

Effective Training for Intelligence Specialists

Setting our Marines up for success

by 1stLt Ben M. Kallas

It would be hard to argue that the training provided to 0231 intelligence specialists—the enlisted intelligence Marines who provide the backbone for all-source intelligence in the Marine Corps—sets them up for success in a combat environment. Perhaps it did twenty years ago, before the proliferation of the Internet and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) precipitated an exponential increase in the volume of available information. This trend will continue, and our junior intelligence Marines are not prepared for it. This is not their fault. Their current situation stems from a combination of inadequate entry-level training and the widespread inability of intelligence shops to conduct training in a garrison environment. This article addresses both issues but focuses primarily on entry-level training because a fundamental restructure of the MAGTF Intelligence Specialist Entry-level Course (MISEC) curriculum will allow intelligence shops to conduct advanced training rather than teach the basic skills these Marines should have already mastered at the schoolhouse. I have drawn from both personal experience—at a regimental-level intelligence shop and a deployment to Helmand Province, Afghanistan—and conversations with Marine intelligence professionals across a broad range of ranks and responsibilities.

Framing the Problem

Modern technology is creating an unprecedented need for intelligence Marines who can understand a complex

>1stLt Kallas is an 0203 Ground Intelligence Officer assigned to Headquarters Company, 6th Marines. He served as the J-2 Production and Analysis OIC and Targeting Intelligence Officer while at Task Force SOUTHWEST, from April 2017 until January 2018.



Are we setting our Marines up for success? (Photo by Sgt James Trevino.)

battlefield, navigate among an array of databases and live information feeds, quickly prioritize the most relevant information, and present that information in a concise manner. When the mission is expeditionary, manpower and resources are constrained; this means that a single 0231 must fill multiple roles. This was very much the case throughout the first rotation of Task Force SOUTHWEST in Helmand Province.

However, intelligence shops within infantry units rarely have access to the resources required to train their Marines for intelligence support to combat operations. The remainder of this section addresses two issues, both of which need to be resolved if 0231s' skills are to expand rather than atrophy. First, exercises are so infantry-centric that they provide no training value to intelligence shops. Second, training outside of exercises is

unrealistic given the lack of resources and the non-intelligence-related duties assigned to intelligence shops in a garrison environment. It is a necessity to have a strong entry-level training pipeline for 0231s, as intelligence training opportunities in the Operating Forces will remain limited for the foreseeable future.

Battalion- and regimental-level exercises are designed to improve infantry skills, and they do that quite well. Not so for intelligence. The essence of intelligence support in operations is collecting information, monitoring information provided by outside sources, identifying what is relevant, and synthesizing it into a coherent picture for the commander. In the real world, most information is irrelevant, contradictory, deliberately false, or only helpful when combined with other scraps of information from days or months ago. When an exercise turns a portion of a U.S. military base into a theoretical “country” and renames the towns, it does not begin to replicate the complexity and confusion of a conflict zone. There is no true backstory to the enemy or civilian population, no means of adequately replicating intelligence inputs from the plethora of U.S. intelligence collection platforms, and no means of generating an information overload situation. Instead, intelligence “injects” are scarce and transparently intended to drive the commander to make a decision. This is useful to the infantry Marines because the intelligence inject will prompt them to conduct an operation, but it does nothing for the analytical or research skills of intelligence Marines.

Intelligence shops fare little better in garrison. Most are primarily tasked with security management, a broad field which includes the handling of all classified information, teaching others how to handle such information, administrative management of all security clearances held by battalion personnel, and so on. The time requirement here is considerable. Factor in the typical drains on manpower—working parties, medical hit lists, required MarineNet classes, and Marines on leave—and one rarely finds a critical mass of intelligence Marines present for meaningful

training. Not that it would necessarily help much; most battalions have just two or three classified (i.e., the secure internet protocol router) computers, so access to intelligence sources is severely limited. For all the talk about the value of open-source (unclassified) information—which does have its merits—intelligence is inextricably tied to the availability of classified networks. While Regional Intelligence Training Centers exist, and are designed to offset these limitations, a combination of unit operational tempo and limitations to class size continue to limit their positive impact.

These are institutional issues that will not be resolved in the near future. They would be less of a concern if junior-enlisted intelligence Marines were already competent in the core skills they need to thrive in a combat environment by the time they graduate basic training and arrive at their unit. At present, MISEC is not structured to provide such skills. In comparison to the broader issues across the Operating Forces, restructuring MISEC is a relatively easy fix—and one that will posture new 0231s to succeed even without effective training at their unit.

