

Maturing the MCISRE

Opportunities for the Corps in special operations

by Col Richard J. Schmidt

Gen Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described the present character of warfare as shifting toward “competition with a military dimension that falls short of traditional armed conflict.”¹ This Sun-Tzuian lens of continuous and ambiguous warfare was captured by USSOCOM (United States Special Operations Command) in papers discussing operations in the “gray zone.”² The 2016 *MOC (Marine Corps Operating Concept)* recognized that threats in these environments lend themselves both to special operations and the capabilities of the MAGTF. To be the most ready when the Nation is least ready, the *MOC* also points out the Corps will need to evolve how it executes the intelligence warfighting function.³

This article argues that the environment described by the Chairman and others, as well as examples from USSOCOM, offer guideposts to prepare the MCISRE (Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Enterprise) for the next war, time now. It begins by describing the environment in which USSOCOM fights and, just as importantly, how it operates. It builds on this foundation with a look at what the MCISRE is getting right. It then recommends areas for further development before concluding with an explanation of U.S. MARSOC’s (Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command) role in creating opportunities for the Corps. Central to making the MCISRE and Marine Corps more ef-

“It’s a Long Way to the Top (If You Wanna Rock ‘n’ Roll).”

—AC/DC

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fective is developing an institutionalized Service relationship with USSOCOM.

The Environment

A wide body of conflict literature captures the challenges of modern warfare. To say warfare is and will be ambiguous is an understatement. Military competition short of war, the gray zone, Marine Corps Intelligence Activity’s future operating environment, and numerous other concepts and classifications all drive home ideas about the complexity of the challenges the United States and our partners face. All of the Services are endeavoring to create new ways of “sensing and making sense” of threats to uncover deception and understand intentions, true dispositions, and capabilities while simultaneously tackling the challenges of big data analytics.⁴ To fully appreciate the opportunities—and challenges—for both MCISRE and Corps afforded by special operations, it is also important to understand the friendly terrain where USSOCOM has invested to create opportunities.

USSOCOM has matured over the last 30 years. It has become a “most ready” force because it is always on. SOF (Special Operations Forces) is persistently in every clime and place. While one might call out the differences between counterterrorism, associated

campaigns, and major combat against peer competitors, the fact is that much of SOF’s intelligence networks, practices, and placements are relevant to ambiguous and high-end warfare. This presents opportunities for a Corps in transition.

Within the U.S. Government, USSOCOM has invested heavily by placing special operations support teams (read liaison officers) in the planning and operational elements within the intelligence community and other government organizations such as the Department of State. On the surface, this provides USSOCOM with greater access to a wider body of information to increase awareness and improve support to decision making. More importantly, the trust and familiarity developed over time has made USSOCOM a true partner of the intelligence community, which has led to greater operational collaboration and planning. The synergy achieved by these relationships produces an operational speed and agility that pales in comparison to a relationship focused largely on data access and information sharing.

Neither the Corps nor USSOCOM have sufficient ISR capacity to deal with major crises alone. This should be a sufficient catalyst for greater cooperation within the intelligence warfighting function, et al. The Nation, however, will never garner the total benefit of a greater Marine Corps-USSOCOM partnership if both hold on to old thinking. The Corps can, and must, collaborate with USSOCOM without holding

“It’s complicated.”

—Hobie Doyle,
Hail, Caesar!

a “MAGTF or nothing” position. Conversely, USSOCOM, its TSOCs (theater special operations commands), and its task forces must improve their Marine Corps literacy to gain a fuller appreciation of what a MAGTF can bring to a fight. Moreover, neither should wait for a third defense secretary fiat to deepen the partnership.⁵ Generating this level of trust requires emotional security in one’s own capabilities, professional recognition of the other’s, and a lot of hard work. To paraphrase an overused African quotation, USSOCOM and the Corps can go further for the Nation together. USSOCOM-MCISRE intelligence integration provides a logical point to develop trust and jump-start the effort.

“Relax, all right? My old man is a television repairman. He’s got this ultimate set of tools. I [We] can fix it.”

**—Jeff Spicoli,
Fast Times at
Ridgemont High**

Promising Starts

It is important to note Marine Corps intelligence and other elements of the MAGTF are already working well with USSOCOM in certain areas. All too often, tactical necessity and expediency, along with enterprising junior officers and SNCOs, drive this collaboration. The real trick is getting beyond individual heroics. Before discussing what else the Corps can do, this section captures some of the Corps’ more promising efforts.

