

Forward and Enduring

Rethinking Marine civil affairs

by CWO4 James Jabinal & Col Valerie Jackson, USMCR

Civil Affairs (CA) remains a misunderstood and underutilized capability in the Marine Corps. As the Service digests the direction issued in Gen David M. Berger's *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (CPG), the Marine Corps needs to break free from the prevailing misconception that CA relevancy exists only during post-combat stability-oriented operations or humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) operations. Years of tactical commanders using CA as Commander's Emergency Response Program fund managers to build schools and other similar projects during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan contributed to this problem. As the Service pivoted to face its pacing threat, these perceptions fed the desire to divest of "legacy" units and capabilities.

That reshaping effort was called Force 2025. It divested of some capabilities but created others, such as the MEF Information Groups. Force 2025 and Reserve 2025 divested CA by cutting three active CA detachments and half of the Reserve CA force. These simultaneous efforts gutted the Marine Corps CA capability. Fortunately, in accordance with the CPG, "Service and advocate-related publications using the Marine Operating Concept or Force 2025 as 'REF A' must be revised." This essentially creates an implied task for force designers to look at capabilities that were divested to see if they have a role in expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO). The *Marine Corps Concept for Civil Affairs* (FOUO document), dated 19 July 2019 and signed by LtGen Eric Smith, Deputy Commandant Combat Development & In-

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No degree of technical development or scientific calculation will diminish the human dimension in war. Any doctrine which attempts to reduce warfare to ratios of forces, weapons, and equipment neglects the impact of the human will on the conduct of war and is therefore inherently flawed.

—MCDP 1, Warfighting

tegration, complements the National Defense Strategy, the Defense Planning Guidance, and plants CA squarely in EABO.

As the CPG orients the Marine Corps to operations in the information environment and EABO, CA must shift positions because they play a major role in each of those efforts. CA, as an information-related capability or information activity, is instrumental to understanding and executing operations in the information and expeditionary basing environment. More often than not, cyber, EW, and tangible communications systems are the only ca-

pabilities associated with information. However, no matter where you are in the competition continuum, there will be one constant in every area of operations: *civilians*. Civilians will be in our battlespace and will likely outnumber Marine Corps forces. They will inhabit every potential forward operating base and occupy civilian infrastructure that can and should be leveraged for EABO. *Civil Affairs is the one capability that is solely focused on providing an understanding of the impact of the human will on the conduct of war.*

This fact requires a CA force to analyze the civil environment. Just as scout

snipers and reconnaissance Marines are specially trained to provide commanders organic and non-organic surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, CA forces are specially trained to conduct civil reconnaissance and civil engagements to inform, influence, and provide information environment battlespace awareness. By building relationships, mapping the human terrain and networks, and identifying infrastructure for humanitarian civic assistance in support of theater security cooperation, CA teams can gain access to critical pieces of terrain for future operations. *Marine Corps Functional Concept-5 (MCFC-5)*, *MAGTF Information Environment Operations Concept of Employment*, (July 2017) states,

CMO and CAO are critical components of MAGTF IE Ops as they provide a conduit for shaping the environment, as well as a capability that greatly enhances the MAGTF's understanding of the IE's human/cognitive aspects.

Not every island in the Pacific can have its own Marine rotational force (i.e., Darwin), nor should they, but the benign presence of an appropriately-sized CA force can enable understanding of the local population, identify key influences, and gain access to portions of the population and infrastructure (ports, harbors, airfields, or communications infrastructure) that may support EABO.

Perhaps the name, "civil affairs," contains too much baggage accumulated from the experience in Iraq and Afghanistan that cannot be overcome. A rebranding of civil affairs to civil reconnaissance (CR) presents a possible means to disassociate from the negative connotations and place emphasis on the actual capability provided to the force. CR Marines are specially trained to target, plan, and coordinate the observation, engagement, and evaluation of specific areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people, and events. Additionally, CR Marines are also specially trained to conduct civil engagement with stakeholders and key leaders as well as develop and maintain the civil preparation of the battlespace that aligns with and feeds the intelligence preparation of the battlespace and

Marine Corps Planning Process.

