

Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion

Creating better, more potent intelligence officers

by LtCol Mark Schaefer

As the Marine Corps continues to invest personnel into the U.S. intelligence community, countless professional growth opportunities exist for both enlisted and officer Marine intelligence professionals. The U.S. intelligence community is comprised of seventeen organizations including the National Security Agency (NSA)—our Nation’s premier signals intelligence (SIGINT) organization—charged to conduct both a SIGINT and information assurance mission for the U.S. Government.¹ The Marine Corps Service cryptologic component aligned to the NSA is Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion (MCSB)—a 550-Marine unit partnered with the NSA in over eight U.S. states and five overseas locations.² Although MCSB is predominately comprised of enlisted 26XX SIGINT professionals, a tour at MCSB provides MAGTF intelligence officers—especially those without a SIGINT background—both experience and knowledge about a wide range of strategic SIGINT operations and capabilities that translate to relevance as a tactical S-2/G-2.

A Partnership with the NSA/Central Security Service

MCSB’s origins date back to the mid-1950s, when the NSA emerged as the Nation’s primary communications intelligence organization.³ The Marine Corps’ first personnel contribution came in the form of 59 Marines (to include former commandant Gen Alfred M. Gray) and by 1961 had grown into Marine Support Battalion, with the latest designation to MCSB in 2002.⁴ The location of subordinate companies and sub-units has evolved over the years for various

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reasons as installations close or changing technology negates the need for physical geographical access at a specific location. Regardless, the NSA and MCSB relationship that matured over the past 60 years has allowed for the placement and integration of Marine cryptologists in both U.S. and allied SIGINT missions

as well as enabled tactical SIGINT for deployed Marine forces.

The Marine Corps SIGINT community is the only intelligence discipline with a well-defined career path for enlisted Marines to gain tactical, operational, and strategic intelligence experience along a career road map designed to reinvest that experience within the Operating Forces. MCSB plays a critical role in the professional growth of enlisted 26XX Marines as they progress through their Marine Corps career. MCSB is the only battalion-sized Marine Corps intelligence unit aligned and fully integrated into an intelligence combat support agency like the NSA.⁵ No other intelligence combat support agency has such an extensive relationship with a Marine Corps unit. The battalion is collocated with the NSA and headquartered aboard Fort Meade, MD. Subordinate to the battalion are a Headquarters & Service Company and five geographically distributed “letter” companies: A, B, D, H, and I.



The NSA and CSS logos.

Headquarters & Service Company and Company B are located aboard Fort Meade. An 0202 captain commands Headquarters & Service Company and predominately provides leadership for the battalion staff. An 0202 major commands Company B—the largest of the battalion’s companies. Company B Marines primarily work in SIGINT collection, analysis, or information assurance missions aboard Fort Meade or in the local area. Although classification restrictions limit full disclosure of NSA opportunities at the unclassified level, a tour at Fort Meade allows for extensive exposure and insight into innovative NSA operations and capabilities. Marines typically have the opportunity to fill two unique billets within the NSA over the course of a 36-month tour. In addition to billets within the NSA, both company- and field-grade officers at Fort Meade have the opportunity to fill company command and key staff billets (i.e., battalion executive officer and operations officer). Marines returning to a radio battalion or other MAGTF intelligence billets will find themselves well versed in national SIGINT capabilities that directly support their tactical mission.

Opportunities for Marines at the other letter companies are similar to those available at the Fort Meade NSA headquarters, and officers have the abil-



MCSB logo.

ity to serve within both operational and leadership billets. 0202 majors command companies D, H, and I, and an 0202 captain commands Company A. Company D is located in Augusta, GA; Company H is located in San Antonio, TX; Company I is located in Wahiawa, HI; and Company A is located in Aurora, CO. All letter companies are collocated with the NSA cryptologic

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Company B, MCSB, formed for inspection. (Photo by LCpl Jessica Glaspie.)

enterprise and fully integrated into NSA operations. Additionally, MCSB has smaller detachments and sub-units in both the continental United States and overseas, with Marines stationed at Suffolk, VA; Fayetteville, NC; Tampa, FL; Germany; Korea; Okinawa; Australia; and elsewhere. Because of the global distribution across the time zones, the sun never sets on MCSB!

No SIGINT Experience Necessary

MCSB is a great opportunity for all MAGTF intelligence officers—especially those who did not start as an 0206 SIGINT officer. Working within a particular intelligence officer billet in the NSA or commanding one of the letter companies provides valuable experience and leadership opportunities that directly translate to relevancy as a MAGTF intelligence officer operating in an increasingly joint environment. For example, as of the spring of 2018, both the battalion executive officer and operations officer—as well as three out of six of the company commanders—are 0202 officers without an 0206 SIGINT background. Aside from gaining experience at the Fort Meade NSA headquarters or one of the global cryptologic enterprise sites, MCSB Marines (both enlisted and officers) have the opportunity to deploy worldwide in support of NSA operational requirements. The unique NSA experience contributes to the professional development of Marine intelligence officers into MAGTF intelligence officers capable of exploiting the vast resources of the U.S. intelligence community.

