

# A Vision for Integrated Civil Affairs

Gaining an edge in the information domain  
by SSgt Abraham Blocker & Maj Diana X. Moga

If the last twenty years of war has taught the Marine Corps anything, it is this: the importance of leveraging information-related capabilities in this chaotic, fluid, and constantly changing operating environment cannot be overstated. Areas ripe for improvement include rethinking civil affairs operators as warrior ambassadors, creating a culture of collaboration and information sharing among interservice and intergovernmental partners, and investment in effective technology platforms.

The *Marine Corps Concept for Civil Affairs*, published in 2019, describes the contemporary operating environment as not only a continuation of the “three-block war” concept but also as an evolution to a “three-floor wars,” in which Marines on the rooftop will evacuate non-combatants while simultaneously detaining adversaries on the second floor and closing with and destroying the enemy on the first floor.<sup>1</sup> This document echoes the 2019 *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, which emphasizes that naval integration and a focus on distributed operations are necessary for success. Both documents make it clear that future chaos and complexity will only increase, and the way to better outcomes is through decentralized and distributed leadership and integration with our Naval and fellow Service partners. Unlike the 20th and 21st centuries, conflicts today have become predominantly irregular. Information is now the preferred weapon.

Irregular Warfare is described as: “A violent struggle among state and non-

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Maj Diana Moga, a Civil Affairs Officer with 4th Civil Affairs Group, speaking to school children at a Primary School in Ocos, Guatemala, 26 August 2019. (Photo by SSgt Abraham Blocker.)

state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.”<sup>2</sup> The contemporary operating environment presents an opportunity for Marine Corps civil affairs and information related capabilities through its ability to illustrate the effects of adversary and

friendly activities on the civilian population through gathering and collating information, and identifying, leveraging, and exploiting human networks. By gaining access and placement to the civil environment through civic action, Marine Corps civil affairs has the po-

tential to provide commanders with real time information that will allow them to make quick decisions and mitigate adversarial influence over civil populations.

### **Civil Affairs Operators as Warrior Ambassadors**

The world has witnessed near-peer competitors use information operations to influence civilian populations. From Ukraine to the United States, as well as non-state actors such as ISIS, the past twenty-plus years of irregular warfare have highlighted the importance of disallowing the enemy to influence and exploit the civil population. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States dominated the battlespace on the ground, while the enemy attacked the true center of gravity: the people. The lessons from the Global War on Terrorism highlight the need for strategic civic action that is based on a shared understanding of the environment.

Make no mistake, the work of winning over the so-called “hearts and minds” is about influencing culture to create and protect budding democracies abroad. As subject matter experts, civil affairs must base its advice to the MAGTF staff not only on *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, fundamentals but also on a baseline knowledge of regional history, foreign policy, government, language, and culture. Understanding the different variables that translate to military action requires critical thinking, intellect, and a degree of scholarship that goes beyond what Marine Corps civil affairs is trained to do today.

Across the DOD, the majority of civil affairs expertise resides in the Army, which maintains both active and reserve component civil affairs units with varying degrees of authorities and sophistication—a multitool of options for the mission. On the other hand, Marine Corps civil affairs capabilities reside almost exclusively in the reserve component, with only three civil affairs groups of limited sub-specialization.

The Marine Corps’ investment in its civil affairs capabilities must grow out of the needs of the MAGTF. While the Marine Corps can learn from the Army civil affairs model, it must de-

sign and develop this capability to suit MAGTF missions and integrate with naval operations. Civil affairs operators support the MAGTF in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions. Non-combatant evacuation operation missions, for example, require a basic knowledge of U.S. embassy organization, host-nation language, written communication skills, media, and inter-governmental organizations—to name a few. Some programs that emphasize this knowledge already exist within the Marine Corps, such as the Regional, Cultural, and Language Familiarization program available via *MarineNet*, the Foreign Area Officer and SNCO program sponsored by the International Affairs Branch, and the Marine Corps University Center for Regional and Security Studies. If the Marine Corps wants an organic, sophisticated civil affairs capability, it must coordinate, integrate, and formalize a holistic education that levels-up the mindset of civil

on developing ever more sophisticated analysis on the importance of a bridge to a local community, how the bridge is used by bad actors, the consequences and effects of U.S. military use of the bridge on the economy, how bad actors might try to exploit U.S. military use of the bridge, and how the community might respond. Imagine if civil affairs operators focused on systematically and consistently providing this type of analysis and could convey the information in a succinct and well written format that nests with the lines of effort important in that area of operations?

