

MCIA's Enterprise Operations Center

Synchronizing MCISRE support

by the Marines and Civilian Marines of MCIA's Enterprise Operations Center

Upon setting his boots back onto the dusty ground of Helmand Province in April 2017, Task Force Southwest's J-2 intelligence officer faced a daunting task: reassembling a complete understanding of the battlespace, its key actors, and the extremist threat after a long absence of Marine Corps presence. Complicating this was the relatively small size of his intelligence section, a reflection of the overall size of the task force itself. Although his Marines were welltrained and highly capable, the J-2's tasks far outweighed his organic capacity. Placing his faith in the reachback concepts pioneered in the *Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Enterprise (MCISRE) Plan 2015–2020*, the major and his team relied heavily on the analytical capability and capacity offered by the enterprise itself and Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (MCIA) in particular. Nine months later, during post-mission assessment, he would note confidently how the reachback support MCIA provided was critical to mission success, and in his own words, "MCIA never let [him] down." A critical nuance one can easily overlook in context of that greater success story, but one with profoundly positive implications for the future of the enterprise is the mechanism within MCIA by which TF-SW leveraged this support—the Enterprise Operations Center (EOC).¹

Located within MCIA's headquarters aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico, the EOC is the Service's only persistently manned intelligence operations

center—essentially the intelligence functional equivalent of Headquarters Marine Corps' Marine Corps Operations Center (MCOC). Manned by active duty and civilian watch officers ranging in rank from sergeant to major and GG-13, the EOC fills two critical roles both as the MCIA Commander's Watchfloor and as the Hub of the Marine Corps ISR Enterprise. First, the EOC serves as an intelligence-centric supplement to the Marine Corps Operations Center, specifically for the Marine Corps' vast, worldwide intelligence community, spearheading the *MCISRE Plan's* guidance to fully integrate operations and intelligence.² Daily, EOC watch officers maintain and disseminate global situational awareness of all

and synchronizes intelligence collaboration between Marine Corps operating forces and supporting establishment, the Defense Intelligence Enterprise (DIE) including our Service Intelligence Center partners, and the wider National Intelligence Community (IC). Lastly, largely because of its nature as the only persistent 24/7 intel center within the Service, the EOC performs an essential implied task: organically providing initial triage-level analytical and intelligence support to MCISRE customers' urgent requirements (especially during traditional garrison non-working hours) until such time MCIA, MCISRE, or external DIE/IC resources can be leveraged. It is within this construct the EOC finds its highest levels of interac-

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MAGTF operations and exercises, as well as other joint and combined operations and exercises in which Marine Corps units participate. The EOC ensures the MCIA Commander and key intelligence leadership within the Service remain abreast of emerging operational requirements that may necessitate enterprise support. The second task, nested within the core of the enterprise concept itself, is integration.³ Within MCIA's role as a Service intelligence center and member of the intelligence community, the EOC directly facilitates

tion with the most forward, tactically focused nodes of the enterprise. Facilitating and synchronizing requests for information and requests for support from MCISRE nodes and IC customers both within and outside MCIA and organically answering initial triage level intelligence requests from MCISRE customers has become the norm for the EOC. Such was the case in March of 2017 at 0200 Eastern Standard Time on a Saturday when the EOC successfully fielded its first of many requests for rapid intelligence support from TF-SW



As in all Intelligence Operations Centers, MCIA's EOC Marines analyze, integrate, produce, and disseminate finished intelligence products. (Photo by Cpl Laura Mercado.)

in Helmand Province, a scenario that repeats itself many times throughout the diaspora of deployed MAGTFs. That said, the EOC provides a value far greater than the sum of its parts—a value and impact to the Service that can only be fully appreciated by examining the context of necessity that has driven the EOC's evolution.

While the existence of an EOC as the commander's watchfloor is neither a new nor revolutionary concept, the EOC's new role as the central node of collaboration and synchronization within the MCISRE is one borne of the near-term and future operations environments and the transformation these changes have sparked within the Marine Corps as a warfighting organization. As the *MCISRE Plan* astutely notes, longstanding presumptions of U.S. firepower and technological dominance can no longer be taken for granted.⁴ As such, the MAGTFs commander's decisive edge must instead be derived from an evolving warfighting philosophy that is responsive to this evolving shift in the traditional operating environment. Applying the Marine Corps' inherent maneuverist philosophy to this uncertain new paradigm, the *Marine Corps Operating Concept* argues that success must now be derived from less quantifiable and tangible facets than traditional

firepower and technological superiority. Indeed, success cannot be ensured merely in the physical environment but must also be seized in the cognitive via the exploitation of "psychological [and] temporal" advantages.⁵ The importance of operating at a more rapid tempo than the enemy is also not news to any serious student of maneuver warfare or the ideas of John Boyd; what has changed is the emphasis on temporal maneuver is now more essential than ever before. The warfighting function of intelligence has long been the central pillar of building the commander's situational awareness and understanding of the battlespace to sufficiently enable successful temporal maneuver, and the traditional challenges faced by the intelligence field in ensuring the timely, rapid dissemination of relevant information represent a critical vulnerability in this new environment.

