

# Making the MIG the Main Effort for Information Dominance

Reorganizing COMMSTRAT to improve, inform, and influence operations in the FMF

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The character of war is changing. Operating on the modern battlefield is more complex than ever before. From the Black Sea to the South China Sea and the Persian Gulf, U.S. forces currently battle strategic competitors who put forward lethal combinations of air, ground, and naval forces combined with compelling narratives to erode support for U.S. strategic objectives. The U.S. military only recently recognized information as a joint function where the battle for public perception, behavior, attention, and sentiment among allies, the international community, and the American public will decide the outcome of wars.<sup>1</sup> The Marine Corps recognized information as its seventh warfighting function shortly thereafter and included communication strategy and operations (COMMSTRAT) as part of its concept of employment, placing the occupational field (OccFld) at the forefront of this battle.<sup>2</sup> However, the Service must solve several problems within the Total Force Structure Process for the community, and like capabilities, to properly be employed across the competition continuum.

Significant problems for COMMSTRAT include: 1) lack of unity of effort in the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) structure, 2) lack of leadership development structure and subject matter

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expertise, and 3) lack of focus on plans and future operations. The MEF Information Groups (MIGs) provide an opportunity to fix these problems. The COMMSTRAT OccFld will improve the FMF's unity of effort, flexibility, and ability to maneuver with information by focusing the preponderance of forces and required capability at the MIGs, which the Service developed to lead execution of operations in the information environment (OIE). The MIG included the COMMSTRAT capability, resident in the COMMSTRAT company, but the capability in the company does not go far enough to support the needs of the MIG or MEF and, most importantly, support to senior leaders and the FMF where a misstep in the information environment (IE) can lead to defeat before the first troops deploy.

The Marine Corps' attempt to generate unity of effort for information and

COMMSTRAT in the FMF has been fleeting. The *Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) Information Environment Operations Concept of Employment (MAGTF IE Ops COE)* states:

Fundamentally, it is now necessary to organize, operate, and fight integrally in and through the IE, just as we do in the physical maneuver domains, to ensure unity of action, and achieve military advantage.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of the MIG, made in response to the above understanding, did not include the research and planning capability for COMMSTRAT, which is essential to communication synchronization across the FMF.<sup>4</sup> Currently, COMMSTRAT capabilities in the FMF are spread between Marine component commands, the MEF command elements (CE), MEF major subordinate commands (MSC), and the newly created MIG COMMSTRAT

companies. The roles and responsibilities between the MEF, MSCs, and MIG COMMSTRAT companies remain undefined. The COMMSTRAT companies have an everchanging, unapproved draft mission to operate from. In the current FMF construct, this has led to a disparity between whose responsible to the MEF commander for researching, building plans, and executing inform operations for the MAGTF. This has also led to arguably unnecessary friction between the MIG commander and the MEF CE COMMSTRAT special staff in regards to who leads planning and execution for COMMSTRAT during operations. It harms the ability of the FMF to synchronize communication in support of influence operations. The *MAGTF IE Ops COE* states inform operations

truthfully communicate with domestic and foreign audiences in order to build understanding and support for operational and institutional objectives.<sup>5</sup>

Assigning operational command authority for inform operations to the MIG commander would provide the MIG the flexibility to maneuver in the IE.

Another part of the unity of effort problem is an over- or under-tasking of the MIG COMMSTRAT company to support the FMF's requirements. At one MEF, the MIG's four operational support teams (OSTs), which are the smallest COMMSTRAT unit with full COMMSTRAT capability, support MEU deployments, special purpose MAGTFs, and deployments for training in the FMF—leaving little room for mentorship, training, and readiness. At another MEF, those OSTs will not be used at all with supporting OSTs being pulled from the MEF and MSC staffs, which contradicts part of the reason for establishing the company to begin with. Thinly dispersed OSTs across the MEF, MIG, and MSCs means the current construct places many subordinates in a “trial by fire” status, supporting deployments with little senior COMMSTRAT oversight. A significant reorganization of COMMSTRAT in the FMF will take COMMSTRAT Marines who compose the seven to nine OSTs on the MEF and MSC staffs and

combine them with the four OSTs at the MIG COMMSTRAT companies. This would make a battalion-like structure similar to how the intelligence and communication battalions currently operate. A reorganization of COMMSTRAT capability at these companies seems prescient considering they are the only units in the Service currently planned to have assigned mission essential tasks (METs) based on the COMMSTRAT OccFld's Marine Corps Tasks.<sup>6</sup> The COMMSTRAT companies would then



*COMMSTRAT logo.*

become the force management tool on the premise for which they were originally designed. Senior leaders within these companies would then have the ability to identify and send the most “ready” Marines and teams to fill capabilities-based requirements for MEF and MSC requirements. The current construct of COMMSTRAT Marines on MEF and MSC staff tables of organization often leads to wasted time as staffs fight to maintain their manpower because of shifting priorities and METs that do not outright identify COMMSTRAT capability as a requirement.