Intelligence Training for the 21st Century

The MISEC instructor cadre has agreed for years that the curriculum needs to change. The current course relies heavily on the rote memorization of a fire hose of information, teaches intelligence “programs of record” which have been obsolete for years instead of programs that are actually used by intelligence professionals, and places little emphasis on research or analytical skills. However, major changes would take time and approval from Training and Education Command—and an extension of the course’s length has remained off the table for years. A review of all basic intelligence courses is already underway, so the following paragraphs provide a template for a more effective course that teaches the necessary intelligence skills in a realistic time frame as well as a few of the challenges inherent to MISEC. It is more radical than what is currently under consideration and

also incorporates aspects of the Ground Intelligence Officer Course (GIOC) curriculum as a means of comparison.

Instructors at MISEC will face two enduring difficulties. First, junior Marines’ military experience is limited to recruit training and a few weeks of basic infantry training by the time they enter the course. Most have no other military experience and little or no relevant work experience with which to contextualize the concepts they learn at the course. Second, the Marines’ educational experience is highly variable. I need not elaborate on the quality of high schools across the United States to explain that most have not received much training in reading, writing, analysis, or information retention. Nonetheless, as the prerequisites for intelligence positions within the broader U.S. intelligence community make clear, such skills are critically important. These are not insurmountable challenges, but they must factor into the course structure.

Contrast this situation with Marine officers entering GIOC: All are college graduates, many of whom have previous work experience. They were selected for (and passed) Officer Candidates School, graduated from The Basic School, received three months of intensive infantry training at the Infantry Officer Course, and learned about scout/sniper employment for another three weeks. By the time they enter GIOC, they are qualified infantry officers with at least four years of academic experience in college and nearly thirteen months of increasingly intense military training, and yet, the three months of GIOC instruction is essentially a sprint. Many workdays last fourteen to eighteen hours, and work on weekends is common. For the junior Marines at MISEC, that tempo is neither sustainable nor legal. Burnout and suicidal ideations would become endemic. To be sure, not all of the course material at GIOC is applicable to MISEC; there is a heavier emphasis on operational planning and analysis. However, most of the course-work focuses on skills that both 0203s and 0231s will perform in the Operating Forces.

The overlap in course material occurs so that officers can reinforce those

skills among their 0231s (which often does not happen—refer to the previous section) and so that officers can perform those tasks themselves when necessary. To expect junior Marines with comparatively limited academic and military experience to obtain proficiency in similar skills sets, in the same period of time, while working half the hours per day, is not remotely realistic. Thus, MISEC needs to be extended to six months. This will create some manpower and logistical issues, since doubling the length of the course will halve the number of courses that can be taught in a given year. Barracks space for students will also have to increase considerably, which is no small issue but hardly one that should permanently limit the course to an unrealistic time-frame.

Most junior Marines receive minimal writing instruction before they enter the Corps and little or none afterwards. In most occupations, this is not a major issue. In the intelligence field, it is. How many junior 0231s have excellent ideas and an intuitive understanding of the battlespace but cannot articulate those thoughts on paper? It is not sustainable for the officers or the intelligence chief to write every sentence that is disseminated by the intelligence shop, and it should not be necessary. Junior Marines' writing can improve dramatically in a short time—again, personal experience—and it should be taught at the schoolhouse. The first month should focus partially on a few introductory classes but primarily on an intensive writing program. The subject matter is irrelevant; what matters is that Marines are uniformly taught to use proper grammar and syntax so that they can confidently put words on paper. They would all understand how to make a clear and succinct point by the end of the month. We train infantry Marines to use rifles, but we do not teach intelligence Marines to use words.

Once Marines have a grasp of writing fundamentals, they will learn about intelligence. The second month will provide an overview of each intelligence discipline—human (HUMINT), geo-spatial (GEOINT), signals (SIGINT), open-source (OSINT), and measure-

ment and signature (MASINT). Emphasis will be placed on the first three, as multiple OSINT courses exist in the Operating Forces and MASINT has limited applicability to forward deployed units. Students will learn about the types of products and reports associated with each discipline, with as much hands-on experience as possible. They will also learn about the various databases associated with each discipline: where to find HUMINT and SIGINT reporting, satellite imagery, and so on. A firm grasp of the available intelligence sources is critical to the rest of the course.

Instructors must have the latitude to provide hands-on training ...

Marines will begin to tie their newfound knowledge together in the third month, which will focus on programs used across the intelligence community to pull in, track, and fuse multiple information sources into a coherent picture. This is the key function of all-source intelligence and a task that 0231s are uniformly unable to perform upon graduation from MISEC. This is partly because the instructors are required to teach hopelessly outdated “programs of record” like FalconView, which is analogous to teaching a course about the power of social media by showing students how to use Hotmail and Instant Messenger.

Instructors must have the latitude to provide hands-on training with the programs 0231s will encounter in the Operating Forces and the broader intelligence community. Google Earth is widely used for intelligence purposes, so either that program or its upcoming replacement will be a necessity. Next should come Palantir, which combines the power of a multi-disciplinary search engine with the ability to store and link information in a collaborative manner. Finally, 0231s should learn the analytical tool set provided by the Joint Improvised-Threat Defeat Organization (JIDO)—the Attack the

Network Tool Suite (ANTS). These tools are specifically designed to simplify all-source research and analysis in a time-constrained, low-bandwidth combat environment.

