

COMMSTRAT Maneuver in OIE

Capabilities, challenges, and the way forward

by Capt Joshua W. Larson, Maj Joshua L. Smith & CWO3 Jared M. Padula

In July 2019, Marines with the 11th MEU aboard the USS *Boxer* downed an Iranian drone using a Lightweight Marine Air Defense Integrated System (L-MADIS) while transiting the Strait of Hormuz. The L-MADIS is a new “soft-kill” weapons system designed to counter a threat from an unmanned aerial system (UAS) and was first deployed, as well as reported on by the media, while aboard the USS *Kearsarge* in early 2019.¹ The media broke the story of the Iranian drone downing first by misstating that it had been “shot down,” providing the impression that kinetic weapons had been used. Subsequent reporting stated the U.S. Navy, not the Marines, had downed the UAS. While this was happening, the 11th MEU Communication Strategy and Operations (COMMSTRAT) Officer and the *Boxer* Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) Public Affairs Officer escorted an embedded journalist from the *Wall Street Journal* within the skin of the ship. Neither the 11th MEU COMMSTRAT officer nor the ARG Public Affairs Officer were made aware of the downing until hours after the engagement.

Meanwhile, the Communication Directorate at the Pentagon, responsible for Service-level communication and providing the direct link between the Marine Corps and the Pentagon Press Corps, received numerous requests from the media for information regarding the L-MADIS since it was an unknown weapons system. Although fielding the L-MADIS was still going through the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities and policy process, the weapons system had gone through

>Capt Larson is a COMMSTRAT officer assigned to the Communication Directorate. He has deployed four times as an enlisted artillery cannoneer, including in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM I (2003) and three times as a COMMSTRAT officer with the 24th MEU and SPMAGTF-Crisis Response. He holds a Master of Arts in Mass Communication and Media Studies from San Diego State University. Other notable assignments include Company Command at MCRD Parris Island, SC (2016-2018).

>>Maj Joshua Smith is a COMMSTRAT officer assigned to the Communication Directorate, Headquarters Marine Corps. His deployment experience includes Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (2003, '04, '05), Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (2011), SPMAGTF Crisis Response Africa (2018), and the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (2019). He holds a Master's Degree in Strategic Public Relations from The George Washington University. Other notable assignments include serving as the Marine Officer Instructor at Yale University (2014-2017).

>>>CWO3 Padula is a Visual Information officer assigned to Plans and Strategy Division, Deputy Commandant for Information.

the security classification processes that determine information appropriate for public release. While the Marine Corps and Navy worked together in the Pentagon to synchronize public statements, President Donald Trump issued a tweet and follow-on statements that the USS *Boxer* had indeed taken defensive action and destroyed an Iranian drone. Soon afterward, the counter-narrative began: Iran's deputy Foreign Minister tweeted, “I am worried that USS *Boxer* has shot down their own UAS by mistake.” The next day, Iran provided video footage of a drone flying over the Strait of Hormuz they purported to be footage from the drone the United States said it had downed.²

These events are provided to highlight the real-world complications of an information environment characterized by the 24/7 news cycle, national-level and adversarial leader inputs into

the open source media environment, and the historically reactive nature of communication engagement among the joint force. As the global society wrestles with the challenges around the fact that any information can become public, it is important that the Marine Corps take a fresh look at how it wields truthful, accurate information as a “warfighting tool or as a condition[ing] tool”³ to maneuver in the information environment. COMMSTRAT, the occupational field that owns public-facing information and operational imagery, is integral to how the Marine Corps maneuvers in the global information environment. That said, there are challenges. DOD policy and mindset constraints need to be addressed, as well as COMMSTRAT educational opportunities and the lack of strategic-level experience. In the end, the elevation of information as a Marine Corps warfighting function provides an

opportunity for the COMMSTRAT community to educate the Service and lead the joint force public affairs (PA) and visual information (VI) communities on how to best leverage information to accomplish the operational mission while supporting Service and DOD narratives through the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (Washington, DC: July 2019) and *National Defense Strategy* (NDS [Washington, DC: 2018]), respectively.

COMMSTRAT is the occupational field that resulted from the October 2017 merger of the formerly separate occupational fields of PA and combat camera. This merge served to

enhance Service-level situational awareness and command and control, improve the Marine Corps' overall ability to exploit opportunities and maneuver in the information environment, and merge two high-demand, low-density occupational fields into one with increased capability and capacity to comprehensively and dynamically plan and execute communication operations.⁴

COMMSTRAT supports three of the seven functions of operations in the information environment (OIE): inform domestic and international audiences, influence foreign target audiences, and provide information environment battlespace awareness. As COMMSTRAT leaders move forward in support of these functions, they must remind commanders and staffs that informing and influencing global audiences, maintaining awareness of the information environment, and providing VI documentation have always been at the core of PA and combat camera. COMMSTRAT is the only occupational field expected to maneuver in the open source spaces of both traditional and social media environments to communicate with any and all audiences while supporting operations with imagery and graphics. This is what makes COMMSTRAT unique and what the occupational field brings to the OIE fight.

