

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL ROBERT MILSTEAD, MARINE CORPS RECRUITING COMMAND VIA TELECONFERENCE DATE: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2008

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SEAMAN WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): (In progress.) A note to our bloggers today online -- please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization, in advance of your question. Respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest is Marine Major General Milstead, who will discuss the current state of Marine recruiting and some of the challenges Marine recruiters face.

And General Milstead, if you have your opening statement ready, you can go ahead.

GEN. MILSTEAD: I do, thanks. And I'm still a brigadier general. I've been selected for major general, so if you can make any push over there at OSD, you know, to get that second one pinned on any sooner, I'd be all over that.

SEAMAN SELBY: Yes, sir. Sorry about that. But yes, sir, we'll get that right.

GEN. MILSTEAD: That's okay. But hey, I want to thank everybody for the opportunity to meet with you all today. You know, this is kind of new. This is the first time I've done this.

You know what my previous assignment was. You know, when I came out of Iraq, I was up there in Public Affairs. And so that's when I first began to recognize, you know, the blog world and how important it is. And it is a significant part of our, you know, new and emerging information environment, I guess. And I want us to be a part of the conversation. You know, it's -- I can stick my head in the sand and I will have only myself to blame. So I want to be a part of the conversation.

You know, just recently I started getting daily analysis of some of the blogs that address Marine aviation, I'm sorry, old habits there, Marine recruiting. And more often than not, I find myself frustrated by what I consider inaccuracies or half-truths in the dialogue.

So you know, I look forward to this discussion and opening up a dialogue. And I'd like to do more of these and I'd like to offer up my, you know, the subject matter experts that we have, when you want to get down into the weeds.

You know, to paraphrase George F. Will, you know, when he was speaking to politics, I'll insert recruiting. And it's like football; it's simple in objective but complex in execution. And I've been the CG of the Recruiting Command now for just almost four months and no prior experience in recruiting.

So I stepped off with a clean plate and I've been drinking through the firehouse. And I think I've learned a lot over the last four months. So I'll take your questions, and we'll see just how much I do know.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And Andrew, you were first on the line. So if you want to, go ahead with your first question.

Q Hey, General. Andrew Lubin. Good to talk to you again, sir.

GEN. MILSTEAD: Hi, Andrew.

Q Good. I'm writing this for U.S. Naval Institute's Proceedings and their website Get the Gouge. Could you talk to us please about officer recruiting, your OCC program? You know, with, and after listening to the show, to the program last night, I guess, with Senator McCain and Obama wanting recruiters allowed on -- back in Columbia University, when are you guys turning up?

GEN. MILSTEAD: Hey, that was, you know, I did watch that last night, and remind me. I want to come back to that, because there was a question that was asked by -- I think it was -- Judy Woodruff, you know, that she was -- it just -- it's exemplar of what people don't know. But I'll come back to that. But you know, we'd be excited to get back onto college campuses.

Okay, the overall officer accession, you know, we get our folks from several sources. One of course is the Naval Academy. That's about 15 percent. And just recently the commandant has gotten a new MOU. And last year, we got 210 officers out of the academy. This year, we got 235. Next year, we'll get 270. And it will cap at 270 for a while.

The tradeoff: We wanted more. We wanted 300, but they capped us at 270. And the tradeoff was, they increased the number of quotas that we could get in NROTC scholarships.

That's the other one. We get about another 10 to 15 percent there, you know, kids that go to -- go on an NROTC scholarship.

The bread and butter, of course, is our officer candidate school -- I mean our OCC, our candidates in our PLC program. That's about 60 percent. And then, of course, the other 10 to 15 percent are the enlisted-to-officer programs, most of those being the ECP or the MECEP, the Marine Enlisted Commissioning Education Program. And we got about 600 guys in that -- and gals -- in that now. So they're in colleges. They're basically attending NROTC. So that's kind of the programs.

Real quick, one of my focuses -- you know, in recruiting it used to be -- they used to say it was big "E" little "O." Lots of enlisted; you didn't pay a whole lot of attention to the officer mission. That's not the case anymore. It's big "O."

