

Marine Corps Intelligence

The interwar years

by Maj Michael H. Decker, USMC(Ret) & Sgt William Mackenzie, USMC(Ret)

In an attempt to institutionalize the intelligence experiences gained by the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in World War I (WWI), the Army published its first doctrinal publication on intelligence in 1920 titled “Intelligence Regulations.” On 18 August 1921, the Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps sent three copies of this classified Army publication to the Commanding General, Marine Barracks, Quantico, VA. In the early years after WWI, Marine veterans of the AEF worked to apply combat lessons learned regarding staff and unit organization, combined arms, and other tactics, techniques, and procedures to the Marine Corps for warfighting. This was especially true of intelligence.

Intelligence Marines often cite the 1939 reorganization of HQMC and the creation of the “M-2” as the birth of Marine Corps Intelligence. Marines are not alone in the view that WWII, or the run-up to WWII, began the formal approach to the craft of intelligence; many in the national intelligence community (IC) point to the creation of the Office of Strategic Services as the birth of the IC, prior to that, there was no dedicated or formal U.S. intelligence service outside of the military. However, an examination of how the intelligence lessons learned from WWI resulted in organizational changes in the interwar years reveals significant Marine Corps intelligence activity that predates the 1939 reorganization of HQMC.

Post-WWI Reorganization of HQMC

Up until a few years before WWI, the Marine Corps essentially had no “HQMC Staff” as we think of it today. The Major General Commandant

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oversaw the Marine Corps through a small personal staff and three staff departments: Adjutant and Inspector, Quartermaster, and Paymaster. It was not until April 1911 that the Office of Assistant to the Commandant was created, headed by Col Eli K. Cole, who served as what today would be called a Chief of Staff.¹ Col Cole was replaced in January 1915 by Col John A. Lejeune.

After WWI, on 1 July 1920, MajGen Lejeune returned to HQMC as the Major General Commandant and brought his experience of commanding the 2d Division in the AEF and extensive use of a European staff system in those organizations to HQMC. On 1 December 1920, Lejeune reorganized HQMC and created the Division of Operations and Training with BGen Logan Feland as its first Director. The Division of Operations and Training included Operations, Training, Military Education, Aviation, and Military Intelligence sections.

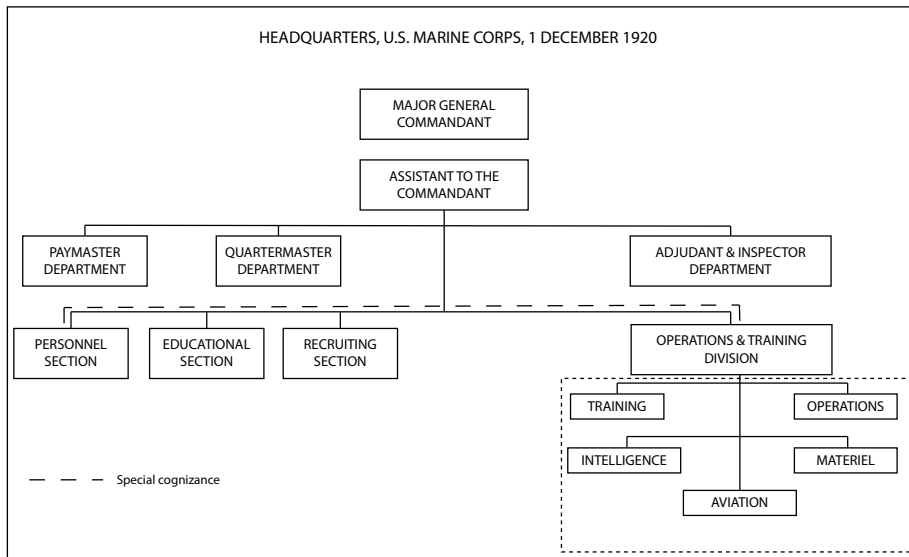
The creation of this “Military Intelligence Section” represents the first permanent Marine Corps intelligence organization. BGen Feland requested that LtCol Earl H. “Pete” Ellis, who had been Feland’s brigade intelligence officer (B-2) in the Dominican Republic, be assigned as the first head of the

