

Professionalizing Air Intelligence, Part IV

What makes a good squadron S-2?

by Capt Christopher A. Denzel

At 0530, 14 September 2012, the twenty students of Air Intelligence Officers Course (AIOC) 12-02 sat down in a classroom in Dam Neck, VA. We had fourteen hours to finish our final exam. Eight hours later, at 2200 Afghan time, fifteen Taliban fighters cut through the fences of Camp Bastion/Leatherneck in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. During the ensuing attack, they killed two Marines, wounded seventeen, and destroyed a squadron of AV-8B Harriers.

A few days later, I checked into Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 264 (VMM-264). We were deploying to Bastion in three months. My CO said, “We have an all officer meeting on Friday. I want you to brief the Bastion attack.”

This was how I began my tour as a squadron intelligence officer, thrown into the fray before I had changed out of my Service Alphas. Three years and two deployments later, I disembarked from the 24th (MEU) with orders. At the same time, MAG 26 had just received a new AIOC graduate. I took her to the Officer’s Club for lunch, armed with a notebook full of notes. I said, “This is what I wish someone had told me over lunch when I first checked in.” It was the same pass-down that has occurred for ages, from Marine to Marine, senior first lieutenant to junior second lieutenant, off-going to on-coming. So why am I writing this article at this point in time?

Changes in Force 2025

When fully implemented, Force 2025 will remove intelligence Marines from most squadrons and reduce the size of MAG S-2s and MAW G-2s, consolidating all these Marines into

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Wing intelligence support companies (WISC). The WISCs form direct support teams (DST) that undergo specific training geared toward their supported unit before being attached for the pre-deployment training and deployment.

Debating the merits of the WISC is a topic for another article. But as with any concentration of “low density, high demand” assets, the WISC will unfortunately place additional distance between that “asset” and the customer it serves.

Before we create that gap, the community deserves an accounting of what makes a good squadron S-2.

Why focus on squadrons? The squadron is where the rubber meets the road in aviation. MAGs and MAWs fly no aircraft. This already places a certain distance between MAG and MAW intelligence Marines and those flying sorties. Squadrons S-2s (mostly led by lieutenants and staff sergeants) are junior in rank and experience, meaning they will benefit more from such lessons. Finally, MAGs and MAWs will retain some of their organic intelligence structure, mitigating the creation of this gap.

By capturing lessons from successful squadron S-2s, this gap might be closed somewhat for future WISC Marines.

Since my experience is limited, I asked other Marines (intelligence and aviators) for their perspectives. What follows is advice validated by the collective wisdom of three Weapons and Tac-



The CO wanted a briefing on what happened at Camp Bastion on 14 September 2012. (Photo by Sgt Keonaona Paulo.)

tics Instructors (WTI) pilots, two Marine Helicopter Squadron One pilots, one WTI Instructor Pilot, two squadron COs, a MAG XO and Operations Officer (OpsO), three AIOC directors, a Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1) S-2, four MEU composite squadron S-2s, two special purpose MAGTF composite squadron S-2s, and a Harrier squadron S-2.

Your Training Was Important

During safety briefs, a warning to not do something that is absurdly stupid yet oddly specific, can be attributed to some Marine who actually did it; your training is no different.

On my first day at VMM-264, I was slapped in the face with the relevance of many things the schoolhouse taught me. A list of things I had once chalked up to “schoolhouse-isms” immediately became essential in that first brief to my squadron and every brief that followed.

We also learned some questionable “lessons.” We were told that we would never get high-demand satellite to collect on our requirements. We were told, “If you ever face a real integrated air defense system (IADS), the Air Force will destroy it before you get into theater.” When we groaned about producing an intelligence preparation of the battlespace (IPB) brief, our instructors admitted that “the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) will produce an IPB for you.” We were told these things were in the curriculum not because we needed them for our jobs but because we needed to be tested on them for the course.

Instead, I viewed their inclusion in the curriculum as wisdom locked in from previous generations.