Last year, I want to say, oh, it was about '07, we had about -- our mission for officers was around 1,500. I think it was 1,535. This year we had to recruit 1,900 officers. Next year it's 2,050. And the year after that it's 2,100. So you can see that the number of officers that we need in this corps as we grow to (202 ?) is significant. And so our OSOs need to get out there and pound the pavement. They need to be officer recruiting officers, OROs, not officer selecting officers.

So that's kind of the wave-top state of it. The playground's changed and we need more officers, and therefore we're proceeding appropriately.

Q Great. If I could follow up, General, when you send your recruiters on campus, how are they received?

GEN. MILSTEAD: Generally they've been doing well. You know, they get out there and they get on campus. Of course, it depends on the demographics. You know, the folks out in San Francisco that got all the visibility, you know, from the Code Pink, that was actually an OSO officer. That was an office selection officer, it wasn't a regular enlisted recruiting station.

But generally speaking, you know, people treat them well. You know, it kind of -- regardless of what side of the aisle people sit on with regard to our president or our nation's policy on Iraq and other issues, they generally support the troops, you know? And so they may speak pejoratively in a blog or in interviews or whatever, but I think they tend to, when it's person to person, pretty much be pretty respectful. So we don't have a problem where, you know, we're apprehensive per se when we walk onto a college campus. Q Great. Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you. And Sergeant Carden (sp), did you have any questions, or do you want me to move on to Grimm?

Q Yes, sir.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay, go ahead.

Q Thank you, sir. This is Staff Sergeant Carden (sp) from American Forces Press at the Pentagon.

GEN. MILSTEAD: Hi.

Q Yeah, can you talk a little bit about enlisted recruiting, just to caveat the officer recruiting issue, and then maybe discuss some of the challenges that you guys are facing with the current influx in Afghanistan, possibly?

GEN. MILSTEAD: Well, first of all, I don't think that Afghanistan or Iraq has presented itself as a challenge. You know, the young men and women that join the Marine Corps today -- and I would probably, you know, say for the most part those that join the other armed services -- know what they're walking into. You know, remember there is no draft, and all these kids, they join to serve their nation, you know, knowing that, especially in the Marine Corps, and

most likely the Army, they're going to move toward the sound of cannons. So it's -- you know, there's not that challenge per se.

We've been very pleased with our success and our ability to meet our recruiting numbers within the Marine Corps. You know, last year we recruited somewhere close to 42,000 total force, both officer and -- I mean, I'm sorry, both regular and reserve. And next year the mission will be about 41,000.

It's -- the quality hasn't changed. You know, people talk about this increase, that we go up to 202K. We're -- we've increased the mission, but we've not decreased the standards. You know, last year -- or this year that we're getting ready to close out the books, you know, over 97 percent of these young men and women are high school graduates, you know. And I'm sure we can talk in a little bit about, you know, waivers and the felony waiver issue and things like this. But bottom line, we -- you know, what it took to be a Marine two and three and five and 10 years ago is what it takes to be a Marine today. We just haven't reduced the standards.

And they do it without bonuses. I mean, we don't offer much. You know, we offer one thing, and that's that you'll be a United States Marine and that will transform you and that'll last for life.

So you know, we've got other services -- and I'm not shooting on anyone else's targets -- they're offering as much as \$30(,000), \$35,000 to join the Marine Corps (sic). We don't. The kids that walk in the door know what they want. The money's not a matter. They want to be the Marines.

And we've continued to make our mission, and we'll make our mission this year again, and I'm confident we'll make it next year.

Does that pretty much answer your question?

Q Yeah, that was great. That was very insightful.

Just for a follow-up, what's the percentage -- the retainability percentage, the retention that you guys --

GEN. MILSTEAD: Oh, well, see, now you're going to ask me for -- you know, I don't have that kind of data in my head, but it's good.

