

Reexamining Distributed Operations

The preeminence of tactical intelligence

by Capt Daniel McGurkin

Our Commandant has been crystal clear: The Corps must prepare to execute distributed maritime operations.¹ Gen David Berger explicitly stated it in his *Commandant's Planning Guidance* and followed up by saying, "Distributed Operations (DO) capable forces are a critically important component of Marine Corps modernization" and that "codifying DO is critical to implementation" of a new force design.²

His comments were echoed in the Chief of Naval Operations' December 2019 *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority: Version 2.0*.³ The document lauded the Navy's need to "continue to mature the Distributed Maritime Operations concept and key supporting concepts" and "design and implement a comprehensive operational architecture to support Distributed Maritime Operations."⁴ But what are Distributed Maritime Operations?

The Distributed Maritime Operations concept finds its roots in response to a familiar historical problem: Soviet development of anti-ship cruise missiles in the late 1950s.⁵ The Navy recognized that distributing forces spatially/temporally and networking them would improve survivability against precision weapons, increase the number of sensors that could alert the force to a threat, and provide commanders a robust set of potential solutions. Practically, this means a well-armed fleet distributed (potentially over the horizon from one another) with a resilient communications network. Most prescient, it means

>Capt McGurkin is an O203 Ground Intelligence Officer. He has served as an intelligence officer forward within Operation INHERENT RESOLVE and as the Deputy Intelligence Officer for Task Force Southwest in Helmand/Nimroz Provinces, Afghanistan. He is currently attending the National Intelligence University as a fellow in the Junior Officer Strategic Intelligence Program.

a clear establishment of commander's intent for if, or when, that network failed.

To support this concept, Gen Berger emphasized that the Marine Corps needs to distribute for five reasons:

1. To better accomplish the mission against a distant or dispersed adversary.
2. To improve maneuver options in order to gain a positional advantage to assault or engage more effectively with direct or indirect fires.
3. To *reduce the effects of enemy fires.*
4. To impose costs and induce uncertainty.
5. To reduce our signature and avoid detection; caveat that "*in a precision strike regime, sensing first and shooting first are a tremendous advantage.*"⁶ (*italics added.*)

All are sound. The third reason best points to threats modern amphibious forces face. Anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles developed by our adversaries may reach thousands of miles, and hypersonic technology makes them difficult to defeat with countermeasures.⁷ Our naval forces must prepare for the reality that not all ships will make it to the littoral. What was perhaps historically a Marine's dull transit to the

battlespace aboard unchallenged vessels, depicted in Hollywood by men hazily hanging from bunks and playing cards, is now when we find ourselves massed and most vulnerable. As a matter of course, articles in our professional journals and elsewhere have previously advocated redistributing Marine detachments on board Navy ships, thus increasing flexibility, lethality, and survivability.⁸

The infantry battalion must do this to ensure enough combat power ashore. Once there, companies and platoons will need to infiltrate and operate clandestinely while far dispersed to avoid presenting a large signature and target. They should expect little support and a high demand for accurate and timely reporting to ensure the unit continues to function as a larger "whole." With this ahead, the Marine Corps must reflect on our complicated history with DO.

Looking Back: Distributed Operations and Enhanced Company Operations

The chaos created for the enemy by the DO concept combines with its worship of commander's intent and long making it an attractive maneuver warfare milestone. Then-commandant

Gen M.W. Hagee published *A Concept for Distributed Operations* in 2005, envisioning units enabled by technological advances to spread far spatially and temporally while maintaining a common goal.⁹ In it, he described DO as

an operating approach that will create an advantage over an adversary through the deliberate use of separation and coordinated, interdependent, tactical actions enabled by increased access to functional support, as well as by enhanced combat capabilities at the small-unit level. The essence of this concept lies in the capacity for action by dispersed units, throughout the breadth and depth of the battlespace, ordered and connected within an operational design focused on a common aim.¹⁰

The Marine Corps Warfighting Lab (MCWL) began DO experiments before Gen Hagee's document was released.¹¹ Col Vincent Goulding, then-head of MCWL's Experimental Division, concluded initial DO experiments by conceding that "the company is probably the smallest tactical formation capable of conducting independent operations—and frequently does on today's battlefield."¹² As Commandant, Gen Conway followed up by directing focus upon what became known as "Enhanced Company Operations" (ECO). This concept attempted to build upon DO by strengthening a company with "improved command and control, intelligence, logistics, and fires capabilities."¹³ Col Blair Sokol, current director of the Marine Corps War College, analyzed DO/ECO in a 2009 monograph at the School of Advanced Military Studies titled *Reframing Marine Corps Distributed Operations and Enhanced Company Operations*. In it, he succinctly described the endstate of ECO as a rifle company able to assume the "stature" of a MAGTF, capable of supporting larger MAGTFs.¹⁴ The monograph also identified a major flaw in MCWL's DO/ECO efforts:

The initial framing of the DO-ECO program lacked a holistic approach because the initial development of the concept was constrained by a permissive counterinsurgency and security cooperation ... approach.¹⁵



The CLIC and deployment of UAS at the tactical-unit level were important enhancements for small-unit distributed operation in the COIN environment. (Photo by Cpl Ryan Tomlinson.)