In December 2014, the 24th MEU S-2 directed us to assemble an IPB for our contingency mission in Yemen. There was no MEF to build it for us. There was no MAW to build the ACE intel slides.

My corporal quickly noticed that some images of surface-to-air missile sites were woefully out of date. He requested updated imagery and within days we had fresh images for all the surface-air-missile sites from those satellites that “we’d never get.”

When the Embassy began planning for a deliberate evacuation, the MEU began planning for if things went wrong. The terrain made a ground convoy to the Embassy impractical. Planning quickly shifted to the ACE. Just as quickly, I was facing a real IADS with no Air Force assets in sight.

When someone says “You won’t ever (insert difficult task),” what they often mean is “I never had to (insert difficult task).” Our training carries the roots of lessons learned over decades and across various operations. While those with low-threat counterinsurgency experience found the training contrived, today’s students look at Syria and no longer need to be convinced of the importance of planning operations within or against an IADS.

Our training has been paid for in blood, sweat, and lives; it deserves to be paid attention to.

Your Training Is Important

It is almost a rite of passage for an air intelligence officer to arrive at a unit and complain that no one has sufficiently trained their Marines for deployment. Training is often seen as a one-time, good forever “inoculation” received at the schoolhouse (or from “someone else”). This is wrong.

Just as the recruit depot produces a “basically-trained Marine,” the schoolhouse produces a basically-trained air intelligence Marine. It does not have the time, resources, or expertise to do more than train Marines in the common skills required across every billet for that MOS. Any training specific to unit or billet is designed to be taught through managed on-the-job training.

To the lieutenant who exclaims, “No one trained my Marines!” one might reasonably reply, “No kidding, that’s your job.” Equally important is training yourself.

Respect the Aviator’s Trinity

There are 25 officers in single-seat FA-18 squadron (20 at 80 percent staffing goal). Only six are not aviators. By comparison, an infantry battalion has 48 officers, 18 of whom are non-infantry officers. Who is the S-1 officer at a squadron? A pilot. Who is the S-4

officer? A pilot. Who is the S-6 officer? A pilot. Every staff officer is a pilot, none have any formal training in the role, and each is expected to perform their job as if they were a school-trained 0102 (administration), 0402 (logistics), or 0602 (communications). This also applies to the many maintenance section positions. Each requires pilots to “figure it out” and teach themselves an entirely different MOS. All while they are still on the continuous learning curve of “pilot progression.”

The adjutant (a pilot) at my first squadron described it simply as, “One job gets you fired, one job gets you killed.” Because pilots are surrounded by other pilots, being good at either of those jobs is not enough. As a pilot, you must also be a “good dude(tte)” because the S-4 today was doing your new collateral job yesterday and may just be the pilot instructing and evaluating a critical evolution in your pilot training tomorrow. Furthermore, the pilot you might not get along with will eventually sit beside you in the cockpit for a mission. Interpersonal conflict between aviators may be the difference between a mistake being caught and a serious mishap. For these reasons, “transactional” relationships do not exist in squadrons. No aviator is “just” the S-1; they are also an instructor, student, peer, and co-pilot.

This is the aviator’s trinity: be good at your ground job, be good in the cockpit, and be a good dude(tte).

The consequence for intelligence officers is that pilots will have little patience for an S-2 who does not excel at their job or one not willing to gracefully accept a series of collateral duties. Some S-2s may wonder how they are expected to accomplish their primary job well when they have so many secondary jobs to do. They miss the point: every pilot has a collateral job in the squadron even before any of the truly collateral duties are divvied up. While the intelligence officer arrived fully trained for their MOS, the aviator is still learning their MOS, their collateral primary staff job, *and* their truly collateral duty.

This brings us to penguins.

Save the Penguins

The MV-22 Training and Readiness



Managed on-the-job training is required to augment the “basically trained” Marines’ understanding of what his MOS really entails. (Photo by Cpl Mackenzie Gibson.)