You know, this ability -- I'll tell you, for me to say that the reason that -- you know, remember -- let me put something in context real quick. You remember it was in '07 that the commandant said he wanted to grow the force to 202K -- I mean, to -- yes, to 202K. So in '07 we stepped off on this. So that's 27,000 additional Marines that we needed above the normal, you know, 30-ish thousand or whatever. So the goal was 184(,000). We finished that first year at 186(,000), and all -- about 186,5(00). So this year, when we were supposed to reach 189(,000), since we were so close last year, we gave ourselves a stretch goal of 191(,000).

Right now we're getting to where we're what, two weeks away from closing the books, maybe, on the fiscal year, and it looks like we're going to finish this year at about 198(,000), maybe some change over 198(,000).

So that means that we'll easily achieve our 202K by the end of next year, when originally, you know, we were only supposed to be at 194(,000). So we will have made it two years early.

Now, is that all because of the great Marines out there on recruiting duty? No. They've certainly played a significant part, but it's also retention, and that's what you spoke of.

The young men and women today, they're hanging around, you know, and they may have two or three deployments under their belt. But you know, they enjoy what they -- doing. They feel they're -- it's worth their effort, and so they're reenlisting.

So I would tell you that our success of building the corps up to 202(,000) has been largely done (sic) to retention as much as that it's been to recruiting.

Q But again, you said it was based off the (inaudible word) of being a Marine, not the bonuses and the extra stuff that the other branches offer.

GEN. MILSTEAD: I would say that's true for the initial walking in the door, because we don't have this -- there's very little I can do. I can give you a little bit of money, maybe 5,000 bucks, if -- for a shipping bonus, if you're going to -- you'll hold off and go, say, around Christmas time or something -- you know, during the lean months. We call it FMAM -- you know, February, March, you know, April and May. That -- you know, that's our lean period. So if we can ship you then, hold you and ship you then, we'll give you five grand, say.

If you've got a -- if you come in the Marine Corps to be an infantry skill set and you'll sign up for either five or six years, we'll give you some money.

Come in just for the normal four years and then, you know, no, we won't give you any money. So it's -- the money for walking in the door is few and far between.

There have been, however, some good bonuses. Congress has been good to all the armed forces for the reenlistment bonuses. Selective reenlistment bonuses -- if you extend for a year and do another combat deployment, we'll give you a bonus. So there's -- and I don't have my arms around that, because that's more the guys upstairs, M&RA.

But there is money that's -- a lot more money for reenlistment and the retention piece than there is for the guys walking in the door. But I don't have a dog in that fight, per se.

Q Okay, sir. Thank you. Just one more question for clarification. You said in '07 the commandant asked for the 202 push by 2011 or 2010?

GEN. MILSTEAD: 2011.

Q Okay.

GEN. MILSTEAD: It was a five-year ramp. And we have will achieved it, three years.

Q Okay. All right. Thank you, sir.

GEN. MILSTEAD: You bet.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Grim, you're next.

Q Yes, sir. Good to talk to you this morning.

GEN. MILSTEAD: Good morning.

Q I want to ask you a question about recruiting demographics. The Defense Manpower Data Center at DOD puts out these numbers for the military as a whole; I don't know how they differ with the Marines, but maybe you can talk about this somewhat. It looks like the -- they break out the country into four regions: the Northeast, Midwest, South and West. And then there are subregions within those. The South is always, every year, strongly overrepresented in recruiting. The Mountain West is overrepresented and the rest of the country is underrepresented, especially the Northeast, California and places like that. Would you like to talk about what you are doing to try and reach out to some of those under-represented places and get people to consider becoming Marines?

GEN. MILSTEAD: Wow. That's a great question and it's a tough question. You know, for us, we separate, first of all -- and you all know this. You know, I mean, you all are an intelligent crowd. You do your homework, you know. So, I mean, you know this.

I break the country left and right, you know, or east and west. I've got the western region; I've got the eastern region. Generally I break it right down the Mississippi river. And then each one of those regions is further broken up into threes. So I have six districts. And you're spot on. Which district struggles or has to work -- they're all working hard, but which is the one that has the greatest challenge right now? That's the 1st Marine Corps District. And that's what? That's Buffalo, Albany, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, New Jersey, Baltimore, Springfield. It's the Northeast. That's the one.

