"BELOW-THE-ZONE" and Command Selection

Major Vylius M. Leskys, U.S. Army

DO YOU BELIEVE that this is a fair and equitable process, that you selected the best qualified officers, and that you gave adequate consideration to those officers with Joint duty experience and those with adverse information? All Active Component selection board members who filter through the Department of the Army (DA) Secretariat answer this formal question in the affirmative at the end of each and every selection process. Why are they so confident in the selection process while some in the field question its results? Why was "Miller" picked up from below the zone with his aide-de-camp experience, but "Jones" with the same experience was not? Why were some individuals selected for command, while other stellar officers were not even alternates on the list? This article attempts to provide answers to these concerns and to dispel some myths about the selection process.

As a board recorder at the DA Secretariat, I oversaw the spectrum of officer boards in promotion, command, and schooling for captains through generals. Officers and others have most frequently asked me about the below the zone and command selection processes. The files of selected officers I saw contained numerous references to exceptional duty performance as well as multiple and wide-ranging indicators of future promotion and command potential. I assure the reader that the selection process works as it is intended to work.

Members of each selection board are governed by three factors when deciding how to score a file:

- The guidance in their memorandum of instruction.
- Laws and policies, including Title 10 of the U.S. Code.
- The personal experiences of the voting board members.

The sum of these three factors combined creates the order of merit list.

Usually signed by the Secretary of the Army or the Army Chief of Staff, the board's memorandum of instruction provides overarching guidance about the skills, experiences, and desired leader attributes (e.g., an officer's "warrior ethos") the future force needs. It also provides selected objectives based on a five-year plan, which is a model of projected requirements for promotion consistent with the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act umbrella.

The law (Title 10) and policy (DOD or chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instructions, and Army regulations) specify the board's composition, personnel management act goals, and maximum below-the-zone selection capabilities and guide the services in executing officer selection boards.

In addition to the memorandum of instruction, Title 10, and DOD policies, each voting selection board member relies on his or her personal experience

Major Vylius M. Leskys is the brigade operations officer for the Warrior Transition Brigade. He served as recorder for the Secretariat for Department of the Army Selection Boards from 2006 to 2008. He holds a B.A. from California State University, a J.D. from Thomas M. Cooley Law School, and an M.M.S. from the Marine Corps University.

and knowledge to rate each file numerically from one to six based on the performance and potential of each officer.

In the end, the aggregate of board members' scores yields the final order of merit list. This selection process is inherently fair when one looks at the end state. If there are 20 board members voting (including the board president), each vote represents only 5 percent of the aggregate. No one voice is more powerful than the rest.

Below-the-Zone

Title 10 of the U.S. Code mandates the below-the-zone process and authorizes the Secretary of the Army to select up to 10 percent of the maximum selection capability from the below-the-zone population. The Secretary of Defense may authorize up to 15 percent if the Army's needs so dictate. In 2006, as an example, the maximum below-the-zone selection rate for promotion boards for all field grade officers was set at 7.5 percent. For 2007, all three boards were set at 10 percent.

Army Regulation 600-8-29, *Officer Promotions*, page 19, paragraph 1-34b states: "The below-the-zone promotions are intended to provide officers of exceptional ability an opportunity to advance quickly to more responsible positions, help retain high quality officers, and give officers an incentive to perform at their highest level." However, what officers find most significant about the process is the fact that, as DOD Memorandum 600-2 states, "those selected from below the zone replace those who otherwise would be promoted from in and above the zone; therefore, they must be clearly superior to those who would otherwise be promoted."

Board members take a cursory first look of the below-the-zone population using the "Yes/No/Show Cause" screening categories. If a below-the-zone officer falls into the "Yes" category, he merits further consideration for accelerated promotion and possesses potential for promotion ahead of his contemporaries; if he falls into the "No" category, the officer does not; if he falls into the "Show Cause" category, involuntary separation is recommended to the commanding general, Human Resources Command.

The board thus generates a preliminary order of merit list of potential below-the-zone candidates based on the aggregate total of individual "Yes" votes. The board then decides how many "Yes" votes it takes to move an adequate number of candidates to the next level of scrutiny, which is the two-to-six numerical ranking. The board generates a second order of merit list that yields the "potential below-the-zone selects" based on the maximum below-the-zone selection capability provided in the memorandum of instruction.

The board then compares these "potential" below-the-zone selects against the candidates they would potentially replace. The board compares the lowest scoring below-the-zone selectee to the highest scoring in- and above-the-zone candidate. The files of the two officers are displayed on a screen so all the board members can see them. The board then discusses the candidates and votes. If the board deems the lowest below-the-zone candidate to be "clearly superior" to the highest in- and above-the-zone candidate, then it stands to reason that the remaining below-the-zone candidates, all of whom have higher rankings in the below-the-zone list, are superior to the remaining in- and above-the-zone counterparts, all of whom have lower rankings in the in- and above-the-zone list.

When this occurs, all of the below-the-zone files will be in the final order of merit list, and represent the maximum below-the-zone selection capability. If, however, the board does not deem the lowest scoring below-the-zone candidate to be clearly superior to the highest scoring in- and above-the-zone candidate, then it must compare the next two candidates (the next to lowest below-the-zone candidate and the next to highest in- and above-the-zone candidate) and so on until a clearly superior below-the-zone officer emerges or until all below-the-zone /in- and above-the-zone comparisons are exhausted.

Command Selection Boards

One of the biggest misunderstandings with regard to the command selection board process is the belief that command boards vote only once for each officer and then somehow deconflict afterwards. In fact, board members vote on individuals in every command category in which officers compete. As a result, a board member may cast 11 separate votes for one officer during a command selection board process. Individual votes reflect the varied assignment histories and experiences of officers competing for command. An officer with previous success in

recruiting, for example, might expect to fare better on the aggregate order of merit list for "recruiting and training" than an officer with comparable performance but no prior recruiting experience.

Command boards, like promotion boards, start with individual voting that creates order of merit lists. The word picture, however, is not based on the candidates' position as a principal or alternate for promotion, but focuses on each officer's performance and potential.

Three courses of action are available to the board. One course of action simply defaults to the command category in which the candidate gets the highest score as the principal category. Another course of action gives the board an open forum to decide the best category for each eligible officer to meet the needs of the Army. The last course of action combines the two, allowing the highest score to initially drive the board decisions, but then allowing board members to pick the best command for officers who score within a certain point spread on other order of merit lists (i.e., those for tactical, garrison, and key billet). For example, if the board decides to pick a one-point spread as its guideline, then the board will look at the file of an officer who scored a 60 in the tactical command order of merit list and 59 on the garrison order of merit list, and decide the command for which he or she is best suited in light of the Army's needs.

Command boards, like promotion boards, start with individual voting that creates order of merit lists.

Board members are restricted to looking at only those officers who are at the top of the order of merit lists and could fill available principal command positions. Once the board fills all principal command billets, it assigns alternates from the highest-scoring remaining candidates on the order of merit list. Ultimately, the process selects principals based on the aggregate of their individual scores, significantly limiting the ability of any one board member's opinion to influence an officer's selection.

Before I began working at the DA Secretariat, I believed in myths: the undue influence of higher ranked officers, the ability of a single individual to sway a board to vote on a single candidate, and the requirement to have worked in a handful of "special" jobs in order to be picked up below the zone or put on the command list. I have found all these myths to be untrue.

In the end, the process is executed with integrity and facilitates the selection of the best officers to meet the Army's future requirements. The quality of the officer's file and his or her manner of performance—in the *collective* judgment of all board members—determines an officer's standing on the final order of merit list. ***MR***