

COMMSTRAT

What it is, what it isn't, and its place in the MIG

by LtCol Kelly Frushour

This article seeks to provide a foundation from which discussion about Communication Strategy and Operations (COMMSTRAT) in the MEF Information Groups (MIGs) can launch. It provides background related to the COMMSTRAT occupational specialty, discusses the COMMSTRAT mission in the MEF and the role of the COMMSTRAT Company in the MIG, offers a counter-current-MIG-trend solution, and concludes with a COMMSTRAT community call to action.

A COMMSTRAT Level Set

In 2017, the Public Affairs (PA) (43XX) and Combat Camera (COMCAM) (46XX) communities merged to form the 45XX occupational field of Communication Strategy and Operations (COMMSTRAT). This merge was a long time coming because the distinction between documentation and communication is a false one. Simply stated, a significant portion of both fields collected and packaged visual imagery (VI). Who captured that imagery was transparent to the final recipient: sometimes PA imagery serviced requirements from the G-3, and sometimes COMCAM imagery fed public messaging for PA. As a career PA Officer (PAO), I always owned the COMCAM Marines and their mission when deployed because the collection of imagery is agnostic—the difference came in the follow-on use of the imagery, and being deployed necessitated the effective use of limited resources.

Because of the size of the PA community, many Marines never encountered a Marine equipped with a camera aside from when they needed a promotion photo. Because of this, few Marines understood that in addition to the VI

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A combat videographer with Headquarters Battalion, MCB Hawaii, records video during the Advanced Infantry Course aboard Kahuku Training Area, September 2016. (Photo by Cpl Aaron Patterson.)

mission, PA was responsible for developing, executing, and assessing communication efforts on behalf of the commander. The COMMSTRAT tasks to provide communication counsel, engage key publics, plan and integrate with staffs, conduct communication research, and assess and evaluate communication effectiveness always have

been performed by PA—just as they are now by COMMSTRAT.

The new name describes what PA did (and still does in the Services where the field still exists), which is treat communication as a strategy not a goal. We do not communicate for the sake of communicating; we communicate with purpose—to affect change in the

knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors of our target publics. We do not lie. We do not distort. We explain and provide context. We constantly seek to inform publics (including our internal publics i.e. Marines) about who we are and what we do. We battle misinformation and disinformation with truth. We deter aggression by demonstrating strength and capability.

We are the most powerful information-related capability in the arsenal because we communicate to *all* publics, in *all* phases, we have *global* effects, and we rarely require additional national-level authorities.

That said, COMMSTRAT does not exist uncoordinated and free-range. We plug in to our higher, adjacent, and subordinate PA counterparts because we do not operate alone, and “our story” is contained in a larger national narrative. The field’s name often gets confused with “strategic communication,” but the distinction is not small and is vital to this current discussion. Strategic communication involves all the elements of national power. The Marine Corps supports strategic communication, but tactical-level units are not deciding how or when to message national objectives. That is not to say COMMSTRAT does not or cannot support the commander’s scheme of maneuver.

The advantage COMMSTRAT creates for the commander is not always immediate. Sometimes COMMSTRAT releases information that is not flattering. We have an obligation to keep the publics on whom our existence depends informed about who we are and what we do—to include the bad. This may cause near-term negative coverage, but it results in long-term reputational credit for being transparent and open.

Messaging and Spells

COMMSTRAT does not own messaging. Messaging is a combination of what we do and what we say about what we do and is ultimately the commander’s prerogative. More precisely, messaging is what people observe us doing combined with what they perceive us saying about what we do. COMMSTRAT advises on both halves of messaging and is the primary entity to release information

about a given event. That said, there is no perfect combination of words that is going to make someone know, think, or do something. That is the very definition of a magic spell. COMMSTRAT does not do spells. I write this because I have encountered numerous service members who believe that a perfectly crafted talking point will carry the day regardless of what we do. This fundamentally fails to recognize the reality of what can be accomplished through words alone.

The words we use, the imagery we publish, and the stories we tell are derived from guidance delivered from higher headquarters or through the staff planning process. This is why it is essential that planners and operational planning teams include or consult COMMSTRAT.

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Publics and Audiences

The credibility and long-term relationships we build through our transparency and proactive communication can be leveraged to sustain operations, access, and freedom of maneuver in physical domains. These relationships are doubly important when we remember we are primarily fighting for influence in the minds and emotions of our partners, allies, and third parties—not directly with an adversary. Short-term, exploitive, and transactional communication that relies on deception, half-truths, disingenuous methods, and dirty tricks is rarely useful for anything other than sowing chaos for short duration.

