

Merge Combat Camera and Public Affairs

Achieving communication synchronization and professional recognition of two similar MOSs

by Capt Nicole Fiedler

In a July 2011 executive offsite decision brief regarding public affairs (PA) structure courses of actions, it was briefed that despite radical changes to the information environment since Operation Desert Storm, the Marine Corps has not adapted its principal communication capabilities (Public Affairs/Combat Camera) to respond to this change, resulting in missed opportunities, a lack of understanding of the Corps' value to the Nation, and risk to the Corps' reputation.¹

Additionally, there exists a Marine Corps-wide misunderstanding of the roles and missions performed by combat camera (COMCAM) and those of PA. Most Marines mistakenly believe that COMCAM and PA are the same because of similarities in job performance; any Marine with a camera in hand is generally classified as being PA.² Despite these similarities, both MOS fields remain separated and are structured under different chains of command, causing significant capability redundancies and loss of communications synchronization. The occupational fields of COMCAM and PA should merge to eliminate capability redundancies, achieve professional recognition of Marine Corps communications, and increase efficiency by employing both occupational fields to the full extent of their capabilities in traditionally low-density, high-demand fields.

In examining how a merger should take place, the roles and missions of

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Combat Camera official logo. (Photo provided by HQMC Combat Camera.)

COMCAM and PA must be understood. By definition, COMCAM is

organized and structured to provide commanders at every element of the Marine Air Ground Task Force, training commands and supporting establishments with digital and physical photographic, video, graphics, printed products and archival capabilities to support requirements in order to achieve the Commander's desired effects.³

While PA provides support to the commander through similar means,

the target audience often differs from that of COMCAM. PA is responsible for effective communications with the U.S. public and international audiences and, therefore, must maintain credibility with their audiences.⁴ According to Department of the Navy Public Affairs Policy and Regulations, "Accurate, truthful and timely information will be made available to the public, the Congress and the news media to help in the analysis and understanding of defense strategy and national security issues."⁵ COMCAM, however, often provides support for a much wider range of requirements such as military information support operations (MISO), military deception (MILDEC), and intelligence.⁶

For a merger to be successful, several steps must take place. Initially, COMCAM and PA should continue to maintain their respective MOSs as each provides distinct capabilities for mission accomplishment, but portfolio evaluations should take place to determine which MOSs can consolidate in the future. To mitigate structure shortages within both occupational fields, public affairs officers (PAOs) should assume management responsibilities of a merger, and both PA and COMCAM



PAs take the photos used in newspapers and magazines. (Photo by Sgt Matthew Troyer.)

officers should receive additional formal education at the Defense Information School (DINFOS) to learn how to employ Marines of each occupational field. Finally, cross-training for all Marines within the Operating Forces and at the Supporting Establishment once a merger has taken place is paramount to ensuring a seamless transition and efficient conduct of operations.

Although there are certain MOSs within COMCAM that provide a distinct capability to accomplish the mission, redundancies—specifically those in imagery acquisition—can be eliminated by an MOS consolidation with PA. The most apparent capability redundancies occur between the 4313 (broadcast journalist) and 4671 (combat videographer), and the 4341 (combat correspondent), and the 4641 (combat photographer). Often, Marines from each occupational field are sent to collect imagery from the same event, an inefficient use of manpower, time, and resources. This inefficiency is magnified at the operational level where there is limited space to embed nonorganic personnel for imagery acquisition. As a result, COMCAM and PA compete for time, space, and resources while gathering similar products, promoting a stove-piped model instead of an integrated effort that maximizes a capability for the

commander. As technology advances, improving both still and video imagery acquisition—and ultimately production that directly impacts communication with target audiences—the convergence of these MOSs within COMCAM and PA will only increase.

In addition to these redundancies, there are structure shortages within SNCO and officer ranks of COMCAM⁷ and PA⁸ that could be mitigated

by merging the fields. The authorized strength report for the PA community (4300 series) is currently 399 enlisted Marines and 96 officers,⁹ whereas the COMCAM community (4600 series) contains 393 enlisted Marines and only 21 officers, all of whom are limited duty officers and warrant officers.¹⁰ The low density of officers and SNCOs within COMCAM, in addition to the Marine Corps force structure drawdown which places “fewer COMCAM Marines at the division”¹¹ requires that “it will be even more important to manage the

manpower so that very junior COMCAM Marines are not put in such a leadership position without additional experience or training.”¹² This concern can be mitigated by PAO management, augmented by COMCAM officers and SNCOs serving in a subject matter expert role. As a result, PAOs serve as the commander’s advisor, focused on future plans—research, planning, and evaluation—and the employment of Marines to meet the communications requirement, while the cross-trained COMCAM officers focus on current operations and training.

If PAOs assume management responsibilities, they need additional training at DINFOS to gain a comprehensive understanding of COMCAM. Currently, to receive the 4302 designator, PAOs must complete the Public Affairs Qualification Course (PAQC), which contains subcourses in theory and doctrine, community relations, internal information, multimedia, media relations, communications skills, public affairs operations, course administration, and a field exercise.¹³ The DINFOS also offers a Combat Camera Leadership Course which offers instruction in Combat Camera Unit Operations and Course Administration.¹⁴ Currently, this course is only available to 4602 COMCAM officers and 46XX (combat camera chiefs)

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staff sergeant or above.¹⁵ If prerequisites for Marine Corps attendees were changed to allow 4302s to attend, this would add only 10 days to their training pipeline.¹⁶ COMCAM officers and SNCOs should also attend PAQC in turn to gain an understanding of the PA occupational field.

