

Modernizing COMMSTRAT When Assigned to U.S. Navy Fleets

Integrating and empowering ARG/MEU public affairs and COMMSTRAT

by Capt Melissa Heisterberg

Two weeks after the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) with the embarked 26th MEU deployed, Gen Qasem Suleimani—an Iranian major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and commander of its Quds Force—was killed in a drone strike conducted by U.S. forces in Iraq. At that moment, the trajectory of the ARG/MEU’s deployment shifted from strengthening alliances and attracting new partners within the U.S. 6th Fleet area of operations to being postured to support follow-on operations in the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations.

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As soon as the ARG/MEU was re-directed from 6th Fleet to 5th Fleet, media outlets began reporting that the ARG/MEU “will now head to Iraq”¹ or “to the Persian Gulf region.”² Meanwhile, the public affairs office and Communication Strategy and Operations (COMMSTRAT) aboard the amphibious assault ship USS *Bataan* (LHD 5) were directed by their higher

headquarters to “go dark on communications” with internal and external audiences. This prohibited the release of imagery—even previously released and approved imagery—on social media pages and websites, as well as banning command correspondence to family members through the MEU’s Deployment Readiness Coordinator.

This is not unusual during a pivotal time and is often seen as the best course of action when unexpected events occur. While higher-level decisions are being made, it is important that the messaging is timely, but the timeliness cannot be at the expense of accuracy. Taking a pause ensures messaging does not outpace political, military, or diplomatic efforts. Operations security, which is a risk-management process used to protect the force and preserve future operations, is paramount during this time—as events at the tactical level could have strategic implications. In this specific situation, the fleets needed to appropriately notify partner nations who were planning on hosting bilateral training events with the ARG/MEU. However, during this time of silence, the MEU’s official Facebook page and



*Marines assigned to the Maritime Raid Force, 26th MEU, fast-rope from a Navy MH-60S Sea Hawk aboard the amphibious assault ship USS *Bataan* (LHD 5). (Photo by LCpl Gary Jayne III.)*

website ignited, and the number of users visiting the sites quadrupled. As domestic and international audiences were seeking information, the ARG/MEU was muzzled and unable to seize the initiative by providing timely, accurate information to the public.

Nations today can start, end, win, and lose wars without ever firing a single round. As the Nation's crisis-response force, ARG/MEUs are able to conduct operations across the full range of military operations; however, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for ARG/MEUs to be effective in the information domain. Manpower and resource shortfalls coupled with a reluctance to utilize a decentralized command and control (C2) approach prevents the ARG/MEU from releasing timely, accurate information to shape the battle space. Meanwhile, China and Russia—who, according to the *National Defense Strategy*, are the principal priorities for the Department—are taking steps to improve and fortify their information campaigns.³

In July 2017, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff established information as the seventh joint function.⁴ The Marine Corps followed in suit, and in February 2019, the Marine Corps published *Marine Corps Bulletin 5400*—establishing information as the seventh Marine Corps warfighting function:

Operating successfully across the conflict continuum requires a Marine Corps capable of understanding the emerging competition continuum, applying overwhelming lethal force when needed, conducting Operations in the Information Environment (OIE) to achieve military advantage, and operationalizing Phase 0.⁵

However, ARG/MEUs have yet to be formally restructured and refitted to be successful in supporting OIE—specifically from a COMMSTRAT and public affairs perspective. If information is truly a warfighting function, then it must be prioritized as such. In order to do this, ARG/MEUs must be properly manned, equipped with appropriate resources, and employed utilizing centralized planning yet decentralized execution.



An MV-22B Osprey crew chief with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron (VMM) 365 (reinforced), 26th MEU, observes the French Navy amphibious assault ship Mistral (Photo by Cpl Gary Jayne III.)