MAGTF-SOF integration. MEUs and various special operations elements are becoming better at developing familiarity through interaction before deployment. In some cases, tactical SOF play is added to create a more realistic operating environment. The quality and level of interaction can be sporadic, however, based on the limited availability

of forces and staffs. The limitations of the MEU force generation cycle also create artificial barriers to interaction. Nonetheless, while a good start, more permanent intelligence relationships between the MEFs and USSOCOM elements would go a long way to developing deeper and more productive ties.

Some MAGTFs have recognized the value of placing intelligence liaison officers at SOF task force headquarters. Although temporary in nature, physical presence forces a level of interaction and understanding that is otherwise achieved by virtual means in only the most cohesive and mature organizations. The MCISRE will be able to harness the true potential of these relationships when they become habitual and predictable. The Marine Corps Intelligence Activity and MEFs have a critical role to play. While qualified personnel are never in abundance, even the right junior Marine officer or SNCO can sufficiently shepherd the relationship to ensure principals, G/J-2s, G/J-3s, and commanders remain meaningfully engaged.

The Corps has also slowly become more adept at bringing deployed MAGTF and MARSOC formations together. The current environment-driven requirements placed upon deploying

MARSOC forces lend themselves well to larger Marine Corps participation through supporting-supported relationships, especially with respect to intelligence. That said, this is only a starting point. Based on its relatively small size and high level of initiative, there is no reason the Corps should not be able to deepen MARSOC-MAGTF ties, whether their relationships are supporting-supported or complementary in the battlespace.

The ability of MAGTF intelligence capabilities to augment MARSOC formations is a sound model for greater USMC-SOCOM interoperability. This capabilities-based approach with unit-based solutions pays larger dividends for both MARSOC and the MEFs because it contributes to corporate learning and durable relationships. From a MCISRE perspective, the Corps benefits more as an institution from this type of support versus simply supplying individual augmentees. It should seek this same type of arrangement, when possible, when working with other USSOCOM formations.

Special operations literacy. Gone are the days of the Corps fighting alone or solely alongside the Navy. Becoming more adept at operating in a joint environment only increases the opportunity for and utility of the MAGTF.



There is need for Marine forces and theater SOC's to advocate for agile and collaborative intelligence operations management. (Photo by Cpl Justin Smith.)

The Marine Corps Intelligence School is taking decisive steps toward lifting lessons learned from MARSOC's MDIOC (Multi-Discipline Intelligence Operator Course) and special operations to inform entry-level intelligence training—no small task considering MARSOC's advanced training builds upon the experience of highly qualified Marines. MARSOC has also stepped up efforts to increase special operations and special operations intelligence literacy among intelligence officers. In addition to working with Marine Corps Intelligence Schools to introduce Marines to special operations early in their careers, MARSOC works with the Expeditionary Warfare School to expose its intelligence officers to a variety of special operations intelligence organizations. Connecting captains to these prime nodes early in their careers enables them to broaden their understanding of intelligence while expanding their professional networks for the benefit of both the MAGTF and SOF.

The next step will be for the Corps to develop deeper special operations literacy earlier in a Marine's professional development. Special operations have often been viewed as a niche capability or as an adjunct to major combat operations. While true under some circumstances, special operations are no longer a boutique capability in the modern operating environment. Nowadays, special operations are often the enduring main effort of a campaign. Generating greater familiarity earlier will make SOF-MAGTF relationships seem less foreign and will contribute to identifying opportunities for the MAGTF sooner.

Adopting (special operations) intelligence culture. A corollary to increasing special operations literacy is imbuing an intelligence culture within the MAGTF. The Corps will struggle with this as mid-level and senior Marine leaders decide for themselves the value of MEF information groups. It's no coincidence the Central Intelligence Agency and SOF were spawned from the Office of Strategic Services. In fact, in special operations, the line between intelligence, maneuver, and other warfighting functions often becomes blurred. USSOCOM and



MARSOC training builds upon the experiences of highly qualified Marines. (Photo by LCpl Gloria Lepko.)

MARSOC embrace this overlap where less of a clear line exists between warfighting functions to gain greater freedom of action. Fostering this mindset across the Corps and MCISRE would serve the Corps well in fights against current and future foes, regardless of the character of the conflict.

Strategic investment of people. The MOC recommends expanding the Corps' network of mission partners, and it is in the MCISRE's interest to place Marines at decisive SOF intelligence nodes.⁶ As mentioned, some MAGTFs place intelligence liaison officers at SOF task force headquarters, albeit if only temporarily. USSOCOM is investing heavily in the expansion of TSOC joint intelligence centers. Investment in these nodes provides a permanent mechanism not only for MARFOR-TSOC collaboration, but also additional advocacy for agile and collaborative intelligence operations management. Because SOF and MAGTFs often have similar requirements, putting a "man in the machine" and in one another's camps increases the opportunities to accelerate processes to meet the requirements of both clients.