Military Intelligence Section in December 1920.² While Ellis remains most famous for writing “Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia” in 1921 during this tour of duty, his official position was Military Intelligence Section Head.³

One other function of the Division of Operations and Training was staffing the approvals of “special duty assignments,” which often included intelligence, reconnaissance, and related missions. These were accounted for in U.S. Navy Regulations of 1920, which stated,

No officer of the Navy or of the Marine Corps shall proceed to a foreign country on special duty connected with the service except under orders prepared by the Bureau of Navigation or by the Major General Commandant as the case may be, and signed by the Secretary of the Navy.⁴

Perhaps the most famous special duty assignment by a Marine during this period is the mission of LtCol Ellis to survey islands in East Asia. Ellis’ special duty was approved by the Major General Commandant and the Secretary of the Navy as required by Navy Regulations. Unfortunately, the mission ended with LtCol Ellis’ death in Palau in 1923.⁵



Source: A Brief History of Headquarters Marine Corps Staff Organization. (Figure provided by author.)

Activities of the Military Intelligence Section

On 10 January 1921, a month after the Military Intelligence Section was formed, it promulgated a “List of Intelligence Regulations, etc. Transmitted to Certain Marine Corps Units.”⁶ The list included items such as the aforementioned Army publication “Intelligence Regulations,” along with various other military orders, articles, and reports. A few excerpts from items on the list highlight the type of things this 40-day old HQMC office felt would be of use to Marine Corps Schools and “certain” field units.

- “*Front Line Intelligence*,” an extract from an article in the *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1920, by Maj Ralph Stover Keyser. Maj Keyser served as Commanding Officer, 2d Bn, 5th Marines, June through July 1918, during battles in the Château-Thierry sector and the Aisne-Marne offensive; then, August 1918 to August 1919, he served as MajGen Lejeune’s Assistant Chief of Staff G-2 (Intelligence Department) in the 2d Division, AEF. The article was a tour-de-force of tactical intelligence support focused on intelligence functions at the division, regiment, and battalion level. Maj Keyser noted, “Military intelligence is more than reliable information, it is reliable information furnished in time to permit appropriate action.”⁷

- “*Intelligence Service in the Bush Brigades and Baby Nations*,” an extract from a 1920 report by Maj Earl Ellis. Ellis noted,

In executing the intelligence functions stated the most difficult problem of all is to force the personnel to realize that their mission is not to gather information of any kind and place it on file, as is generally the custom, but to gather pertinent information, put it in proper form for use and then place it in the hands of the person who can use it to best advantage—and this as quickly as possible.⁸

- “*Functions of Intelligence Officers in War Plans*,” an extract from U.S. Army Instructions to Intelligence Officers by *Military Intelligence Department, 1921*. This Army doctrine stated,

As the plan is built up, every portion should be submitted to you for attack as the enemy’s representative—this for the purpose of providing the means of disinterested construction [sic] criticism. Your mental attitude in doing this work should be that of the enemy’s Chief of Staff, who, supposedly having captured the plan, strives to make arrangements to circumvent it.⁹

In 1922, BGen Feland wrote in the *Marine Corps Gazette* that he saw the Division of Operations and Training as essential for the Marine Corps to

mitigate future losses in combat and increase organizational readiness. He stated,

The principal function of the Military Intelligence Section was the “collection and compilation of intelligence useful to the Marine Corps, in carrying out its mission.”¹⁰

There is ample evidence of the Military Intelligence Section collecting and compiling information. As evidenced by the HQMC letter forwarding “Intelligence Regulations,” the Military Intelligence Section also took part in the Division of Operations and Training’s efforts in the areas of organizing, training, and equipping the Marine Corps. This included developing tables of organization and tables of equipment for intelligence sections and units.

In 1921, MajGen Lejeune authorized the creation of combat intelligence personnel billets in deployed Marine Corps units.¹¹ In the following year, the Marine Corps assigned a new four-section executive staff—to include personnel, intelligence, operations and training, and supply—to brigades and infantry regiments.