MCWL was responding to an urgent need in the Marine Corps' current forward deployed units in Iraq and Afghanistan, and their conclusions reflected this limited scope. Col Sokol went on to make recommendations for an overhaul of the infantry battalion's table of organization and equipment, as well as recommendations for how the warfighting functions could integrate into DO/ECO.

Of the warfighting functions, Gen Conway listed intelligence first in precedence (above maneuver) in his 2008 *A Concept for Enhanced Company Operations*. "Intelligence," he said, "is at the core of maneuver warfare and the first warfighting function that must be addressed in ECO capability development."¹⁶ The years since publishing have only proven his assertion more valid. Given the incredible pace of modern fires and maneuver, a poor or misinformed battlefield move is now punished faster than ever. Whether in the information space or with precision guided munitions, combatants are quick to exploit collateral damage or a lengthy radio transmission. Perceptively, the 2015 *Marine Corps Operating Concept* (MOC) implored the Corps to "seek to capture the value of pushing networked intelligence down to tactical units" and "see the opportunities

inherent in having every aircraft and vehicle, potentially every Marine, capable as a battlefield sensor."¹⁷ Nor was the *Marine Corps Operating Concept* the first to advocate for this. A 2005 article in this magazine pointed to the intelligence windfall to be had if the battlespace were saturated with sensors attached to every Marine.¹⁸ Hence Gen Berger's fifth reason to distribute: Who can "sense first and shoot first" wins.

The Marine Corps has made efforts in integrating intelligence at the lowest level. Most noticeable among these have been the Company Level Intelligence Cell and rapid deployment of unmanned aerial systems (UAS). But these attempts are haphazard and based on a flawed model. In trying to rapidly meet the needs of deployed units in a COIN fight, we put the proverbial cart before the horse. Col Sokol was insightful in concluding his monograph:

If the intelligence function is the principle feature of ... ECO design, then the [Headquarters and Service] Company and Weapons Company, which retains the organic dismounted reconnaissance and mobile combined arms reconnaissance capability, should have been reviewed prior to the infantry squad. Only by framing the relationship of the infantry battalion—particularly the command and control,

intelligence, and reconnaissance assets—to the regiment, division, and MEF assets can the DO-ECO concept nest holistically for full-spectrum operations. *ISR integration should be provided down to the company level.*¹⁹ (italics added)

His prophetic comments called for a systemic review of how we structure our infantry battalions. Combined with the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*'s focus on DO, the Marine Corps is long overdue in abandoning current intelligence organization at the tactical level. It is time to provide company and battalion commanders with the intelligence capabilities needed to decide and win battles of modernity.

Structuring Tactical Intelligence to Support Distributed Operations: Lay the CLIC to Rest

The Company Level Intelligence Cell (CLIC) was a product of Gen Conway's ECO push. The CLIC, like ECO, grew out of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The CLIC as it stands today was designed in accordance with the needs identified there. However, the resultant COIN-based organizational recommendations, made within the construct of the current infantry battalion table of organization and equipment, will fail in the DO environment emphasized by senior leaders. We cannot expect a company commander to make decisions in a peer-to-peer battle based on the intelligence recommendations and analysis of a junior intelligence or infantry Marine armed with a sUAS and twenty days of intelligence training. To make decisions based on commander's intent far from the flagpole, on ship or shore, and with degraded communications, we need to give tactical leaders the enablers to do so.

Existing Tools and Past Recommendations: DSTs, 0203s, and the SARCC

To capitalize on the far-reaching nature of DO, intelligence at the tactical level must be "multi-int" and independent. We must seek to increase the distribution of sensors. Though not an inherently special operations forces concept, Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) and other

special operations forces units have implemented it for some time. A Marine Special Operations Company deploys with an "Intelligence Direct Support Team (DST)" made up of numerous intelligence enablers from different disciplines. This readily available unit then attaches, detaches, organizes, and integrates itself into the MSOC's subordinate Marine Special Operations Teams to maximize collection, targeting, and analysis across the area of operations. Importantly, it alleviates the company commander's need to turn "inward" and focus on coordinating his/her own intelligence operations.

