

No Better Friend

Gaining advantages through Civil Affairs

by Col Michael T. Aldridge, USMCR & LtCol Steven T. Contrascere

“Gaining information advantages depends on how quickly and effectively one side can develop and maintain situational understanding relative to the other side. The side that is faster at acquiring, processing, and exploiting information, for the purpose of generating understanding, will make faster and better decisions, and will drive tempo.”¹

—MCDP 8

“Demonstrate to the world there is ‘No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy’ than a U.S. Marine.”²

—Gen James Mattis

For as long as the Corps has existed, military operations and the civilian environment have intersected. Perhaps the earliest example of Marine Corps civil affairs doctrine is found within the *Small Wars Manual*, published in 1940. Large portions of the manual are dedicated to discussing the civil-military relationship: “Every endeavor should be made to assure the civilian population of the friendliness of our forces.”³ The 21st-century operating environment (OE) has become more blended with the civil environment. Often, the OE is indistinguishable from the civil environment. The evolving landscape of the OE, coupled with the digitization of societies and the rapid exchange of

information, has increased risk to both military operations and the civilian populace. The MAGTF commander must be aware of the impacts of operations on the civil environment, impacts of the civil environment on operations, and how to produce effects within the civil environment to gain an information advantage. Marine Corps Forces Reserve provides this capability to the MAGTF commander: the Civil Affairs Groups (CAGs).

Civil-military operations (CMO) is the MAGTF commander’s business. *MCTP 3-03A* defines CMO as “the activities of a commander performed by designated civil affairs ... forces that establish, maintain, influence, or exploit relationships between military forces and indigenous populations and institutions, by directly supporting the



Capt Kyle Stackhouse, left, and SSgt Jose Ortiz, center, both with 1st Civil Affairs Group, Force Headquarters Group, Marine Forces Reserve, interact with an interpreter during a civil engagement exercise at 25 Area Combat Town on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, CA. The civil engagement exercise was conducted by 1st CAG and U.S. soldiers with 425th Civil Affairs Battalion, 358th Civil Affairs Brigade, to provide simulated local populace interaction and key leader engagement training to the exercise participants. (Photo by LCpl Mhecaela J. Watts.)

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attainment of objectives relating to the reestablishment or maintenance of stability within a region or host nation.”⁴ The CAGs bring a unique capability to the MAGTF commander that is not fully replicated in the active component. The 1st, 3d, and 4th CAG, subordinate to Force Headquarters Group Marine Corps Forces Reserve, are Select Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR) formations task organized to provide civil affairs capability to the MAGTF. Formations are tailored to the mission and the size of the MAGTF, ranging from a four-man civil affairs (CA) team to a multi-team CA detachment. Likewise, the CAG Headquarters possesses the personnel and expertise to form the core of an S9/G9 as part of the MAGTF staff.⁵ However, the real advantage that CA officers, CA specialists, and CMO planners bring to the MAGTF is their unique experiences and varied backgrounds within their civilian capacities. A CA officer or specialist may be a captain or sergeant, respectively, when they put on the uniform, but most of the time they may be business owners, law enforcement officers, federal agents, non-governmental organization employees, social media engineers, or cybersecurity experts—with many possessing advanced degrees. Additionally, because the civil affairs field is not an initial entry military occupational specialty (MOS), every CA officer or specialist has an additional MOS across the range of occupational fields within the Marine Corps. This career diversity and their relevant experience can rarely be replicated within the Active Component. For the MAGTF commander, a CA Marine is a three-for-one bargain. Sgt Aaron Sanchez, a civil affairs specialist and civilian recruiter for a major defense firm says, “As a civil affairs NCO, I’ve developed skills in relationship-building, strategic communication, and operational planning—abilities that directly enhance my role as a recruiter ... [w]hile civil-military operations and aerospace recruiting may seem unrelated, they require many of the same strengths: emotional intelligence, adaptability, and strong understanding of organizational dynamics.”⁶ Likewise, Maj Paul Mower, a civil affairs officer and Assistant U.S.



Marines with 1st Civil Affairs Group, Force Headquarters Group, Marine Forces Reserve, conduct a civil engagement exercise at 25 Area Combat Town on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, CA. (Photo by LCpl Mhecaela J. Watts.)

