

# Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion

A unique unit in need of a unique structure

by Capt Lawrence V. Coffey

The sun never sets on MCSB (Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion); it is a truly unique unit. Subordinate to Marine Corps Intelligence Activity and headquartered in Fort Meade, MD, MCSB's subordinate companies are located in Georgia, Colorado, Texas, and Hawaii. Its Marines are strewn across the globe in Germany, Australia, Japan, Korea, and other countries. Although tasked with a unique mission, MCSB has failed to adopt a complementarily unique structure and consequently fails to accomplish its mission effectively.

MCSB's stated mission is to

train, employ, and deploy Marines to conduct Signals Intelligence, Information Assurance, and National Tactical Integration activities satisfying NSA/CSS [National Security Agency/Cen-

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tral Security Service], Marine Air-Ground Task Force, and Joint Force Intelligence Requirements while under the operational control of the Director, NSA/Chief, CSS.

The majority of MCSB's Marines fill NSA/CSS positions, and MCSB's mission statement stipulates the assignment of its Marines to NSA/CSS as their primary role. Marines serving in NSA/CSS positions are not assigned to the same operational mission set within NSA/CSS; instead, NSA/CSS assigns Marines to subunits within its structure. Marines assigned to the same adminis-

trative squad are not necessarily in the same operational unit. It is truly a joint environment where MCSB's Marines work alongside civilians and service members from all other Services. Marines who do not work directly for NSA/CSS serve in administrative functions or constitute the Marine Cryptologic Support Element (MCSE), an entity designed to liaise between NSA/CSS and the Operating Forces. MCSB's current structure and focus cause the unit to fail its mission, dishonor its commitment to NSA/CSS, and retard the development of its assigned Marines.

Three main problems manifest in MCSB's structure, and priorities, coupled with recommendations for improvement, are discussed below. I propose a structural change be applied to MCSB that, accompanied with an adjustment of the unit's priorities, will enable MCSB to accomplish its mission fully while honoring its commitment to NSA/CSS and its assigned Marines.

First, MCSB is a divided unit with incompatible priorities. Marines assigned to MCSB work for both the Marine Corps and NSA/CSS, and while this is not intrinsically a problem, as demonstrated by Marines assigned to joint units, MCSB has failed to appreciate the implications of this arrangement. Although NSA/CSS assumes operational control of nearly all MCSB Marines, MCSB is still equipped with a full staff, that does not serve in NSA/CSS positions, expected of a unit that is in operational control of its subordinate elements. MCSB is not an operational unit, although it attempts to perform as if it is. Keeping MCSB's mission in mind, the result of a full staff is the creation of unneces-



**MCSB needs to do away with unnecessary and incompatible manning requirements that exist within the battalion.** (Photo by LCpl Isabelo Tabanguil.)

sary work: MCSB's own staff distracts its Marines from accomplishing their mission. MCSB's Marines who are not assigned to NSA/CSS roles are doing what is expected of them—they keep themselves busy; however, if they were not assigned to superfluous positions, they would not create additional tasks for MCSB's Marines who are assigned to NSA/CSS positions. It is a case of talented, driven Marines, who do not have a full job, creating a full job for themselves.

To correct overstaffing, I recommend that all Marines assigned to MCSB hold NSA/CSS positions, to include the Commanding Officer, MCSB, and his subordinate commanders.<sup>1</sup> I recommend that the only Marines exempt from NSA/CSS positions be those of non-intelligence specialties, such as administrative Marines. MCSB's Marines would continue to complete required annual training as expected of any Marine; however, the staff currently creating unnecessary tasks would redirect its efforts toward more meaningful responsibilities aligned with MCSB's mission. MCSB's staff, comprised of capable and experienced Marines, would be re-employed to important NSA/CSS positions. By withholding MCSB's key leaders from NSA/CSS positions, MCSB obstructs its own mission of satisfying NSA/CSS requirements. MCSB should allow these Marines to serve in NSA/CSS positions in direct support of the unit's mission rather than reserving them for Marine Corps functions.

Second, MCSB ineffectively evaluates its Marines. Marine Corps officers serve as reporting seniors and reviewing officers for fitness reports, and recommenders for proficiency and duty conduct markings, for nearly all Marines assigned to MCSB. However, it is commonplace for a Marine's operational supervisor to be a member of another Service or a civilian. Marines supervised by Marines are the exception, not the rule. The implications of this arrangement are that Marines are evaluated based on their performance in their collateral (Marine Corps) duties first and their NSA/CSS position second. While diligent Marine Corps reporting seniors acquire evaluations



*Marines don't need to be assigned to superfluous positions. (Photo by Cpl Joseph Scanlan.)*

from their Marines' NSA/CSS supervisors, the chain of responsibility between the supervisors and the supervised in NSA/CSS positions is reduced to noble intent. Marines will naturally defer to their Marine Corps supervisors rather than their NSA/CSS supervisors, as one would expect. The current structure reveals MCSB's prioritization—MCSB comes first, then NSA/CSS—and in turn dishonors MCSB's commitment to NSA/CSS. If given a chance, NSA/CSS supervisors would not hire a Marine who was only partially accountable to them. What supervisor would?