Developing strong relationships means treating those with a stake in the success or failure of the Marine Corps as “publics” and not “audiences.” Although many publications use the word “audience,” to have the mindset of a professional in the field of communication, it is helpful to substitute the word for

“public.” The word “audience” implies people who are paying attention to you / your unit and ready to engage with you or your unit. That is not a valid assumption to possess, particularly in today’s day and age where we all are drowning in information and have no shortage of things to occupy our screens. Scarcity of attention defines the challenge of the environment in which we operate. Using the term “public” reminds us that we have to gain attention, we have to find common ground, and we have to take a longer-term view of the maintenance of the relationship. In the immediate term, COMMSTRAT does that through sharing compelling stories and interesting visuals. COMMSTRAT also does that by remembering publics are comprised of people. People generally care about things that affect them or things that are interesting. We strive to inform by letting people know why they should care about us and how we affect them, and we do so in an interesting way.

MEF and MIG

The MEF Information Groups (MIGs) with their subordinate COMMSTRAT Companies (CSCs) came into being around the same time as the PA and COMCAM merge. Before I came to III MEF and many times since, I have asked, “How is this supposed to work?”

Unlike its sister units in the intelligence and communications battalions, there is no COMMSTRAT capability at the MIG that does not reside in the MEF or, for that matter, the other major subordinate commands within the MEF. The only thing the MIG has on the MEF is more COMMSTRAT Marines. The COMMSTRAT community designed the CSC to be the deep bench for the MEF COMMSTRAT mission: to provide augments in support of MAGTFs when needed, to produce products when needed, and to conduct training for the Marines.

The purpose of the CSC is not well understood; the problem lies, at least in part, in the name. A more accurate name would be COMMSTRAT Support Company because the company supports the MEF COMMSTRAT

mission, it does not own it. The current name implies otherwise and the resulting confusion is a breeding ground for information fratricide. That said, the CSC does not *just* support the MEF COMMSTRAT mission. A key point of friction lies with the responsibility for engagement—a core competency of COMMSTRAT. It is perfectly valid to assume a CSC would conduct engagement; however, the company that produces products for all the information-related capabilities should not also be releasing products for PA purposes. Back when Information Operations was in vogue, PA was never a core or a supported capability; it was a related one. That distinction was important then and should not be lost or blurred now. For this reason, Visual Information Company would be a clearer name.

III MEF COMMSTRAT has experienced whose-role-is-it challenges with the MIG. For example, at a III MEF Commanders Conference, a major subordinate command—after seeing the robust CSC on the MIG’s organizational chart—asked where they were supposed to go for COMMSTRAT guidance, the MEF or the MIG? Answer: the MEF.

First, the MEF COMMSTRAT section has the relationships with higher and adjacent COMMSTRAT/PA. Remember, COMMSTRAT doesn’t operate uncoordinated and free-range. Here in III MEF, the list includes Indo-Pacific Command, HQMC, MARFOR-PAC, Pacific Fleet, 7th Fleet, I MEF, U.S. Forces Japan, U.S. Forces Korea, Joint U.S. Military Assistance Groups, regional embassies/consulates, and Okinawa PAOs. MEF COMMSTRAT, with the senior community members, coordinates with these entities—situation dependent—and provides guidance to major subordinate command COMMSTRAT sections, to include the MIG.

Second, the CSC does not do the full complement of COMMSTRAT core competencies. It does not plan, it does not engage, it does not assess; not because the COMMSTRAT Marines do not know how, but because they are not at the right level. Two separate entities cannot do the MEF COMMSTRAT mission. Two separate entities cannot



MajGen Paul Rock, CG, 3d MEB; MajGen Shinichi Aoki, CG, Japan Ground Self-Defense Force Amphibious Raid Deployment Brigade and BGen Ariel Caculitan, Deputy Commandant, Philippine Marine Corps, answer questions during a press conference for KAMANDAG 3 at Subic Bay, Philippines, October 2019. (Photo by LCpl Ujian Gosun.)

share the mission either. Communication research cannot be separate from planning, planning cannot be separate from implementation, and implementation cannot be separate from evaluation, which in turn feeds planning and so on. It is a circular, fluid process that involves realtime adjustments based on how information is being received. Tasks are not linear. Actions in the information environment happen in seconds, and there is no luxury of time to ask the MEF G-3 to task the MIG to task the MIG’s Information Command Center (the III MIG name for the ICC) to task the CSC to help with something immediate or emerging. Hence, the mission of the CSC is to provide augments, provide training, and produce products—not plan, engage, or assess.