Manual is 483 pages long, its *Air Naval Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures Manual* is 710 pages long, and its *Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization Manual* is 996 pages long.¹ Add to this the knowledge required as the command’s adjutant, the legal policies and regulations, and the *Manual for Courts Martial* (772 pages) as the command’s legal officer.² You can begin to see how much a pilot is required to keep in his head throughout the day. Even worse, when a pilot is on the flight schedule, they are not learning their ground job. When they are doing their ground job, they are not studying flight manuals.

You can only fit so many penguins on an iceberg before others get pushed off. Keep in mind, “One job gets you fired, one job gets you killed.” Some penguins are more important than others.

With this information and responsibility overload for pilots as a *baseline*, intelligence Marines must closely inspect how they support aviation operations.

Even the flight brief for the most straightforward mission will last close to an hour. Some can run two hours long. Most of the time, the blue threat (a mishap) is more likely and consequential than the red threat (the enemy), pilots will naturally focus on the plan more than the threat.

This means that intelligence Marines must cut to the point and ruthlessly focus only on the things pilots will use to make decisions during planning and in the cockpit. Pilots are good at studying volumes of material. They *can* remember anything. They cannot remember *everything*. Thus, intelligence Marines must be realistic about which “intelligence penguins” will get pushed off the iceberg, and they must be judicious about what penguins they put there in the first place.

The phrase, “Be brief, be right, be gone,” is not just a pithy motto for intelligence officers—it may be the most essential rule.

Prepare To Be Alone

My OpsO once asked me, “Harold, what’s it like to be all alone? I’m an Osprey pilot. The CO’s an Osprey pilot. The XO and MO are Osprey pilots. We’re all Osprey pilots. You’re the only intel officer here. How do you know if you’re doing a good job?” The question struck me. I started thinking about how I held myself accountable. It is not hard to look like you are doing a great job to people who do not really understand what you do. So when I began assembling a turnover binder, I highlighted things that I punted.

Despite being based in Helmand, the long range of the Osprey meant that we

had a tertiary mission to reinforce or evacuate the U.S. Consulate in Herat province, 200 miles away. I had no information about the area. I did not try to maintain even a peripheral awareness of the threat in Herat. No one at the squadron or MAW seemed to care either. When my replacement arrived in theater on 15 July 2013, I encouraged him not to repeat my mistake.

Less than two months later, a car bomb detonated at the Consulate gate and seven Taliban fighters attempted to storm the compound. The MEF dispatched a quick reaction force aboard Ospreys to reinforce the Consulate and provide security as it recovered from the attack. Because I called attention to my failure, my replacement had points of contact, threat assessments, landing zone imagery, and all the intelligence he needed to enable the rapid launch of his squadron’s aircraft.

Doing your job well is a balance of implementing suitable practices while constantly looking for methods to improve upon. Critical analysis of what you have done right *and* what you have done wrong not only helps the Marine replacing you, but it will help you fix the problems before then. When there is no senior air intelligence officer looking over your shoulder, you will often be the only one who can truly hold yourself and your Marines truly accountable.

Integrate With Maintenance

A squadron S-2 who has not integrated their shop with maintenance has not mastered their craft. Maintenance does not need intelligence to know what wrenches to turn on what aircraft. But intelligence can make important contributions to the moral component of the maintenance effort.

Imagine spending an entire deployment fixing aircraft, twelve hours a day, seven days a week, never knowing what those birds are going off to do or what the results are when they return. When big missions go, the wrenches turn twice as hard to get extra aircraft up for the mission and to also fix them when they return.

Instead, letting these Marines know how their hard work is helping the squadron take it to the enemy adds in-

valuable motivation to the daily maintenance grind. Every Marine wants to know how his efforts are contributing to the fight. Knowing that you are turning “down” birds into “up” birds is not enough. A daily intelligence brief during maintenance meetings that shows how their contributions are impacting the enemy is a low-cost, high-payoff contribution.

Additionally, almost without exception, every squadron flight schedule begins with “0730 FOD [foreign object debris] Walk (All Hands).” The squadron gets on-line up at the back of the hangar and marches slowly forward out of the hangar and a hundred yards or so onto the flight line, scanning the ground for FOD that can get sucked into an engine and damage it. It takes ten minutes.

