

# COMMSTRAT Is Operational

Creating advantages in the information environment

by LtCol Chris Perrine

Many have argued recently that the Communication Strategy and Operations (COMMSTRAT) occupational field needs to be “operationalized.” The implication is that COMMSTRAT is passive, lacks deliberate planning, and does not provide much support to operations. There is also a desire to use COMMSTRAT almost like a kinetic weapon, with a laser focus on the enemy. So let’s ask the question, is COMMSTRAT operational? The answer is absolutely yes—and no. Yes, COMMSTRAT can be used for proactive communication that will give a commander an advantage in the information environment. However, there are some significant caveats that prevent COM-

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MSTRAT from being the influencing tool aimed at adversaries that many think it should be.

In order to understand how best to utilize COMMSTRAT, it would help to understand the mission of COMMSTRAT as well as the laws and policies that guide COMMSTRAT efforts. The COMMSTRAT field was created in October 2017 by merging public affairs (PA) and combat camera as part of the Marine Corps’ modernization effort. The mission of COMMSTRAT as found in the 6 June 2019 *Marine Corps*

*Concept for Communication Strategy and Operations* is:

Communication Strategy and Operations Marines advise commanders and staffs on communication matters; research, develop, integrate, and assess communication plans; communicate with internal, domestic and international audiences; and produce written and visual information products in order to build understanding, credibility and trust with audiences critical to mission success.

Because of the First Amendment, which we are sworn to protect, news reporters and social media users can report on Marine Corps activities extensively and without censorship. They will talk about us, whether we join the conversation or not, but it is in our best interest to engage in order to ensure an informed and accurate dialogue. Additionally, the Marine Corps is bound by the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), a law that fosters transparency and compels the release of information unless it is protected by one of the nine exemptions under the statute. Most FOIA coordinators are separate from COMMSTRAT, but the COMMSTRAT officer is responsible for answering media queries related to information released under FOIA. Additionally, COMMSTRAT follows DOD and Department of the Navy regulations for PA. DOD has five principles of information, which can be summed up with the saying “maximum disclosure of information with minimum delay.” The principles specifically call for compliance with FOIA in letter and in spirit, a free flow of information without censorship or propaganda, an injunction not to classify information



*Images tell a story about naval capability that needs to be shared with the world. (Photo by Cpl Austin Mealy.)*

to avoid criticism or embarrassment, an expedited flow of information to the public, and the withholding of information only if disclosure would adversely affect national security or threaten the safety or privacy of the men and women of the Armed Forces. (DoD Principles of Information and *Joint Publication 3-61 Command Public Affairs*.)

The COMMSTRAT field can and does conduct detailed planning and execute proactive communication. COMMSTRAT should be included in all planning efforts from the beginning of the Marine Corps or joint planning process. We also have our own communication planning process—research, plan, implement, and evaluate—and we have a 4505 MOS with Marines who have earned a master's degree in mass communication and are experts at conducting research, developing communication plans, and conducting assessments. We also have sophisticated assessment tools, which cost tens of thousands of dollars, to measure the effectiveness of our efforts. In today's high-paced information environment, it is imperative that communication plans are developed based on research. Proactive communication is essential in order to effectively convey the command's message, stay ahead of adversaries, and break through the noise. It is also critical for COMMSTRAT to constantly monitor media reporting and social media activity to identify and respond to misinformation, challenges to the command's narrative, and legitimate concerns from the community. No matter how proactive COMMSTRAT is, we must always be prepared to respond to a crisis.

It is important to note that COMMSTRAT does not operate in a vacuum and is rarely tactical. COMMSTRAT messaging is nested under the *National Defense Strategy* and guidance DOD, HQMC, and combatant commands. All messaging for activities and events that are likely to garner national or international media attention is approved at the HQMC or DOD level. Such messaging is also usually approved by the Department of State—including any embassies affected—and oftentimes by other government agencies. COMMSTRAT



**Training exercises with allied nations send messages to nations that we consider our allies critical to successful training or combat operations. (Photo by LCpl Brienne Collins Miller.)**

typically is not tactical because the means of distributing the message is via the news media and social media, both of which are widely distributed and potentially global. While COMMSTRAT messaging can have tactical effects, it is an area weapon, not a point weapon like a sniper rifle. Because the COMMSTRAT messaging is approved at the national level and is aligned with messaging from HQMC, DOD, and Department of State, COMMSTRAT messaging *is* national messaging. It is a mistake to try to subordinate COMMSTRAT messages to other messaging efforts, such as tactical influence efforts. Instead, those influence efforts should be carefully developed so they do not undermine COMMSTRAT efforts.

