

# The Unnecessary Command

Re-aggregate the operating forces with the bases and stations that support it

by Maj Phillip R. Roberson, Jr. (Ret)

Doctors live by the guiding principle: “First, do no harm.”<sup>1</sup> This is also a paramount principle whenever an organization implements major changes to its processes and structure. If we apply this perspective to examining the Marine Corps Installation Command (MCICOM), it is difficult to argue that the benefits outweigh the challenges this new command poses for the Marine Corps. It is time to acknowledge that the Marine Corps was better positioned before MCICOM when the MEF commanders also commanded the bases and stations that supported the operating forces. Abolish MCICOM and reaggregate the operating forces with the installations to better align support to meet the security challenges of the 21st century.

Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM changed the Marine Corps as it attempted to meet the demands of recurring deployment cycles of finite duration. The Marine Corps was singularly focused on preparing Marines to deploy to Iraq and Afghanistan. This meant that managing installations consumed resources and attention that commanders simply did not have. A snapshot in time provides a glimpse of the conditions where it was a perfectly reasonable solution to create MCICOM. It enabled the Marine Corps and MEF commanders to plan their roles in the wars of the day while another commander planned how the

**>Maj Roberson is a retired Marine Logistics Officer. He joined MCI-PAC where he assumed the role of MCIPAC AC/S G-4 until 2018, before joining the Resources & Logistics Directorate at the U.S. Mission to NATO.**

installation continued to operate in a comparatively static environment.

In 2011, the Marine Corps followed the path of the Army, Navy, and Air Force to create an installation command. This newly formed command’s mission was to

[exercise] command and control of Marine Corps Installations via regional commanders in order to provide oversight, direction, and coordination of installation services and to optimize support to the Operating Forces, tenants, and activities.<sup>2</sup>

The Marine Corps transferred its camps, bases, stations, and airfields to MCICOM, with the exception of some training bases that remained under the command of Marine Corps Training and Education Command.

Before MCICOM’s inception, installations were commonly referred to as the fifth element of the MAGTF. The Marine Corps was the last to create an installation command because its installations were integral to the operating forces they enabled; there was little separation between operating force and

installation Marines. This integration worked well for the Marine Corps. If a commander wanted a service or project beyond what the installation table of organization or budgets supported, he could prioritize and shift resources to satisfy a particular operational or readiness demand. MCICOM changed this dynamic because the authorities for deciding installation policy shifted from the MAGTF commander to a different commander who reports to the Assistant Deputy Commandant for Installations and Logistics (I&L).

MCICOM was created and placed in the Assistant Deputy Commandant (ADC) for Logistics and I&L of HQMC. The I&L Director for Logistics Facilities is now also the Commanding General for MCICOM. On the surface, the rationale for creating an installation command was sound. This separate command could manage the range of installation tasks that are more common to municipalities rather than a Service branch within the DOD. However, as the Marine Corps returned to its pre-war equilibrium, unintended consequences emerged that more than negated the realized benefits.

When MCICOM was created, the largest Marine Corps Bases—Camps Pendleton, Lejeune, and Butler—assumed the added titles and responsibilities of Marine Corps Installations Command—West, Marine Corps Installations Command—East, and Marine Corps Installations Command—Pa-

cific (MCIPAC), respectively. These new commands retained their previous responsibilities and they assumed new ones without the staff increases corresponding to the new authorities. MCICOM also still does not have the personnel necessary to oversee and staff their original command responsibilities and the new regional responsibilities.

The immediate benefit MCICOM provided the Marine Corps was operating force commanders no longer needed to manage the installations and its many operations; they became installation customers rather than directors and process owners. This brought with it a different set of problems. MEF commanders now needed to request support from other commanding generals rather than issuing orders to subordinate commanders. The installation could now only provide the services and programs for which it was staffed and funded. While MEF and installation commanders continued to support each other to the best of their abilities, command authorities changed the dynamic and the operational commanders now needed a sound bureaucratic argument to make institutional changes, whereas before, these same commanders could issue a statement or directive; the Marine Corps constrained its MEF commanders' authorities and made them less effective.