Now, I get places like Recruiting Station Atlanta, which is down in the 6th District. They close on their mission the end of the first week, traditionally. One week, and they've made their quota. So they're continuing to build. But then again, Denver -- Denver's another RS that if I was a young major and had to go somewhere I'd want to go. They're knocking it into the -- into the stands.

So you're right. And we look at this, and one of the first things I asked was kind of like that: Okay, how is it that we have these recruiting stations spread around the country? It was obviously based on some sort of demographics, you know, analysis. When was the last time this was done? You know, I would offer that the country has changed; the demographics has changed some. Do we need to look at doing this?

You know, some of it is driven by BRAC. For instance, we used to have a district headquarters for the 8th District, which is Texas and New Mexico and all that -- used to be -- no, I'm sorry, for the 6th. It used to be down in New Orleans. No, it was the 8th. It was in New Orleans, and then they re-did the line and they moved it up to Dallas. Some of that was Katrina, but it was also -- it was already planned.

So we're looking at it, but we'll send the recruiters to where the seniors are. So we have an analysis that shows where these kids are.

So instead of moving the stations, I'll maybe say, okay, well, this station that's in an area that does very, very well, we'll give them, say, for discussion purposes, 10 recruiters. And I'll send 15 or 20 to the -- to an area that needs more recruiters.

You know, we target, you know, of course, our seniors. The seniors in high school is the bread and butter because they're the ones that we talk to as they begin their senior year. We want to get them into the pool and have a year to work with them before we ship them in the summer.

So it's an ongoing process. I wish I could give you, you know, that I have this project, that project and that project. But we don't but we are looking. It's a constant. Again it's more art than it is science.

Q Well, if I may ask a follow-up question --

GEN. MILSTEAD: Sure.

Q -- on the subject of art, have you considered the question of whether it is the recruiting message that is causing this?

I mean, the Marines of course have the best recruiting commercials, if I may venture an opinion on the subject with the, you know, rock climbing and the swords. And does that play better in the South and in the Mountain West? Do you need a different way of talking to people in the Northeast and California and places like that?

GEN. MILSTEAD: Well, not really. But I will tell you, you know, I mean, I'll be open kimono with you here.

For the ones that we show for instance in certain areas, the guy climbing the rock may be an African American. And that may play in the Northeast or it may play, you know, in the Atlanta area or something like this. The one that plays in Nebraska, you know, it's a cornfed, you know, redheaded white boy. And the one that plays out in Phoenix, Albuquerque and Southern Mexico is a Hispanic.

So we kind of look at it that way, and that's not a bad thing. But we do look at those sorts of things. But you brought up a good point that I want to just, and again I'm not throwing rocks at anybody else. But other -- we're diametrically opposite, I think, to some of the other services in how we recruit, what our message is. Other services recruit, offer themselves as a means to something else, to something better. You know, we'll get you a college education. We'll get you financial stability. You'll improve your lot in life. The Marine Corps offers itself as the destination. You know, the, like we say, the transformation, and it's for a lifetime. We offer you one thing only, and that's that you'll be a United States Marine.

We don't talk college. We don't talk money. We don't talk, you know, anything else. We make one promise and that you'll be, you know, the -- a United States Marine. And I think that resonates. That sort of message resonates nationally. It's just a function of propensity to serve or whatever. And we're looking at that too especially and we can talk about, you know, minority issues and everything.

We're -- I've got, I've put together a, what we'll call a diversity advisory group, with some leading community leaders that are African America, to

tell me how I can better refine the message or what I can do to increase the number of African American men and women that, when they graduate from college, they join the Marine Corps instead of going somewhere else. And you know what. Somebody talked about that thing last night.

There was a whole lot of talk about national service from both McCain and Obama. And I just kind of chuckled because I said, you know, words are cheap. Believe me, I'm living that. I want to see that and I want to see people come into the service. But it's easier said than done.

Q Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And do we have any follow-up questions?

Q Absolutely. Hey, General, I've got two, one from a blogger who just e-mailed one in, and one of my own, if you don't mind.

