

# Underdogs: Marines Earn Bronze in First All-Service Esports Tournament

GySgt Mathew D. Springer, USMC

*Editor's note: This article is the second-place winner of the 2023 Leatherneck Magazine Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest through the Marine Corps Association Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the third-place winner and honorable mention entries.*

**M**arines are made to compete. They feel the call deep within their warrior spirits to test themselves against peers, sister services, and allied forces as a measuring stick for future success against their adversaries. This conviction goes beyond competitions-in-arms, such as marksmanship, martial arts, or more mainstream events like the Army's "Best Ranger" Challenge; it is the core concept of why there are All-Marine teams in basketball, golf and eight other athletic events. Yet as the Marine Corps strives to evolve for an information-driven age, there grows a need for competitions that challenge the mind. A growing number of Marines believe video games are that challenge. This is the story of a small team of Marines that attended the first ever all-service electronic sports (or esports)

competition hosted and recognized by the U.S. government. It is a story of ingenuity, defying the odds, and victory at an event that has paved the way for military gaming well into the future.

In May 2022, the Air Force hosted the inaugural FORCECON event at the Boeing Techport Center in San Antonio, Texas. The first-of-its-kind convention focused on three pillars: innovation, technology and gaming. While military modernization is no stranger to innovation and technology, this would be the federal government's first foray into the world of tournament-level esports. The idea was simple yet ambitious: gather a team from each branch for a particular game, pair them with a professional coach for a week of training and hold a double elimination bracket at the end of the week.

FORCECON coordinators chose Halo

Infinite, the most recent iteration of an iconic game franchise, as the tournament game of choice. Halo was the perfect game for the inaugural event. It did not come with the potential baggage of seeming to glorify modern-day wars as it was set in a futuristic sci-fi setting where all of humanity is united against a common foe. Its game types were self-explanatory to the average tactical mind, including King-of-the-Hill (secure key terrain and hold for a target amount of time) and Team Slayer (earn 50 kills before the opposing team). Most importantly, Halo's medium-speed gunplay and "first-person shooter" perspective were easily digestible to both die-hard franchise fans and non-Halo players alike. It would be easy for servicemembers who had never before watched professional Halo to tune in and root for their branch's team. The stage was set for an all-service competition fit for the 21st century.

There was only one problem: the Marines were the only branch that had no such team ready for this event.

The Air Force and the Space Force both had longstanding support for their gaming communities. With programs of record, budgetary spending, and top-level recognition within their respective branches, the Air Force and Space Force jointly hosted regional tournaments with a systematic process for finding their most qualified players. Their final roster included semi-professional gamers who regularly streamed online for audiences as a way to showcase their gaming prowess. The Army esports team, who faced significant hurdles early on in their public-facing engagements, nonetheless had years of experience fielding competitive teams for such an event. The Navy had already established their esports team, named "Goats and Glory," as a part of their recruiting command, equipped with their own gaming facility, recruitment communication skills training, and an expectation that their team members stream on a regular basis to build a viewership audience. Even the Coast Guard, a branch with fewer total servicemembers than Marines stationed at Camp Pendleton alone, had a gaming com-



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Under the guidance of Coach Emanuel "Hoaxer" Lovejoy, left, Marine Corps Gaming member LCpl Jairath "Raine" Lomeli, right, practices with his teammates to prepare for the esports tournament.





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TEAM NAME  
**MARINE CORPS  
GAMING**

**WAFFLES**  
 CPL HOUSTON BURNS

**EZULON**  
 LCPL SEAN TOBER

**ЯΛΙΠΣ**  
 LCPL JARIATH LOMELI

**HEERO JTR**  
 SSGT JEREMIAS TOVAR-ROSA

ARMED FORCES SPORTS  
 NAVAL CHAMPIONSHIP

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COURTESY OF AIR FORCE GAMING

The starting lineup for the All-Marine team at FORCECON 2022. Players go by their call signs during gaming events, allowing for in-game roles to supersede military rank and formalities.

Top: At FORCECON, 2022 held in Techport Arena in San Antonio, Texas, audience members watch as Marine Corps Gaming (MCG) plays against Coast Guard Gaming (CGG) on stage. The 2022 Armed Forces esports championship was the first esports tournament held exclusively for servicemembers of all branches. (Photo courtesy of FORCECON Media Production)



munity officially endorsed by their service's morale, well-being and recreation (MWR) organization.

Nonetheless, FORCECON reached out to Staff Sergeant Ian Mills, the Director of Marine Corps Gaming (MCG), a grassroots organization for active-duty Marines to socialize and network over a common interest in gaming. Despite having no staff support or budget for such an event, SSgt Mills quickly went to work, determined to have the Marine Corps represented at the event. Leveraging his experience as a member of the All-Marine wrestling team, he reached out to Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS) sports in search of funding and support.