Before MCICOM, a MEF commanding general was also the commanding general of the bases that supported the MEF's assigned forces. This created unity of command and simplified coordination; there was seldom any confusion about commander's intent. Today, this same MEF must coordinate with a different chain of command, and the installation can support only to the point that existing budgets and personnel allow. While it remains possible for the MEF to fund some projects that are within the intended scope for allocated funds and to temporarily transfer personnel, there is greater friction; it is not simple and all it takes to scuttle the best laid plans is for one person with the ability to say no. There is a better way to effectively manage an organization.

MCICOM's creation also removed the MEF commander's fiscal flexibility

while enabling the Marine Corps to compartmentalize resources disproportionately in favor of the operating forces that enabled the Marine Corps' leadership to allocate resources disproportionately in favor of the operating forces. There were separate lines before, but budget execution authority rested with the MEF commander. Now separate budget allocations to the operating forces and installations were segregated by chains of command; budget execution authorities no longer overlapped, thereby creating additional bureaucratic friction whenever a commander sought to deviate or divert appropriated funds. The Assistant Deputy Commandant for Programs and Resources (ADC P&R) obtained a firmer grasp on budget execution. The new structure ensured stricter adherence to Marine Corps budget priorities. Budget decisions at HQMC were now enshrined with the command structure to enforce them.

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Resources would be beyond the reach of installation commanders because they were now part of a separate chain of command, but this also meant that installation commanders could not provide MEF commanders with services and materiel the budgets did not fund.

The operating forces budgets increased while the installation budgets decreased. At the end of fiscal year 2018, the III MEF Commanding General directed his staff to transfer money to MCIPAC to purchase items for Marine Corps Base Hawaii's and Marine Corps Base Butler's barracks for the benefit of III MEF Marines. Before MCICOM's inception, this transfer was an internal III MEF transaction. Now with MCICOM, MARFORPAC, ADC P&R, and ADC I&L all have the authority to scrutinize and disapprove it. This transaction was not approved, and the money was allocated to what the commander previously determined was a lesser pri-

ority. The MAGTF commander, who had the budget authority to allocate this money that was budgeted to fund military operations and enhance readiness, was prevented from allocating it in a way that he believed would best improve Marines' lives, which has a direct effect on morale and combat readiness. In this particular case, command authorities prevented a MEF commander from authorizing budgeted monies for the benefit of Marines within his command. Commanders at every level lost their ability to shift resources without HQMC concurrence.

The 2019 *Commandant's Planning Guidance* acknowledges the challenge separate chains of command poses: "we created separate chains of command for our installations and the operating forces they support, further inducing friction and inefficiency." As the former MARFORPAC commanding general, Gen Berger experienced the challenges firsthand. The installation commander that supported MARFORPAC in Hawaii was stationed in Okinawa. As the senior Marine in the Pacific, he coordinated with ADC I&L for some issues. The Commanding General Marine Forces Pacific did not have the authority to order the Commanding General of Marine Corps Installations Command-Pacific to provide any support that was counter to the MCICOM commander's intent. MARFORPAC had a robust budget in comparison to the MCIPAC's austere one, and the installation often did not have the resources to provide the levels of support expected from the operating forces. This inconsistency diverted attention from what operating force commanders are charged with accomplishing: preparing Marines to defend the United States and its interests.

Combined Arms Training Center (CATC) Camp Fuji presents a perfect example of challenges posed by installations residing in a parallel chain of command. CATC Camp Fuji is a command that evolved over the past few decades to become a training base staffed by III MEF Marines closely coordinating with the operating forces they support. CATC Camp Fuji has a relatively small organic table of orga-

nization. The majority of its table of organization is staffed with III MEF Marines through the Fleet Assistance Program. After MCIPAC's inception, CATC Camp Fuji became an installation, which meant that many of the hybrid functions it previously performed were outside its scope. Overnight CATC Camp Fuji transitioned from a unique organization providing a range of services to an installation that was performing services for III MEF's operating forces that they should have been performing for themselves. The CATC Fuji commanding officer was managing operating force Marines to provide services beyond what an MCICOM installation was charged with providing. This command of unquestioned value fit well under the III MEF/Marine Corps Bases Japan structure but not within the MCIPAC. The mission analysis and force structure review of what CATC Fuji should become as opposed to what it was produced MCIPAC staff churn that began late in 2017 and remained unresolved yet accepted.