GEN. MILSTEAD: Sure.

Q Here's my question. We chatted with some people, some of the Army recruiters, maybe two months ago, three months ago. And they're talking to us about the felony waiver and what a great deal that is, and they've got a program now where kids who don't have a GED, the Army's going to get them up to a GED type of level. Do you think the Marine Corps is going to have to stoop to that, or is the message strong enough where you don't even need those kind of kids?

GEN. MILSTEAD: We -- and you know, I'm glad you brought up the felony waiver. I think, you know, like Mark Twain said, sometimes a lie gets halfway around the world before truth pulls its boots on. You know, we got beat up when I was still up in Washington in the public affairs arena, you know, last year when this felony waiver thing came out. There was the perception that, you know, they were kicking open the jailhouse doors and that we had to recruit felons to make our -- you know, our quotas for enlisting. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We still enlist people that have -- on a felony waiver, but let me explain briefly. This is all part of screening. Felony waivers have not increased, they've remained relatively constant, you know, going all the way back to '03, '02, well before we started this ramp to increase the size of the Marine Corps. We do a waiver, whether it's a drug waiver or a felony waiver, you know, it's intended to evaluate the whole person.

The numbers, for instance, last year in '07, we had 350 felony waivers. That's less than 1 percent of the total force that we enlisted. Now, the other number that was thrown around was 523, and that was also felony arrest and conviction numbers, and that would be 1.35 percent. These are numbers I have burned into my brain housing group from my days up there in public affairs.

But the takeaway is, five hundred -- even if we use the highest number, 523, we didn't have to enlist those guys and gals; we chose to. I could have still made my goal. You know, I have a delayed entry program; I could have slid some left. We actually exceeded the goal a little bit. So that was a decision on our part to bring them aboard, not -- because we chose to, not because we had to. And remember too, it's a holistic thing. We look at the entire package. We consider his character, written references, the recommendations throughout



the recruiting chain of command, and it requires a general officer approval. And I look at -- at them. So it's a decision that we make to bring them aboard.

And I'll just give you an example. You know, a kid takes his mother's car -- his mom and dad's separated. The kid goes over there, takes his mother's car while he's spending the weekend with his mom. She doesn't know it. She reports it. Grand theft auto. That's a felony.

Kid breaks into the country club golf cart shack, he and a buddy, liquored up, they're 16, they get a golf car and they're joyriding around on the golf course. That's felony burglary and some other things. Those are two instances.

I just saw one two days ago where a guy when he was in college got in a fight, he was getting his ass kicked, so he bit the guy on the nose. The guy had to go to the hospital and have his nose, you know, sewn up. The kid was charged with felony assault and, you know, something to cause bad bodily harm, something like that. The kid's now a law school graduate, for heaven's sakes, and is applying to come in the Marine Corps as a lawyer.

So, yeah, there are felonies out there, but you know what? Bad people, evil men we don't bring into the Marine Corps.

So it's something we want to keep doing. I want that arrow in my quiver. But it's -- I'm not kicking open a jailhouse door. And I know I'm not supposed to repeat colorful terms, but I just did. You get my point.

Q Exactly. Hey, and the follow-up question comes from Jim Dolbow, who writes for the Coast Guard blog. And he is asking about the tattoo waiver. And he says everybody seems to be tattooed from the age of 10 on up. Is the Marine Corps' more-restrictive-than-normal tattoo policy affecting your numbers?

GEN. MILSTEAD: No. No, it's not. And for instance, officers, for officer accession programs, I look at every package. Every one. If it's a MECEP, if it's a kid coming in, I look at it.

And that way I'll, you know, keep the playing field level.

But the commandant is concerned. You know, he's come out with a couple of ALMARs and speaking to the issue. But I think it's a cultural thing.

You know, I laugh. What, 40, 50 years ago, if a woman had pierced ears, especially if she had two or three holes in one ear, she was probably viewed as a woman of questionable character, you know. Now everybody's got, you know, multiple piercings, if not at least just one.

