

Our Belleau Wood Moment

Meeting the challenges of the information environment

by Maj Audrey F. Callanan & Col Jordan D. Walzer

In 1899, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, MajGen Heywood, received a shocking report: only 89 Marines out of the entire Marine Corps could qualify with a rifle as marksmen or sharpshooters.¹ This sparked a concerted effort to professionalize the Marine rifleman. Nearly two decades later, Marines deployed to France and were thrust unexpectedly into the lines at Belleau Wood. However, the attacking Germans were surprised as they started to get picked off at distances once thought impossible—even from as far as four football fields away. The Marine Corps experienced a “Belleau Wood moment” that has carried on to this day.² This hard-earned reputation for marksmanship helped establish the Marine Corps as an expeditionary force for the next hundred years. Today, the Marine Corps stands again on the edge of a precipice, and the evolving operating environment demands new formations, new missions, and new skillsets. As in 1899, the Marine Corps is woefully unprepared for the challenges our Marines will face—especially in the information environment (IE). To adapt, we will need to fix some critical “holes in our swing.” We must professionalize the information-related capability areas into a cohesive Information Maneuver (IM) Occupational Field capable of integrating and fighting as a part of a combined arms team.

In a contested IE, we must train to the standard we are expected to fight.³ To gain and maintain information advantage, we must sense, make sense, and act faster than our rivals. In doing this, we create an advantage in three areas: systems overmatch, prevailing

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narrative, and force resiliency. Achieving this advantage requires maneuver in the IE by a convergence of capability and tradecraft, authorities, approvals, placement and access, will and excellence, and lethality.⁴ If you stacked these requirements in the shape of a pyramid, you would find the foundation built on the skills and experience of the individual Marine. As with any warfight-

From this, the Marine Corps can begin to harness the value of information advantage. U.S. joint and interagency partners are often the cornerstones of competence within these information capabilities. We are holding ourselves back from reaching the same level of expertise with the constant rotation of the IM workforce. Gaining, growing, and maintaining these exquisite skills

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ing function, the underpinning rests on competence to demonstrate capability and excellence in one’s craft—in this case, those trained to fight in the IE. With information capabilities, like space and influence operations, significant training and education investments are required for Marines to be technically and tactically proficient. Professional growth and development opportunities come from successive assignments within the occupational field, which allows Marines to master their craft.

requires a professionalized force capable of unleashing the ingenuity of the individual Marine.

Several years ago, the Marine Corps professionalized and established occupational fields for Cyber Operations and Communications Strategy and Operations and a Primary MOS (PMOS) for Enlisted PSYOP Marines—but not the other IM capabilities areas. As a result, when a Marine checks aboard their unit to fill the billet of a Space Operations Staff Officer, for example, they may

not have been to a MOS-producing school yet and are likely working in the IM field for the first time. As these are Free MOSs and not PMOSs, they will also likely never work in this field ever again. III MEF Information Group's (MIG) current manpower roster shows 39 Marines filling IM roles at the headquarters. Of those, 32 were on their first IM tour, and only 7 were on their second tour (6 of those because they are in PMOSs of cyber or enlisted psychological operations). The Marine Corps cannot expect to prevail in competition or conflict with a transient force that brings "junior operational experience" only in the IM capability areas regardless of grade. *Force Design 2030* directs that we must commit to a cycle of continuous learning to ensure a margin of advantage over our adversaries.⁵ Yet, the current model forfeits the ability to build senior Marines with the required breadth of experience. Roles like the MIG's Information Command Center

director or the schoolhouse director for IM MOS-producing schools need to be filled by Marines who are purpose-built for those assignments. This would not happen at any other Marine Corps unit. Can you imagine a Marine Aircraft Group operations officer who is not a Weapons and Tactics Instructor or an operations officer at an infantry regiment who did not have significant kinetic fires experience? This current model is akin to the old Marine Corps' Career Broadening Tours—a program to address high-demand/low-density MOS shortfalls that produced only Secondary MOSs. A significant flaw in the program was it left many Marines out of step with their peers and less competitive for promotion. "Career broadening" did not work in 1983, and it does not work now.⁶

This model is at odds with current Talent Management guidance that states talent retention must be a priority.⁷ Talent retention is not just keeping Marines

in uniform—it is using the talents of the individual Marine and providing commanders and staff with appropriate subject matter expertise. Done right, IM Marines help commanders and staffs understand and leverage the pervasive nature of information and maintain the advantage in the IE across the seven warfighting functions.