The second problem for the FMF COMMSTRAT community is a lack of expertise because of an organizational structure where little to no teaching, coaching, and mentorship can occur. COMMSTRAT Marines “routinely do not have the rank, credibility, or

professional savvy to communicate our capabilities to senior leaders.”<sup>7</sup> The structure for the overall community has grown since 2017, yet the operational requirements, inconsistent employment of current forces, and continued dispersion of COMMSTRAT forces threatens the ability of the community to teach, coach, and mentor junior leaders.<sup>8</sup> The lack of mentorship and coaching has led to a deficiency in the transfer of knowledge within the OccFld. In order to mentor and guide someone, there needs to be relationships—but many junior officers have very little contact with their higher and adjacent COMMSTRAT staffs outside of sending situation reports or weekly synchronization meetings. The current dispersion of COMMSTRAT's forces will hurt the MAGTF's capability to execute OIE. A robust command with experienced and reputable mentors can introduce incoming COMMSTRAT officers to the regional and local area media, which may mean the difference between social media sites and journalists trusting COMMSTRAT leadership or having to build those relationships from scratch. The constant turnover in the military can be frustrating to the media and negatively affects credibility. It can harm a command's ability to communicate in a timely manner and seize the initiative in regard to the narrative. Junior officers who have recently laterally moved from other OccFlds also tend to bear the responsibility for developing communication plans for their respective commands during high profile cases of misconduct or during a crisis. While misconduct and crisis will continue to occur, the lack of experience, training, and leadership structure exacerbates the problem. Having well-trained and experienced officers in the right places can decrease the time it takes to communicate during these high-profile events. Reorganization at the MIG COMMSTRAT companies helps develop junior officers and lateral movers by providing a COMMSTRAT-based leadership structure where lieutenants fall in on COMMSTRAT OSTs and work their way through more traditionally recognized billets in a company

structure such as operations and executive officer leadership. A battalion-like structure would allow field-grade officers to teach, coach, and mentor the captains who—in kind—could do the same for lieutenants. Reorganization provides the added benefit of mirroring COMMSTRAT officers' professional development with their peers. This would make COMMSTRAT officers more relatable to their peers and more effective as they promote through the ranks. All of this would serve to develop officers who understand command responsibilities and have received the best training, coaching, and mentorship the military can provide.<sup>9</sup>

The final problem stems from COMMSTRAT community's focus on current operations with minimal capability and capacity to execute planning. The Marine Corps has failed to train, man, and equip COMMSTRAT forces to support DOD requirements for research, translation, production, and assessment. Part of this shortfall resides in translation and security clearance investment. The *DOD Strategy for Operations in the Information Environment* states:

effective information operations require substantial and sustained intelligence support. Given the dynamic nature of the IE, some legacy processes and tools may not be sufficiently responsive and new methods for sensing, assessment, and command-and-control may be required.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, COMMSTRAT professionals cannot decisively, or otherwise, counter enemy propaganda because the COMMSTRAT community has not fully integrated into the MIG, which is responsible to the MEF for the majority of OIEs. Reorganizing COMMSTRAT capability at the MIG with requisite clearances provides the benefit of integrating with the information coordination cell, which will help identify priority intelligence requirements to ensure identification of indications and warnings in the right places, as well as provide access to linguists. With the MIG commander's authorities, they can properly allocate or align resources to ensure COMMSTRAT can execute the mission.

Relocating force structure to the COMMSTRAT companies would also mean that the planning efforts for operations and exercises would have to transfer to the MIGs. The *Fiscal Year 21 COMMSTRAT Occupational Field Modernization Campaign Plan* states that "COMMSTRAT staffs (Command Elements, special staff sections, etc.) use COMMSTRAT products and services. COMMSTRAT organizations (Operational Support Teams, Companies, etc.) produce COMMSTRAT products and services."<sup>11</sup> Having the planning and production capability pushed to the MIGs gives the staffs breathing room to support their commander as his communication counsel. This also translates to planning being more easily synchronized with and supported by the other commands and staff sections at the MIG.

### Counterarguments

A few counter arguments that could be made against reorganizing the majority of COMMSTRAT Marines under the MIGs are: 1) MEF CE effectively serves many of the functions that would be transferred to the MIG COMMSTRAT companies, and 2) this reorganization would weaken the ability of COMMSTRAT professionals to support the varying commanders and their varying objectives.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the MEF CE already serving the same function as the MIG, the biggest difference is that the MEF COMMSTRAT officer is responsible for advising the MEF CG, COMMSTRAT MSCs, and companies whereas the MIG coordinates OIE on behalf of the FMF—much like the GCE, ACE, and LCE develop and execute the ground, air, and sustainment schemes of maneuver respectively. For the aforementioned reasons, the MEF CE is also not currently manned, trained, and equipped to execute the planning, research, coordination, and execution of MEF-level OIE. The Marine Corps has tried to build that capability in the MIG. Placing COMMSTRAT at the MEF CE will continue to be a problem as COMMSTRAT MCTs are not core METs and not currently in consideration to become one. The COMMSTRAT

companies currently fill some of the gaps with augmentation of the MEF CE and MSCs, but this still places a majority of the planning and research for COMMSTRAT on the MEF CE, which creates a gap between the MEF CE COMMSTRAT planners, the MIG OIE planners for all of the other OIE tasks, and the COMMSTRAT company that answers to the MIG commander. MEF CE COMMSTRAT augments the MIG using liaison officers (LNOs), but LNOs represent the MEF CE COMMSTRAT section and do not actually work for the MIG commander—contributing to the issue of unity of command and effort. This should work in reverse. The MEF CE should identify its requirements and task the MIG to support them. The current, separate planning efforts between the MIG and MEF CE COMMSTRAT make properly resourcing requirements at both commands difficult, if not impossible.