By task-organizing several "Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Platoons" in support of infantry companies, the Marine Corps can provide this level of freedom and flexibility to company commanders. Like a DST, this platoon would house representatives from all collection disciplines. A counter-

The Marine Corps already has officers trained to command such a detachment. Our organization has long struggled finding a place for Ground Intelligence Officers, known by their MOS as 0203s. After attending the Infantry Officer Course, Scout Sniper Unit Leader Course, and Ground Intelligence Officer Course, 0203s are prepared to supervise the intelligence cycle and tactically employ ground reconnaissance and surveillance assets. But most never do. A 2017 *Gazette* article by a pair of 0203s laid forth the issue. The authors lamented the fate of most ground intelligence officers, describing the all-too-familiar story as the pipeline ends with ground intelligence officers overseeing security management at a combat logistics regiment, engineer support battalion, or other non-infantry unit.²⁰ 0203s are trained to conduct sustained intelligence operations at the tactical level and in contested environments

To make decisions based on commander's intent far from the flagpole, on ship or shore, with degraded communications, we need to give tactical leaders the enablers to do so.

intelligence/human intelligence specialist could make the most of the populace and interrogate prisoners of war. A modest signals intelligence (SIGINT) detachment could find the enemy, coordinate with organic and supporting fires, and punish him for poor signature control as a robust communications suite fed and benefited from the rest of the SIGINT enterprise. A pair of scout/sniper teams could occupy hides and provide vital reporting or identify potential support-by-fire positions. Ground sensor operators could cover down avenues of approach to the defense. An imagery analyst could provide updated overhead imagery while a dedicated pair of UAS operators see over terrain kilometers away and a small fusion cell compiles/routes collection for further exploitation—all seamlessly integrated into the company's scheme of maneuver.

for infantry commanders. The recent implementation of the Tactical Intelligence Officer Course as prerequisite entry-level training for all intel officers helps standardize this, but attendance of the Infantry Officer Course gives 0203s an inherent understanding of the commander's needs and helps increase community credibility. With modest alteration of the training pipeline and certification, ground intelligence officers could oversee the slightly more technical and nuanced collection of SIGINT and HUMINT. 0203s understand how to manage multiple, complex ground reconnaissance and intelligence operations within an AO. A platoon led by them easily integrates into pre-existing tools for organization and control.

Within the MCWL, CLIC report is a model for the organization of bat-

talion level intelligence. That organization allowed company commanders to focus on training infantry skills while still able to expect a robust intelligence capability when deployed.

A similar organizational model could work at the battalion level as a “Battalion Level Intelligence Company,” or more simply: Intelligence Company (Figure 1). At the head sits the battalion’s intelligence officer. Within this company, the battalion’s ISR platoons would train their organic scout/snipers and UAS teams before other attachments, who began the workup with a brief home unit period (Radio Battalion, Intel Battalion, etc), attach early. This enables 0203s to train their platoons as a team before entering a supporting relationship with a rifle company. An inherent understanding of intelligence and a relationship with the S-2 would exist as the ISR Platoons were simultaneously employed with great dispersion.

A model for simultaneous employment, too, already exists. *MCRP 2-10A.6, Ground Reconnaissance Operations*, defines the Surveillance and Reconnaissance Coordination Center (SARCC) as

the principal intelligence functional center for the supervision and deconfliction of intelligence and reconnaissance collection operations. It is responsible for the command and control, intelligence operations direction, coordination, monitoring, and reporting of ongoing and supporting collections operations and reporting.²¹

It is staffed with representatives from each collection entity in the area of operations, and thus the publication mandates that it is normally located farther rearward. However, this need not be the case. By distributing communications/other equipment among platoon members and using simple battle-tracking tools like map pens, protractors, and notebooks the SARCC can be operated out of a ruck (and was done in this manner by the author as a member of the GCE for Exercise STEEL KNIGHT 2020).

MCRP 2-10A.6 recommends the GCE maintain its own SARCC and report directly to the MAGTF SARCC.²² A company SARCC easily integrates