Currently, the Information Warfare Coordinator at II MEF is a tank officer, and the Marine Corps Information Operations Center's S-5 is a military police officer. They are members of a community subject to involuntary MOS reclassifications and directed lateral moves (LATMOVE) in support of *Force Design 2030*. Once they LATMOVE, they will move onto a new PMOS and seek to establish credibility to remain promotable. This would pull them away from valid operational requirements and the ability to make meaningful contributions in the IM community where they have already developed subject-

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matter expertise. Today, there is no way to retain these talented Marines in the IM community.

With such a glaring problem, we must offer a solution. The Deputy Commandant for Information signed a decision memorandum that directed the staff to find manpower solutions to integrate IM into a combined arms team and professionalize a dedicated force to address current readiness issues. This includes consolidating all IM capability area MOS's into the 17XX Occupational Field and creating two new PMOSs: 1706 Maritime Space Officer and 1707 Influence Officer. Transitioning FMOS billets where Marines receive "just in time" training to PMOS billets where Marines arrived trained and experienced has an immediate impact on unit readiness and the push toward MIGs reaching full operational capability. The Marine Corps must solve the fundamental "people" challenge we have laid out and provide the forces operationally required by the combatant commanders and the MEFs. Building hybrid LATMOVE and direct accession PMOSs with formalized career progression and the ability to capitalize on experience in subsequent assignments are critical elements of the Commandant's *Talent Management 2030* strategy. This offers Marines an alternative to accepting their current PMOS for an entire career or separating from the Service.

Not everyone agrees that the Marine Corps needs an IM Occupational Field. We are known for "close with and destroy," and some ask why should we veer so far off our brand? The Marine Corps will always prepare for a kinetic fight. However, all you have to do is look at the current operating environment and see how our rivals are competing and making small yet incremental advancements in the strategic environment. They know precisely what Sun Tzu meant by "a victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle." The debate is not if the Marine Corps has a valid requirement for Marines who are versed in these topics but what level of mastery is required for the current and future force success. Because the IE is always relevant and information advantage can be gained or lost in any do-

main, information is the commander's business. This does not negate the need for a subject matter expert to advise the commander and staff on the information warfighting function, especially as our opponents' information capabilities pose an enduring challenge. Force health is the commander's business, but no one contests the need for a battalion medical officer.

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Our pacing threat focuses on information-related capabilities.⁸ As Stand-in Forces, do you think we will need more or less cyber operations capability? Will we be more or less dependent on space operations in the future? What about electromagnetic spectrum operations, influence operations, or deception planning? This is not about deviating from who we are as Marines; this is about increasing our arsenal of weapons in a combined arms fight.

One could also argue that smaller MOSs come with inherent risk. While this is true, it does not negate our IM requirements. We assumed risk by standing up cyber in 2018. It posed challenges then and still does. Cyber will need care and feeding for years to come before it is healthy, but it is a critical capability that few would argue we do not need. Lack of professionalized skillsets developed over multiple tours leaves the Marine Corps less capable of performing mission requirements. Instead, we can preposition a risk mitigation strategy that renders the IM Occupational Field, as proposed, supportable at moderate risk. The question is not whether we can assume the risk associated with the professionalization of the IM Occupational Field—the question is, what is at stake if we do not?

Change is hard because it always involves risk, but the Marine Corps has never been a risk-averse organi-

zation. We are purpose-built to leave the safe harbor, and it is not enough to adapt—we need to adapt quickly. Rivals in 21st-century competition and conflict value information as central to their way of war and have designed their force for this operating environment. According to the *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, "Everything starts and ends with the individual Marine." As we professionalized our riflemen over a hundred years ago, we have a fleeting opportunity to meet the challenges of the future fight. We must create an IM Occupational Field capable of integrating and fighting as a part of our profession of arms; this is how we maintain an asymmetrical advantage over the adversary. This is our Belleau Wood moment.

Notes

1. Staff, "The Beginnings of Marine Corps Marksmanship," National Rifle Association, (January 2021), available at <https://www.americanrifleman.org>.
2. "Our Belleau Wood moment" is a phrase used by BGen William Bowers to refer to generation-defining moments to meet the needs of the future operating environment. He cites (Owen, 2014).
3. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
4. This model was developed by LtGen Matthew Glavy, and it describes the convergence of factors need to gain and maintain information advantage.
5. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.
6. Scott Vasquez and Michael Williams, "Re-engineering the Marine Corps Officer Promotion Process for Unrestricted Officers," (thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2001).
7. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.
8. Ibid.

