

Intel Reachback and the Emperor's New Clothes

The unpublished AAR on MCISR-E's OEF failure

by Maj Nicholas R. Nappi

"But he hasn't got anything on!" the whole town cried out at last. The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, "This procession has got to go on." So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all.¹

Intelligence reachback "support" to RC(SW) (Regional Command (Southwest)) during OEF (Operation ENDURING FREEDOM) was an unmitigated failure, but recorded as a resounding success. RC(SW) was supposed to be the proving ground for the concepts laid out in the *MCISR-E (Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Enterprise) Roadmap 2010*, and intel reachback was going to showcase *MCISRE's* federated support paradigm. Reachback nodes from the continental United States promised to provide the forward deployed commander the same quality support at a reduced price. The split-basing methodology mirrored *MCWP 2-1* and enabled a reduced "footprint" and less "boots-on-the-ground."² It failed in almost all respects, but this assessment will not be found in any official AAR (after-action report) from 2012–2014.

I am writing this article because the future is uncertain, and conflict could be right around the corner. I feel obligated to comment on the failings of intel reachback so that flawed assumptions do not inform any potential contingency plans that are currently underway. I am taking a no-holds-barred approach to

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Have requests for information been adequately handled through the reachback channel?
(Photo by Cpl Jonathan Boynes.)

this issue, but I will also give recommendations on how its deficiencies can be improved. The frank recommendations given are not meant to demean or criticize those that put their hearts and souls into the reachback mission. All observations will cover my personal viewpoints and do not reflect my previous command, my present command, or the views of the Marine Corps.

From 2012–2014, I became intimately familiar with intel reachback support to OEF. First as an observer, then as producer, next as the consumer, and finally as one who contributed to the "official" AAR of intel support as we closed down Camp Leatherneck in October 2014. It is my hope that this "unofficial" AAR will spark some informed conversations and force us to

revisit our assumptions with respect to the capabilities that intel reachback advertises.

2012–2013: Observing OEF Intel Reachback

From September 2012 to March 2013, I served as a combat replacement in the C2/G2 (Intelligence) section in Camp Leatherneck in RC(SW). I ran the Stability Operations and Information Center, which focused on the Afghan government and population. I also worked adjacent to the IOC (Intel Operations Center) and had the unique opportunity to observe their processes. As a combat replacement, my tenure in the C2/G2 spanned the RIP/TOA (relief in place/transfer of authority) from one intelligence battalion to another. In this respect, I had a perspective on the continuity of the processes as well.

As a neutral observer to intel reachback, my take-away was that both “consumer” OEF units had disdain and contempt for the quality of products that the reachback nodes produced. No one, however, highlighted the problem because of the high-level visibility that the experiment had in the *MCISRE* roadmap. To say that the emperor was naked would have been politically hazardous. Therefore, it was easier to just accept the products from the rear and figuratively drop them in the “circular file” (trash). I found it humorous to watch the process. It reminded me of when one of my children draws me an unintelligible picture. I have no idea what it is, but I still stick in on the fridge because their efforts are so cute.

Failure to address the deficiencies of intel reachback seemed harmless, expedient, and it gave us something to chuckle over during deployment. This proved disastrous. Not speaking up was essentially moral cowardice and intellectual laziness. Intel reachback Marines were working 24/7 shifts in vain, and they knew it! While we were laughing at reachback’s products, the reachback leadership was struggling with an outbreak of illegal drug use, particularly of the drug spice. Based on later conversations with that reachback cadre, cynicism about the reachback mission

was a contributing factor behind the drug abuse.

2013–2014: Leading OEF Intel Reachback

In the summer of 2013, I assumed command of the PACO (Production and Analysis Company), 1st IntelBn (1st Intelligence Battalion), in Camp Pendleton, CA. It was a large company, and at 220 Marines, it dwarfed the other companies in the battalion. The main mission of PACO was to once again run OEF intel reachback from Camp Pendleton; the last time

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that PACO had the mission it also had the spice ring. This time was going to be different. OEF intel reachback was more mature, and lessons were learned from previous mistakes. The new reachback would “fence-off” 114 Marines out of PACO’s 220. In theory, this would protect the Marines from

being pulled to other billets and give stability to the mission.