CR teams can be deployed to provide a persistent presence in places the Marine Corps requires access. CR Marines and/or civil-military operations (CMO) planners need to be in select embassy theater CA planning teams with their Army counterparts. As the Department of the Navy's only civil affairs force, Marine CR teams also provide opportunities for increased Naval integration and should be on board Naval vessels such as hospital ships and even littoral combat ships (littoral combat ships have been deployed to Singapore to conduct theater security cooperation and HA/DR). CR Marines can also embed with forward deployed construction battalion civil action teams.

As we look to our pacing threat, we see an example of non-traditional use of resources to further a military goal. China's expansion in the Pacific did not start militarily. Instead, it started with fisherman on an island, a shelter being built on the island, then communications infrastructure on the island, and then a military runway shortly thereafter! In his *Washington Post* article describing Chinese activity in the South China Sea, Alan Dupont, professor of international security at the University of New South Wales in Sydney calls the strategy "fish, protect, occupy and control."¹ In its own way, China has been conducting EABO without overt military action. The Marine Corps can act now and achieve the same effect with CR Marines who do not require

authorities or lengthy approval processes to conduct civil reconnaissance and civil engagements.

To give the Service the capability it needs to fight in today's environment, there needs to be a redefinition for the community. The logical place for this capability is in the MEF Information Group (MIG). To this end, each MIG should have a civil reconnaissance company to be its hands, feet, eyes, and ears in the battlespace. Currently, MEF Information Groups have psychological operations (PSYOP) and communications strategy (COMMSTRAT) companies on their tables of organization; with minimal investment, they can have a CR company as well. Additionally, an "engagement battalion" could be created under the MIG with a CR company, PSYOP company, and COMMSTRAT company capable of employing mixed engagement teams while conducting CR, CMO and Military Information Support Operations. (See Figure 1.) This will provide lieutenant colonel command opportunities to these MOSs and a logical path to becoming a MIG commanding officer.

Rebranding of the Reserve Component CA force can consist of changing the civil affairs groups (Colonel commands) to civil reconnaissance regiments. It could also follow the model of the Reserve infantry and artillery regiments by having one civil reconnaissance regiment with a G-9 branch and geographically distributed CR battalions (lieutenant colonel commands)

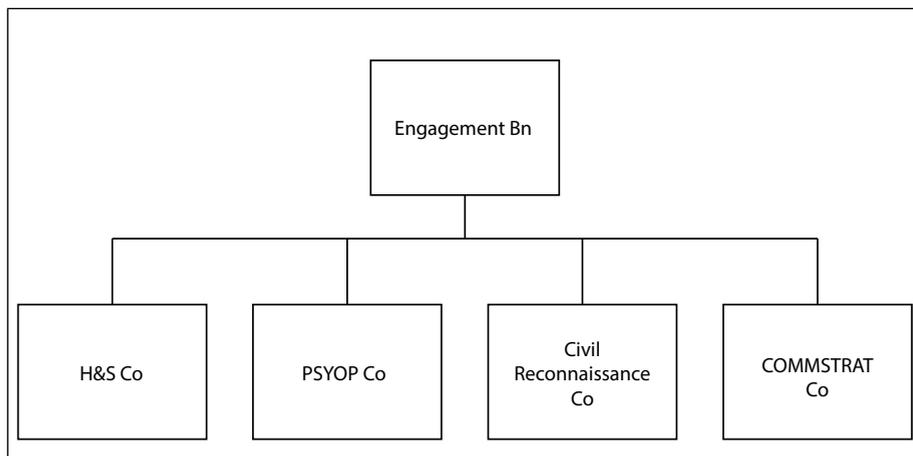


Figure 1. There have been several ideas of a battalion comprised of various information related capabilities (IRCs); this depicts a formation that can be implemented today.