sion statement, and provide accurate and sophisticated evaluations of its Marines. Second, MCSB's leaders should be required to conduct their Marines' counseling sessions in conjunction with their NSA/CSS supervisors. In this way, both supervisors would be able to coordinate the tasks and evaluate the performance of their Marines. Third, MCSB should not seek to simplify the content of fitness reports for the ease of board consumption. If a Marine Corps board is unable to interpret an NSA/CSS supervisor's evaluation, the board should broaden its understanding of sig-

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In order to rectify MCSB's backwards process of conducting evaluations, I recommend that MCSB restructure the manner in which it writes evaluations. First, NSA/CSS supervisors should serve as reporting seniors and Marine Corps officers as reviewing officers.<sup>2</sup> In this way, MCSB would demonstrate its commitment to prioritizing NSA/CSS's mission, as directed by its mis-

nals intelligence rather than expecting a simplification of Marines' evaluations. Our Marine Corps risks becoming the left-behind military intelligence Service if we continue to refuse to appreciate the complexity of the specialty of our evaluation process. Alternatively, the Marine Corps should reconsider the assignment of Marines to positions for which it is incapable of processing evalu-

ations. Why does the Marine Corps assign Marines to NSA/CSS positions if the Marine Corps is not interested in their performance in these positions? This proposed improvement to MCSB's evaluation process constitutes growth as a Service and progression in line with the *Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, & Reconnaissance Enterprise (MCISR-E) Plan: 2015–2020*.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, approximately one-third of Marines assigned to MCSB—and in turn NSA/CSS—are first-term Marines. Despite their tenacity and penchant for hard work, Marines fresh out of training hunger for a unit that performs typical Marine Corps activities such as field exercises, unit physical training, and unit-wide functions. In turn, MCSB's junior Marines are disappointed by their experience, as it does not resemble the Marine Corps they expected. MCSB is tasked to provide Marines to the NSA/CSS workforce, not to perform typical Marine Corps functions.<sup>4</sup> MCSB's companies provide Marine Corps-themed activities because they want to help Marines feel like Marines; in doing so, MCSB applies a bandage to a self-inflicted wound. As a result of these activities, NSA/CSS supervisors, who consequently do without their Marine workforce, are impaired in the accomplishment of their missions.

In order to eliminate the desire to conduct events that enable MCSB's junior Marines to feel like Marines, I recommend that the Marine Corps not assign junior Marines to MCSB.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, would absolve MCSB's companies from the desire to plan and execute unnecessary events. Additionally, intelligence Marines who arrive at their first unit often do not hold adjudicated clearances, thus, approximately 50 percent of first-tour MCSB Marines spend their first year in the unit waiting for the Department of Defense Central Adjudication Facility to adjudicate their clearances.<sup>6</sup> NSA/CSS does not accelerate access by granting temporary access to non-adjudicated Marines, whereas other Marine Corps units, such as Radio Battalions, do. This change would have two additional, favorable consequences: first, the performance of Marines, relative to other Services, providing resources to



**Marines want to do Marine things; that's why they joined the Corps.** (Photo by Sgt Brandon Thomas.)

NSA/CSS would improve, and second, assignment to MCSB would be associated with prestige—an assignment fit for Marines who perform well in their first tour or tours.

To conclude, I recommend viewing MCSB as a union that provides resources to its employer: NSA/CSS. MCSB is responsible for providing administrative functions for its assigned Marines. However, MCSB is not an operational unit in the traditional sense, and it would perform better, both in terms of accomplishing its mission and on behalf of its assigned Marines, if it stopped behaving as one. Ultimately, the Marine Corps should not assign Marines to NSA/CSS if MCSB is incapable of allowing NSA/CSS to fully employ these Marines. The Marine Corps risks damaging its reputation, with both the intelligence community and our joint Services, by half-heartedly committing to this relationship. MCSB is a unique unit; it is time for it to structure itself in a complementarily unique manner.

#### Notes

1. The counterargument that the administrative functions of MCSB constitute a full-time job is disproved by the existence of intelligence units in other Services that are responsible for both administrative and operational control.

2. The Performance Evaluation System (*MCO 1610.7*) permits non-Marine Reporting Seniors.

3. Although integration into NSA/CSS supports several of the goals identified in the *MCISR-E Plan*, MCSB's committed integration into NSA/CSS directly supports Goal 4: Partnership Design and Goal 5: Professional Design. Uniquely postured to capitalize on its integration into NSA/CSS alongside other service members, MCSB should embrace, rather than continuing to shun, this opportunity.

4. A comparison of re-enlistment rates between MCSB's 26XX Marines and other Marine Corps units' 26XX Marines would be beneficial in examining the result of the disillusionment many junior MCSB Marines experience.

5. The prohibition of assigning junior Marines to MCSB would likely decrease the unit's size. This, I suggest, is an acceptable consequence and ultimately in the best interest of the Marine Corps, its junior 26XX Marines, and NSA/CSS.

6. At any time, approximately 20 percent of MCSB's Marines (nearly all of them first-term Marines) await DOD CAF adjudication. Unable to perform NSA/CSS tasks, these Marines experience understandable frustration and pose a leadership drain on MCSB staff, through no fault of their own.