Another critical area for investment is the SOFLE (Special Operations Forces Liaison Element) associated with the MEUs. Intelligence is a human endeavor and a contact sport. In short,

people matter. The SOFLE program began as a multi-functional element but has since been trimmed down. Unfortunately, this downsizing resulted in the elimination of the SOFLE intelligence billet. This SOF intelligence representative provided immediate access to a variety of SOF intelligence nodes and the ability to leverage them quickly to meet MAGTF requirements. This was due in no small part to the representative's professional networks and the fact they are trusted agents within the SOF intelligence enterprise. It's no secret from an intelligence perspective the SOFLE is more useful to the Corps and its MAGTFs than it is to USSOCOM for now, and that's okay. In this case, our MAGTFs could benefit tremendously from continuous access to SOF intelligence from an insider while operating afloat.

Another page from the USSOCOM playbook is strategic investment in the intelligence community. This comes at a significant cost to USSOCOM's Service components because it reduces the pool of deployable forces. Nonetheless, they make USSOCOM senior and tactical leaders better informed and more agile, and they create opportunity where it otherwise would not exist. The Marine Corps is heavily invested in the National Security Agency but

less so in other parts of the intelligence community. Greater and permanent investment in the CIA for planning and collaboration would go a long way toward operationalizing a more holistic approach to warfare for the Corps and toward creating opportunities for the MAGTF.

Fighting smaller and distributed. In his seminal work, *SO Intelligence: Guiding the Tip of the Spear*, COL Konrad Trautman, USA (Ret), outlined the shortfalls in SOF intelligence and prescribed a model that MARSOC, dating back to Marine Corps USSOCOM Detachment One, would embrace and improve.⁷ MARSOC's intelligence direct support teams are designed around this model. Their ability to sense and make sense accelerates the kill chain down to the team level. Naval Special Warfare and Army Special Operations Commands have leveraged MARSOC to adapt their programs toward this model.

From an ISR perspective, the MEFs already have the tools at hand to jump-start tactical multi-discipline intelligence and strike elements similar to MARSOC's. Here is a case where MAGTFs can take a page from the MARSOC playbook. Now is the time for MEFs to force collaboration, experimentation, and cohabitation of these capabilities to develop a distributable, tactical ISR/strike element that can be useful not only in support of the MAGTF but also of SOF and the joint force. The MEF information groups are going to take several years to sort themselves out. In the meantime, it's time to bring together intelligence, radio and reconnaissance battalions, and air-naval gunfire liaison companies.

It's worth noting MARSOC's successful intelligence program is not solely a function of predeployment integration training. MARSOC invests heavily in the development and resilience of its Marines. These Marines also have the opportunity to take "multiple snaps" as a result of a near 1:1 deployment-to-dwell ratio. Underpinning this is the fact MARSOC lives in an intelligence culture that champions innovation, experimentation, and adaptation. The entire formation hunts.



The MARSOC and MAGTF can create a long-term and productive relationship through the development of an effective intelligence-sharing mechanism. (Photo by LCpl Gloria Lepko.)

PED (processing, exploitation, and dissemination collaboration). In 2016, CMC directed the MCISRE to support target development in support of contingency operations. This, in conjunction with the FY17 OSD (Office of the Secretary of Defense) ISR Transfer Fund, jump-started the Corps' efforts to develop a Service-level, FMV (federated full-motion video) PED capability to make a more meaningful contribution both to MAGTFs and the joint force.

larger, full-service joint PED centers servicing strategic missions.

Common production standards. In the 21st century, the intelligence community continues to struggle with production standards. Their advancements in data availability contribute to greater opportunities for creative production. Considering that the data used across products is generally the same, the inclination, for the sake of efficiency and interoperability, should be to adapt pro-

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AFSOC (Air Force Special Operations Command) was designated by the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency as DOD's proponent for FMV PED standards. MARSOC has leveraged its close relationship with AFSOC to broker standards for the development of MCISRE's training program. The result will be a shortened, standards-based curriculum that will allow MCISRE to be more responsive to MAGTFs by eliminating training associated with

production standards to those of the unit in contact. USSOCOM is decisively engaged across the globe. Adopting the production standards of its engaged forces—where it makes sense—shortens the intelligence production cycle, creating more time for developing awareness and decision making while at the same time making products more usable across the entire force.