Brilliance in the Basics

Of COMMSTRAT's fourteen advertised core competencies, engagement is its most important value proposition to the Marine Corps. COMMSTRAT

has the legal authority to engage with any audience—domestic, friendly, and adversarial alike—in an official spokesperson capacity with full attribution. COMMSTRAT engages with these audiences in a variety of ways, often through traditional media relationships, but also through social media and direct engagement. Because the media permeates much of the information environment, the COMMSTRAT mission remains closely aligned with media operations. This includes disseminating COMMSTRAT products into the media environment while also establishing and maintaining mutually-beneficial relationships with legitimate, credentialed journalists. Historically, the Marine Corps' relationship with the media has been overwhelmingly positive. Not only do journalists provide decision space by often informing COMMSTRAT leaders of breaking news ahead of time, media coverage often results in positive exposure for the Marine Corps. It is also important to note that the Marine Corps has a legal responsibility to promote and practice transparency in both good times and bad. As a Service fighting for a democratic Nation, public opinion is one of the most important centers of gravity for the Marines Corps and the DOD as a whole.⁵ It is the COMMSTRAT field that facilitates the transparency

and authenticity for the Marine Corps which then translates to favorable public opinion.

Fire-and-forget, one-way engagement is nonexistent in today's information environment, which means commanders need communication and VI professionals to help them navigate the nuances of the two-way, dialogic communication that now defines global information. For this reason, COMMSTRAT expertise can also provide communication support for community and key leader engagement,⁶ both through message synchronization, engagement techniques, and imagery documentation.

Effective COMMSTRAT engagement requires coordination and planning, but VI provides the day-to-day tactical influence that leads to OIE victories. For this reason, the science and art of imagery acquisition, development, management, and dissemination represent the occupational field's most basic, yet vital competencies. VI supports the language of words with the contextual language of images, and its ability to grab attention and incite emotion can have immediate dramatic impact as well as enduring effects; look no further than Joe Rosenthal's photo of the flag raising on Mount Suribachi over 75 years ago as an example of both. Research has proven the brain processes images exponentially faster than it does text.⁷



Informing domestic and international audiences of ongoing support operation is a way to influence a global audience. (Photo by Sgt Ariel Solomon.)



We can engage any audience—foreign or domestic—at any time. (Photo by Cpl Matthew Kirk.)

Because of the volume and rapidity of often contested narratives and frames in the information environment, VI plays a crucial role in the Marine Corps' mission to counter adversarial propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation. Although not feasible because of current resource constraints, consider how Iran's narrative might have been different had 11th MEU Marines captured imagery of the Iranian drone dropping out of the sky into the Strait of Hormuz. VI also supports credibility. DOD policy and regulations prevent COMMSTRAT Marines from engaging in altered imagery or "deep fakes." A commander who supports unfettered COMMSTRAT access to operations will have the ability to quickly delegitimize misinformation or disinformation with a timely photo or video. VI also maintains its important role in supporting tactical operations, such as tactical site exploitation, landing zone surveys, forensic documentation, and support to military information support operations.

COMMSTRAT also has a continuing role in battlespace awareness. The difficulty and cumbersome nature of assessing and monitoring the information environment requires an "always-on" mentality and integration among all information-related capabilities (IRCs). COMMSTRAT Marines actively monitor and analyze the media envi-

ronment and can support open-source intelligence efforts. COMMSTRAT Marines are already engaged in information command centers within each MEF and will only continue to support efforts to better comprehend the information environment.

COMMSTRAT supports issue management and crisis communication, the former defined as the act of proactively identifying and prioritizing emerging threats and opportunities that impact mission success. Although issue management often requires command involvement and mitigating action, COMMSTRAT Marines build communication strategies that highlight those mitigating actions while finding opportunities to feature Marines and initiatives that promote Marine Corps values and warfighting capabilities within operational security limitations. COMMSTRAT Marines also provide training for the FFMF, the joint force, interagency, and partner nations be it social media training, media interview preparation, or efforts to educate internal audiences on misinformation, disinformation, and operational security.

Finally, COMMSTRAT leaders provide communication and VI advice and counsel to the commander. As stated, complexity permeates today's information environment and COMMSTRAT Marines integrate across IRCs to help

commanders navigate an information environment made fluid by the nuances of dialogic communication, decreased trust in the Federal Government and institutions in general,⁸ and an increase in misinformation and disinformation efforts by America's adversaries. Of course, it is the commander who often represents the face and voice of the unit, whether through traditional or social media, and commanders deserve a COMMSTRAT professional who understands the mechanics and philosophy of integrated communication, operational imagery, and the benefits of each when planned and executed with precision and consistency.