This point also reveals a challenge to COMMSTRAT officer development. The rapid growth of structure in the MIG has had deleterious effects on the COMMSTRAT community as a whole. To grow our capacity, COMMSTRAT has been flooding the zone with lieutenants out of TBS and accepting lateral moves from other MOSs. The MOS-producing school for COMMSTRAT officers is a joint school. After graduation, COMMSTRAT officers learn

their trade through on-the-job training. With the bulk of junior officers in the CSC not being exposed to the majority of core competencies on a daily basis, they risk learning bad habits and incorrect ideas about their MOS from well-meaning but uninformed Marines. Moving additional COMMSTRAT Marines directly into the MIG—to the ICC and not the CSC—will only exacerbate this problem.

Third, the mission cannot be split down some imaginary line between publics or phases. Communication actions in peacetime—even when focused on domestic issues—have implications for the ability to generate and sustain combat power in Phase III operations. In this sense, COMMSTRAT has always be “operationalized,” no less so at the bases and stations as at the MEFs, even as we as a community have failed to effectively explain that connection. COMMSTRAT coverage plans in support of operations/exercises/events address objectives for multiple publics because once information is public, it is available and accessible to all, and efforts in one area can affect efforts in another. The MEF COMMSTRAT section cannot focus on command information or crisis

management type tasks and leave the MIG (and by extension the CSC) to be “laser focused on the enemy,” as has been suggested. The suggestion reveals an attritionist mindset toward communication and seeks to throw COMMSTRAT strengths at an adversary’s surface. This is especially misguided when an adversary lacks a free press. The gaps lie within the relationships the United States has with other nations and the media environments therein, to include America’s. Hence, coverage plans that address objectives for multiple publics.

If the mission cannot be shared or split, where does COMMSTRAT belong? If the question is what does the MEF Commander need rather than what does the MIG need, the answer is the COMMSTRAT mission belongs where it is, in the MEF, with COMMSTRAT access to the MEF commander and integrated with the MEF staff, with that relationship mirrored in the major subordinate commands, and strong liaison officers from MEF COMMSTRAT in the ICC. This maintains the necessary separation for credibility’s sake while ensuring the ICC can effectively track and monitor the information environment through the running estimate.

Maintaining COMMSTRAT’s credibility, and by extension our capability and effectiveness, requires a philosophical, if not always physical, separation from some of the other information-related capabilities. The inclusion of COMMSTRAT in the MIG accepts risk in this regard. While it is too soon to tell if that risk will bear fruit or ruin, in the near term, the costs have been confusion over roles and responsibilities, misallocated resources, and a degradation in the overall ability of both the MEF and the MIG to support the MEF commander’s communication requirements.

My proposed solution represents an experimental condition not tested with regard to the MIG. Remove the CSC from the MIG and shift the capacity to the MEF. The MEF then has the capacity to provide liaison officers to the ICC. Support to PSYOP would come from a few 45XX Marines (not officers) assigned to either the ICC or directly to PSYOP to design products and run the Tactical Imagery Production System. Imagery is largely agnostic, and PSYOP can access it through the Defense Visual Imagery Distribution System or via a local archive that includes FOUO and higher imagery. This provides a clean(er) break between the

inform and influence functions, returns capacity to the MEF, provides the ICC better insight to MEF COMMSTRAT actions, enables the ICC to provide input to MEF COMMSTRAT actions, and gives the MIG some capability in terms of production and reprographics.

Ownership and Call to Action

Historically, PA, and now COMMSTRAT, has spent so much time explaining who we (Marine Corps) are and what we (Marine Corps) do that we have neglected explaining who we (PA/COMMSTRAT) are and what we (PA/COMMSTRAT) do. As anyone in communication knows, if you do not explain yourself, someone else will. It is a particularly galling experience to sit through lectures/presentations/meetings where the COMMSTRAT capability is discussed as something needed with no recognition that it exists—and has always existed. For the issues I have outlined above, we (PA/COMMSTRAT) have only ourselves to blame, but we also have an invaluable opportunity. The increased focus on the role of information in warfare, the creation of the MIGs, the vibrant discussion about the Marine Corps’ future roles in response to the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* (Washington, DC: July 2019) have gained us growth and demonstrated the recognition of COMMSTRAT as a valued capability.

I ask the COMMSTRAT community to take the time to explain our role, to explicitly state the value we bring, and to ensure that Marines are informed of our existence when COMMSTRAT capabilities are discussed. For those outside the COMMSTRAT community, please recognize that the Marine Corps has built a cadre of professional communicators who have been immersed in the world of “war under informationized conditions” since they earned the MOS. We all will benefit if commanders and planners leverage that expertise in planning and operations.



LtGen H. Stacy Clardy, III, answers questions during a press conference following the III MEF change of command ceremony at Camp Courtney, Okinawa, Japan, May 2019. (Photo by PFC Francesca Landis.)

