

Who Needs COMMSTRAT?

How an improved Fleet Marine Force leadership structure and improved communication strategy and operations better supports the warfighter

by Capt John J. Parry

Communication strategy and operations (COMMSTRAT) serves as the “backbone” of the message and visual information production support for the MAGTF. As a supporting capability within the new seventh Marine Corps warfighting function of information, the COMMSTRAT community has a problem set that will improve the speed and focus of the MAGTF once solved.¹ This problem set includes identifying and delineating roles and responsibilities between the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) and Supporting Establishment (SE) while optimizing operational structure for COMMSTRAT forces. The lack of a unifying concept for the public affairs and combat camera merger has left COMMSTRAT Marines reeling to understand what the new occupational field (OccFld) needs to do to make this happen. This stems from the rapid merger of the legacy public affairs and combat camera fields which began in 2016. The merger led to the emergence of the COMMSTRAT OccFld, but no new policy or doctrine related to the merge followed in trace.

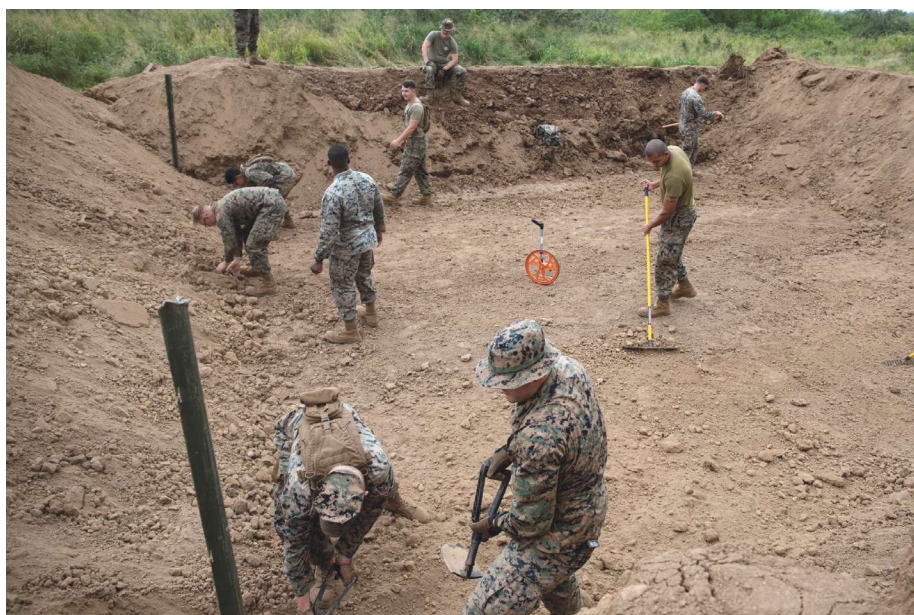
Over the past decade, the OccFld has continued to remain relatively unhealthy at the senior ranks.² This deficit in leadership and personnel as a whole actually drove the Service’s decision to execute the merger. Another symptom of the problem is the lack of structure to nurture proficiency and develop leaders for the senior ranks. Junior company grade officers continue to face a future where they enter the fleet and have no “top cover” in working directly for

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a chief of staff and general officer in their first billet. No other OccFld has second lieutenants working at senior commands as the senior advisor for their community. Both a cause and symptom of the problem, the community has a significant deficit in the lieutenant colonel and colonel ranks, which degrades the ability of the community to teach, coach, mentor, and choose with whom to invest from the junior ranks. These gaps make it particularly challenging

for the COMMSTRAT Marines supporting the range of military operations, considering they are one of the few MAGTF capabilities continuously working to shape the operating environment even while their peer organizations are solely focused on training and readiness.

The Marine Corps’ leadership definitely understands the need for COMMSTRAT capability, having supported precepts for promotion boards to protect



COMMSTRAT is continuously working to get the Marine story out. (Photo by LCpl Samantha Sanchez.)

the OccFld, but this has not translated at the operational and tactical levels in the FMF. In order to fix the problem, the COMMSTRAT OccFld needs to improve its organizational leadership structure and competitiveness, which ultimately improves support for the warfighter. The community can also make significant strides in improving operational support with better definition of FMF and SE roles and responsibilities, which supports improved efficiency, force proficiency and development, and warfighting effectiveness.

Roles and Responsibilities for COMMSTRAT: FMF vs SE

The Marine Corps can improve its COMMSTRAT support for the warfighter with a better understanding of “who does what” between the FMF and SE. The whole purpose of the FMF in garrison is to prepare for war. The purpose of the SE is to support the warfighter and enable his ability to prepare for war. The most significant problem with the OccFld stems from the blur between roles and responsibilities in the FMF versus the SE.³ What COMMSTRAT needs to define for the FMF is how it will support all the information-related capabilities’ production demands for communication products while in execution of any of the range of military operations. This means focusing on targeted audiences, how they receive their information, and generating products and engagements to reach them the way they will best receive it.