MCCS representatives were already aware of the growing esports phenomenon. They recognized that esports would quickly become a popular program that Marines may want to compete in and were already in talks for future participation. Unfortunately, those changes could only come in 2023 at the earliest, and MCCS had no funds available for a short-notice 2022 event. Adding to the heartache, Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC) informed SSgt Mills via the Trademark Licensing Office that MCG could not utilize the iconic eagle, globe

and anchor in any of its engagements at FORCECON due to the ambiguity surrounding MCG's unofficial status with the Marine Corps. SSgt Mills needed to figure out a no-cost solution, or else his team would need to fund their own trip and buy their own equipment, all the way down to their yet-to-be-purchased jerseys.

Mills had a creative solution. He approached Air Force Gaming representatives and discussed his current situation with HQMC, MCCS, and the quandary he was in with funding. Emphasizing the need for all branches to have representation at the inaugural event, he asked his Air Force counterparts if there was any way their branch could help. As the hosting entity with a fully funded program, they concurred with SSgt Mills' rationale and agreed to pay for his team's lodging, per diem, and flights. They even agreed to design and purchase MCG's jerseys. Within two weeks, Mills assembled a team of eight Halo players from across the Marine Corps. Airline tickets were purchased, hotels were booked, and official orders were signed. The Marines were going to FORCECON.

On May 24, 2022, the team arrived in San Antonio, Texas, and began their week of tournament preparation. They took

part in media interviews and even had green screen recordings for tournament-day animations. Most importantly, they met their coach, Emanuel "Hoaxer" Lovejoy. Hoaxer was the Halo Championship Series' reigning Best Coach award recipient in 2021. For five days, he ran the All-Marine team through drills, discussed strategy and installed a playbook all while assessing his talent pool for the final roster. His leadership would be instrumental to MCG's performance, and he would be on stage with them come gameday. He selected a lineup that consisted of SSgt Jeremias "Hero" Tovar-Rosa, Corporal Houston "Waffles" Burns, Lance Corporal Sean "Ezulon" Tober, and LCpl Jariath "Raine" Lomeli. Like in the aviation community, these players would go by their call signs for the duration of the event, allowing for in-game roles to supersede military rank and formalities.

"This was my introduction to the Marine Corps," said Coach Hoaxer. "What I knew about Marines is they are the ones doing the dirty work, really getting in there ... grit, boots on the ground, they're those type of dudes. Jarheads of the scene."

When asked what it was like to coach amateur servicemembers as opposed to top-level talent, he went on to say, "The difference between coaching a pro team versus MCG is, the Marines were very keen on responding. You would think pro players are already very astute to the game and the peak of communications, but pro players already have their convictions and their idea of how things need to go. It was refreshing to have a group of players who were like 'I hear you' or 'got it' immediately, looking for those directives."

On May 29, MCG opened the tournament against Coast Guard Gaming (CGG) in a King-of-the-Hill match, and their resilience was immediately put to the test. In a best-of-7 scoring format, CGG immediately jumped to a 3-1 lead. The Marines were taking disadvantageous gunfights, losing key terrain, and playing more like four individuals. Just as they began to gain momentum toward another score, a hardware malfunction disconnected a member of CGG. While event staff replaced the equipment, MCG took advantage of the free timeout.

"Hoaxer pointed out that I was often off on my own, and not being a good objective player," said Raine. "We made some adjustments, and I told myself I needed to jump in the objective whenever I could. He did that kind of coaching for all of us."

The adjustments worked. MCG secured

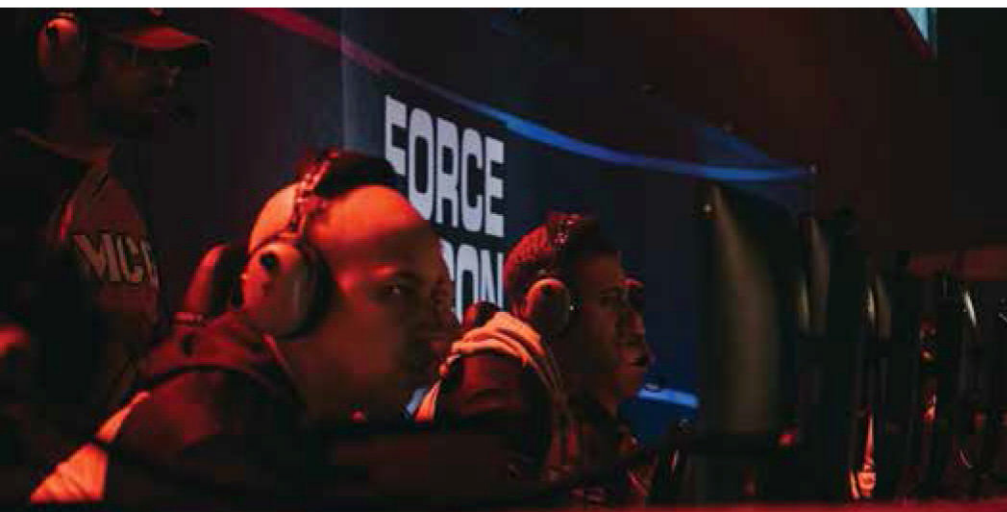


LCpl Jariath "Raine" Lomeli poses for green screen media images taken during pre-event week prior to the tournament.



