

# Intelligence-Driven Operations

Getting it right for the future fight  
by the Marines of Intelligence Company,  
1st Marine Raider Support Battalion

The bloating of the intelligence footprint as you move up the chain of command was not only flawed for a counterinsurgency environment but is enough to sink efforts to effectively compete with a great power.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, the Marine Corps is largely organized, trained, and equipped in this manner, thus undermining the tactically-focused intelligence that will be sorely needed in the competition sphere. The lessons learned from the Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) Intelligence Enterprise, and in particular the Direct Support Teams (DST) operating in both counter-terrorism and great power competition realms over the last ten years, would benefit the broader Marine Corps as it reinvents itself to meet present and future threats.

The way MARSOC Intelligence units man, train, and equip is far more closely matched to its force employment model than the broader Marine Corps. The only thing that comes close is a MEU Si2 Section MEU when reinforced with intelligence battalion and radio battalion detachments, but the parent units are doing little, if any, integration because they are not organized to do so (root problem) and do not have the proper training to create a common basis for integrating (contributing factor). Ultimately, the Marine Corps is doing itself a disservice in structuring force-generating organizations in a manner completely foreign to how they organize when employed operationally.

The mission-oriented structure and equipping of MARSOC throughout

**>The Marines of Intelligence Company, 1st MRSB represent all intelligence disciplines and have spent between two and seven years training and deploying with MARSOC at the team, company, and Special Operations Task Force level. They have deployed in support of a wide variety of missions in PACOM, CENTCOM, and AFRICOM.**

the organization makes the force more uniquely able to meet mission requirements than any other Marine Corps unit. It starts with the special operations training pipeline and continues through pre-deployment training and deployment. This article will focus on how MARSOC intelligence has gotten this right, with a particular emphasis on developing the capabilities of Intelligence Special Operations Capable Specialists (SOCS), which includes the four disciplines (F=SIGINT, G=GEOINT, H=HUMINT, I=All-Source) and how they are built into an interoperable team.

## Historical Context

In 2003, the Marine Corps was tasked by the Secretary of Defense to create a special operations unit with the well-documented resulting proof of concept being Marine Corps Special Operations Command Detachment One—colloquially referred to as “Det 1.” The lesser known detail of Det 1 is that of the 81 Marines that comprised the unit, 32 of them were intelligence Marines (roughly 40 percent). The heavy focus and prioritization of tactical level self-sufficient intelligence personnel was a break from the traditional mold but validated itself as a guiding principle for the next two decades of

MARSOC’s force employment. Having intelligence Marines continuously alongside the special operators created a unique, interwoven capability that required no forced integration and resulted in a light, fast, lethal targeting element to operate in contested and denied areas with tactical, operational, and strategic impacts. Nearly twenty years later, we examine the modern day MARSOC and cite lessons learned and concepts to replicate.

## MARSOC Intelligence Training and Equipping

MARSOC intelligence candidates undergo a six-month pipeline to become S\_\_\_ O\_\_\_ C\_\_\_ S\_\_\_ (SOCS) with the most important course being the eighteen-week Multi-Discipline Intelligence Operations Course (MDIOC). The majority of SOCS intel candidates are already somewhat seasoned and have volunteered to be part of MARSOC. MDIOC creates a transformation in students’ paradigms from having a primary MOS tunnel-vision to instill that intelligence fusion is more important than any single intelligence discipline, a key principle that is reinforced throughout this article.

The pipeline is unique because it forces all intelligence disciplines to learn

baseline knowledge needed to facilitate integration and overall successful intelligence operations in a SOF environment. Initial classes are designed to educate analysts and collectors on basic capabilities, limitations, and their overall role within the intelligence cycle. Because of the wide variety and independent nature of the billets and operating environments to which multi-discipline intelligence operators (MDIOs) are assigned, the pipeline exposes MDIOs to capabilities, requirements, and asset availability in an effort to prepare them for the circumstances they will encounter. While the MDIO pipeline provides an unmatched foundation for integrating intelligence disciplines, it is still founded on training and readiness standards with periods of instruction being continually updated with the experience of recent deployments and emphasizing interoperability of intelligence disciplines. The ability to frequently refine training to adapt to current intelligence employment enables MARSOC to produce MDIOs with a baseline capability to meet ever-evolving mission sets.

Marines who successfully graduate MDIOC earn the necessary MOS of 8071 and are subsequently assigned to a Marine Raider Support Battalion within MARSOC. Here, they are encouraged to take advantage of opportunities to attend individual training schools that are Marine occupational specialty (MOS) critical, essential, and enhancing. Examples include various courses run by national intelligence agencies, conferences, new equipment fielding, and many more opportunities. Innovation in this regard is highly encouraged, as the command will support training with time and funding so long as Marines are able to communicate its purpose and relevance, along with comprehensive feedback upon their return.