To enable a successful merger, cross-training for enlisted Marines in both occupational fields within the Operating Forces and at the Supporting Establishment is also required. Cross-training ensures Marines are

technically and tactically proficient in imagery acquisition to meet the commander's communications requirements. The advantages of cross-training have already been demonstrated by the 26th MEU during their deployment in July 2013.¹⁷ "Cross-training is a huge benefit; we have a relatively small shop, even combined with both PA and Combat Camera, to cover the 2,400 Marines and sailors with the MEU,"¹⁸ said Capt Lucas J. Burke, PAO for 26th MEU, as quoted in a Marines.mil article:

At any time, any one of us may be grabbed to take photos, provide media escorts, or conduct an interview. The end state is the same: document our operations and convey them to a wider audience, but I try to keep strengths within each MOS if time and personnel allows.¹⁹

While there are many advantages to merging COMCAM and PA, COM-

CAM leadership has previously argued that a merger of the occupational fields would not provide better support to Marine Corps missions.²⁰ Because of the distinct requirements that COMCAM supports, they believe a merger is not ideal because of the different training that Marines in the two

... PA is limited by doctrinal constraints in certain situations.

fields receive and the different audiences they are trained to reach.²¹ In addition, it is argued that COMCAM provides support for a wider variety of requirements such as MILDEC, MISO, and intelligence while PA is limited by doctrinal constraints in certain situations.²²

HQMC recognized the potential efficiencies of merging the occupational fields: the COMCAM proponent was "recently reorganized from Training and Education Command to the Office of Marine Corps Communication."²³ Despite the argument by COMCAM that their requirements are distinctly different, particularly in supporting and enhancing information-related capabilities through imagery acquisition, the issue is not what products are collected but instead centered on how it will be used. Through a communications process that complements the Marine Corps Planning Process and ultimately leads to a communications plan, PAOs and others responsible for information-related capabilities determine what products (written and visual) are required to meet a communications objective. Regardless of the requirement, the process of imagery acquisition by individual COMCAM and PA Marines is the same.

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A public affairs guidance brief. (Photo courtesy of 26MEU Public Affairs.)

In conclusion, there is efficiency gained by merging PA and COMCAM at HQMC, within the Operating Forces, and at the Supporting Establishment. To achieve synergy in meeting the commander's communications requirements, Marines in each occupational field should receive in-depth cross-training on how to collect imagery for a variety of requirements and market their products for multiple target audiences. PAOs and COMCAM officers should also receive additional instruction at DINFOS to better understand the requirements of each occupational field. If PAOs assume management responsibilities of a merger, this allows the limited number of COMCAM officers and SNCOs to focus on providing subject matter expertise to the PAO. Looking to the future, a thorough evaluation of each occupational field's portfolio must occur and consolidation of the 4313 and 4671, and the 4341 and 4641 must be considered.

As technology and modernization continues to drive these two occupational fields closer together, eliminating capability redundancies is essential to meeting the requirements and demands of the 21st century information environment. Aligning these two fields is consistent with the enduring principles as set forth in the *36th Commandant of the*

Marine Corps Planning Guidance that "...as a Corps, we also remain committed to constantly improving the quality of our manning, training, and equipping efforts and our resultant warfighting capability."²⁴ The desired end state of merging two similar occupational fields is more efficient accomplishment of the mission in two low-density, high-demand fields, and achieving Marine Corps-wide professional recognition of the capabilities of both PA and COMCAM Marines.

Notes

1. Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Capabilities Development Directorate, Executive Offsite Symposium, "Task #6, Force Structure Review DOTMLPF (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities) Part 2 Decision Brief," *PA structure COAs (courses of action)*, (Washington, DC: 2011), Slide 5.
2. Ann Miller, et al., *Combat Camera Support to Marine Corps Missions*, (Washington, DC: Center for Naval Analyses, 2012), 19.
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order 3104.1B, Marine Corps Combat Camera Program*, (Washington, DC: 2011), 2, accessed at <http://www.marines.mil>.
4. U.S. Department of the Navy, *SECNAVINST 5720.44C, Department of the Navy Public Affairs*

Policy and Regulations, (Washington, DC: 21 February 2012), 1-1, accessed at <http://doni.daps.dla.mil>.
5. Ibid.

6. Marine Corps Combat Camera, *Marines.mil*, accessed at <http://www.hqmc.marines.mil>.

7. Miller, 57.

8. EOS brief, *PA structure COAs*, Slide 5.

9. Total Force Structure Management System, 4300 MOS. Downloaded 22 January 2015.

10. Total Force Structure Management System, 4600 MOS Pull, 27 February 2014.

11. Miller, 58.

12. Ibid.

13. Director, Defense Information School (DINFOS), "Training Program of Instruction for DINFOS PAQC [Public Affairs Qualification Course], (Fort Meade, MD: 2014), accessed at <http://www.dinfos.dma.mil>.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Cpl Kyle Runnels, "Connecting the World to the MEU: Public Affairs and Combat Camera," *Marines.mil*, 2 August 2013, accessed at <http://www.marines.com>.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Miller, 4.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid, 9.

23. Combat Camera Roadmap, *Marines.mil*, accessed at <http://www.hqmc.marines.mil>.

24. Gen Joseph F. Dunford, *36th Marine Corps Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 2014), 2, accessed at <http://www.hqmc.marines.mil>.