Allowing the MEF CE to focus on special staff responsibilities and advisement of the MEF CG would allow the COMMSTRAT company to improve focus and execution for inform operations, support to the other functions of information, and operational plan readiness. This does not mean that the MEF CE COMMSTRAT officer will not influence plans, but it does mean they would influence those plans at a conceptual level via advising the MEF CG and staff.<sup>13</sup> Appropriate tasking via the MEF CE operations section would assign the MIG to develop a more comprehensive plan—much the same as a MSC. The MEF CE COMMSTRAT officer would also be able to advise the MIG commander, much the same as any higher-level staff officer would; however, a staff officer does not hold the same sway as a peer-level commander. That last statement holds true no matter how the COMMSTRAT community organizes moving forward. Additionally, a 1985 study of public relations, the civilian equivalent of COMMSTRAT, showed the most successful organizations with communication had their public relations executives working directly for the chief executive officer.<sup>14</sup> A reorganization at the MIG

COMMSTRAT company would not change the special staff responsibilities of senior COMMSTRAT officers on the MEF CE or MSC staffs to advise the commander. Reorganizing COMMSTRAT at the MIGs would allow the MIG to allocate OIE capability-based resources as identified, required, or tasked to supported commands as well as surge resources and personnel during crises. This would improve support to the MEF and MSCs—much like the communications occupational field, where most of their junior officers are assigned to the communication battalions before being sent to more independent duties. The MEF and MSCs could augment with deputies from the COMMSTRAT companies, giving senior COMMSTRAT leaders more control and credibility by selecting the best and brightest to work in a more independent capacity. Finally, the MIGs may someday evolve into something akin to the GCE, ACE, and LCE: the information combat element. If so, planting the metaphorical COMMSTRAT flag within the MIG would allow the MIG to more effectively support organizations with the umbrella of resources at its disposal and the subsequent responsibilities they entail.

Placing the preponderance of COMMSTRAT capability at the MIGs would allow the MIGs to truly become the main effort for OIE, which would serve to solve the problems with the COMMSTRAT FMF community. MIG COMMSTRAT would more efficiently synchronize messaging efforts and resources with the other information-related capabilities during operational planning and execution. MIG COMMSTRAT would improve focus on training, readiness, plans, and future operations. MIG COMMSTRAT Marines would have an instantly cred-

ible network of potential mentors and relationships offered up by their senior leaders when trying to gain trust and credibility with the media during operations, misconduct, training accidents, or crises. The organization would allow for the assignment of Marines at the MSCs with an appropriate grade and relevant experiences to improve COMMSTRAT support to senior-level commands. Above all, reorganization at the MIGs would help focus COMMSTRAT in the FMF to ensure America achieves its strategic objectives.

The alternative to placing COMMSTRAT forces at the MIG, lack of a traditional leadership and mentorship structure in the community aside, is a reorganization of MIG OIE planning capability at the MEF CE, which would allow for unity of effort there instead—a much larger proposition than what is previously proposed in this article. Additionally, COMMSTRAT at the MEF CE would need to become a reportable item in the Defense Readiness Reporting System or by designation of COMMSTRAT MCTs along with other OIE MCTs as METs—that is, if the Service is serious about giving equal status to OIE alongside the other elements of the MAGTF.

#### Notes

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3. *Marine Air Ground Task Force Information Environment Operations Concept of Employment*.

4. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-61, Public Affairs*, (Washington, DC: 2016).

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6. Deputy Commandant for Combat Development and Integration. *OPNAVINST 3500.38B/MCO 3500.26\_USCG COMDTINST M3500.1B MCTL 2.0 – 1 MAR 2020* (Washington, DC: March 2020).

7. Garron J Garn and Joseph Digirolamo. “First to ‘Like’: Returning Relevance to Public Affairs,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: December 2015).

8. *MARADMIN 534/17*.

9. John J. Parry, “Who Needs COMMSTRAT?” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: April 2020).

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11. Headquarters Marine Corps, *FY21 COMMSTRAT Occupational Field Modernization Campaign Plan*, (Washington, DC: May 2019).

12. LtCol Kelly Fruschour, “COMMSTRAT: What it is, what it isn’t, and its place in the MIG,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: April 2020).

13. “Who Needs COMMSTRAT?”

14. James Grunig, *Excellence in Public Relations, and Communication Management*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1992).