The United States lost the Vietnam War when it lost the initiative with the civil population, which allowed the enemy to exploit the citizenry. No amount of combat prowess could overcome the enemy once it established influence and legitimacy with the civil population and the people lost trust in the legitimate authorities. As the *JOC Irregular Warfare* publication states, the

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affairs to that of a learned MOS that demands more critical thinking and independent study at more junior officer and enlisted ranks like many other specialties. To accomplish this, Marine Corps civil affairs must leverage existing schools, programs, resources, and units that already touch the cultural aspects of the civil environment in a coordinated and systematic fashion.

At present, civil affairs tasks run the gamut from the more abstract Civil Preparation of the Battlespace to the mundane and baffling engineering assessments. A tiny civil affairs force (approximately 300 Marines) cannot do this variety of tasks well, especially since the reserve component—by definition—spends less time applying its MOS skillset. For example, imagine that instead of bridge assessments, civil affairs operators focused their efforts

United States military is in a “struggle ... for legitimacy and influence over the ... populations.” This influence and legitimacy are the result of thoughtful, strategic activities that as a whole impact the civilian population in a favorable way—the whole impact being greater than the sum of its individual parts. It is not the result of disparate activities such as medical capability exercises and humanitarian assistance engineering projects that are driven predominantly by budgetary appropriation angst and training opportunities for reservists.

### **A Culture of Information Sharing**

Therefore, in order to accomplish meaningful effects from civil affairs activities, Marine Corps civil affairs must integrate the MAGTF concept into how civil-military operations are conducted. The beauty of the MAGTF is seam-

less integration and mutual support amongst the command, ACE, GCE, and LCE to create an effect that destroys the enemy. In the same manner, Marine Corps civil affairs must seamlessly integrate with all partner teams that are involved in the information operations fight, to include intelligence, psychological operations (PSYOP), and public affairs. Approaching the information warfare fight as a combined and joint effort is the path to success. The enemies we currently face and the potential near peer competitors do not have the institutional silos that have become memorialized between various job functions within the Marine Corps and civil affairs as well as other Services. Currently, there is no effective platform or information technology to collect, collate, and share information gathered during civil information management (CIM) activities utilized within the Marine Corps. Having a system that allows for CIM to be rapidly aligned with the commander's critical information requirements, is relevant to the lines of efforts, and also has the ability to be seamlessly shared with our partners in the intelligence, PysOps, sister Services, and U.S. government agencies while integrating efforts to contribute and align Information Operations is critical in order to operate at the speed of information flow. Having this coordinated action that paints the civil environment picture from a multi-layered perspective will allow the commander to make quick and accurate decisions that shape the environment rather than react to it. The joint and whole of government approach collaboration is currently established in joint and Marine Corps civil affairs doctrine. However, it must be established as common practice and civil affairs Marines must be trained to operate in this manner as the norm.

In the current state, if a civil affairs Marine gathers a critical piece of information the only means of dissemination is via the Marine Corps Civil Information Management System (MARCIMS), a format heavy PowerPoint storyboard, CIMREP, or SITREP. This critical information will either go to a platform that no one uses or work its way through the traditional



**Sgt Tatiana Gema, Sgt Jimmy Correa, Maj Diana Moga, and SSgt Blocker planning a medical community relations event with a mayor and the commanding officer of a local Guatemalan infantry company. Ocos, Guatemala, 26 August 2019. (Photo by SSgt Abraham Blocker.)**

channels in the command operations center (COC) going through multiple filters. At the same time, the enemy/bad actors have no such limitations or filters for information sharing and have already seized the initiative before the CA Marine has finished his PowerPoint storyboard or uploaded information into the non-user friendly MARCIMS. The problem with MARCIMS in its current state is that it is not widely adopted or effectively utilized within the Marine Corps civil affairs community, let alone by partners within the Marine Corps that are allowed access. In addition, there is limited ability for access by other branches of Services and U.S. government agencies.

In order to become effective and gain the initiative at the speed of information flow, a system must be developed where this information can be quickly gathered, memorialized, and analyzed to be shared, not only with the commander but also with adjacent units. Imagine the same Marine described earlier who has gathered a critical piece of information being able to upload it in realtime through a user-friendly technology that immediately flags that critical information to the COC. This information is then not only available for immediate access to the COC but also to the

commander, intelligence, and PsyOps. This would allow them to analyze this information, make decisions, and disseminate the civil environment information to the command and ground combat elements for immediate action. Next, imagine that an adjacent Army special forces unit would also have access to this critical civil information in realtime. This can happen, and only when it does will we be able to regain the initiative from our adversaries and dominate the information operations battlespace.