The first step in reconstituting 1st IntelBn reachback was to conduct a site survey to 2d IntelBn, who was currently executing the mission. Little over a week before the site survey, one of 2d IntelBn’s reachback Marines committed suicide, and the feeling of loss was palatable. 2d IntelBn’s commander recognized that the greatest single risk to the reachback mission was human factors. In his opinion, the Marines in reachback did not enjoy the work, and the 24/7 shifts were hurting morale. He stressed the issue that it was hard to maintain regular contact between junior Marines and their NCOs during 24/7 operations. One recommendation was to consider ending the weekend shifts. Perhaps the only success story out of the 2d IntelBn site survey was that the CI/HUMINT (counter-intelligence/human intelligence) Marines were largely on autopilot. The reports that the CI/HUMINT Marines were producing from the rear were compilations of numerous reports sent from forward. In this mission area, he expressed confidence.

With these lessons learned, 1st IntelBn implemented measures to mitigate the effects of 24/7 operations. These involved increased mentorship



It is possible to provide an excellent reachback product, but current AARs need to be more specific and critical of our efforts so far. (Photo by Cpl Skyler Treverrow.)

and counseling, increased initiatives from the family readiness officer and generously giving recognition when appropriate. The 114 Marines were an all-source support node, and a CI/HUMINT platoon was chopped from one of the battalion's adjacent companies. 1st IntelBn rear was in direct support of 1st IntelBn (Fwd) and *MCISRE*'s reachback concept was the "shiny penny" of the MEF headquarters group. The first month of reachback operations saw a steady stream of VIPs enter the spaces, and they were regaled with reports from Afghanistan on what a great job reachback was doing.

All the mitigation measures seemed to work. However, as time progressed, motivation became harder and harder to maintain. This problem was only compounded by the Christmas holiday season. Just like the two other iterations of reachback, morale started to fail, and it surfaced in the form of increased alcohol use. The first two incidents came shortly after the CI/HUMINT platoon was chopped to reachback. In the period of one week, two of those Marines got DUIs. By the end of January, there had been a total of four alcohol-related incidents in less than two months. The one consolation during this time frame was that 1st IntelBn (Fwd) was continuing to praise the work of 1st IntelBn's reachback. Or so we thought ...

2014: Customer of OEF Intel Reachback

In May 2014, I deployed to Camp Leatherneck to conduct a RIP/TOA with the 1st IntelBn (Fwd), the Marines who we had been supporting. In the first week of "left-seat/right-seat" turnover, I noticed that none of the products from 1st IntelBn rear (reachback) were being briefed. I asked why and was told that they never used them; it was easier just to accept them, praise them, and then stick them on the fridge for everyone to chuckle at. Nothing had changed in two iterations of OEF reachback since I had originally observed the operation in 2012. It was still politically too dangerous to criticize the concept or tell the emperor that he was naked.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and intel reachback's emperor's new clothes problem is a great example of this. Forward units thought that they were helping by giving false impressions of reachback's usefulness. In the meantime, drug outbreaks, alcohol issues, domestic violence, and a suicide occurred. Instead of having the moral courage to do something about the problem, I too gave into pressure and contributed a glowing review for the "official" AAR coming out of Helmand.

Reachback has uses but not as extensive as advertised. It can bring efficiencies to operations and reduce a unit's "footprint," but in order to capitalize on the promise an intelligence planner must have an accurate picture of its constraints and restraints. The following paragraphs will lay those out.



Original illustration from Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales Told to Children, 1837. (Illustration by Vilhelm Pedersen.)

What Intel Reachback Does Not Do Well

The weakest aspect of intel reachback is subjective analysis by far. In a deployed environment, the C2/G2 owns the enemy narrative, and his guidance drives the analytical focus. This dynamic between the G2 and the analyst cannot be duplicated from thousands of miles away, via email, or by video

teleconference. The C2/G2 requires daily interaction with his analysts in order to prioritize effort, provide focus, and to set cadence. The bottom line is that reachback is weak in the areas of all-source analysis, HUMINT (human intelligence) and SIGINT (signals intelligence).

An example of the untenable dynamic is the following vignette: the C2/G2 is taking his nightly brief from the IOC in Afghanistan before he hits the rack. He has already been working for 18 hours. He has questions on some intelligence reporting that surfaced from the evening brief, so the outgoing shift has sent those RFIs (requests for information) to the reachback element in the United States. The reachback element is completely dependent on the specificity of the RFI because the C2/G2 will be sleeping if they need clarification.