Attorney, relays, “By emphasizing critical thinking, civilian engagement, and inter-organizational coordination, civil affairs allowed me to leverage the skills and relationships that I developed in both my primary MOS as a judge advocate and my civilian career.”⁷ Finally, Maj Kurt Hoffman, a CMO planner and civilian project manager, had this to add regarding his experience: “I work to understand the needs of civilian institutions and populations and then help develop and implement solutions to these needs. By integrating my primary MOS, my Civil Affairs MOS, and my civilian employment, I get to employ my overlapping skillsets and maintain a high level of personal and professional satisfaction regardless of the present task.”⁸

Civil Affairs Enable Information Advantage

While any Marine unit can conduct CMO to some degree, only specially trained CA personnel may conduct civil affairs operations (CAO). Civil affairs operations, an activity of CMO, “are those actions planned, coordinated, executed, and assessed to enhance awareness of, and manage the interaction with the civil component of the operational environment,” and “identify and mitigate underlying causes of instability within civil society.”⁹ Through civil reconnaissance (CR), civil preparation

of the battlespace, or participating in wargaming as the green cell, CA personnel contribute to the planning process and the commander’s decision-making cycle regarding impacts of military operations on the civil environment. However, CAO does more than this. As part of a feedback mechanism, CA Marines may also provide the commander information relative to the adversary gained from CAO activities. Activities such as key leader engagement, civil environment assessments, and liaising with non-governmental organizations or indigenous government agencies can feed intelligence preparation of the battlespace (IPB) and the information tasking and coordination cycle to allow the MAGTF commander to gain information advantage, create effects, and support the scheme of maneuver.

While CAO may be executed during any phase of an operation, it is particularly suited to Phase 0 to influence and inform civilian populations, conduct network analysis, understand stability/instability factors, and affect informational and human aspects of the OE.¹⁰ Ensuring civil environment considerations are built into the targeting cycle and information tasking and coordination cycle is key to gaining an information advantage. The MAGTF commanders should be deliberate in where CMO planners are placed within the staff to properly task and enable CA



Capt David Warrington II, an assistant team leader with 1st Civil Affairs Group, Force Headquarters Group, Marine Forces Reserve, interacts with simulated town locals during a civil engagement exercise at Red Beach Combat Town on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, CA.
(Photo by LCpl Mhecaela J. Watts.)

teams or detachments to conduct CAO. Some considerations may include within the G/S-3 directly supporting operations and tasking or forming a distinct G/S-9 to provide direct advice to the MAGTF commander. Placement within the Fires and Effects Coordination Center or the Information Coordination Center stands as other possibilities, depending on mission requirements. A particularly effective practice may be incorporating CMO planners into the collateral damage estimation process or the MAGTF's contribution to the development of the restricted target list.

Likewise, attaching CA teams to maneuver elements at the tactical level, CAO can be executed to accelerate the MAGTF commander's information advantage and, in some cases, may produce operational or even strategic effects, reinforcing our status as *no better friend*. Our primary competitor and greatest geopolitical threat, the People's Republic of China, views the information domain as the primary warfighting domain and has elevated it to the same status as the air, space, and maritime domains.¹¹ Nested under the People's Liberation Army (PLA) doctrine of "informationized warfare" is the "Three Warfares" concept (public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare). According to Dr. Brendan Mulvaney, the "Three War-

fares approach gives the PLA ... the direction to actively target people ... ahead of time. This includes not just individuals, but organizations, and also the rules and norms."¹² For example, in a notional Phase 0 scenario, employing CA teams at key civil environment network nodes to counter and disrupt adversary messaging and influence through a prevailing narrative can produce an information advantage that achieves higher level military information support operations objectives.¹³

Civil Affairs in Action

The CAGs are some of the most operationally active SMCR units within the Marine Corps and provide a capability only found within the reserve component. While CAGs rarely activate as a fully constituted formation, the groups persistently provide CA capability to both the FMF and the Joint Force supporting GFM requirements, as well as joint and Service exercises. Routinely, the CAGs activate two to four-man CA teams and often provide individual CMO planners to support operations and exercises.

MEUs typically deploy with a CA Team. Most recently, 1st CAG provided a CA Team to support the 15th MEU for its 2024–2025 WESTPAC deployment. After action reports and feedback from the MEU personnel were

incredibly positive regarding the CA capability provided. The 15th MEU took a unique approach in forming an S-39 principal staff officer overseeing information operations for the MEU. Led by a CA officer, the S-39 enabled more than 40 unique operations, activities, and investments across eight countries within the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility. These included subject-matter expert exchanges, civil reconnaissance, community relations, and support to humanitarian assistance/disaster relief. Maj Drake Toney, previously the 15th MEU S-39, gave his perspective on the integration of CA capability into the MAGTF: "Seasoned Civil Affairs planners embedded at echelon provide the supported staff with a zoomed-out perspective of the MAGTF in the Combined, Joint and interagency landscape. This perspective includes the resources and capabilities the supported commander can bring to bear against the problem set and the potential risks to mission and force that may accompany tactical maneuver decisions. These planners typically bring tactical experience that spans both functional and geographic combatant commands and goes beyond what some might assume to be limited to foreign aid or assistance."¹⁴

Likewise, 1st CAG provides a CA team to each Marine Special Operations Company (MSOC) in support of Operation PACIFIC EAGLE-PHILIPPINES Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) 511. The CA Marines assigned to the Special Operations Task Force undergo advanced training such as Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape Exercise RAVEN. Once training concludes, the CA team deploys with the Marine Special Operations Company to provide the Raiders a civil affairs capability.