The requirement to break down the barriers and stovepipes that inhibit the timely flow of accurate, relevant intelligence across the force have been examined in great detail and do not need to be rehashed here. The existence of the enterprise as a concept and its guiding document, the *MCISRE Plan*, owe themselves to the recognition of this issue and the comprehensive ongoing effort to redress it—an effort that is currently yielding great success, if often

in the context of unexpected growing pains. Rather, we must acknowledge this context in order to fully appreciate the EOC's critical role as the connective tissue and catalyst for breaking down these barriers, enabling the exercise of the enterprise function across the Service and realizing the MCISRE's vision of federated production and rapid dissemination enabling successful maneuver in the temporal domain. The EOC and the functions it performs are the enterprise's bid to bypass the traditional impediments imposed on the intelligence warfighting function—by its nature, a rapid, collaborative, and flattened process—by the rigidity of organizational and staff hierarchy, both within and outside the Marine Corps. Traditionally, with a handful of noteworthy exceptions, Marine units at the forward edge of the fight relied on intelligence information from higher that had to move at the pace of a slow trickle through multiple layers and echelons of bureaucracy before reaching the commander. Inversely, relevant tactical-level intelligence emerging from the evolving battlespace also often encountered similar obstacles in reaching higher decision makers in a timely manner. This became especially apparent when intelligence requirements necessitated support from entities outside the Service, such as theater, national, or other Service entities. As a full-fledged Intelligence Community Watch Floor, the EOC has the authority to reach out directly to any of its peer entities throughout the DIE and allowing it to bypass many of these procedural obstacles and leverage the vast intelligence wealth of the greater IC directly on behalf of the tactical-level commander. Additionally, the EOC also serves as a collaborative catalyst within the MCISRE itself, by which the various members of the Enterprise, ranging from deployed MAGTFs, to garrison operating forces, and to the supporting establishment can coordinate. As such, it shares information, pool resources, and synchronize efforts without being constrained by the tyrannies of geography and institutional hierarchy.

This function and its profound impact on the way the Enterprise does

business is best represented by three recent vignettes. As addressed earlier in this article, in spring of 2017, Task Force Southwest’s enterprise-derived intelligence successes originated quite literally with a Saturday 0200 local time phone call to the EOC. The request was for urgent support in the form of specialized geospatial products needed to support aerial delivered fires. The task force’s supported Afghan forces were in contact throughout the battlespace, and these products were needed with the utmost urgency—an urgency which greeted the EOC watch officer who picked up the phone. As one may expect, this watch officer immediately notified MCIA leadership of the need to activate its geospatial production capability over the weekend and begin immediate production. In the interim, the Marines downrange needed a solu-

Within 24 hours of receiving notification of the MEU’s task, the EOC Watch initiated “push” intelligence support to the MEU. This support included: addressing an exhaustive list of intelligence requirements ranging from geospatial support to route studies to analytical products of the threat to coordinating comprehensive intelligence support during the insert of the force. This support persisted for the full duration of the operation. Leveraging its unique position, as a central collaborative node per the MCISRE concept, the EOC equipped the MEU with rapid and accurate national-level intelligence support to enable planning and execution. Lastly, perhaps the most satisfying example of EOC and enterprise success is one that hits closest to home: enterprise support to Marine units participating in Defense Support to Civil Authorities

challenging scenario. As noted, it was a true coalition effort across the Enterprise and IC that yielded tremendous success in this endeavor, but the EOC’s critical role as central coordinator serves as powerful validation of the Enterprise concept of the EOC’s role therein. These initial successes have not been without mistakes, missteps, and in some cases painful lessons learned. However, as the Service continues its effort to rapidly modernize in preparation for tomorrow’s fight—a fight that will occur as much in the information, space, and cyber domains as it does in the physical and will be fought against the backdrop of emerging great power competition and near-peer threats—the role of the EOC can only become more critical. MCIA will in turn continue to grow in its role as the hub for expeditionary intelligence within the Service and IC, and the EOC will remain at the forefront of that evolution.

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tion and the EOC did not fail. Combining the archives of historical ENDURING FREEDOM geospatial, within two hours of receipt of the request, the EOC had provided Task Force Southwest’s intelligence selection a workable solution in the form of historical products that fulfilled the requirement until new production could occur. As a result of these efforts, the Marines in Helmand and their supported Afghan forces controlled multiple airstrikes against enemy forces—a potent micro-level example of the EOC exercising the enterprise concept to provide rapid intelligence support to urgent tactical level requirements. During this same tumultuous timeframe—specifically, February 2017—the deployed 11th MEU received an order to provide indirect fire support for Operation INHERENT RESOLVE, specifically requesting the MEU deploy conventional forces to Northern Syria.

and Humanitarian Assistance Operations in the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Maria in the fall of 2017. As both Hurricanes made landfall, Marine active and reserve forces throughout the United States were called to assist. The need for a central collaborative hub for intelligence support immediately became evident. Assuming this role, the EOC adeptly synchronized a powerful coalition of intelligence capability and capacity across the Enterprise, including the MAGTF Intelligence Centers in both I MEF and II MEF, as well as intelligence nodes within Marine Forces Reserve.

Additionally, the EOC leveraged its unique position and authorities to reach out to the IC, federal law enforcement, and disaster-relief entities to ensure the strongest possible availability of information and unity of effort regarding intelligence support to this unique and

Notes

1. Interview between MCIA CO and TF-SW ROTO-1 S-2, January 2018.
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Enterprise Plan 2015–2020*, (Washington, DC: 2014).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