Following the individual training phase, Marines then form a DST and begin the first part of their unit training phase (UTP I). This training block is flexible and can take a variety of forms depending upon mission analysis, region-specific knowledge required for the deployment, and concepts that may be unfamiliar to a Marine preparing

for their first special operations deployment. *The premise of cross-discipline work that starts in MDIOC continues through the pre-deployment training cycle.* Gone are the days of closed doors, compartmentalized workspaces, and a removed officer-in-charge (OIC). UTP I begins with a Raider Support Team Orientation Course, which is the first time the DST is exposed to the Marine Special Operations Company (MSOC) and Marine Special Operations Team (MSOT) leadership and vice versa. A classroom-style introduction, followed by a demonstration of the employment concepts that the DST provides, build early and often integration. The next portion of the UTP I is an academics week where the Marine Raider Support Team (MRST) of intelligence, communications, and logistics comes together to learn about each other's disciplines as well as topics to include but not limited to embassy protocols, cultural familiarization, concept of operations process, counterintelligence concerns, and many more educational topics.

The MRST then moves on to the Team Readiness Exercise (TRX) series

known as TRX I and TRX II. TRX I brings the individual skill sets together and provides the DST with dedicated time to establish standard operating procedures, become deeply familiar with teammates' capabilities, work on processes, and determine information flow protocols. An intelligence scenario is provided to test how the DST fuses the information collected from multiple sources. TRX II is a varsity-level intelligence exercise where the DST is expected to be fully ready to deploy. The deep intelligence scenario tests all disciplines at the highest levels of collective training tasks and simulates the DST entering a deployed environment with a low-profile footprint.

After proving capable of supporting Marine Raider operations, the DST changes operational control to the Raider Battalion and completes UTP II. UTP II consists of two or three MSOC-level exercises where the DST is charged with supporting the four disaggregated teams and the MSOC headquarters. The importance of integration with MSOC and MSOTs cannot be overstated, and this is why



**Preparations to conduct low-signature collection in an urban environment during TRX II.**  
(Photo by Intelligence Company, 1st MRSB.)

a full six-months is dedicated to this phase despite the DST already being deemed deployment-ready. The DST typically splits personnel to spread load the capability, while the OIC and chief manage all collection and analysis from the MSOC headquarters' location.

Training is not the only part of MARSOC that drives integrated intelligence; the same can be said for the equipment set and the operational employment of the force. A DST's equipment density list is driven purely by their own mission analysis and validated up the chain of command. This process is crucial to identifying the essential equipment to bring on deployment, especially for the agile operations in which SOCS thrive. Having a plethora of tools and equipment to fit any mission is one of the key factors in making SOCS chameleon-like in their flexibility to meet a huge array of operational requirements. Despite this, the gear list remains deliberately tailored, avoiding the large footprint that comes from the "this is how we've always done it" and "just bring everything" mindset. With the wide variety of gear and equipment also comes a responsibility to train. Not only do SOCS of a specific discipline train on their own equipment, but they also cross train with that of other disciplines. Gear is maintained at the company level, not the battalion, which makes it much simpler to train and become familiar with the equipment set.

### Operational Employment

With operational employment, the common theme remains the MDIO concept. Each DST retains the flexibility to quickly stand up and break down Direct Support Elements (DSE), typically a two to four Marine element of various disciplines sent out to support an MSOT or conduct independent intelligence operations. The cumulative knowledge across the SOCS allows for quick establishment of a DST or DSEs because they can project requirements for their fellow SOCS, even outside of their primary discipline. The gear set organic to the DST allows the SOCS to act on this initiative. Between collection assets and communication nodes, the DST is well equipped to meet a

wide variety of mission objectives. The SOCS, with a knowledge of capabilities as well as practical usage of the gear, can anticipate requirements and purpose-build a DST or DSE independent of outside resources or guidance.

