up the topic with why making the decision early on in your career is so important.

Marines must first understand that there is no perfect career path when deciding to go the 1stSgt or MSgt route, as so many different variables come into play that make most Marines records each a unique situation. When looking at setting a Marine up for success in the MSgt route; enhancing your records within your Primary Military Occupational Specialty (PMOS) by showing diversity, covering all billets available, performance (in billets held inside and outside of the PMOS) as well as completing and maxing out as much training as possible are some of the quickest and most effective ways to be more competitive with your peers for promotion. However, these are some of the same attributes that tend to also enhance a Marines record for 1stSgt, with some additional considerations. Marines should start planning this decision early on in their career and not make it a hasty decision "on the fly" once they pick up GySgt. An important concept to keep in mind is that Marines don't put (F) on their fitness reports for the wrong reasons, which does sometimes tend to hinder a Marines ability to get selected to 1stSgt or MSgt, since their priorities have not been where they should be within their PMOS, where they have set themselves up as a "Duty Expert". Some of these considerations will be covered more in depth below, concerning the dual eligible quandary.

There are numerous reasons why Marines want to go the 1stSgt route. With this route being the most complex and puzzling to a vast majority of Marines, we will focus on the 1stSgt route more than MSgt. So you, specifically, or one of your Marines is putting (F) on their fitness reports, or is considering doing so. The first question that tends to get asked in this situation is, why? That is a good question that deserves to be asked and usually has many answers, depending on who is answering. A good majority of Marines that select the 1stSgt route want to be a 1stSgt for various personal and professional reasons that generally vary. Most of those Marines have made it a goal and want to follow through and accomplish that goal. Another group of Marines go the 1stSgt route for a slight different reason. These Marines typically are looking for something different and may not be fully content in their PMOS. If they really want to be a 1stSgt or not is irrelevant, but regardless they put (F) and hope for the best either way. The last group is those that know they won't be looked at for MSgt for 5-6 years (on average); they want to be selected for E8 so they tend to take the path of least resistance (which tends to be the thought process) that will get them selected sooner than later. These Marines tend to be the ones that don't necessarily want to be a 1stSgt, but the need to be promoted overrides the want/need to stay in their PMOS. During recent SNCO selection boards, Marines have been eligible for the 1stSgt Promotion zone typically after 3 years in grade as a GySgt, so this thought process does make sense, but there are things to consider, in advance, of making this very

important decision. Ensure the decision is made for the right reason! Sometimes, Marines typically fall in any one of these categories and sometimes Marines fall in several, simultaneously.

Every Intended Military Occupational Specialty (IMOS) is more or less competitive every year. The Career Counselors maintain the selection rate percentage statistics for every IMOS at the adjournment of every board. These statistics tell us exactly how competitive that IMOS was with the numbers of Marines in zones and the total number of allocations. By computing the math, this also gives a selection rate percentage to give the Marine an idea of what percentage of a chance that he/she had to get one of the few allocations available. The 1stSgt route (8999) has consistently been **one of the top two** competitive IMOS for past years E8/E9 boards. Regardless of the 1stSgt/MSgt route that one may take, performance tends to trump most other aspects of the Marines individual record, as performance typically carries over 80% of the weight of a Marines entire record. For example, a Marine GySgt 0369 could have a Bronze Star with a V, a Black belt 1<sup>st</sup> degree MCMAP qualification and have gone above and beyond in all training and schools and still be passed over for MSgt (or not selected to 1stSgt – as a free look) due to having low performance in that PMOS (basically performing below the Marines peers). Performance inside and outside of the PMOS also goes to show a willingness and ability to perform outside of a Marines comfort zone, making that Marine more well rounded as a Marine in general. Some Marines in certain PMOS's are not afforded the opportunity to get outside of the PMOS, due to the PMOS being a critical MOS (so the community cannot afford to let Marines leave at the time). Comments on Section I & K (from the Reporting Senior and Reviewing Officer) of the fitness report are always big ticket items since this is information coming from the "horse's mouth" of how you performed throughout the reporting period and how the RO breaks you out in comparison with your peers that he/she has reviewed. Comments that truly speak to the performance reflected throughout the reporting period, without inflation and fluff, or space filler type comments, make a board members job of placing a Marine above their peers a little easier. For example, if a Marine is filling a Company GySgt billet and is in charge of say 300 Marines, having that reflected is a tangible comment that the board member prepping your record can copy and paste directly into your brief. When a Marine has tangible bullets with statistical data notated in their billet accomplishments; having them reiterated in the Section I comments can effectively enhance the board members ability to give the MRO the best chance of a complete and accurate brief.