As manpower shortfalls continue to be a thorn in the Marine Corps' side, the Marine Corps must take a closer look at where to assign its COMMSTRAT professionals who have the depth, knowledge, and experience in the field. At a minimum, composited MEUs must be manned with no less than ten COMMSTRAT Marines, including two officers, two staff non-commissioned officers, three combat photographers, and three combat videographers. With

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the likelihood of conducting distributed and disaggregated operations, the joint force cannot afford to lose the opportunity of capturing imagery and releasing relevant information first. This is especially critical when operating in the Black Sea or Arabian Gulf, where regional adversaries can quickly gain an advantage in the information

domain through provocative, unprofessional, and harassing encounters with U.S. ships and aircraft. During the ARG/MEUs recent deployment, Amphibious Squadron 8 only had one mass communication specialist and one collateral duty public affairs officer on the amphibious transport dock and amphibious dock landing ship, respectively. Manpower shortfalls at the ARG/MEU level also result in a higher level of dependence on the fleet.

The *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG)* states,

We need to re-focus on how we will fulfill our mandate to support the fleet. We must be fully integrated with the Navy to develop a vision and a new fleet architecture that can be successful against our peer adversaries while also maintaining affordability.⁶

The guidance goes on to reiterate the importance of operational responsibilities not being viewed as separate and distinct. Therefore, the time to reestablish a more integrated Navy-Marine Corps architecture is now. Information must be a joint, Navy-Marine Corps team effort from the fleet down. However, without having physical representation and advocacy at the fleet level, ARG/MEUs continue to be stifled by release authority and maneuverability

restraints, which have been prevalent at the ARG/MEU level for decades with no change. As the COMMSTRAT field continues to expand to meet a growing requirement, the *CPG* regarding integrating at the fleet level cannot be an afterthought. MEFs are aligning with the fleets and part of this effort should expand across all warfighting functions with combined blue-green teams working together in the 5th, 6th, and 7th Fleets. Having a COMMSTRAT field grade officer—preferably with MEU experience—at each fleet where ARG/MEUs routinely operate would help public affairs and COMMSTRAT overcome the ever-so-present joint language barrier and would also allow ARG/MEUs to be more effective in the maritime and information domain.


A formalized number of COMMSTRAT Marines assigned to a composited MEU and fleet-level representation would show significant progress towards ensuring, even at the tactical

level, the Navy-Marine Corps force is manned to bend the information environment to its will. However, the ARG/MEU also needs to be refitted with the appropriate equipment—or bandwidth in this case. With an interconnected and shrinking world, an image can travel around the globe within a few seconds—shaping, informing, and influencing everyone along its path.

In less than 280 characters and in a matter of seconds, the president has threatened nations, lauded U.S. allies, and changed policy. Evidently, the speed at which imagery travels depends on where the image was taken, where it is being sent to, and through what medium the image is being sent. Sending large files such as photographs and video packages from a seabased platform to an ashore site, such as the fleet, can take hours, days, and sometimes weeks. Waiting several weeks for imagery to be sent, received, and reviewed by the ashore fleet or host nation was not un-

common throughout the *Bataan* ARG and 26th MEU's deployment. For example, a video production of bilateral training was approved for release after three weeks. Supplemental photographs from the same bilateral training iteration were never approved, and after four months, the ARG/MEU was told the imagery would not be approved because it was under review for too long and was no longer relevant. Without change, the United States and its allies will continue to miss opportunities to highlight these strategic partnerships.

The ARG/MEU should be granted release authority rather than waiting for the fleet or some other entity not on scene to approve the information or imagery, which greatly decreases its timeliness and relevancy. During a president-directed American citizen evacuation, the 26th MEU sent imagery back to the ship midflight utilizing the Network On The Move-Airborne, which provides realtime access to networks