Creation of the Fleet Marine Force

In February 1922, MajGen Lejeune sent a memorandum to the General Board of the Navy, stating, “The primary war mission of the Marine Corps is to supply a mobile force to accompany the Fleet for operations ashore in support of the Fleet.”¹² MajGen Lejeune retired in 1929, and it was not until MajGen Ben H. Fuller became Commandant that the pace of development of Lejeune’s envisioned mobile force began to accelerate, evolving first into an “expeditionary force” and eventually into a term that better inferred the role of Marines within the fleet: the Fleet Marine Force. On 7 December 1933, the Secretary of the Navy created the Fleet Marine Force by issuing *Navy Department General Order 241*.¹³

In 1931, Marine Corps Schools in Quantico began work on a tentative text to be titled “Marine Corps Landing Operations.” By June 1934, the *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations*¹⁴ was available in mimeograph

AUTHORIZED INTELLIGENCE STAFF PER UNIT	OFFICERS	ENLISTED
For each independent brigade HQ	1	10
For each brigade forming part of a division	1	2
For each regimental HQ	1	7
For each battalion of infantry	1	13
For each battalion of artillery	1	1
Air Service, per wing	1	1

An example of the envisioned size of intelligence staffs and units at various echelons. (Figure provided by author.)

form for use by the 1934–35 school years’ classes. The tentative manual was revised and reproduced in various forms annually until 1939, when the definitive version was issued as *Fleet Training Publication 167 (FTP-167), Landing Operations Doctrine, United States Navy 1938*.¹⁵

FTP-167 contained extensive guidance on intelligence and reconnaissance. It emphasized the importance of a detailed intelligence plan that compared data required for the mission to the data available on the area of operations and the development of a plan for collecting the additional information needed to conduct the operation. This in turn would determine the “size, composition, and tasks of the reconnaissance force dispatched to the theater of operations.”

In the chapter on “Ship-to-Shore Movement,” there was a list of reasons to use rubber landing craft, one of which was the “landing of intelligence agents.” The chapter on task organization recommended creating a reconnaissance group and noted how “photographs and panoramic sketches executed by surface craft or submarines and oblique aerial photographs from seaward will be a great assistance” to boat group, fires support group, and troop commanders.

Pre-WWII Reorganization of HQMC

On 21 April 1939, MajGen Thomas Holcomb issued “Headquarters Memorandum NO. 1–1939” on staff organization and procedures, in which the Division of Operations and Training was redesignated the Division of Plans and Policies.¹⁶ Popularly known as “Pots and Pans,” the new division retained the same subdivisions as the old with the standard number designations of

a general or executive staff but designated “M” rather than “G.” Under the supervision of a director, the division contained the standard M-1, Personnel; M-2, Intelligence; M-3, Training; and M-4, Supply and Equipment Sections as well as a M-5, War Plans Section, which was abolished in the fall of 1941 and absorbed by M-3.¹⁷

The first Director of the M-2 was believed to be Maj David A. Stafford. An article published on the occasion of BGen Stafford’s retirement noted,

From 1935 to 1940 he served variously as a ‘sea soldier’ aboard the USS *West Virginia*, and as officer in charge of intelligence in the Division of Plans and Policies at Marine Corps Headquarters in Washington, D.C.¹⁸

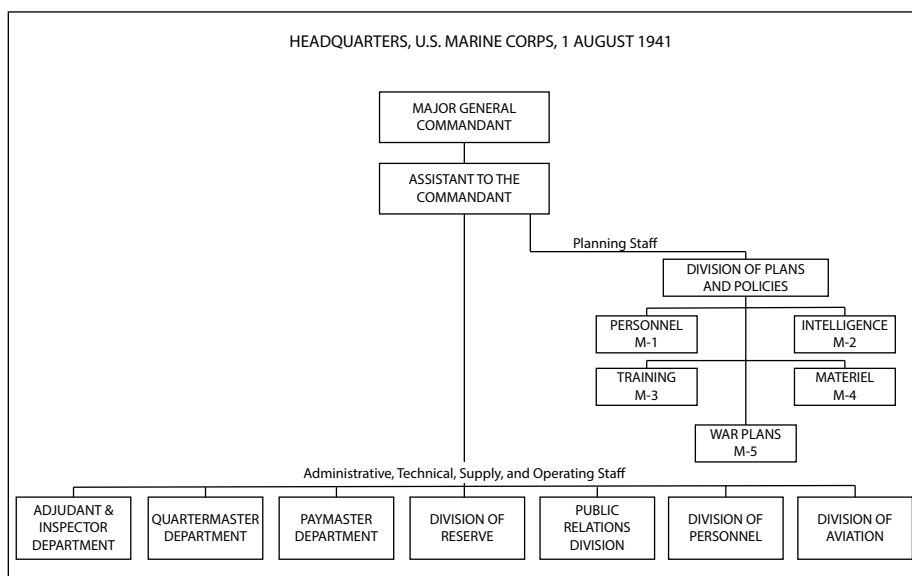
Mark Stout has written on the importance of the WWI experience to the creation of an IC in the United States, noting,

