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Space Assets: Key Combat Enabler for Multinational Force West

By MAJ Michael Russell

UFO, GPS, DSP. What do these three acronyms have in common? If you answered Space, as in “the final frontier,” then you’re absolutely correct. Each acronym (UFO — Ultrahigh Frequency Follow-On, GPS — Global Positioning System and DSP — Defense Support Program) represents a different constellation of Department of Defense satellites; satellites that provide critical combat support to warfighters around the globe. Those Space professionals reading this will see this opening statement as a real “duh” kind of thing, but to a group of U.S. Marines who knew nothing about space support, they became central to acquiring support they never dreamed possible.

In Iraq, Space teams are supporting the division, multinational corps, and combined air and ground component headquarters levels, all of whom are supporting the Global War on Terror.

One Army Space Support Team recently returned from Iraq and although they were only at half strength, they made a huge difference for some U.S. Marines and they brought Space support to a whole new level in the war on terror.

At an outpost in Iraq, a Joint Space Support Team, supporting the I Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward), turned those Space assets mentioned above into combat enablers on a daily basis during their tour of duty. They were breaking new ground. The team, which is the first and only Joint Space Support Team in the United States Central Command Area of Responsibility, consisted of Soldiers, Marines and an Airman.

This unique team was led by a Space-smart Marine Corps artillery officer. “This is a complex leadership position,” said MAJ Michael Russell, team leader of the Army Space Support Team that was wrapped into the

Joint effort. “He had to be able to communicate in three different languages (Marine-speak, Army-speak and Air Force-speak) and then he had to help the joint team members produce meaningful and effectively tailored products to support a variety of operations with differing needs.”

Many people probably think that a Space product will be as helpful to an aviator as it would be to a grunt, but this is not the case. Marine Regimental Combat Teams have different missions and therefore different informational parameters than an Army Brigade Combat Team, or a Marine Air Wing, or a Marine Expeditionary Unit.

A Marine Chief Warrant Officer 2, also an artillery officer, assisted the Air Force and Army members in the integration of automation and Space effects to Marine ground operations.

The Army Space Support Team was from U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command/U.S. Army Forces Strategic Command at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo. It was a 3-man team and besides Russell, an experienced Space Operations Officer (FA40), it consisted of an Intelligence Sergeant and a Topographic Specialist. The Air Force contribution to the Joint team was a Space Weapons Officer.

The Joint Space Support Team is responsible for integrating space assets and effects into operations across the Al Anbar Province in western Iraq. They directly support I Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) and all subordinate units in the province. Within military occupation specialties of combat, combat support and combat service support, Space is combat support, akin to intelligence or communications.

The Army and Air Force members of the team bring a wealth of Space equipment to the fight in Iraq: Iridium



Soldiers check on a satellite antenna that is used to provide space support to the warfighter.

Satellite cell phones, a SATURN antenna dish for secure and non-secure global network access, an Air Force system to receive satellite broadcasts, and computer hardware and software to put these and other tools to good use.

“We have a good equipment set to fall in on in theater,” said SGT George Mead, Army Space Support Team member. “As with everything else, we had to modernize it as we went. We would refurbish, repair and update it as required in order to maintain the level of support the units required.”

If there existed a piece of equipment that the team felt would help them prosecute the fight, they would go after it and see if they could add it to their arsenal. Their bottom line was whether or not it would support the warfighters in the field.

However, it’s not the equipment that the Marines were missing so much as the Army and Air Force knowledge of how to acquire the benefits Space can provide. This knowledge, expressed in the idioms of the respective services was not always easy to decipher and use effectively.

“This is where the team’s commander really earned his money” said Russell. “He was an enabler, giving us the support and information we needed to be able to produce precise, targeted products and to provide vital information to the entire spectrum of units operating in our corner of Iraq. He worked through the Marine Corps structure and helped us to be as effective as we could possibly be.”

Historically, Space support to the warfighter has encompassed satellite communications, GPS navigation for ground troops and weather forecasting. Today’s Space applications go beyond these traditional products. Space now plays a significant role in many missions, such as detecting and disseminating warning of theater ballistic missile launches, providing precise navigation solutions for a variety of munitions like the Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System and Army Tactical Missile System, and actively engaging in

the search for downed aviators and missing persons during a Personnel Recovery Operation. The I Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) Joint Space Team has supported all of these missions, and more.

“Our team, along with literally hundreds of Space personnel across the globe — from Baghdad, to Doha, to Colorado and California — stood ready to support the fight here in Iraq,” said Mead.

As each new Space Support Team rotates into theater, the Soldiers, Marines and Airmen not only appreciate what each brings to the fight, they build on it and the role Space plays in that fight simply grows. Russell’s team along with the Air Force member and the Marines who supported them are home now. A new team has fallen in on the equipment and is continuing the mission, enlarging the support they provide as ideas and concepts they try prove effective. It is the way of the military, no matter what service you are in.

The Joint Space Support Team is a success story. So much so, in fact, the next Marine Command in Al Anbar Province, II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) has continued to utilize the Joint Space Support Team that replaced Russell’s. According to JSSC team leader LTC Robert Terselic, “the U.S. fights as a Joint team ... it only makes sense that our Space team is Joint.”

MAJ Michael J. Russell entered the U.S. Army in 1989 as an Infantry Private in the 1st Ranger Battalion. He was commissioned through Officer Candidate School in 1995 into the Infantry. He served in the Panama Invasion and Operation Iraqi Freedom I. Russell’s space assignments include: Space Operations Officer, U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll, U.S. Army Space & Missile Defense Command and, most recently as the Army Space Support Team (ARSST) 4 Team Leader in 2nd Space Company for the First Marine Expeditionary Force in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He is currently the commander of 2nd Space Company, 1st Space Battalion, 1st Space Brigade.