A focus on training and supporting training for command and control capability is the best way to make this happen. Legacy FMF public affairs operations in garrison focused on production of visual information products (VIPS), which generally had little reach and impact. The targeted audience for a unit conducting training on a local range, which was historically the FMF garrison main effort, is limited or negligible. The “so what” of garrison generated VIPS ultimately feels that it is aimed toward getting the attention of senior leadership. This serves little value to the enterprise. In the past, at least, units had their picture on the front

page of a base newspaper, which many senior leaders said was not worth their time. When I was a second lieutenant, for example, my battalion commander told me upon seeing his unit on the front page of the base paper, “That’s good fish wrap.” Now those pictures are posted on official unit web pages, which garner marginal interest. Current traffic usually includes new Marines checking into a unit and searching for contact information, or by Marines who are searching for a link to outlook web access or SharePoint. Granted, garrison unit training stories on targeted communication mediums can provide value to a unit when they focus on the accomplishments of individual Marines (see note below on UIO program).⁴ Yet, COMMSTRAT Marines do not have the capacity to support all units down to the platoon level while building the proficiency required for war. FMF COMMSTRAT should still generate VIPS; however, the value and priority should be on the training these events provide for COMMSTRAT forces to support the ROMO. Much of the legacy combat camera print mission and equipment also needs to go to the SE. This includes print and reproduction capability outside of deployable systems, posters, and other methods. Many requests for internal products are a “nice to have” for the FMF and not a requirement. Nice to have is not expeditionary. These requests require expensive and facility consuming non-expeditionary equipment that will not go with the warfighter when the order comes from higher headquarters. Additionally, the Marine Corps demands an “expeditionary” mindset, which means all supporting arms capabilities must minimize their required space aboard ship for combat deployments to maximize space for personnel, vehicles, aircraft, and life support. Legacy combat camera support to the warfighter should focus on documentation, staff VIP support requests, and deployable print support capability.⁵ All information operations and staff support requests for FMF COMMSTRAT in garrison should be supportable to the extent that capability can go forward. The SE can fulfill any other requirements for the FMF.

Improved Support to the Warfighter

The Marine Corps can improve its support for the warfighter by economizing COMMSTRAT forces while in garrison. This means structuring and focusing FMF COMMSTRAT capability where it is actually needed as Marine forces provide support to the unified commands. It also means economizing COMMSTRAT forces by moving them from the MEF command element (MEF CE) and main supporting commands (MSCs) and then allocating and reorganizing them at the MEF information groups (MIG). This supports a proposed principle that COMMSTRAT staffs use COMMSTRAT products and services while COMMSTRAT organizations produce them. This principle drove planning for the intel OccFld in the 1990s and also mirrors the design of other MIG enabler battalions. While this principle does mean a reduction of personnel in garrison at the MEF CE and MSCs, it also means ownership of the right capability within the MEF CE and MSCs to ensure support for global force management and proper identification of ready, scalable COMMSTRAT forces attached via the MIG to serve the ROMO. The MEF CE will plan and provide oversight of all FMF COMMSTRAT through leading global force management and the command inspection program.⁶ The MIG will ensure the readiness of COMMSTRAT production and service support to the MEF CE and MSCs. The COMMSTRAT capability will realign and reorganize at the MIG, which improves support for the current Combat Development & Integration concept for MAGTF information environment operations concept of employment.⁷ The staffs at the MEF CE and MSCs can then use COMMSTRAT products and services while the MIG COMMSTRAT capability produces them. MEF CE and MSC leaders will then require the following capabilities from COMMSTRAT in garrison:

- Public affairs advisor.
- Plans, future operations, current operations capacity.
- Media engagement.
- Communication medium supervision and training (marines.mil web-sites/social media).

- Unit information officer program implementation and oversight.

I argue that these are the actual requirements for FMF COMMSTRAT capability in garrison even with the current allocation of forces. The reduction in garrison MEF/MSC COMMSTRAT forces will allow the Marine Corps to apply economy of force toward garrison requirements. The realigned COMMSTRAT forces at the MIG will provide scalable, task organized capability to the MEF and MSCs for deployments or development of VIPS as required (crisis communication, law enforcement, good news stories). Many public affairs officers have long argued that at the beginning of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, the MSCs did not know their staff. All public affairs personnel at this time were consolidated at the SE. The above proposed construct ensures organic senior leadership at the MEF/MSC level who maintain the right capability to mitigate this gap in trust. The staff assigned to the MEF CE and MSC COMMSTRAT staffs will lead COMMSTRAT teams allocated to them by the MIG, whose teams will have been validated through training and exercises. These teams will also maintain a general or direct support command relationship in garrison.