The issue of collaboration goes beyond any particular tool; it is a cultural problem. Silos must be torn down and mission focused integration must become the norm. This integrated joint concept of operations must be at the center of civil affairs activities in order to achieve effectiveness and relevance for the MAGTF commander. It requires partnership, planning, and integrated action with intelligence, PsyOps, and public affairs on the strategic and tactical level. Each job function touches an element of the civil environment to gather and provide information to the MAGTF commander and conduct influencing operations. By training with and working in seamless tandem with these fellow Marines, civil affairs will be

able to provide a holistic picture of the civil environment and not merely a slice focused on an engineering project, a potential threat, or community relations event. This integrated collaboration between all job fields that touch the civil environment will supply a multilayered view of all aspects of the civil society, its effects on MAGTF operations, and the enemy's activities. At the same time, it will provide subject matter expertise and advise on the planning and conduct of civic action to accomplish the commander's mission and the area of operation's lines of efforts.

This need for collaboration and information sharing between MOSs, sister Services, and U.S. government agencies highlights another obstacle. The Marine Corps civil affairs community is small. Currently, approximately 300 Reserve Marines fill civil affairs billets with officers only serving three-year tours before returning to their primary MOS. This quickly creates a manning issue and advocacy issue. However, this obstacle highlights the opportunity for collaboration and innovation. By creating a seamless flow of information between every Marine who touches civil information (intel, PysOps, public affairs, etc.) and coordinating activities, this obstacle is not only mitigated but the desired effects of mapping and influencing the civil domain are enhanced.

### Relevant and Effective Technology Platforms

The MARCIMS was designed as the program of record for civil information. Its aim is to enable civil affairs Marines to collect, organize, analyze, visualize, and share field collected data. Its developers built the application, which consists of web pages and standardized forms that users can modify in realtime as a means for civil affairs specialists to create content, build knowledge on the civil environment, and input data. But despite its features and design, MARCIMS has failed to gain the wide-spread use that its developers had hoped for—leaving still a need for an effective information collection and sharing platform. The small size of the civil affairs community, MARCIMS' imperfect design, and the learning curve

required for proficiency have presented obstacles for the platform to catch on.

Though MARCIMS can be used across information operations to input civil information, regardless of whether a Marine is civil affairs, the absence of a user-friendly ability to upload files, create pages, or use the assessment forms has contributed to the failure of wide-spread adoption. It appears to have been designed with potential integration with other information operations or intelligence information gathering platforms, but as it is today, MARCIMS is an island. Civil Affairs Marines gather and input information that does not connect with the broader information operations picture in a manner that coordinates with intelligence, psychological operations, and public affairs.

There are technology platforms that are utilized by the aforementioned communities that share information with other branches of Service. Civil affairs should adopt these platforms in order to share information and coordinate activities. By doing this the MAGTF commander will be provided a holistic picture rather than a fragmented siloed view.

### Conclusion

Civil-military operations rely on information and collaboration. Without information, civil-military operations are guesswork at its worst and a drain on U.S. resources or even counterproductive to U.S. interests. The last two decades of war among the people prove that measuring the success of activities meant to influence attitudes, feelings, and beliefs held by the local population is complex and extremely nuanced. For this reason, civil-military operations, Information operations, psychological operations, intelligence, and public affairs must work in sync to define success and conduct civic actions in concrete terms. A shared understanding of goals and capabilities—answering the question of “why”—when it comes to civil military operations and information operations is necessary for achieving some measure of positive impact on the local population and “moving the needle” when it comes to influencing culture in a direction favorable to U.S. strategic

ends. The sophisticated use of information and coordinated action described above to inform, influence, and shape the civil environment exists at the center of achieving a unity of effort among the information-related capabilities across the Navy-Marine Corps team.

By adopting a technology platform that is widely utilized across the U.S. military, enhancing training and selection of civil affairs Marines to select the most capable warrior ambassadors, and integrating fully with partners, Marine Corps civil affairs will be at the tip of the spear to provide leadership and subject matter expertise in coordinated civic actions to create the desired effects on the civil environment rather than react to it. Only by adopting the MAGTF approach of coordinated combined action and applying it to the civil operating environment will Marine Corps civil affairs provide relevance and value to dominate the modern near-peer competition in the battlespace of the future.

By adopting the culture of information sharing and coordinated action, Marine Corps civil affairs will be a force multiplier and not merely the Marines that “hand out soccer balls.” A Marine Corps civil affairs that can integrate seamlessly with partners within the Marine Corps, other branches of Service, and U.S. governmental agencies will be a force multiplier and a partner of choice to conduct civic actions in the hot and cold wars of influence over civil operations wherever the Marine Corps operates around the world.

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### Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Concept for Civil Affairs*, (Washington, DC: July 2019). Not approved for public release.
2. Department of Defense, *Joint Operating Concept Irregular Warfare, Version 1.0*, (Washington, DC: September 2007).