The standard origin myth of modern American intelligence has the period from World War II to the passage of the National Security Act in 1947 as the seminal period. ... It is clear that many of the artifacts, values, and assumptions that exist in today’s Intelligence Community date back to World War I.¹⁹

Intelligence Marines traditionally observed the HQMC reorganization of April 1939 and creation of the M-2 as the birthdate of Marine Corps intelligence. However, it seems that on 1 December 2020, intelligence Marines around the world should be saying to each other “Happy 100th Birthday, Marine!” and discussing the heritage of the first Director of Intelligence, LtCol Pete Ellis.

Notes

1. Kenneth W. Condit, Maj John H. Johnstone, and Ella W. Nargele, *A Brief History of Headquarters Marine Corps Staff Organization*, (Washington, DC: Historical Division, United States Marine Corps, 1971).
2. David J. Bettez, “Quiet Hero,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: November 2008).
3. Then-Maj Earl H. Ellis, *FMFRP 12-46, Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia*, (Washington, DC: August 1921).



Source: A Brief History of Headquarters Marine Corps Staff Organization. (Figure provided by author.)

4. Department of the Navy, *United States Navy Regulations*, (Washington, DC: 1920).

5. LtCol P.N. Pierce, "The Unsolved Mystery of Pete Ellis," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 1962).

6. Headquarters Marine Corps, "Instructions on Marine Corps Intelligence," (Washington, DC: January 1921).

7. Ralph Stover Keyser, "Military Intelligence," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: December 1920).

8. Maj Earl Ellis, "Intelligence Service in the Bush Brigades and Baby Nations," (Washington, DC: U.S. Marine Corps, 1920).

9. U.S. Army Instructions to Intelligence Officers, *Enclosure to Letter CF-152-AO-15*, (Washington, DC: Military Intelligence Department, 1921).

10. Logan Feland, "The Division of Operations and Training Headquarters U. S. Marine," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico VA: 1922).

11. Major General Commandant letter to Brigade Commander, First Provisional Brigade, U.S. Marine Corps, Port au Prince, Republic of Haiti on 17 June 1921.

12. Major General Commandant memo to General Board on 11 February 1922,

13. Allan R. Millet, *In Many a Strife, General Gerald C. Thomas and the U.S. Marine Corps 1917-1956*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993).

14. LtCol Kenneth J. Clifford, *Progress and Purpose: A Developmental History of the United States Marine Corps 1900-1970*, (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division Headquarters, 1973).

15. *FTP-167, Landing Operations Doctrine, United States Navy 1938*, (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Operations, Division of Fleet Training, 1938).

16. Thomas Holcomb, "Headquarters Memorandum NO. 1-1939," (Washington, DC: April 1939).

17. Kenneth W. Condit and Maj John H. Johnstone, *A Brief History of Marine Corps Staff Organization*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, revised 1970).

18. *Press Republican*, "Gen Stafford Retired from Marines June 30," (Plattsburgh, NY: July 1949).

19. Mark Stout, "World War I and the Birth of American Intelligence Culture," *Intelligence and National Security*, (Abingdon, UK: 2017).



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The advertisement features a large background image of a brick building with a sign that reads "MARINE CORPS COLLEGE FOR ENHANCED MILITARY EDUCATION". In the foreground, a person's hands are shown typing on a laptop. The laptop screen displays the Marine Corps College of Distance Education & Training website, which includes a list of courses and a "Blended Seminar Program" section. A QR code is located in the bottom left corner of the advertisement.