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## Writing Great FITREPs

September is the busiest month for FITREPs – E-7, E-8, W-2, O-1, O-2, O-4, and O-5 FITREPs are all due, plus departing senior reports for about 50 percent of commands. In the end-of-the-fiscal-year scramble, sometimes quality takes a back seat to quantity. Here are some tips on how to achieve both.

If it's your FITREP, make sure you provide timely, quality input (see my July 2004 column on "Building Better Brag Sheets.") However, recognize that your involvement does not stop here. A FITREP may go through several revisions before it is finalized; stay involved in this process. Ask to see FITREP drafts as they progress from department head to XO to CO. You may be a great writer, and your CO may be a great writer, but if your XO is a lousy writer and mangles your draft, you lose.

One of the biggest disappointments I experienced as a CO was when great officers submitted lousy FITREP inputs. That often cost them, not because I was vindictive, but because I rank based on whom I consider best for command and promotion. Officers who refuse to learn how to write good FITREPs can damage a lot of careers if they make CO. Make sure all of your officers learn this valuable skill.

Remember the three purposes of FITREPs: document performance, provide feedback, and serve as basis for decisions by selection boards. Boards often review hundreds, sometimes thousands, of records in a brief period of time. Briefers may only spend a few seconds on each FITREP. You want your FITREP to catch their attention.

I recommend the following format:

- Strong opening statement ranking the Sailor and characterizing performance.

- Bullet-points of specific accomplishments (quantified, and showing impact).

- Final recommendations for promotion and follow-on assignment.

NAVADMIN 049/97 removed restrictions on comments. Therefore, ranking is permissible, and for your best performers, essential. "RANKED 1 OF 48 COMMANDERS OF ANY DESIGNATOR." "#2 OF 24 OFFICERS ASSIGNED." "RANKED 3 OF 18 COMMANDING OFFICERS." Don't be afraid to use all caps for the opening sentence – BUPERS won't reject your report for this. Make it STAND OUT for the reader. Always rank your top EPs; rank MPs who just missed the cut. (See my January 2004 column on "Taking Care of Number Two" for more tips on the "right" words.)

Ranking is not appropriate for "pack" performers. Instead, use decreasing adjectives of "outstanding," "excellent," "capable," to characterize performance. Don't pull punches for poor performers. State your judgment up front; don't bury it in the report. If an officer shouldn't be promoted or selected for command, make the call; don't hope the board will read between the lines. Do not use the term "dirtball," however tempting.

Prioritize bullet points based on demonstrated leadership and mission accomplishment. Use these criteria as a "noise filter." Don't waste lines describing esoteric actions that are meaningful only to your supported command. If you feel compelled to write a job description, use block 29.

Know what each of your Sailors needs to be advanced or promoted. If you consider them worthy of promotion, write your FITREP with that as the overriding consideration. Avoid stupid mistakes (see my September 2003 column on "The Ten Deadly Sins of FITREPs"); they cost your Sailors dearly, and diminish their opinion of their boss.

In the final recommendation, reiterate career assignment recommendations in block 40. Know the hierarchy of block 40; for line CAPTs, "Flag Officer," "CO, Major Command," "REDCOM DME" are

at the top. For CDRs and below, "CO," "OIC," "XO" are tops. "Department Head" is not as meaningful; boards do not select department heads. However, do not grant "CO" endorsements automatically if not warranted. Remember that O-6 FITREPs signed by CAPTs must be endorsed by the first flag officer in the chain of command.

When you write your opening and closing lines, think "sound bites." Write a phrase that a briefer can copy onto your PSR to be read by the rest of the board. Good examples I have seen: "Future Chief of Chaplains" (made meaningful as it was written BY the Chief of Chaplains), "Ranked 2 of 46," "Future flag officer." There are some bad examples, too: "15th consecutive Outstanding PRT." Sorry. Doesn't help toward promotion.

Ensure important AT contributions are folded into regular FITREP; many briefers skim or skip AT FITREPs; many commands no longer provide them. Don't forget Bilger Awards – include for all members of the command, especially the CO and XO. Don't waste words. "Earned FY 03 Bilger Award" says enough.

Final thoughts: NAVADMIN 071/04 now permits reporting seniors to insert 000-00-0000 instead of their SSN in block 27 of member's copy (not BUPERS copy) of FITREPs. Do this. Identity theft is a serious problem; providing your SSN to a disgruntled or careless Sailor is not smart.

Use the tools provided in NAVFIT98, particularly the spell checker and the validation tool. Rejected FITREPs can create significant problems for officers facing upcoming boards. I've submitted over 200 reports without a single rejection; you should be able to do the same.

In summary, write quality inputs, submit them early, track your FITREP at each stage of production, use the three-part structure, include a sound bite, and submit on time.

*Next month: Guest column by my friend CAPT Larry Weill on a fascinating study he's completed on FOS (failure of selection) officers.*