

# The Marine Attaché

Task me . . . please

by LtCol Scott D. McDonald

After completing two attaché-type tours, many colleagues have asked me to comment in this forum on what I have learned. This past fall I had the pleasure of attending the Security Cooperation Planners' Course presented by Security Cooperation Education and Training Center (now part of the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group). During this course much is said about the Embassy country team, and the military's role within it, in supporting security cooperation. This discussion focuses on the important role of the senior defense official/defense attaché, the role he plays in foreign military sales, and other formal security cooperation programs. However, aside from passing mentions of the role of the attaché, there seemed to be little understanding among the staff or my fellow students of the role of Marine attachés in general, how they assist security cooperation specifically and, more importantly, their utility to the Marine Corps.

Unfortunately, this was not wholly surprising. In fact, as a serving Marine attaché it was I who had to reach out to the Marine Corps, establishing linkages with communities of interest and seeking out opportunities to be tasked with Marine Corps-specific duties. This is, in part, because the Marine Corps has largely accepted the position that its attachés do not work for the Marine Corps. This perception is incorrect. Marine attachés are an important part of the Marine Corps security cooperation architecture and need to be better leveraged by the Marine Corps if we are to make the most of our partner relationships around the world.

## Command and Control Background

One of the reasons that serving as a Marine attaché is an interesting, rewarding, and challenging assignment is

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the fact that you work for several masters. While fulfilling a range of duties, one reports in turn to the Ambassador, the geographic component commander, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency.

The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, pays most of the bills for the attaché program and, as such, has primary tasking authority. The reality, however, is much more nuanced and complex. To begin with, nothing the attaché does takes place in isolation. Interests that span the range of the U.S. foreign policy community are addressed in the same day and often during the same meet-

ings. As the official representative of the U.S. Marine Corps in the country to which accredited, each "boss" listed above has a legitimate interest in the Marine attaché's activities and a claim on his time. In fact, in many ways the attaché's role in the Embassy enables him to help coordinate the interests of these disparate actors, bring their objectives into the interagency team, and execute their programs effectively.

As an attaché I actually appreciated the input I received from each of these actors as it helped me to understand U.S. interests in the area in which I was serving and highlighted the areas in which the U.S. foreign policy community did not understand what I was



*Marine attachés can assist in building partner relationships around the world. (Photo by 1stLt Mark Lazane.)*

responsible for teaching them. Though not the purpose of this article, I maintain that the primary role of an attaché, and one that combines the goals of all of his bosses, is as an educator—educating the host government about the U.S. military and U.S. interests, as well as educating the U.S. Government about the interests and military of the country in which he serves.

### The Corps' Equity

Considering all the Marine attaché can do and does for actors across the U.S. Government, it is unfortunate that the one boss who seems most hesitant to task its attachés is the Marine Corps. Based on my interaction with many senior Marine leaders, I think that this hesitancy to reach out to attachés comes from a misunderstanding of the

of Marine Corps concepts into the intellectual lexicon of the host military. This enables him to bring value to all of his bosses, not just to the Marine Corps. Attaché offices are by their very nature joint. They are so small relative to the tasks they are responsible for executing and rely on each other for so much that leveraging joint capabilities becomes second nature. In that, they draw on Service backgrounds to explain the U.S. military position and outlook. Additionally, our foreign partners want to hear varied Service perspectives, and they generally have a heightened interest in hearing from the Marine Corps.

However, the Marine Corps has limited manpower and cannot put attachés everywhere. Currently, there are less than 40 Marine attachés worldwide. Consequently, the Corps attempts to

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attaché's role. I have lost count of the number of senior Marine leaders who practically began their first conversation with me by saying, "I know you do not work for me." They thought that because someone else pays the bills they could not or should not task me. They have been led to believe that while on this "external" billet, the Marine Corps does not get a say in how I am employed. The truth, which I was always quick to explain, is that a Marine attaché is constantly working for the Marine Corps. He is the public face of the Marine Corps overseas, he speaks in the name of the Commandant, he implements the Commandant's guidance in his discussions with foreign partners, and he is the medium through which most foreign military leaders communicate with the Commandant.

In fact, on a daily basis the attaché brings the most value to the U.S. Government in his role as an educator in Marine Corps 101 and as a translator

place Marine attachés in countries that have significant Marine Corps equities. This makes it even harder to understand why we do not leverage these assets more. In fact, a Marine attaché serving in his accredited country cannot open his mouth without conducting security cooperation. Every interaction he has with the host nation—which is near constant—is conveying a message regarding not only the U.S. interest in and commitment to the host nation, but those of the Marine Corps as well. He should not be doing this without direct input from the Marine Corps he is representing.

As the Commandant's representative, the Marine attaché also has remarkable access to the host-nation military and government. While other offices often have good access in niche areas, because of the role of an attaché as the official representative of his military, he tends to be welcomed across the military and even in other parts of the govern-

ment. The Marine attaché is especially suited for this role because of the Corps' proficiency in integrating fires across the geographic domains, as well as the reputation it has built for responding rapidly to disasters around the world. As a result, the Marine attaché builds hundreds of relationships in his country of accreditation that can assist the U.S. Marine Corps in improving its own training, security cooperation, and partner relationships.

### Task Me

With all that Marine attachés can add to the Marine Corps' worldwide mission, it is a shame that the Marine Corps does not do a better job of leveraging them. Marine leaders, from Commandant to geographical Service component staffs and everyone in between, should not think twice before reaching out to their attachés. We exist to support your interests, programs, and policies. Tell us what you want to do, ask us our opinion of your initiatives, and tell us what you do not know or are trying to understand about our host country. That is why we exist.

Do not worry about whether we have other tasks or not. We are used to the deluge, but are happy to spend our time and effort on issues that we know matter to someone back home. And in the end, the goal is a better U.S. foreign policy and the protection of U.S. interests. Working Marine Corps-specific issues helps that. Furthermore, in the Embassy environment, there is rarely an issue, once we are aware of it, that is not important to several of our bosses and partners—both in the host country and the interagency.

So let me work for you. It will help me do my job by helping me understand what people need to know, and help you do yours by exercising the tool that the Marine Corps has spent time, money, and personnel costs putting in place. Task me . . . please.



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