Right: GySgt Mathew D. Springer, the author of this article, scrimmages against other FORCECON players during pre-event week as an alternate.

Below: Marine Corps Gaming while onstage at FORCECON 2022. Eight Halo players from across the Marine Corps were brought in to represent the Corps during the championship tournament. (Photo courtesy of FORCECON Media Production)



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**Marine Corps Gaming's All-Marine starting roster poses for promotional media during pre-event week. From the left: SSgt Jeremias "Hero" Tovar-Rosa, Cpl Houston "Waffles" Burns, Coach Emanuel "Hoaxer" Lovejoy, LCpl Jariath "Raine" Lomeli, and LCpl Sean "Ezulon" Tober.**

the final three hills and took round one. They followed it with a commanding win in Team Slayer, earning the requisite 50 kills for victory while the enemy trailed at 33. MCG was moving on to the next round, but now they faced one of the tournament's titans. If CGG was viewed as an even match, it was time to be the underdogs.

Space Force Gaming (SFG) was the second seed in the pre-tournament rankings, and many expected nothing less from them than an appearance in the championship round. As the first round

progressed, MCG once again found themselves behind 1-3 on King of the Hill. Yet once again, MCG made midgame adjustments and elevated their level of play to win the game 4-3. The match culminated in late-game theatrics by Hero, who singlehandedly fought for his life in a gunfight against three opponents on the final hill. His determination disrupted the enemy's tempo so thoroughly that his fallen teammates respawned, regrouped, and stormed the hill to secure the victory.

The second round was a back-and-



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**Director of Marine Corps Gaming, SSgt Ian Mills, cheers as the All-Marine team competes on stage.**

forth Team Slayer format which drew arguably the loudest crowd up to this point. MCG found themselves down almost 10 points by midgame but stuck to their teamwork fundamentals until they were soon pressing the advantage. The Marines held a 44-40 lead in the waning minutes of the game, but SFG refused to blink. SFG suddenly slowed the game to a snail's crawl, held their positions with zero aggression in their body, and waited for the first sign of an MCG player to rapidly strike with all four players at once. This strategy caught MCG off-guard and led to a high-tension 49-49 moment of sudden death. But SFG's hopes for a comeback were dashed when Hero took an unorthodox sprint through the middle of the map during the last gunfight, completely exposed on all





Marine Corps Gaming placed third overall after defeating the teams from the Navy, Coast Guard and Space Force in previous games as seen in the tournament bracket results for FORCECON 2022, (above) earning them the title of underdogs. The All-Marine starting roster and their coach celebrate their bronze-medal win (right) during the awards ceremony. (Photo courtesy of Air Force Gaming)



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sides, and through the front door of the structure that SFG neglected to defend, assuming it was unlikely anyone would approach it so recklessly. He rounded a corner and shot a burst from his rifle into the back of a wounded SFG member who was trying to heal, scoring the final point and ending the entire series. SFG members stormed off the stage, one of whom screamed expletives backstage as they grappled with the reality of being victims of the night's largest upset.

The Marines made it to the semi-finals and secured a podium placement, but their "lightning in a bottle" had run out. MCG was summarily outclassed by Air Force Gaming in a best-of-five series, where they failed to stay competitive for any meaningful period of time. Knocked into the elimination bracket, they ran headlong into a red-hot Army esports team that had just eliminated Coast Guard and Space Force in their crawl back to contention. Whether it was competition fatigue, demoralization, or simply the Army's cohesion as the longest-tenured team in the tournament, MCG was eliminated after back-to-back losses. Air Force Gaming would take

gold, followed by Army claiming silver and the Marines earning bronze.

The first All-Marine esports team will never garner a modicum of reverence in the long, illustrious history of Marine Corps lore; too serious and too sacred are true heroics in the profession-of-arms. But Marines of today can enjoy a sense of pride knowing that this team represented their service admirably. They left zero questions of their competitive spirit and prohibited anyone from labeling competitions of the mind too complex for Marines.

As for the future of military gaming, FORCECON 2022 was a massive success and FORCECON 2023 planning is already underway. Next time, the competitors wearing scarlet and gold will have the added pressure of knowing that being the underdogs is a Marine Corps gaming tradition.

*Author's bio: GySgt Mathew D. Springer is a Chinese Mandarin linguist with Company B, Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion aboard Fort Meade, Md. He currently serves as the senior enlisted leader of the Office of Expeditionary Direct Support, and has deployed to Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. He is a proud member of the first All-Marine esports team and was in attendance at FORCECON 2022.*

*Editor's note: The recent Modern Day Marine 2023 hosted the first ever Objective 1 Wargaming Convention which provided a focused venue for demonstrations, game-play and networking among military wargaming practitioners, designers and industry. Both computer-based games and table-top board games were included over all three days of the expo.*



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