The CAGs can also operate within the Joint Force. Under current Joint Civil-Military Operations doctrine, joint civil-military operations task forces (JCMOTF) may be formed as a subordinate task force under a Joint Task Force to conduct CMO across the Joint Operations Area. In 2024, 1st CAG formed the nucleus of the Combined JCMOTF (CJCMOTF) for Exercise BALIKATAN 2024. The 1st

CAG commanding officer was designed as the CJCMOTF commander to Marine, Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel and subordinate units. Working shoulder-to-shoulder with its Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) counterparts, the CJCMOTF conducted a variety of humanitarian and civic assistance missions, engineer civic action program projects, and cooperative health engagement activities to not only improve the lives and well-being of the Filipino people but to also strengthen the American military-AFP relationship under the Mutual Defense Treaty. The CAGs provided personnel to staff both the combined and joint staffs, as well as six CA teams embedded directly within the Filipino communities. The AFP assessed the contributions of the CJCMOTF to be a resounding success and directly resulted in the continued employment of the CJCMOTF, with 1st CAG in the lead, for BALIKATAN 2025.

As one of the newest stand-in-forces the Marine Corps presents to the Joint Force, untapped opportunities exist to enhance information advantage by attaching CA teams to the Marine littoral regiments. Because of the low-signature, information-rich, mobile, and distributed nature of the MLR, a persistent civil affairs capability can enhance all-domain operations across the competition continuum, especially within the first and second island chains. Like the MEUs, a CA team can be activated and attached to the MLR for the duration of a deployment, exercise, or other significant operations. Civil reconnaissance is pivotal in enhancing the effectiveness of the stand-in-forces in archipelagic defense. It bolsters maritime domain awareness by identifying civilian maritime activities and providing vital situational understanding. Through host nation and community engagement, CR builds important knowledge of the civil environment and key terrain that is useful for MLR operations, develops relationships that deepen cultural knowledge, and prevents unintended disputes and altercations with civilians. Civilian reconnaissance strengthens counter-reconnaissance by assessing the impact of enemy malign activities on

local communities. Additionally, collaboration with local forces—both law enforcement and military—improves interoperability and reduces the risk of misinterpreting their actions and intent. These efforts align seamlessly with the Marine Corps' emphasis on distributed operations and the strategic use of local knowledge to maintain an advantage in complex archipelagic environments.

1. *Increase the number of Individual Mobilization Augmentee (IMA) billets across Marine Forces and MEF staffs:* IMAs are Marine reservists who directly support the active component command. Augmenting MARFOR and MEF information staffs with a dedicated IMA detachment of CA reservists provides the commander with subject-matter expertise regarding the best employment of CA capability with the MAGTF. A natural landing spot for the CA IMA detachments would be the MEF Information Groups and could seamlessly integrate with their active component counterparts.

2. *Assign Active Component Influence Marines to CAG Inspector-Instructor staffs:* As the active component influence field continues to grow, the Service should likewise consider the integration of influence officers and influence chiefs into CAG inspector-instructor (I-I) staffs. For example, the civil affairs assistant operations officer is filled by an active component officer; however, the billet MOS is a reserve MOS. An influence officer is fully qualified to fill this billet with no additional training or MOS qualifications required. Filling this billet with an influence officer provides a two-fold added benefit of increasing MOS credibility and proficiency as well as experience with the SMCR.

These remain some of the most committed and professionally competent men and women throughout the Marine Corps. Many are incredibly successful in their civilian lives but choose to remain committed to answering the Nation's call when needed. Their vast experience both within the Marine Corps—active and reserve—and within their civilian specialties can rarely be replicated within the active component.

The Marine Corps Reserve Civil Affairs Marine is truly the physical embodiment of *no better friend*.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 8, Information*, (Washington, DC: 2022).
2. James Mattis, "No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy," *Leadership Now*, September 11, 2019, https://www.leadershipnow.com/leading-blog/2019/09/no_better_friend_no_worse_enem.html.
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington, DC: 1940).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCTP 3-03A, Marine Air-Ground Task Force Civil-Military Operations*, (Washington, DC: 2023).
5. Ibid.
6. Andrew D. Gonzalez USMCR, email message to authors, March 31, 2025.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 8-10, Information in Marine Corps Operations*, (Washington, DC: 2024).
10. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 3-31, Marine Air-Ground Task Force Fires and Effects*, (Washington, DC: 2024).
11. Brendan Mulvaney, "PLA Views on the Information Domain," *China Aerospace Studies Institute*, January 12, 2025, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/4018763/pla-views-on-the-information-domain>.
12. Ibid.
13. Note: Military information support operations are classified as an enabling operations function under the CMO umbrella. See *MCTP 3-30A*.
14. Drake P. Toney USMCR, email message with authors, March 28, 2025.