I think you're seeing a lot of the same thing with tattoos. It's a cultural thing. You'd be surprised how many of these college kids come in, and they have everything from their mother's name or their dad's name, who's passed away, to a religious tattoo, to -- you know, a cross or a star of David or something of the like. I mean, it's a cultural thing.

But the commandant, you know, feels that there's some tattoos of an excessive nature out there, and especially in officers, you know, he feels that it may -- you know, not represent our traditional values and that some of these kids have taken the liberty to just, you know, tattoo themselves to excess.

So he's not going to kick them out of the Marine Corps. They're grandfathered. But they're not going to slide over to officer programs.

So I'll tell you that the number of kids that we do not let come into the Marine Corps are not that significant because of tattoos. It's -- it has not a -- it does not have an adverse effect, per se, on our recruiting.

Q (Inaudible) -- thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And we are just about out of time, sir. But do you have a closing -- some closing remarks, sir?

GEN. MILSTEAD: Well, I do. You know, I just -- one thing that, you know, I really thought you all would ask me about and you didn't, so I want to tee it up, and that's recruiter misconduct. I mean, that's right square on my plate. You know, we have a zero tolerance for it. And you know, I can sit here and tell you that, oh, this isn't going to happen and that, you know, these things happen in the world. Well, you know, they shouldn't. And every accusation is going to be thoroughly investigated and adjudicated appropriately.

You know, the instances are few and far between. But you and I both know one is too many.

There's a case in Houston right now. We've got a case on the West Coast. I can't comment about them, of course, because they're still in the process, and I'm in the chain.

But I think the moral DNA of our recruiter force is good. I mean, you all know what distributed operations is, and I would offer that nowhere in the Marine Corps is distributed operations more -- you know, the term of operational -- how we operate than in the recruiting force.

I mean, I've got people spread all over the country, to include Alaska and Hawaii. Hell, I even got them out in the Pacific. And many of them are out there with a minimum of supervision. You know what? They do well. They do the right thing.

And so this sort of conduct, when we discover it, it's not consistent with what America, you know, expects from our Marine Corps. And we take it serious and it hurts. And we don't (shoo-shoo ?) it and we will -- we don't hide it. And we put it out there to where, you know, it just needs to be done publicly, but it needs to go through the due process.

So that's just one thing, I think, that you couldn't talk about recruiting without addressing recruiter misconduct, because I'll tell you, one of them, just -- I was down in Biloxi, Mississippi a couple days ago and talking to our recruiters. And there's one school that we're still not back into to the point that we would like to be, and it goes back to a recruiter misconduct five years ago.

I mean, you know, trust is a fragile thing. And so once it's violated, it takes time to build it back up. And so it only takes one of these knuckleheads to give us, you know, a challenge of getting back in there, because we don't deal with the malls, remember. We deal with the high schools. So that's kind of what I wanted to make sure that I got addressed, because I don't

think we would have covered the playing field, had we not talked about recruiter misconduct.

SEAMAN SELBY: Well, thank you very much, sir.

And thank you all to the bloggers that were on the call today. We appreciate your time.

GEN. MILSTEAD: Hey, let's do this -- let's do this again. I mean, I'd like to -- I'd like to open a dialogue. You all -- you know how to get a hold of our public affairs. You all individually can call and talk, if you have questions.

Again, you know, I look at these blogs and I look at the dialogue, and it's not you-all, but it's people -- I mean, there's even kids asking about joining the Marine Corps on gaming -- on gaming blogs. And I look at some of the replies and they're just, you know -- I just want to jump on my computer and -- you know, and jump in there myself, which I can't do. So let's do this more regularly. And again, I offer up my staff, if you want to get down in the weeds on some issues. But let's plan on doing this every so often, okay?

Q Sure.

SEAMAN SELBY: Yes, sir. Thank you.

Great, General. Thanks for the time today.

GEN. MILSTEAD: Okay, thank you all. Have a great weekend.

SEAMAN SELBY: You too, sir.

Q Yes, sir.

GEN. MILSTEAD: All right. Cheers.

SEAMAN SELBY: Bye.

END.