Enhancing every training qualification possible (even though it may not be required at the time) goes to show how much time and effort that a Marine put into actually wanting to (or not wanting to) be promoted. If a Marine hasn't qualified on the Pistol range for a number of years and they have been at duty stations where it would have been possible, it typically shows a lack of care and concern on the Marines part, unless there is documentation in the record, mainly in the Section I comments, as a Directed comment stating the pistol exemption, etc. Continually auditing the Official Military Personnel File (OMPF), as viewed on Marine Online (MOL), is also an important part of ensuring that the Marine is relaying to the board that he/she actually wants to be selected, due to the hard work and efforts that

they have put into preparing for the board. Even though it is not required to put certificates into your record (which we hear Marines use as an excuse regularly in counseling sessions), if a Marine really wants to be selected then that would be a main priority to accomplish prior to the board convening. Basically, being proactive and knowing what the board members have access to see within your record, then going above and beyond to accomplish the tangible things that can be done prior to the board convening will make a Marines record more competitive for either the 1stSgt or MSgt route.

A lot of Marines have misconceptions on whether switching from 1stSgt to MSgt, or vice versa, is a good or bad thing. It is typically viewed as a negative act. It is known that showing consistency is the best course of action, to show the board members that you are consistent and that you are pursuing the route that you truly want to go, which is the most effective method. Showing consistency would be ideal, but not always the best option to continue with if the individual Marine's circumstances have changed. There are several case by case scenarios that must be looked at to ensure that Marines know the impact of each. The best understood scenario is the Marine that continues with the decision originally made for 1stSgt or MSgt, and no change is made throughout all GySgt fitness reports. The second scenario is, the GySgt that has been putting MSgt (M) on all fitness reports and then makes the decision to switch to the 1stSgt (F) route, for whatever reason. The third scenario is Marines that have been putting 1stSgt (F) and then want to switch to MSgt (M), staying in his/her PMOS. Lastly is the "Switch ball hitter", basically meaning that every time that the wind changes, so does their decision and route. Or, said another way, if things don't necessarily go their way they switch to the other direction. This last decision tends to show board members that the Marine doesn't know what they want and that their priorities may not be the needs of the Marine Corps, but mainly their individual needs, which could adversely affect the outcome of the possible selection. The overall effect of each of these decisions is based off of how 21 different board members, from year to year, perceive each record, again, on a case by case basis.

Before getting into the specifics of each of these decisions, it is important to know what the Dual Eligible Quandary is, and what its implications are. The easiest way to describe the Dual Eligible Quandary is that a Marine continues to put all of their eggs in one basket for 1stSgt; neglecting the PMOS skill sets for MSgt being reflected on the in-grade fitness reports. A lot of Marines talk to their reporting officials and ask them to not mention their MOS technical skills in the Section I & K comments, but want the focus to be on the administrative facets only, in thinking that this will set them apart for 1stSgt. This is probably one of the worst things that a Marine, and his/her leadership, could do to try to help their competitive chances for future selection to E8. The implications of this are that the Marines record may not be competitive enough for 1stSgt, so doesn't get selected for that route. The Marine has been neglecting his/her PMOS skills and now is not competitive enough to get selected in the PMOS, so now they don't get selected either way. Now the Marine has put himself/herself into a situation where they may have to retire (if they stay around that long) as a GySgt, when they could have planned their career in advance to have helped alleviate the problem in the first place, by being well rounded for the primary path of MSgt or the 1stSgt route. This is the worst case scenario,

but also what tends to happen is the Marine really wants to be selected to 1stSgt, but doesn't get it. The Marine then gets selected to MSgt and is sometimes not happy with the selection. The bottom line is that a selection is a selection and every Marine should be striving to enhance their proficiency within their PMOS regardless. Especially since this is the field that they have been school trained in, in the first place.