Direct relationships with the MSOC and MSOT commanders are extremely important. At the MSOC level, the DST is able to receive the commander's guidance/intent and execute intelligence operations in an autonomous manner that may not be possible in the FMF

self-sufficient in satisfying their own intelligence requirements ... once execution starts, our organic intelligence and reconnaissance assets generally provide the most reliable and responsive support to Marine units.<sup>2</sup>

MARSOC accomplishes the targeting cycle at the MSOC and MSOT level (equivalent to a squad+ or company-) only by having a DST and DSE. MSOT commanders are provided the smallest possible footprint that allows for answering their own intelligence require-

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because of bottlenecked approval structures. In an MSOC, the mutual trust and confidence between operators and MDIOs is established early because of the unique work up process and the subject matter expertise that each SOCS brings to the table. This mission command of the DST and each SOCS sets MARSOC apart from a conventional unit and allows members of the DST to integrate with other units, commanders, interagency partners, and U.S. interests worldwide. On a recent deployment, the Special Operations Task Force leveraged an opportunity to employ intelligence collection systems aboard a Navy asset transiting nearby. This could only be facilitated through common understanding among the SOTF commander and intelligence personnel, and relationships with conventional forces and leveraging operational-level staff support. It also introduces a concept more commonly found in MARSOC: operations can frequently be designed to support intelligence. The close-knit nature of the MSOC and DST personnel enable a fluid switch back and forth between intel supporting ops and vice versa.

The DST/DSE concept does a vastly better job of accomplishing the endstate for intelligence operations outlined in *MCDP 2*:

Commanders should aim, to the greatest extent possible, to become

Highly capable maneuver units with small footprints are the way of the future, and the DST/DSE construct is critical to making this achievable.

On recent deployments to the Western Pacific, the DST has been in charge of a large intelligence section responsible for advancing many lines of effort at various tactical and operational levels. Not only has there been FMF and MARSOC integration but also across the entire joint force, interagency, and contracted support. With regard to integration, interoperability, and interdependence, this mission has proven that MARSOC working in conjunction with 3d Radio Battalion and other I & III MEF Marine augments is mutually beneficial. The collection coverage vastly increases because of more teams and collection assets. 3d Radio Battalion Marines are exposed to and trained on equipment that SOCS-Fs employ, and MARSOC benefits from the reachback processing, exploitation, and disseminated cell and linguist support at 3d RadBn Virtual SIGINT Operations Center. On the same token, SOCS-Hs can be freed up for more missions or emerging opportunities from the 0211 Marine support, which is consistently dependable. The DST OIC has other officers as direct reports, and the officer-to-officer cross talk proves highly beneficial especially when not from the

same original MOS discipline. The autonomy the DST OIC gives the RadBn Det OIC develops that officer to a great extent, and the relative closeness in rank provides a less pressurized environment where collaboration is encouraged and hierarchical challenges do not get in the way of mission accomplishment.

SOCS-Is and Gs have shown time and again how they are force multipliers. An example of SOCS-I diversity is from a deployment as recent as 2019. The DST split their two SOCS-Is to cover two geographically separate missions. One SOCS-I deployed to the Southern Philippines and was the intelligence chief, responsible for the fusion of over 40 intelligence personnel's collection, information, and analysis. The other SOCS-I, a young staff sergeant, deployed to Yemen and was the only intelligence Marine for a significant area of operations. The latter found himself serving as the focal point for the intelligence process at the MSOT level while coordinating with higher commands, external SOF units, and being appointed by an O-5 level commander to serve in a J2 capacity—a billet reserved for an O-3 or higher. The expectation and responsibility historically placed on SOCS-Is is in a completely separate class from that expected of an average all-source analyst, given

entry-level training tailored to the lowest common denominator.

SOCS-Gs have routinely found themselves controlling multiple ISR assets simultaneously, serving as collections managers, foreign disclosure officers, and targeting chiefs. One of those duties is often a full-time job for the majority of the DOD, but MARSOC looks to maximize capability with the minimum-required personnel. Without overwhelming an individual or unit, consolidating tasks forces inherent fusion.

### Where the FMF Falls Short and What We Can Do About It

Over the last ten years, Intelligence Battalions, 1st and 2d in particular, have attempted to restructure their task organizations into readily deployable detachments in an attempt to create integrated intelligence teams. Despite these attempts, Marines are realizing the concept has failed for want of effective all-source fusion and SIGINT personnel. The all-source fusion typically falls short because of the seniority of 0211 HUMINT specialists and 0241 Imagery analysts (typically seasoned E-5s to E-7s) over their 0231 all-source intel counterparts (typically E-3 to E-6). While the DST concept relies upon the OIC and senior SOCS-I to drive

the fusion of intelligence, and MARSOC reinforces this concept through training, experience, and tailored selection of those individuals (while rank is an important factor, sometimes it has to be a secondary consideration to experience); this foundation is not set at the Intelligence Battalions to make the concept succeed. The 0231 community is further set up for failure to be the driving force in intelligence fusion through having less tactical exposure and substantially less pipeline training than other intelligence MOSs. Further degrading integration efforts, the false wall that has been built by having a separate Radio Bn results in a real-world divide between SIGINT and the wider intelligence enterprise.