Improving collection requirements and operations management. No organiza-

tion satisfies all of its requirements. Nonetheless, given common interests in both specific threats and geography, greater collaboration between the Corps and SOF at all levels would increase efficiency toward meeting both organizations' requirements. While there are several means by which this could be done, at a minimum, joint Marine Corps-USSOCOM collection requirements management boards at the MARFOR-TSOC level would be a good start toward capturing unique and overlapping requirements. It would also afford the opportunity to capitalize on the placement and access of one another's collection operations.

As mentioned above, the larger challenge to capitalizing on the opportunities associated with special operations is institutionalizing relationships and establishing, but also moving beyond, data-sharing capabilities. The latter is of limited utility without the former. It is persistent human interaction—reinforced by collocation and enduring familiarity—that increases the opportunity for the Corps to gain greater access to the battlespace, whether solely for intelligence operations or for other purposes. Habituating a culture of SOF-MAGTF collaboration will allow MCISRE and the Corps to increase efficiency and predictability and rely less upon individual heroics to make the blue force system work.

Exploit the Opportunities MARSOC Can Provide

"ΜΟΛΩΝ ΛΑΒΕ"
—King Leonidas

As the Corps' official component to USSOCOM, MARSOC plays several roles in bringing together Marine Corps and USSOCOM intelligence. MARSOC is an advocate, sponsor, collaborator, and facilitator. MARSOC's role in USSOCOM affords it unique access and opportunities to export capabilities to the MCISRE and the MAGTF as well as to collaborate on projects as part of the global SOF network.

Examples of MARSOC's role in bringing USMC-USSOCOM intelligence together are placed throughout this article. In addition to those already mentioned, MARSOC invites Marines from across MCISRE to the Multi-Discipline Intelligence Operators Course and to train as partners in the Marine Raider Support Group's predeployment exercises and other events. By design, MARSOC deliberately returns its special operations capability specialists to other elements of the Corps with the intent of infusing the Corps with their special operations experience.

Operationally, MARSOC works to connect SOF intelligence nodes with deploying and deployed MAGTFs to foster interactive intelligence relationships. When possible, MARSOC leverages the global SOF network to satisfy MAGTF intelligence requirements when the latter may not have placement and access, or when operational security and surprise are essential to MAGTF plans. MARSOC and the MCISRE also collaborate on intelligence systems development and integration. In short, the Corps should leverage and exploit everything useful to which MARSOC intelligence has access, whether it be tradecraft, training, access, or systems.

Conclusion

Institutional, fiscal, manpower, and technological obstacles, not to mention wily and evolving threats, will challenge the Corps' ability to evolve its intelligence capabilities. Opportunities to make the MCISRE more predictive and responsive to the MAGTF and to make the MAGTF more useful to the Nation lie in deeper, long-term relationships with critical partners, namely USSOCOM and the intelligence community. MARSOC has a role to play in identifying opportunities, exporting best practices to the MCISRE and the MAGTF, and translating for USSOCOM and the MAGTF until they become well versed in one another's languages and culture. In some ways, conditions are ripe to realize the vision of our 29th Commandant that was, perhaps, just a little ahead of its time. Fortunately, now more than ever, the opportunity for the Corps to develop and capitalize

on these relationships has never been greater.

Notes

1. Gen Joseph Dunford, Jr., 19th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Hearing Before the Senate Armed Service Committee," (Online: March 2016), available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov>.

2. United States Special Operations Command, "The Gray Zone, v13," (white paper, MacDill Air Force Base, FL: 2015).

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

4. Ibid.

5. In 1983 and 2005, Defense Secretaries Weinberger and Rumsfeld, respectively, took directive actions that would result in greater collaboration between the Corps and USSOCOM. The first effort resulted in the MEU(SOC) program and required the Corps to make structural and training adjustments to participate in special operations. The second effort, starting with U.S. Marine Corps U.S. Special Operations Command Detachment One, required the Corps to demonstrate it could make the necessary adjustments to participate as a full partner in special operations. Its success evolved into the creation of MARSOC. For a deeper look at the political environment surrounding the Marine Corps' formal entry into USSOCOM, see LtCol John P. Piedmont, "Det One: U.S. Marine Corps U.S. Special Operations Command Detachment, 2003–2006," (Washington, DC: Marine Corps History Division, 2010).

6. MOC.

7. Konrad Trautman, *Special Operations Intelligence: Guiding the Tip of the Spear*, (Joint Special Operations University Special Report, (Washington, DC: November 2014).

>Editor's Note: Molon labe is Greek for "come and take it/them." The literal translation is "having come, take." The point of the quote is for the Corps to come and extract from MARSOC the maximum utility it has to offer.