Challenges and Recommendations

The merge of PA and combat camera into COMMSTRAT is in its third and final phase as of this writing.⁹ COMMSTRAT supports operations now, but *optimizing* COMMSTRAT as an operational capability relies on major shifts in policy, a candid analysis of educational paradigms, and a solution to field-grade officer inventory shortfalls.

In order to communicate with precision, the Marine Corps must compete at the speed of relevance, a term used by then-Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis in the 2018 NDS when he stated:

current processes are not responsive to need; the Department is over-optimized for exceptional performance at the expense of providing timely decisions, policies, and capabilities to the warfighter. We must not accept cumbersome approval chains ... or overly risk-averse thinking that impedes change.¹⁰

Furthermore, geographic combatant commands (GCCs) that divide the earth into manageable command and control spaces may benefit a commander's decision space in a kinetic fight, but information respects neither borders nor boundaries—it is global, instant, persistent, and compresses the levels of war. Although truthful, credible information can win in the long run. The DOD's severely antiquated release authority policies within stove-piped GCCs, along with a reluctance to communicate because of aversion to risk, are the shackles that prevent

COMMSTRAT forces from gaining *immediate* victories in the information environment now. It is time to analyze where our COMMSTRAT Marines can best serve all levels of war, which may mean adjusting the table of organization. COMMSTRAT efforts, too often handcuffed at the tactical level, would likely better serve the institution and combatant commanders alike if integrated directly into our naval fleets.

Education is another notable challenge. COMMSTRAT officers are expected to provide advice and communications counsel to commanders at the colonel level and above and often work as special staff to the commander alongside the staff judge advocate, the medical officer, and the chaplain—the latter three of which have *years* of specialized education. Yet the MOS-producing, entry-level training provided COMMSTRAT officers at the Joint, Defense Information School (DINFOS) is limited to 45 days. MOS-specific, intermediate-level training opportunities for officers consist of two courses at DINFOS that focus primarily on staff integration, strategic thinking, and the synchronizing functions of information operations (IO), not mass communication, communication influence, or media effects-based curriculum—disciplines which would better educate COMMSTRAT Marines and IO and military information support operations practitioners. Furthermore, because officer-centric training at DINFOS is focused on PA, COMMSTRAT officers miss out on operational imagery education.

Because of the lack of Service-specific COMMSTRAT education, COMMSTRAT Marines are increasingly attending Service-specific schools in the military information support operations and civil affairs occupational fields. Surely, all three share some striking similarities (e.g., audience analysis and segmentation), yet specific, mass communication and traditional and emerging media principles and theories, as well as operational imagery curriculum, are under-represented within COMMSTRAT officer MOS road maps.

DINFOS is putting remarkable effort into modernizing its curriculum;



We can tell a better story with COMMSTRAT leaders who can better integrate with IRC. (Photo by LCPI Andrew Bray.)

however, the rest of the Marine Corps is spearheading OIE efforts. Therefore, the time has come to consider Service-specific intermediate COMMSTRAT training that provides a COMMSTRAT leader who can better integrate with IRCs in support of OIE *today*.

Although DINFOS is putting remarkable effort into modernizing its curriculum, the Marine Corps is spearheading OIE efforts across the joint force. Because of this, the Marine Corps must consider Service-specific intermediate COMMSTRAT training so that the Marine Corps can benefit from COMMSTRAT leaders who can better integrate with IRCs in support of OIE *today*.

Finally, inventory shortfalls prevent the Marine Corps from integrating at the highest levels of strategic communication across the joint force. There are just three COMMSTRAT billets at the GCC level, and only one is currently filled. This means the Marine Corps is missing out on a wealth of potential communication and operational experience at the strategic communication level. COMMSTRAT major and lieutenant colonel inventory, 75 percent and 31 percent respectively as of February 2020, are both “unhealthy” in accordance with the Manpower and Reserve

Affairs definition of the term. The most efficient solution to “grow” more inventory now is by opening the lateral move aperture—which was open only to company grade officers for fiscal year 2020—to majors and lieutenant colonels across the Corps. Any risk involved in MOS credibility could be mitigated via Service-specific intermediate training and mentoring.