Fleet intelligence team integration does occur when detachments from radio and intel battalions are chopped to MEUs and SPMAGTFs, but it still contrasts sharply with the levels achieved by the DST. Part of the discrepancy lies with a lack of mission, as MEUs spread their intel focus thin by tracking issues in dozens of countries in an area of responsibility, along with the high demand of Geographic Combatant Commands for MEU SIGINT and HUMINT teams being chopped to units with a more specific mission and focus. The other primary detractor is the lack of cohesiveness in the intelligence team throughout all phases of the workup, including those prior to CHOP. While there is a substantial amount of integration done post-CHOP, which is heavily dependent upon the MEU S-2 and Expeditionary Operations Training Group, intelligence tasks are never a primary objective of the training. Thus, scenarios are tailored so that intel personnel are often simply pawns to ensure MEU operations take place at the right time. While this is necessary to ensure complicated MAGTF operations are properly synchronized, it is no means to guarantee intelligence teams are effectively prepared to drive operations in a complex environment.

While the DST concept is bolstered by leveraging both SOCOM and Marine Corps resources, it is still achievable by the FMF. Moreover, the emerging battlefield demands that the



**Intelligence must have forward presence to support the targeting cycle against any adversary.** (Photo by Intelligence Company, 1st MRSB.)



**DST Marines conduct maritime operations.** (Photo by Intelligence Company, 1st MRSB.)

Marine Corps widely institute the concept. Light, highly capable teams of intelligence personnel designed to operate independently with a tactical focus are essential to success in competing with and, when necessary, defeating a great power. To achieve this, the authors recommend the following changes in how the Marine Corps addresses current gaps to more closely mirror the DST:

- **Doctrine:** Intelligence is often the main effort and key maneuver element in Phase 0 and can be all the way through Phase 3 (you cannot kill it if you cannot find it). Though this concept is reinforced in intelligence publications, it is rarely done in the references in other fields.
- **Organization:** Match the structure of force-generating organizations to those employing them. Keeping a MEU/SPMAGTF continually composited with its intelligence personnel and equipment is a perfectly viable COA when the MEF maintains the resources to train those personnel and maintain the equipment. At the very least, pull SIGINT personnel and equipment under the same roof as the other key intelligence disciplines to break down the wall.
- **Training:** Apply the MDIO concept across the training pipeline for intelligence Marines, from MOS school

through the pre-deployment workup. Create realistic training that forces all intelligence specialties to come together and truly fuse intelligence, with TRX II being a baseline model. Tactical commanders must also understand they are just as much of a training audience as their assigned Marines when it comes to understanding proper employment of intelligence capabilities. Training cadre must be mature and experienced enough to mentor and educate commanders along these lines.

- **Materiel:** Streamline the equipment set from large servers and heavy communication nodes to reflect the lighter footprint carried by the DST and other SOCOM intelligence personnel. A light footprint for even the most highly classified means of communication is becoming more of a reality. Commercial-off-the-shelf collections equipment is also quickly approaching the capabilities of the DOD, thus an adaptable acquisition system is vital. More interaction between MARSOC and FMF intelligence personnel will lead to shared lessons learned when it comes to equipment.
- **Leadership:** Leading small and highly capable teams demands a brand of leadership from officers that may be familiar to those with a large base of leadership experience but is likely

foreign to newly-minted Basic School graduates. As high-performing teams only break down walls insofar as they trust one another, character, competence, and personality must all be considered when selecting their leaders. Further, the leadership of the tactical decision maker that is supported by these intelligence teams must balance commitment to mission and military standards with freedom of thought and action.

- **Personnel:** Create All-Source Intelligence Specialists that are worthy of their mandate to be the foxes among the hedgehogs of the intelligence field, and push them to be exposed to the requirements of tactical-level decision makers early and often. If any intelligence MOS has a lateral-move requirement, the 0231 field should be the priority. Cross-train 0241 Imagery Analysts and 0261 Topographic Specialists, and continue to seek a solution to merge them into a common GEOINT MOS.

These recommendations represent jumping-off points for a continued dialogue that will be mutually beneficial. While there are a number of lessons that the FMF can learn from what MARSOC has learned, there are also inputs from across the FMF essential to MARSOC, with the vast majority of SOCS coming from the FMF representing one of the many invaluable inputs. Continued engagement between Marine SOF and conventional forces is not just enhancing to present mission sets; rather, it is critical to guaranteeing success in the future fight.

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**Notes**

1. Michael T Flynn, Matthew F. Pottinger, and Paul D. Bachelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2010).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 2, Intelligence*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