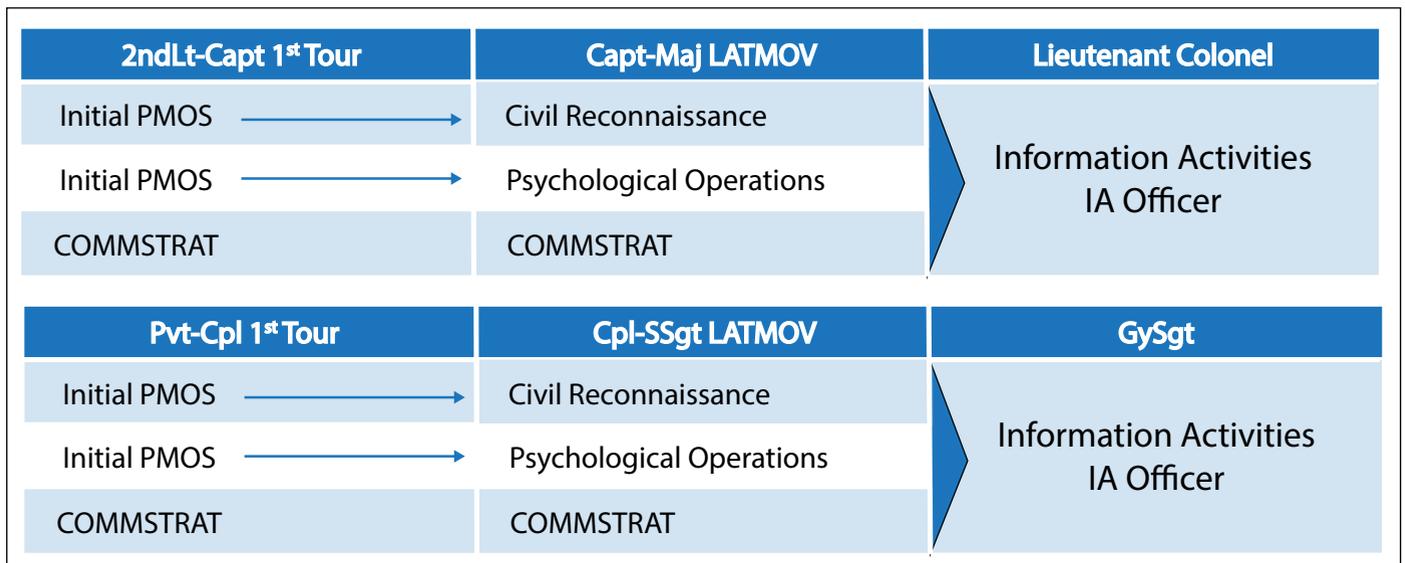


Figure 2.

aligned to or subordinate to a MIG. Another alternative, perhaps, is to have two regiments—one on each coast with the west coast regiment reinforced to support the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*. This will truly provide a persistent presence capability with the Reserve Component augmenting the smaller Active Component. The inspector and instructor (I&I) billets are lieutenant colonel command screened billets and should be an active component officer ideally from an IRC MOS sourced from engagement battalions.

In the future, there needs to be an information activity primary MOS track similar to intelligence officers where, as company grade officers, they specialize in ground, air, signals, and then become a MAGTF intelligence officer; virtually all enlisted MOSs become an occupational field chief as a SNCO. (See Figure 2.) This can be COMMSTRAT officers and first lieutenants who laterally move to CR, or PSYOP as a primary MOS. They could specialize, gain experience in their PMOS, cross-train, or attend courses in other information activities and become an information activities officer upon reaching the rank of major or lieutenant colonel. This would be the same for enlisted Marines as they specialize in their PMOS and become an IA Chief. Gen Berger recognizes that “even talented, high-performing officers have changing interests over

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“Those who are victorious plan effectively and change decisively. They are like a great river that maintains its course but adjusts its flow.”

—Sun Tzu

time.” It is not uncommon for Active Component Marines to begrudgingly receive orders to civil affairs and end up wanting to stay in the community. An information activity primary MOS track acknowledges changing interests and enhances operations in the information environment.

Professionalizing, modernizing, and rebranding civil affairs is essential to integration with operations in the in-

formation environment. To compete, fight, and win in the cognitive age, the Corps must modernize and retool its critical civil affairs capability. Scores of CA Marines have fought the fight the Corps asked them to in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it is time to realize that the skills honed in those fights are applicable to any battlefield. Those that study, analyze, record, and engage with the human dimension will prove decisive in the significant fights ahead. The Corps can ill-afford to relegate this vital specialty to wars of the past, and must instead step boldly into a new vision for an age-old skill.

Notes

1. Simon Denyer, “How China’s Fishermen are Fighting a Covert War in the South China Sea,” *The Washington Post*, (Online: April 2016), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