COMMSTRAT is a unique capability that can communicate with all foreign and domestic audiences in all phases of operations, and COMMSTRAT supports both the Fleet Marine Force and the Supporting Establishment. However, the primary and most important audience is the U.S. domestic audience. Why? Because as the mission statement says, COMMSTRAT's purpose is to build understanding, credibility, and trust with audiences *critical to mission to success*. No audience is more critical to mission success than the U.S. audience. Although the

approximate size and structure of the Marine Corps is now part of U.S. law, there have been multiple attempts to get rid of the Marine Corps as a separate Service. Gen Victor Krulak's book, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1984), provides a good overview of some of those efforts. It was Gen Krulak who wrote that America does not need a Marine Corps, America wants a Marine Corps. If America ceases to want a Marine Corps, we will cease to exist. Without the support of the U.S. population as well as our political leaders, we will not have the money or resources needed to conduct operations. When we urgently need new body armor or armored vehicles like we did in Iraq, we will not get them. When we need a pay raise to close the gap in increased cost of living, we will get our housing allowance cut instead. When we need to repair our facilities or address issues with family housing, it will fall on deaf ears. When we need moral support from home while our Marines are engaged in combat, we will get silence. Or, perhaps we will be spit on like the Vietnam veterans were instead of being welcomed home with open arms like the veterans of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) in Afghanistan and Operation IRAQI

FREEDOM (OIF). And let us never forget, we recruit future Marines from the domestic audience. If we fail to connect with prospective recruits in the future, if we fail to convince them that we are prestigious and the finest fighting force of all time, there will not be a Marine Corps in the future.

Some argue that the American people are not paying attention, so we should just focus on the People's Republic of China (PRC) or Russia since the *National Defense Strategy* names them as competitors. This could not be more wrong. The American people certainly paid attention during OEF and OIF, and they provided tremendous support. If the American people are not paying attention now, that is probably a good thing. If they were paying attention, it would likely mean something bad happened. However, now is exactly when we should make every effort to connect with the American people to educate them about what we do and let them see us as humans rather than just faceless uniforms. People care about people, and when we go to war, the American people will care about individual Marines and the sacrifices we make—*not* about our latest unmanned aerial vehicles, submersibles, or HIMARS missiles. It is critical that we earn the trust of the American people now to ensure their support later. In repeated Gallup surveys, Marines score the highest amongst the Armed Forces in terms of prestige but toward the bottom as far as importance to national defense. Why? Because although we are small in size and lack strategic weapons, Marines have a legacy of heroic achievement and because a COMMSTRAT Marine helped to tell the story.

But why not focus on the PRC? Of course we should direct communication efforts toward potential adversaries. Our *National Defense Strategy* makes it clear we are in a great power competition. However, even a cursory study of the information environment makes it clear we have a very limited ability to affect the PRC public. Just read Singer and Brookings's *Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media* or David Patrikarakos' *War in 140 Characters* for an understanding of



**Training exercises with our allies send messages to those nations we consider critical to successful training and combat operations.** (Photo by Cpl Josue Marquez.)

the “Great Firewall of China” and the PRC’s complete control over news media and social media in that country. Simply put, we have very limited ability to reach that population, even without considering cultural and linguistic limitations. If the Chinese government disagrees with a word, that word simply ceases to exist in their news or on their Internet. If people switch to an emoji or photo, that emoji or photo will quickly cease to exist. All media is controlled and monitored by the government. In fact, in February 2020, the Department of State listed the five foremost Chinese state media organizations as operatives of the state and mandated they be treated as foreign functionaries with rules similar to diplomats. During the first few weeks of protests in Hong Kong in 2019, I remember reading that virtually nobody in the PRC knew the protests were happening even as the rest of the world watched. When word did get around, the government called all protesters “terrorists.” I remember one Chinese citizen saying he did not understand how hundreds of thousands of people could all be terrorists, but that is all he heard. Other reporting has shown that even Chinese students studying in the United States get most of their information from state-controlled Chinese media, and the Communist party

uses those students to suppress speech negative to the PRC. More recently, the PRC in January and February of this year came under intense criticism for suppressing information about the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak and punishing citizens who spoke out against the government.

Even if we could reach the people in China, it would be a mistake to think that we are going to overcome thousands of years of the Chinese historical-cultural narrative by waving a magic communication wand. They have deeply engrained beliefs about us, their place in the world, and the direction they are headed; it would be extremely difficult to run the hierarchy of effects from awareness to values to behavior using inform or influence efforts, especially if they are not supported by our actions or national policies. Likewise, the Chinese Communist Party is an ideologically driven party that is primarily focused on survival of the party and achievement of party objectives. While we can support U.S. Government and Indo-Pacific Command efforts to convince the PRC that we are committed to a *free and open* Indo-Pacific region and have combat-credible forces ready to respond to crisis, it is unrealistic to think that public communication efforts will influence their beliefs and

values to the point of causing them to change their policy objectives.