In the two squadrons I have been with, my Marines were the only ones in cammies at FOD walk. This is not a trivial point. The “upstairs” Marines in the S-shops wear cammies (maintainers wear flight suits and coveralls). S-shop Marines sit in climate-controlled spaces all day, while maintenance Marines are sweating it out (or freezing) on the flight line and in the hangar. Worse, S-shop Marines often show up at 0800 (after FOD walk ends) and leave by 1600. It is not uncommon for maintenance Marines to work nights, weekends, or twelve-hour shifts, especially when the squadron is flying a lot.

It is the smallest thing to make your Marines show up at 0725, grab a cranial, and get a little sweaty outside in the early morning humidity. You will probably be the only cammies on the flight line, and people will notice.

Caring about maintenance is less about your role as an intelligence Marine and more about your role as a contributing member of the unit. When your penguins are fighting to stay on that iceberg, these small gestures matter.

Know Your Place

My first CO said, “You have more MOS credibility than most of the pilots here.” He meant that most pilots are in some form of training (gaining new qualifications) until they are senior captains. Air intelligence Marines come

with all of the formal training they need to execute their job.

The intelligence officer also has a direct line to the XO and CO. The majority of captains in any given squadron will work for another captain who works for a major who, in turn, reports to the XO and CO. Despite the intelligence officer’s junior rank, he speaks for the CO on the intelligence staff section and warfighting function.

As a “one-deep” officer, intelligence officers will also have more exposure to broader squadron operations than many pilots. While I was involved in planning every operation we conducted, many junior pilots were involved in planning only one small component, unfamiliar with the broader scheme of maneuver until the final mission brief.

Intelligence officers will also have more leadership experience than some junior captains in the squadron.

Intelligence officers will also have more leadership experience than some junior captains in the squadron (an aviator may have one or two years as a captain before they lead their first Marines). This creates a bizarre mix of experience with junior rank. Captain Victor Tenbrink put it this way:

An intelligence officer at the squadron is without natural peers—you are the only one of your kind and frequently the most junior officer. It is necessary to gain respect, including of the most senior pilots, to effectively perform your job.

It is a delicate balance to strike, and the commandment goes both ways.

Intelligence officers must never forget that while the S-2 sits next to the S-3 and the Maintenance Officer on an organization chart, it is a junior partner in the unit. While any aviator would be a fool to discount the enemy, any intel-

ligence officer would be a fool to ignore the fact that intelligence is but one item on a long list of things important to effective squadron operations. You must know when to assert yourself and when to get out of the way.

You’re Not That Kind Of SME

Pilots regularly designate subject matter experts (SMEs) in certain areas (e.g., “AIM-120 SME” or “Aircraft Survivability Equipment SME”). But this just makes that aviator the *relative* SME in the unit. It does not denote true *expertise*. They are careful to be the conduit to the true SMEs and not confuse a knowledge management tool with special qualifications. In the same sense, the S-2 is the *relative* threat SME for the unit, but not a true threat SME with *unique* expertise. Additionally, with some exceptions, your pilots will (or should) have very little interest in your analysis of threat *capabilities*. The segment of the intelligence community focused on air threats is filled with experts who have been working their respective target areas for longer than most of us will spend in uniform. Many air threats rely on highly-technical systems exploiting complex math, science, and engineering principles to make their systems work. These intelligence community SMEs often have advanced degrees in these subjects.

Therefore, when it comes to threat *capabilities* (distinct from situational assessments), “VMM-264 S-2 assesses (insert scenario)” is a poor substitute for “According to the Missile and Space Intelligence Center (insert scenario).”

None of this is to imply that you should not know the threat cold. You must know what the experts say, but you are not the expert. You are a different kind of SME. Your *unique* expertise is in your unit’s mission and intelligence requirements, in understanding the intelligence resources available, and in tailoring it to the mission and your customers. Without you, that intelligence community SME does not know your mission, and your pilots do not know the intelligence community SME exists.