The first three months progressively cover broad skill sets that any all-source intelligence professional should have. In the fourth month, the Marines will begin to look at specific collection platforms and common enemy threat weapons. There is no need to cover every platform in depth, but a basic understanding of common UAS, satellites, ground reconnaissance and surveillance units, and signals collection systems is a requirement so that analysts know the capabilities and limitations of the platforms that provide the information they receive. This sets realistic expectations regarding the information they should expect to be available and also cues them to request additional collection to support their analysis. This month can be a hands-on experience for the students; there are enough case studies and realtime data feeds available to make this happen.

Common threat weapons are covered in depth at GIOC, and experience strongly suggests that MISEC needs to dedicate additional time to it. Intelligence is focused on the enemy, and weapons are what the enemy uses to kill friendly forces. Yet few junior 0231s realize that the AK-47 is actually a rather rare weapon; the later AKM or its Chinese and Yugoslavian variants are far more common. Recognizing those variants may indicate the logistical networks that an enemy employs. The difference between an enemy unit with RPKs (Soviet light machine gun) and one with PKMs (a general-purpose Kalashnikov machine gun) can be a life-and-death distinction. Understanding the difference between generations of man-portable air defense systems is an even more serious matter. Like collection platforms, it is unrealistic to cover everything, but a decent introduction is necessary.

The current MISEC curriculum focuses heavily on intelligence preparation of the battlespace (IPB), a highly structured approach to understanding the weather, enemy, and terrain within



Time should be spent teaching Marines how to write effectively. (Photo by LCpl Laura Mercado.)

a battlespace prior to a deployment or mission. This is understandable, as IPB requires a diverse set of skills and, therefore, exercises a broad range of intelligence-related tasks. The problem is that students are minimally prepared before they are tasked to prepare an IPB brief; per the current curriculum, IPB is introduced at the beginning of the third week. I would not introduce such a comprehensive project until the fifth month, by which point the Marines can write, understand all of the disciplines of all-source intelligence, find the relevant products and reports, employ programs to harness all of that information, and understand the significance of common enemy weapons.

Thus, the fifth month incorporates all of the basic skills they have learned and translates it into the first comprehensive intelligence product of the course. This month will also incorporate lessons on how to effectively portray information on PowerPoint slides (as much as senior officers seem to hate it, every brief still involves PowerPoint) and how to brief an audience. Greater emphasis goes toward slide-building than briefing, as officers or an intelligence chief tend to give the briefs. That said, the best way to learn to build a good briefing slide is to build slides—and brief them to a harsh audience at

the schoolhouse. A professional-looking brief will always appear more credible than a sloppy one that contains the same information.

Month six wraps up the course with intelligence support to targeting, followed by a final exercise. Targeting is integral to any combat operation and is always driven by intelligence. The first two weeks of the month will introduce deliberate targeting (pre-planned strikes on enemy positions) and high-value individual (HVI) targeting. The latter is almost exclusively tied to counterinsurgency, which is less prominent in today's Corps than it was in past years. Still, HVI targeting remains common—even among conventional forces—in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, and it will likely regain prominence in future conflicts.

A final exercise will incorporate all of the skills that students learned during the course. It will be based on a real-world scenario and incorporate an in-depth IPB. Students will have to fuse inputs from multiple intelligence disciplines and employ intelligence programs like Google Earth, Palantir, and JIDO's ANTS. Once the IPB is complete, students will support both deliberate and HVI targeting. Each event will be graded and critiqued by the instructors. By the end of the course, students will have learned and employed all of the

basic skills they need to succeed in any combat environment.

Conclusion

I sought to make two points with this article: that junior 0231s are not provided anywhere near the level of training they need to succeed in modern combat environments and that this need not be the case. MISEC is the same length as GIOC, despite the fact that GIOC students are all academically experienced, were screened for their MOS, received almost a year of increasingly intense training beforehand, and work nearly twice the hours of MISEC students during the course. 0231 Intelligence Specialists are capable of learning a great deal in a short time; I watched them provide intelligence support that rivaled that of special operations units in Afghanistan. But it took time, in a combat environment where lives were at stake. That is not the place to learn intelligence. That place is the schoolhouse, and we are presently failing them in that regard.

The course structure I just outlined is six months long, and it does not demand the same rigor or breadth of subjects as the GIOC curriculum. But six months is a more realistic amount of time to impart the basic skills that junior 0231s will need to hit the ground running upon graduation, as they are unlikely to receive much in the way of sustainment training after that. Even if intelligence training someday becomes a priority in the Operating Forces, we owe it to our junior Marines to dramatically increase the quality of education we provide them. Lives and wars depend upon their ability to support operations, and now is the time to make long-overdue changes to their basic training.