That said, COMMSTRAT does support operations. First, COMMSTRAT builds and maintains the trust and credibility of the American people and our political leadership, which is critical to our success and gives the commander room to maneuver. Second, COMMSTRAT builds and maintains credibility with international audiences. By demonstrating how we operated in compliance with the law of war and other international norms under the diplomatic umbrella created by our national leaders, we prevent interference from other countries and maintain support from coalition partners. Third, we develop confidence in our allies and partners that cooperation with us is in their national security interest and that we are faithful partners. Fourth, we communicate with local audiences to explain our actions, address their concerns, and correct misinformation. Fifth, we inform Marines, Sailors, civilian employees, and family members, leading to increased readiness and morale.

Additionally, COMMSTRAT can support maneuver and tactical efforts. For instance, prior to the liberation of Kuwait during Operation DESERT STORM, PA engagement led to media reporting extensively on the presence of a Marine amphibious force off the coast. This coverage helped convince Saddam Hussein that an amphibious assault was coming from the east, and he devoted significant resources to stopping it. When the actual attack came, the majority of forces swung around his western flank and crushed his army. The effect was a major contribution to the military deception plan. However, great care should be taken when planners consider using COMMSTRAT for an effort like that. As soon as the news media think we are manipulating them instead of being truthful and transparent, we will lose them and face a 24/7 onslaught of criticism from those who drive the national and international dialogue.

COMMSTRAT can support operations and Phase 0 competition in many other ways. When we conduct humani-

tarian assistance/disaster relief efforts in ravaged coastal areas, COMMSTRAT can tell the world how Marines are supporting the effort—building goodwill and support for our operations—and provide information to victims to let them know where to find assistance. We can also seek to affect the decision making of competitors by releasing imagery of a HIMARS shoot from the deck of a ship, like I MEF did off the coast of California during the bilateral exercise DAWN BLITZ, or a rapid HIMARS insertion like III MEF did in Australia during TALISMAN SABRE, or an insertion by LCAC like the 31st MEU recently did in Okinawa. We can conduct media engagements during bilateral and multilateral exercises and engagements to show the strength of our ally and partner network, which we do as a rule. We can release imagery and information that shows our continual forward presence, engagement, and readiness whenever the MEU operates in the region or I or III MEF conduct an exercise. We can also highlight experimentation with new capabilities or new concepts, such as expeditionary advanced basing operations. During combat, we can release imagery of our destruction of the enemy's forces and seizure of key terrain in order to demonstrate success on the battlefield. We can also release imagery that proves an enemy's bad actions or law of war violations.

However, there is a major limitation that prevents an orientation on the enemy and prevents COMMSTRAT from focusing efforts on the influence effect many desire. Because of the First Amendment, FOIA, the DOD principles of information, and other laws and regulations, COMMSTRAT will sometimes release information that is not favorable to the command. For instance, when we have fatal training accidents, we will release an announcement and provide as much information as is releasable, consistent with security and privacy considerations. Following the 6 December 2018 midair collision between an F/A-18D and C-130J off the coast of Japan that resulted in the loss of six Marines, the investigation results were released through FOIA.

COMMSTRAT engagement with the media on that mishap as well as a series of other aviation mishaps revealed many problems with aviation readiness and certainly do not support efforts to convince competitors of our combat credibility. When Marines engage in misconduct, we will provide details and allow media to attend the court martial.

These are just some examples of information that we are required to release that do not further most communication objectives. However, they do support one communication objective, and it is the most important. They provide a transparency that leads to the continued trust and support by our critical audiences. This works to our long-term benefit and preserves our institutional legitimacy. For instance, when media contacted III MEF about white nationalist photos posted on social media, the question was not, "Are you going to do anything?" Instead, they asked, "What are you doing to hold the Marine accountable?" Our transparent actions with previous cases built confidence in the media that we would do not condone such behavior and would do the right thing. This trust must be preserved at all costs. If we fail to meet this standard and maintain that support, we might as well stop communicating because when we communicate it is vital that our critical audiences believe us and believe that we are doing the right thing. Anyone who disagrees should consider the Vietnam War. The military did not lose the fight in Vietnam; we lost the trust of the American people and their willingness to support the military. While the politicians had long struggled for support, the military kept the faith of the people until the 1968 Tet Offensive. A tactical victory for the United States that destroyed the combat effectiveness of the Viet Cong, it was an operational defeat that crushed the narrative that we were winning and led to the end of support for operations.