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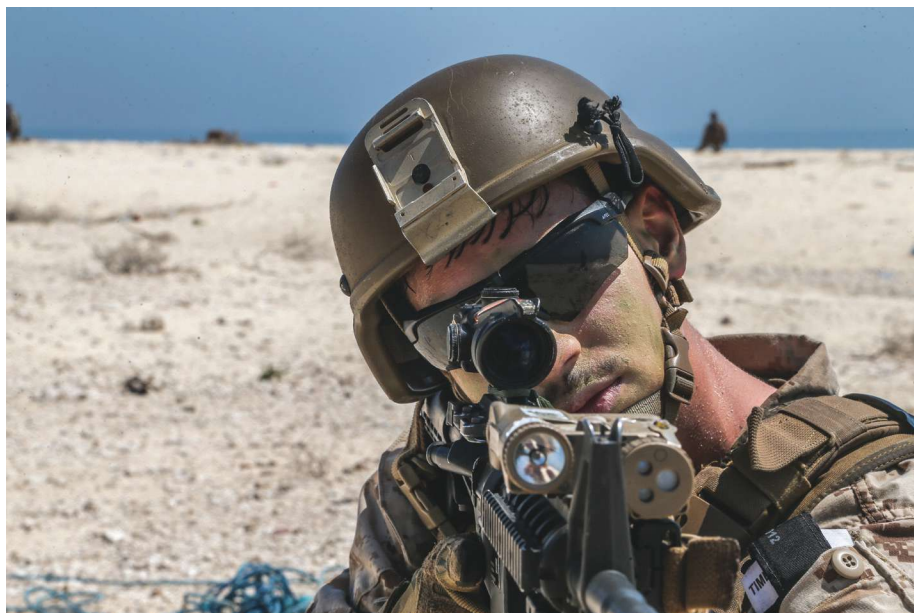
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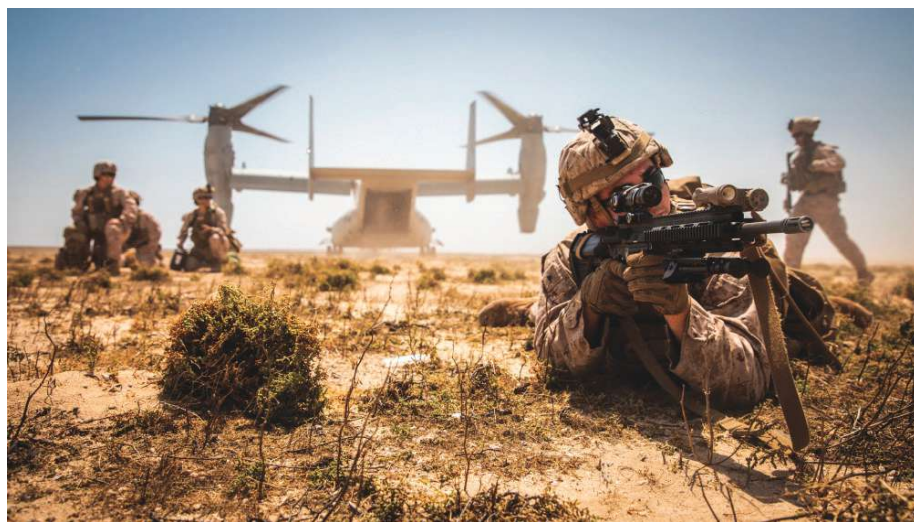
during airborne operations aboard MV-22B Osprey aircraft. Additionally, while members of the MEU's Maritime Raid Force provided security in Libya for a meeting between the Libyan prime minister, U.S. ambassador to Libya, and Africa Command commanding general, the MEU was able to transmit imagery in realtime utilizing the Mobile User Objective System. However, in both cases, the timeliness of obtaining approval was exacerbated by the latent shipboard bandwidth and the desire from the fleet to review the imagery.

In comparison, Marine Corps units that do not fall under a fleet seem to have more success than their MEU counterparts while operating in the same region. During Special-MAGTF Crisis Response-Central Command's (SPMAGTF-CR-CC) embassy reinforcement in December 2019, which was shortly before the Gen Suleimani strike, the COMMSTRAT officer was able to release imagery and information as the operation was unfolding. Throughout the reinforcement, the officer provided realtime, accurate information to key stakeholders—including the media. Later in the deployment, SPMAGTF-CR-CC and MEU elements trained on remote Saudi Arabian islands in the Arabian Gulf. The training occurred on the same islands but on different, yet consecutive, days. A benign photograph of a Marine behind a rifle was not approved for release at the fleet level; however, a similar photograph taken by an SPMAGTF-CR-CC photographer, which went through a non-fleet approval chain, was approved for release.