MCSB is part of the Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Enterprise (MCISRE), and MCSB Marines are at the forefront of SIGINT operations within the NSA, providing analytic, linguistic, and other support to the joint force and Marine Operating Forces. Marines are placed in NSA billets that are relevant to current operations and offer a wide range of development for an intelligence professional. Tactical to strategic opportunities exist for Marines at the NSA, and most positions exploit the Marines’ inherent leadership skills. A Marine may have the opportunity to

lead a small team to emplace collection systems in an austere location or cue national collection satellites to satisfy intelligence requirements supporting national decision makers. Additionally, both officer and enlisted internship programs exist within the NSA that expose Marines to an advanced intelligence-centric curriculum through the National Cryptologic School and different areas within strategic intelligence, such as collection management, analysis and reporting, signal development, policy, support to military operations, and information operations. The opportunities are rewarding and, as an added benefit, deploying Marines undergo specialized training (e.g., personal weapons training, defensive driving skills, advanced medical, or other mission-required training). Whether they choose regional intelligence shops or support to counterterrorism mission sets, Marines typically gravitate toward mission areas that are relevant to the Marine Operating Forces of today and tomorrow.

The NSA is a melting pot where civilians and military integrate to accomplish the national SIGINT and information assurance mission. MCSB Marines find themselves integrated and often leading government civilians, contractors, and service members from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. That ex-



Company D on a formation run. (Photo provided by the author.)

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posure also allows Marines to learn about sister Service tactical SIGINT capabilities that MAGTF intelligence officers can leverage during follow-on assignments. The joint nature of the NSA is impressive, and the Marines maintain a first-rate reputation within the agency as motivated and consummate professionals. Although the NSA is closely aligned with the cyber mission (the current commander of U.S. Cyber Command is also the Director, NSA), MCSB is not affiliated with U.S. Cyber Command or Marine Corps Forces Cyberspace Command.

Although Marines can expect a challenging tour, MCSB can also provide a welcome tempo reprieve from the Operating Forces and allow its Marines to focus on family and education. Time is available for Marines to grow personally and professionally, and MCSB Marines have significant resources available to them at their respective military installations. Marines can take advantage of NSA-required job qualification training through the National Cryptologic School and translate it into college credits for a degree at partner universities. Additionally, the National Intelligence University offers no-cost undergraduate and graduate degrees that Marines can take advantage of during their tour at MCSB. The opportunities are endless!



Company B inspection. (Photo by LCpl Jessica Glaspie.)

Conclusion

A tour at MCSB provides both Marine enlisted and officer intelligence professionals an unmatched experience within the NSA. Junior- and mid-grade intelligence officers seeking professional growth are welcome at MCSB and are in for a rewarding tour. The scope of employment opportunities within the NSA is vast, and the experience gained translates to relevance as a MAGTF intelligence officer. The tactical Marine Corps operating force units that benefit from receiving a post-MCSB MAGTF intelligence officer will find a welcomed access to national intelligence community resources and an intelligence officer who knows how to leverage them. The MCSB experience is all part of creating better, more potent intelligence officers capable of fighting for the intelligence needed to support MAGTF and joint operations.



MCSB Marines on the obstacle course. (Photo by Maddie Ecker, USA.)

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“Every Marine is, first and foremost, a rifleman. All other conditions are secondary.”
 —Gen Alfred M. Gray
 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps

Notes

1. Joint Staff, *Joint Publication 2-01, Joint and National Intelligence Support to Military Operations*, (Washington, DC: July 2017).
2. The Central Security Service is the military cryptologic component within the NSA, and it “promotes full partnership between the NSA and the cryptologic elements of the Armed Forces.” For brevity, I refer to the National Security Agency/Central Security Service as the National Security Agency (NSA) throughout the article. This information is available at www.nsa.gov.
3. LtCol Pete Brown, “Early Marine Support Battalion,” (Online: 14 September 2015), available at <http://mccaonline.org> and George F. Howe, “The Early History of NSA,” *Cryptologic Spectrum*, (Online: 1974), available at <https://www.nsa.gov>.
4. Early Marine Support Battalion, HQMC, *Command Lineage of Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion*, (Washington, DC: September 2015).
5. Joint Staff, *Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning*, (Washington, DC: June 2017). A combat support agency is a “Department of Defense agency so designated by Congress or the Secretary of Defense that supports military combat operations.”