Now looking at each of these scenarios, just discussed, and breaking each one down further will help Marines see the possible impact of each decision. As mentioned above, staying consistent by continually keeping (F) or (M) on fitness reports would be the ideal situation. However, things do change and reasons for the original decision may not necessarily be relevant now, so it may not be feasible to continue with the Marines initial decision. The second scenario was the Marine going the MSgt route and then decides to switch to 1stSgt. Breaking this decision down even further shows a few concerns that one must consider. First is that the Marine needs to make sure that this is the decision that they really want to make. If a Marine has a competitive enough record, they could be selected for 1stSgt or they could be lessening their chances for selection in their PMOS if they don't get selected to 1stSgt, which we discussed above in the dual eligible quandary. Typically a lower percentage of Marines end up getting selected for 1stSgt going this route, due to the fact that they have been able to establish a degree of being the "duty expert" in their PMOS and now are behind the power curve of continually setting their record up for success for the 1stSgt route. Another area to focus on is if the decision is for the right reason, or if the Marine is getting pressure to go that route due to someone else thinking that the Marine would be better suited for that route. If your IMOS is now closed out or the allocations dropped dramatically, depending on the timing, jumping ship may not be the best decision, depending on the timing of the decision. The third decision is to switch from 1stSgt to MSgt. If a Marine has been consistently going 1stSgt and then decides to pursue the MSgt route, this is really a no brainer. Every Marine was school trained in their PMOS, which is also the MOS that they continue to steer towards in going to towards the E8 pay grade. If a Marine was putting (F) consistently on all fitness reports and then decides to put the focus back on their original MOS for MSgt, this can only be a good thing. Quite a few Marines would disagree, but once put into perspective it would be better understood. Depending on the reason that the Marine put (F) to begin with, now the situation or mindset has changed. Along with that mindset is the decision to switch to MSgt. Every Marine pursuing the 1stSgt route should continue to set themselves up for success as both a MSgt and 1stSgt, which so many Marines tend to neglect. For those that have been continuing to be proactive in both routes, the switch would not be a bad one. Those Marines that have been putting all of their eggs in one basket are Marines that would not necessarily benefit from the decision, but it could only help if the rest of their record speaks highly enough for MSgt. Lastly is the "Switch Ball Hitter". Consistency in whichever path taken is the key. A board members job of selecting the best and fully qualified for each allocation is a daunting task. If a Marine is indecisive and cannot decide which path that he/she wants to take, it really is not looked at as favorable. Marines in the past have been selected,

who fall in this category, but the margin is usually not very high. This is a good reason why the decision to select (F) or (M) early on in the Marines career is so important.

Recent years SgtMaj through MSgt selection boards have steadily increased in competitiveness in the path for 1stSgt, showing a dramatic increase in numbers of Marines pursuing the 1stSgt route, with allocations dropping pretty significantly. We will discuss statistics for the last three boards (FY09, FY10 & FY11) to put this increase into perspective. In FY09, we saw that 819 Marines were in the primary zone for 1stSgt (having put (F) on their last fitness report). The allocations for 1stSgt that year were XXX. This left an overall selection rate for the IMOS of 8999 being XX%, meaning that all 819 Marines in zone had a XX% chance of getting one of the XXX allocations. On the FY10 board, there were 866 Marines that were in the primary zone with the allocations being XXX. This left an overall selection rate at XX%. On the FY11 board, there were 966 Marines in zone for 1stSgt with only 173 allocations. This left a 14% selection rate. As the numbers of Marines that continue to put (F) on their fitness reports rise and the number of allocations drop, a lot of great Marines continue to not be selected for 1stSgt. In a good majority of cases, it isn't that the Marine is doing anything wrong, but their records are just not as competitive for 1stSgt as the next Marine who was selected for the rank. Also to remember is that not every stellar Marine can be taken out of every other IMOS, as this would deplete the quality Marines within each community. In this case, a Marine might have the ultimate goal of becoming a 1stSgt, but regardless of what the Marines desires may be, his/her record speaks highly for staying in the PMOS and going the MSgt route. This is obviously a good thing that must be kept in mind.

In wrapping up this important topic, the Enlisted Career Counselors do not have a magic crystal ball to tell you that you will or will not get selected to the next higher rank. We also can't tell you specifically why you didn't get selected, as the selection boards and the Promotions Branch (MMPR) does not keep data concerning this fact. If they did, then there would have to be 21 different answers in why a single Marine did not get selected, and the list would be rather lengthy. A lot of times board members can't pin point one specific reason why your record may not be as competitive as the next Marine, but for whatever reason it just wasn't. This is why it is SO important to start molding your career at an early stage and to not wait until you haven't been selected to start taking an active interest in your career. The information included in this article has been gathered from experience in counseling individual Marines, as well as debriefing every active duty SNCO selection board. Our compiled debriefs, from the past 3 years Fiscal Years selection boards are included on our sections website at: <http://www.manpower.XXXXXXXX>.

In conclusion, it is highly recommended that Marines continue to pursue avenues of improvement within their records by seeking guidance from their Senior Enlisted Advisors, as

well as from a Career Counselor, prior to ever becoming eligible. Our recommendations are just that. If you have a better solution to getting selected and decide that you don't want to follow through with our recommendations, then that is why they are called recommendations. Keen competition is not the only reason that Marines don't get selected, but ultimately it is a major determining factor in the non-selection, when there are only so many allocations for the great number of Marines in zones for promotion. This is also why every year, hundreds of "Water Walker" Marines are not selected for promotion with their peers. They were just not as competitive as the other competitive Marines that were just that much more competitive, that year for the allocations allotted. In attempting to set yourself up for success; continue to be proactive and seek guidance from various avenues are the keys to success.