The Marine Corps' ability to shift budget allocations to the operating forces as it reduced installation budgets created additional challenges that will take years to remedy. The most pressing challenge for MCICOM is facilities sustainment, restoration, and modernization. This requirement did not go away. Funding requirements continued to grow as installations deferred maintenance and delayed construction to replace degraded facilities. In addition, many end-items and equipment reached the end of their planned life cycle without funds available to replace them. For example, barracks furniture replacement shifted from a planned seven-year replacement cycle to a twelve-year cycle, and it remains to be determined if this will be possible in future budgets with shifting priorities. Yet, the demands upon the installations do not correspond with annual budgets; the customers of installation facilities and services expect support that annual budgets do not enable.

The Army, Air Force, and Navy all have an installations command. It is logical that the Marine Corps followed, but as the smallest of the Services, a separate

installations command created more challenges than benefits. MCICOM required additional staff that was not part of the previous ADC I&L Facilities Division. Instead of the slimmer staff of subject matter experts, MCICOM now has a larger contingent of officers and civilians managing traditional staff billets. Worse, MCICOM does not have the staff required to satisfy the manpower demands, so it operates at a suboptimum level. Some of the functional oversight within the installations remains under the policy oversight of I&L (Logistics Policy), which means there remains duplication of functions

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### ***The Marine Corps' operating forces and its installations are symbiotic ...***

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and oversight within I&L. This makes working with MCICOM immensely frustrating; MCICOM has not realized its potential, and the Marine Corps cannot afford to resource it. Unfortunately, it is a suboptimal organization and everyone needs to acknowledge that it is time to rethink how the Marine Corps views and manages bases and stations.

The Marine Corps' operating forces and its installations are symbiotic; both perform better when integrated. Shifting money from the installations in favor of the operating forces ultimately penalizes the customer of the installations, which is primarily the operating forces. Such an approach is only possible in the shortest of terms without damaging the organization's ability to support itself. The MCICOM experiment proved that installations are truly the fifth element of the MAGTF, and it is time to reconstitute what was as the organization makes changes that enable it to better respond to external challenges rather than internal ones.

The most expeditious remedy to the Marine Corps' disaggregated force structure is to return to the pre-war equilibrium. Dissolve MCICOM and

return the installations into the chains of command of the operating forces they support. The I&L Logistics Facilities Director should retain its infrastructure policy role, and MAGTF commanders should once again command the fifth element of the MAGTF. Installation commanders should be responding to operational commanders' intent to best support the MAGTF. There should always be unity of command in an operational setting as the Marine Corps responds to the United States' security and defense priorities of the 21st century. The Nation's enemies present ever-increasing challenges. To focus on these challenges, any internal friction should be eliminated whenever possible. A MAGTF commander must know that the Marines supporting him are adhering to his guidance and direction rather than considering the priorities, limitations, and overall concerns of a parallel command structure.

For a moment in time, the MCICOM provided a benefit to the Marine Corps. As the Marine Corps returned to its pre-war equilibrium, the institutional friction and inefficiency an installation command creates meant it is no longer viable. The rationale for its creation, which enabled Marine Corps leaders to separate budgets and personnel, made sense on the surface, but it also removed MAGTF commanders' authorities and operational flexibility to make decisions that required installation support. It is now time to recognize creating the installation command caused more harm than benefit. It is now time to re-aggregate the operating forces with the resources that support it to posture the Marine Corps to respond to the security and defense challenges of the 21st century.

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#### **Notes**

1. Information on the Hippocratic Oath is available at <https://en.wikipedia.org>.
2. Information available at <https://www.mcicom.marines.mil>.