Your job is to anticipate your unit’s intelligence requirements. As these come from operational requirements,



You have to know where to find the SME for the answers you are looking for. (Photo by Cpl Patrick Osino.)

you must be adept at operational planning to anticipate them. As one of my pilots stated, “A good wingman anticipates what the lead aircraft’s next move will be or what lead needs without being told.” But many answers to your intelligence requirements will have inescapably technical components and should be answered by true threat SMEs. So you must know how to find them and what to ask. Rarely will you be given the information or a product that does not require being reframed or adjusted to fit your unit’s mission; so you must understand the material in order to safely tailor it. You are, therefore, expected to be a SME in your unit’s mission and a SME in the resources available. Capt Tenbrink put it this way:

True professional nirvana is achieved when you know more about the tactical employment of the aircraft than any copilot and more about threats than anybody whatsoever in the squadron.

Among other elements of the MAGTF, you must be the acknowledged SME for intelligence factors that impact the ACE. He continues:

Frequently, your command element (CE) S-2 will not have the background to be able to offer detailed analysis on an IADS. So don’t let them try. It will not be hard to sell, even to the CE S-2,

that all things ‘air intel’ are your domain. This will take a lot of production and briefing requirements off the CE S-2. When the MAGTF Commander directly requests assessments from the ACE S-2, you are doing your job right.

The only way to do this is to train for it. Injecting yourself into aviator training (while not getting in the way) trains yourself, your Marines, and your pilots. It builds trust, demonstrates competence, and ensures intelligence is not an afterthought. In this, your squadron’s pilot training officer (PTO) and WTIs are your first stop.

Think beyond the Squadron

Ironically, the best squadron intelligence officers often end up focusing beyond their squadron. As they try to improve their shop, they cannot help but look at the entire “kill chain” of intelligence support (training, personnel, processes, resources, etc.) with a critical eye. Inevitably, they conclude that the things that will improve their S-2 can improve S-2s at other units as well.

These Marines do not stop at developing a new intelligence support technique, they write a how-to guide and ensure the rest of the community is aware of it. Such work does nothing to help themselves; they already under-

stand the technique and how to employ it. But they want to see others make *new* mistakes, not the same old ones.

Because this is so rarely done, intelligence officers who do so will very quickly gain a reputation as the “go to” person. This *community* focus will almost never make it into an award or fitness report. In many cases, the aviators may not be aware of it, understand it, or even care. But the Marines who feel compelled to make the community better, despite this, are often the ones who hold themselves to the highest standards of intelligence support.

The Bottom Line

These all boil down to two tenets: be a competent intelligence Marine and achieve a deep understanding of integration with your unit. This can be said of nearly any occupational field in the Marine Corps, so while those tenets are comprehensive, they are not adequate by themselves.

I have little doubt that others will modify a few of these commandments, remove some, and add others. Every squadron S-2’s experience will differ, but all of these lessons should more or less apply and may certainly be applicable to other intelligence fields or other MOSs entirely. But at minimum, this should provide future squadron S-2s a starting point and some guidelines for figuring it out themselves, as we all must do to some extent or another.

Notes

1. Commander Naval Air Forces, *NAVMC 3500.11E MV-22B Training and Readiness Manual*, (Patuxent River, MD: 2018); Commander Naval Air Forces, *Air Naval Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures 3-22.3-MV22 Combat Aircraft Fundamentals*, (Patuxent River, MD: 2017); and Commander Naval Air Forces, *A1-V22AB-NFM-000 NATOPS Flight Manual Navy Model MV-22B Tiltrotor*, (Patuxent River, MD: 2018)
2. President of the United States, *Manual for Courts-Martial*, (Washington, DC: 2019).

>Editor’s Note: This article is a continuation of Capt Denzel’s articles on professionalizing air intelligence that ran in the January 2016, May 2017, March 2018, and September 2018 issues of the Gazette.