The Way Forward

The Communication Directorate is responsible for enabling the Service to communicate with precision and consistency by providing communications counsel to the Secretary of the Navy, Commandant of the Marine Corps, and HQMC staffs; to develop, integrate, and assess Service-level communication plans; produce communication products; and inform and educate relevant audiences in order to set conditions to achieve institutional objectives. While the Communication Directorate maintains, updates, and distributes a “communication playbook” using inputs from experts across the FMF, the Directorate should consider building a Service-level communication strategy that guides and informs the acquisition of VI and the release of public information. A centralized communication strategy will lead to de-centralized execution

with a communication *purpose* and prevent disparate communication strategies across the FMF. At best, the absence of a centralized communication strategy leads to output “filler” vice objective-based outcomes. At worst, it leads to ambiguous messages that have “as much potential to undermine the achievement of any given objective as to advance it.”¹¹ COMMSTRAT practitioners across the FMF must support their commander’s communication endstate, of course, and consider larger GCC strategies, but a truly synchronized strategy will best communicate the Commandant’s priorities and Service-level and DOD narratives with precision and consistency.

Centralized communication planning undoubtedly assumes a candid look at how the Marine Corps manages its social media. As the power of attention increasingly becomes currency in the information environment, creativity is welcome but dangerous. The Marine Corps does have a distinct brand: the advertising agency, Wunderman Thompson, has spent millions of Marine Corps dollars to develop it over the decades. But the Marine Corps’ social media presence across the FMF is not synchronized nor branded. Large organizations, public and private, throw a considerable amount of talent and resources into control of their brand. In fact, marketing firms exist that *only* execute social media strategies for organizations, to include sports teams and even individual influencers. Just as a major car manufacturer does not cede control of communication objectives to an excited, creative transmission department manager who wants to publicly showcase a new transmission widget or allow a geographically far-flung car dealer to design and create their own branding strategy, the Marine Corps also needs to ensure FMF commands support an established brand and narrative while allowing for appropriate variations due to geographic or primary audience considerations.

Any discussion of communication, whether part of government, private sector, or academia, must make mention of the difficulty of measuring communication effects. It is the single-most important variable in measuring the

success or failure of COMMSTRAT or any other capability involved in inform and influence efforts. Because of education and experience shortfalls already mentioned, the Marine Corps does not possess the requisite amount of expertise or resources to measure communication effects across the FMF in a way that can truly impact operations or Service-level communication strategies. Big data is a significant aspect of global society; and sooner rather than later, the Marine Corps will need to figure out a way to include the appropriate level of social and data science education in order to work alongside IRCs and artificial intelligence to provide true communication assessments for commanders.

COMMSTRAT will increasingly become more relevant as it contributes more often ...

COMMSTRAT will increasingly become more relevant as it contributes more often and more efficiently to the OIE fight. Consider the opportunity for COMMSTRAT to maneuver in the information environment in the Iranian drone scenario. A synchronized communication plan, free from the cumbersome chain of release authority and supported by the Communication Directorate’s proximity to the Pentagon Press Corps as well as Navy and Marine Corps leadership, could have seized upon the opportunity with the embedded *Wall Street Journal* reporter aboard the ship to counter the Iranian narrative *in near realtime*. Subsequent credible, truthful operational imagery supporting the Marine Corps narrative could have been collected, branded appropriately, disseminated, and shared among all Marine Corps social media outlets in the following hours and days to exploit international-level media attention and highlight the 24/7 crisis-response presence of the Navy and Marine Corps team—tying into and directly supporting the CMC’s vision. To win in the

information environment, the Marine Corps must innovate to operate at the speed of relevancy, which means a better educated COMMSTRAT occupational field task organized to reach across the compressed levels of war to disseminate operational imagery and truthful, accurate information that can compete with our adversaries.

Notes

1. Tyler Rogoway, “USS Kearsarge Transits the Suez Canal with Anti-Drone Buggies Keeping Watch on Deck,” *The Drive*, (January 2019), available at <https://www.thedrive.com>.
2. Staff, “Iran Releases Footage It Says Disproves Drone was Downed by U.S.,” *BBC News*, (July 2019), available at <https://www.bbc.com>.
3. Nathan Strout, “The Marine Corps’ 4 Priorities in the Information Environment,” *Defense News*, (January 2020), available at <https://www.c4isrnet.com>.
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 534/17*, (Washington, DC: 2017).
5. Steve Boylan, “Public Opinion: A Center of Gravity Leaders Forget,” *Military Review*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Sep-Oct, 2015).
6. Joint Staff, *Joint Publication 3-61, Public Affairs*, (Washington, DC: November 2015).
7. Douglas R. Vogel, Gary W. Dickson, and John A. Lehman, “Persuasion and the Role of Visual Presentation Support: The UM/3M Study,” (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota School of Management, 1986).
8. Lee Rainie and Andrew Perrin, “Key Findings about Americans’ Declining Trust in Government and Each Other,” Pew Research Center, (July 2019), available at <https://www.pewresearch.org>.
9. *MARADMIN 534/17*.
10. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: 2018).
11. Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategy in Information and Influence Campaigns*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