The reduction in garrison requirements for the FMF will enable the reorganization of tactical COMMSTRAT forces, which nearly triples the number of COMMSTRAT operational support teams (i.e., a COMMSTRAT platoon) at the MIG. This COMMSTRAT company will then become a battalion with three companies. The battalion will have a command-slanted battalion commander and senior enlisted leader from the community. The companies will have a company commander and senior enlisted leader from the community. The company will have three platoons led by a platoon commander and platoon sergeant. The proposed structure will require no additional staff. The new MEF support battalion will provide the S-shop functions required to provide the unit life support in garrison. This is a proven model, which is currently used at the School of Infantry-East to support the train-



Training and readiness will still be the focus. (Photo by LCpl Nicolas Atehortua.)

ing battalions. (I also argue that the Service can even look to consolidate the other S-functions from the enabler battalions at the MEF support battalion for greater efficiency.) The Marines within the COMMSTRAT company will support the MIG, MEF CE, and MSC requirements while maintaining focus on training and readiness as the main effort. Training and readiness has never been a focus for COMMSTRAT forces. The legacy public affairs and combat camera communities assumed to an extent they were trained and ready because of a largely self-induced—and not necessarily required or relevant—operational tempo in garrison. The focus on training and readiness will improve the quality of COMMSTRAT support to the warfighter.

Improved COMMSTRAT Leadership Development

The realigned FMF structure will improve the structure for developing junior Marines and improve competitiveness for both enlisted and officers among their peers. Historically, officers and SNCOs in both public affairs and combat camera had little interaction at their commands with senior OccFld Marines. This “spread the peanut butter thin” concept made public affairs and combat camera Marines a lot like an octopus. The octopus is the smartest

non-vertebrae in the ocean. However, it has a fatal flaw. The octopus does not nurture its young. When the octopus dies, the knowledge it accrued over its lifetime dies with it. Instead, the previously proposed COMMSTRAT organization enables senior COMMSTRAT leaders to nurture the leadership and professional abilities of younger Marines and pass on their hard-earned knowledge. The proposed structure empowers COMMSTRAT Marines to demonstrate leadership ability, compete with their peers, and the ability to identify and shape the next generation. The new structure will foster a “boss” or “commander’s mentality.” I also add that a commander’s mentality is far different from a “staff mentality,” whereas the commander must focus on his responsibility for the whole command while the staff focuses solely on their specialty. A COMMSTRAT Marine with experience as a commander will better understand the challenge of command and improve support in such a way that only an experienced commander would. The proposed shift in focus will improve the quality of COMMSTRAT support to Marine Corps warfighting where it counts the most: operations across the range of military operations in support of their command, the unified commands, and the United States of America.

This article provides a solution for the FMF to improve the operational design of the COMMSTRAT OccFld. Consolidation of COMMSTRAT assets and clearly defined FMF/SE roles and responsibilities help ensure the Marine Corps builds upon its reputation as the finest warfighting organization in the world. Nonetheless, the COMMSTRAT OccFld needs the buy-in of senior leaders to improve support to the warfighter, and improve the OccFld's professional development and competitiveness.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *CMC White Paper*, (Washington, DC: January 2019).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, Manpower & Reserve Affairs, *MMPR/CEB Statistics for FY19*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 5720.77, Marine Corps Public Affairs Order*, (Washington, DC: July 2010). See also Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 3104.1B, Marine Corps Combat Camera Program*, (Washington, DC: October 2011). These orders do not define the new occfield requirements and instead focus on the competing requirements between Public Affairs and Combat Camera. There is no unifying order, policy, doctrine, or concept for the COMMSTRAT occfield.

4. Recognition of the individual Marine will become the responsibility of the command to which he belongs. The Unit Information Officer program is designed to be overseen by the MEF and MSC CommStrat capability and handled at the small unit level by an officer of the command's choosing. This remains an important aspect of building trust and camaraderie within a command. CommStrat does not have enough Marines to show recognition of every Marine's awards and promotions. However, CommStrat can train unit information officers to generate this information and manage their command's communication mediums. See *MCO 5720.77* for details.

5. Ibid.

6. This program does not yet exist.

7. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Air-Ground Task Force Information Environment Operations Concept of Employment, Combat Development & Integration*, (Washington, DC: July 2017).

>Editor's Note: See MARADMIN 004-20, Announcement of Way Ahead for Reestablishing/Reinvigorating Fleet Marine Force and Navy-Marine Corps Component Command Relationship, (Washington, DC: January 2020).



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