In this vignette, the reachback intel analyst who has been handed this RFI is also trying to handle an angry phone call from his wife. They live less than one mile away, and she needs him to pick up their child from school. "It will only take 10 minutes!" she yells in the phone. At this point, our intrepid corporal does an internal tactical decision game.

- COA 1: "I put my heart and soul into answering this RFI like my career depends on it." "But wait!" he says. "I've never even met this C2/G2, and he's not the one who does my pro/con marks. So, I guess my career doesn't really depend on it."
- COA 2: "I put my heart and soul into this just because I'm a professional. My wife will kill me when I get home, but while she's screaming at me, I will be content in my professionalism."
- COA 3: "I do the bare minimum to check the box on this RFI and then I go pick up my kid from school. I don't want my wife to kill me!"

In intel reachback, choosing COA 3 is the norm. It's simple risk management on the part of the Marines and the quality of their subjective analysis is ... subjective.

This vignette ends with the C2/G2 waking up in the morning to read the barely passible analysis product. The

reachback node has technically supported his requests, so he cannot say that they are unresponsive. However, for him to send the unsatisfactory product back, he would also have to provide further clarification, and he would have to wait another day for the corrected product because the analyst who wrote it is now sleeping. This all takes time that he does not have. Instead he looks to the fusion officer in the IOC and says, "Don't send them anymore RFIs ... fix this garbage!" The fusion officer is on a seven-month deployment, and she is thousands of miles away from her sleeping husband and children. She's pretty sure they'll understand if she puts all of her focus on answering the C2's/G-2's RFI.

What Intel Reachback Can Do Well

Intel reachback's strongest potential lies in creating long-term, objective, encyclopedic products. The best example of these would be GEOINT (geospatial intelligence) products such as maps, ter-

rain models, and target packages. These products could also include counter-intelligence products that collate already published analysis. The bottom line is that reachback can be strong in areas of CI (counter-intelligence) and GEO-INT.

In the following vignette, our over-worked C2/G2 needs a hydrology

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analysis of an area where the unit may conduct operations in the future:

"Hey, Fusion Officer. We may be doing ops in this area next month. How long would it take to get a hydrology study done?"

"Sir, the imagery analysts in the rear have the same access to those hydrology

databases that we have, and they have a faster connection speed. They could probably get us something by tomorrow, and our topographic platoon out here can print it out for you."

This vignette ends with the C2 waking up the next morning to an already satisfactory product. However, he sees a couple additional details he wants displayed. His 100 percent complete product is done by day three.

Conclusion

The efficacy of OEF intelligence reachback support from 2012–2014 has been inaccurately captured in official AARs from the period. This could lead to false assumptions for its capabilities in future conflicts. The implications for this on operations could be severe. This unofficial AAR shows intel reachback through a much more critical lens.

Failure to accurately examine the effects of intel reachback operations also could have severe effects on garrison operations. Every iteration of OEF intel reachback was marked by low morale and hampered by human factors. These ranged from drug rings, to alcohol abuse, to suicide. These negatives do not play well into the *MCISRE* narrative of reachback, but they are its reality.

It is only through an unbiased look at the pros and cons of intel reachback operations that we can truly capitalize on its promise. The key take aways for an intelligence planner is that reachback does not do subjective analysis well, but it can be very effective in delivering long-term, objective, and encyclopedic products.

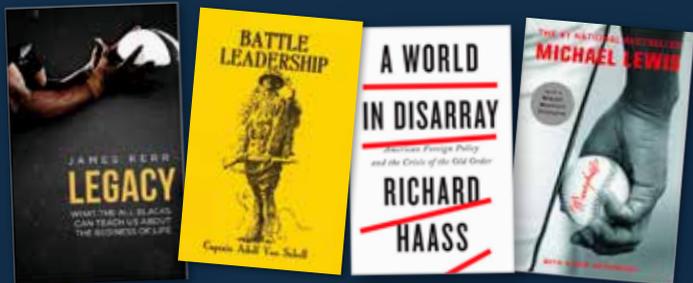
Notes

1. Hans Christian Anderson, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, (Denmark: originally published in April 1837; translated by Jean Hersholt), available at <http://www.andersen.sdu.dk>.
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 2-1, Intelligence Operations*, (Washington, DC: September 2003), 4–12.





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