In a world where it only takes a single smartphone and a few seconds to communicate globally, the DOD cannot continue to rely on inadequate resources. A large amphibious ship is usually provided between 16 to 24 megabits per second (Mbps) in total bandwidth. This total amount supports multiple Navy and Marine Corps classified and unclassified systems, which results in about four Mbps of upload and download being available for the Non-secure Internet Protocol Router Network (NIPRnet). This is roughly the equivalent of running all NIPRnet



Fox Company, Battalion Landing Team 2/8, 26th MEU, conducts routine platoon-level sustainment training in the 5th Fleet area of operations. (Photo by Cpl Tanner Seims.)



The Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response-Central Command conducts a tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel exercise. (Photo by Sgt Kyle C. Talbot.)

requirements on a single smartphone with two or three bars on a 3G cellular network. When this is distributed to the individual user level, each NIPRnet browsing session is often afforded less than 24 kilobits (Kbps). For comparison, a telephone modem in the 1980s provided about 56 Kbps, which is approximately 50 percent more than the bandwidth most users have on the ship. With increased signature management requirements and the unlikelihood of refitting amphibious ships with better technology, it is even more essential that

MEUs not only have fleet-level representation but also release authority at the ARG/MEU level through centralized planning and decentralized execution.

Centralized planning by utilizing the integrated COMMSTRAT officer at the fleet and decentralized execution by allowing ARG/MEUs to retain release authority decreases the dependency on latent shipboard connectivity and allows the ARG/MEU to release timely, relevant information. Because of information's unique potential to directly affect the various levels

of war, the planning must be controlled by a higher-level command that has a broad perspective of the battlespace. Centralized planning with decentralized execution allows commanders to exploit fleeting opportunities in a rapidly changing, fluid environment. If a decision supports the overall intent and meets communication objectives, ARG/MEUs should be allowed to seize the initiative during execution. However, the higher-level planners must clearly articulate the overall intent through official and formalized orders—similar to any other operation.

If the recommendations articulated in this article were in effect prior to the Bataan ARG and 26th MEU deploying, rather than “going dark on communications”—following the General Suleimani strike and the redirection of the ARG/MEU from 6th to 5th Fleet—the ARG/MEU would have received formalized, proactive guidance from the top down and produced imagery to support that.

For example, a COMMSTRAT officer assigned to the fleet and working alongside their public affairs counterparts, could have discussed the importance of releasing imagery that highlights the MEU’s fixed-wing aviation



AV-8B Harriers assigned to Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 365, 26th MEU, fly over the USS Bataan (LHD 5) beside a French Air Force Dassault Mirage 2000-5 fighter interceptor.
(Photo by Cpl Nathan Reyes.)

curate information being released, or—even worse—believed. As long as ARG/MEUs continue to operate in a dynamic age of interconnected global networks, information will remain an important instrument of national power and be critical to national security. Therefore, when MEU COMMSTRAT is as-

2. Glen Carey and Anthony Capaccio, “Review of U.S. Adds to Mideast Forces, Denies Exit From Iraq After Errant Letter,” *Bloomberg*. (January 2020), available at <https://www.bloomberg.com>.

3. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

4. Joint Staff, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, (Washington, DC: July 2017).

5. Gen Robert B. Neller, *Marine Corps Bulletin 5400, Establishment of Information as the Seventh Marine Corps Warfighting Function*, (Washington, DC: February 2019).

6. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

7. P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Booking, *Like-War: The Weaponization of Social Media*, (New York, NY: Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

Turning off communication, as opposed to finding a way to communicate effectively, only leads to one voice being silent and all the other voices being louder.

assets, which are capable of conducting expeditionary strikes from a seabased platform. Routine imagery of AV-8B Harriers conducting ordinary flight operations could have been released by the MEU and would have reminded key stakeholders that the ARG/MEU has that inherent capability. As previously discussed, consistency is everything—no matter how big or how small the message is. Turning off communication, as opposed to finding a way to communicate effectively, only leads to one voice being silent and all the other voices being louder. The silence often causes speculative reporting and inac-

signed to a fleet, it must be provided the appropriate manpower, resources, and release authority to continue to manage relationships with publics and provide timely information in order to build understanding, credibility, and trust with audiences critical to mission success.

Notes

1. Ben Werner, “USS *Bataan*, Marines 26th MEU Heading to Middle East Amid Tensions with Iran,” *USNI News*, (January 2020), available at <https://news.usni.org>.