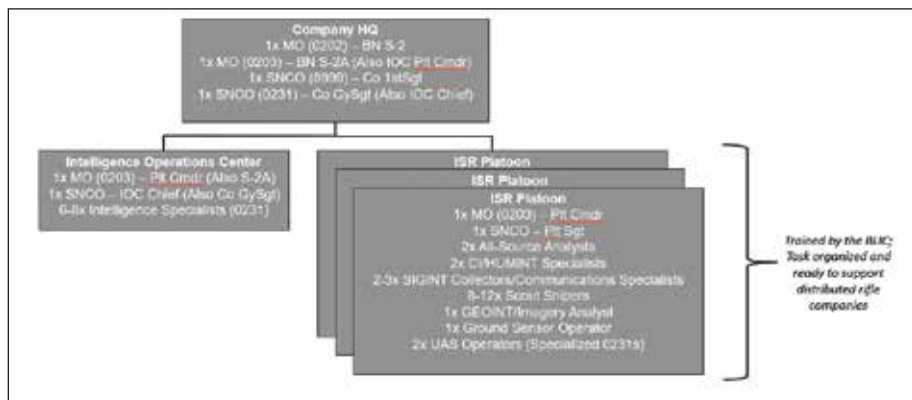


Figure 1. One Potential Organization of the “Intelligence Company.” (Figure provided by author.)

into this model. This agency would control reconnaissance operations for the company commander and report intelligence directly to the Battalion SARCC (located with the the Intelligence Operations Center). The Intelligence Operations Center, relieved from its traditionally marginalized role and given a myriad of organic collections assets, could focus on the role of Collections Operations and Requirements Management, Targeting, and Production/Analysis while continuing to coordinate closely with the MAGTF Intelligence Operations Center. The “INT” specific subject matter experts (HUMINT and SIGINT detachment commanders) still play a role at the MAGTF level, maintaining their traditional analysis cells and contact with their wider communities.

Theoretically, the intel company could retain tasking authority from the S-2 to the ISR platoons. However, attaching ISR Platoons and placing them under the control of a company commander opens new doors for tasking. This format enables battalion commanders to task line companies with Ground Reconnaissance Tasks as defined by *MCRP 2-10A.6* like DETECT and LOCATE.²³ Company commanders, now organically controlling collection assets with a residential SME on hand, could organize and task their company accordingly to accomplish its assigned and intelligence-minded mission.

This model ensures the MAGTF is fed by a myriad of well-trained, flexible, task-organized nodes to facilitate decision making. It saturates an informa-

tion/intelligence driven battlefield with well-organized sensors. Survivability of those sensors are now increased as they close on the beachhead spread across several ships alongside their companies, promising a collections posture ashore regardless of the denied littoral environment. It will succeed in a DO environment.

Conclusion

Re-organizing the infantry battalion and redistributing intelligence personnel may seem like radical notions. But the Commandant has been frank: The Marine Corps will refuse to be “defined by any particular organizing construct;” even the sacred MAGTF.²⁴ The “intel company”-structure postures the Corps to “sense first and shoot first.” Now is the time to get serious about intelligence at the tactical level. Playing our role as *the Fleet’s* Marine Force requires we buy-in, organize, and operate to finally benefit from what we have long championed. The DO concept is not a complication of effort for tactical or operational commanders. Rather, it is a voluntary reduction of control in pursuit of a purer form of maneuver warfare. Calcifying intelligence at the tactical level enables this and the naval Service’s efforts to pursue victory in a complex peer-to-peer fight.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

2. Ibid.
3. ADM John M. Richardson, USN, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*, (Washington, DC: December 2018).
4. *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*.
5. Kevin Eyer and Steve McJessey, "Operationalizing Distributed Maritime Operations," *Center for International Maritime Security*, (January 2020), available at <http://cimsec.org>.
6. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.
7. Congressional Research Service, "China Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities: Background and Issues for Congress," (Washington, DC: United States Naval Institute, December 2019).
8. Capt Austin Dahmer, USMCR, "The Marine Corps Must Reinvent Itself," *Proceedings*, (Annapolis, MD: December 2019).
9. Maj Blair Sokol, "Reframing Marine Corps Distributed Operations and Enhanced Company Operations," (monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2009).
10. Gen M.W. Hagee, "A Concept for Distributed Operations," (Washington, DC: April 2005).
11. "Reframing Marine Corps Distributed Operations and Enhanced Company Operations."
12. Col Vincent Goulding Jr., "Enhanced Company Operations," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: August 2008). (Author found cited in Sokol.)
13. Gen James Conway, "A Concept for Enhanced Company Operations," (Washington, DC: August 2008).
14. "Reframing Marine Corps Distributed Operations and Enhanced Company Operations."
15. Ibid.
16. "A Concept for Enhanced Company Operations."
17. Gen Robert Neller, "Marine Corps Operating Concept," (Washington, DC: September 2016).
18. Maj Robert Reynolds, "Intelligence Support to Distributed Operations," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: December 2005).
19. "Reframing Marine Corps Distributed Operations and Enhanced Company Operations."
20. 1stLt John Boger and 1stLt Austin Dahmer, "Why the 0203 MOS is Broken," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: September 2017).
21. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 2-10A.6 Ground Reconnaissance Operations*, (Washington, DC: May 2016).
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

