Case Study

U.S. Marine Forces Reserve Deploys IP Videoconferening

VCON
VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

Introduction

For armed services personnel, effective and reliable communications technologies are among the most valuable weapons at their disposal. When in 2001 the Marine Forces Reserves (MFR) commanders were reviewing the communications tools provided to Marine Forces Reserves Reserve Training Centers across the country, they realized that videoconferencing should be part of the mix. Today over 60 of the 188 reserve training centers in the United States have VCON ViGO systems installed for ad hoc and scheduled meetings. A VCON Media Xchange Manager (MXM) permits centralized management of the network and end points from a single point in New Orleans at the MFR information technology operations center.

Marine Forces Reserve on stand-by

The mission of Marine Forces Reserve is to augment and reinforce active Marine forces in time of war, national emergency or contingency operations, provide personnel and operational temporary relief for the active forces in peacetime, and provide service to the community.

Centers managing battalions, regiments and divisions host commanders' offices and manage the day to day operations of local or regional MFR projects. Some of the communications between battalion personnel and their commanding officers is in the form of telephone calls. All commanding officers also have laptops or personal computers for MFR use. E-mail services are hosted by the MFR headquarters in New Orleans as well as in the larger centers where IT has deployed Exchange servers.

CASE STUDY QUICK FACTS

MXM Size: 100-user license

Number of Desktop Endpoints: 60 VCON ViGOs

MCUs Deployed: Cisco 3540 with T.120 module

Most Valuable MXM Features:

- Administration: remote endpoint configuration/support and dial plan configuration

- Management: event log (for troubleshooting purposes) and
gatekeeper for presence and directory services

- Applications: Integrated Collaboration Environment for PowerPoint presentations
and Ad-hoc conferences

Communication between centers travels over multiple parallel Frame Relay networks. For tasks such as command and control of reserve personnel and the simple recording of system inventory and maintenance, each of the 188 centers has a T1 (using Frame Relay) providing two Private Virtual Circuits, one to headquarters in New Orleans and the other to the back up center in Kansas City, MO.

While most communications are via e-mail and telephone, the body language and non-verbal communications available through a videoconference are valuable to evaluate subordinates and for those in smaller centers to feel a part of the larger battalion or division.

Management challenges with Solutions

When the 60 ViGOs were ready to be deployed in the field, the video network administrator, Lee Cassingham, trained the handful of personnel who were going to be performing other maintenance tasks at key centers on the installation of the VCON ViGO software. "We had the human resources going out to the field for other reasons already so adding a ViGO installation was not a major burden for us or the field offices," recalls Cassingham. "Our firewall is at the network egress point here in New Orleans so we didn't have any security concerns, however, we had all the videoconferencing systems register with the MXM here in order to provide everyone with the same level of technical support and management, regardless of the size of their center or the technical training of the IT personnel based there."

Cassingham says that it took less than two hours per location to install the software and camera, perform the configuration, demonstration and to train the users on their system. "We control what is loaded on these computers in the field anyway, so we didn't
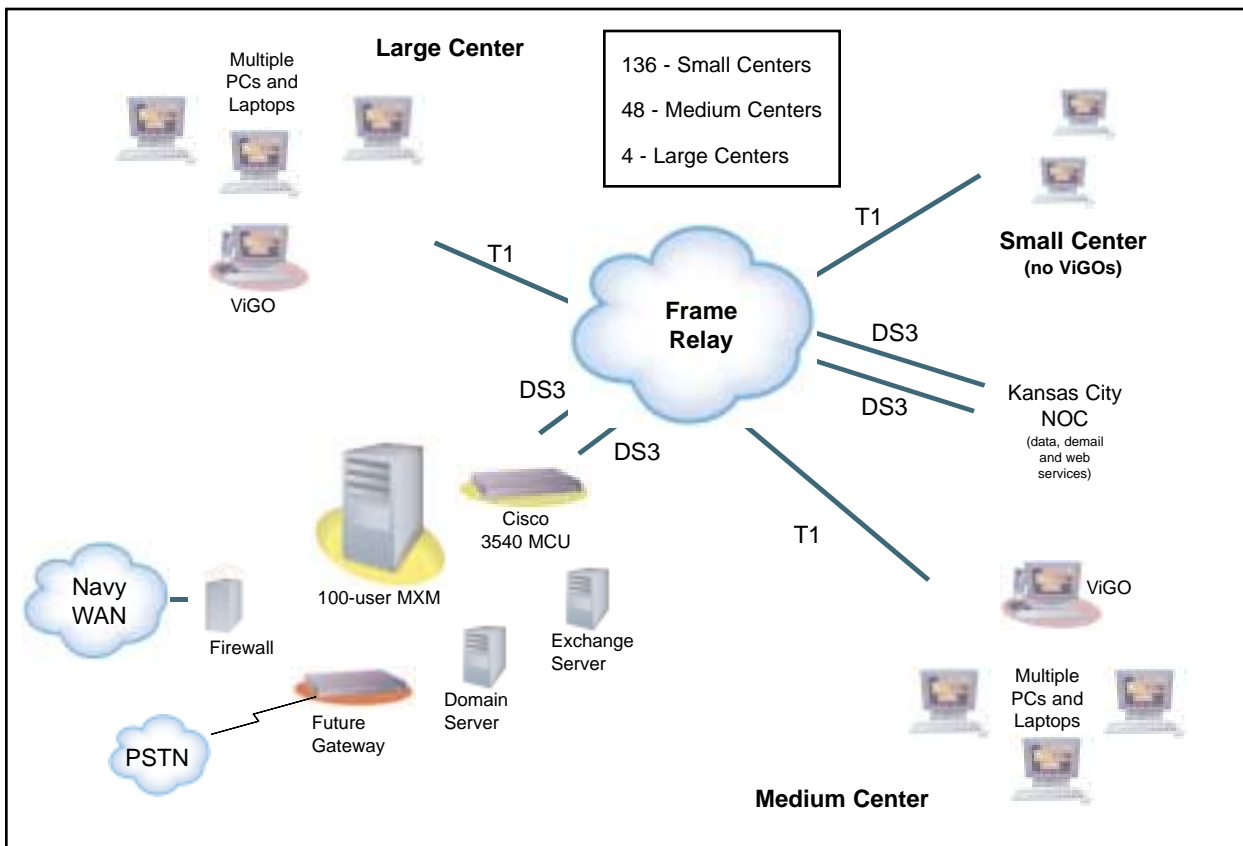
run into anything unexpected. In some instances, the ViGO is installed on a laptop that is shared by center staff."

On occasion, the ViGOs have been used to support remote technical services. "With the ViGO on a laptop, I instruct the staff member to log on from a location where I can see the problem they are having and I have a much

The MXM also makes it easy for all the system directories accessed by users to be kept current without local IT involvement. "The users don't want to remember an IP address or an awkward alias. With MXM and LDAP they just look at their PC screen. They know who's available immediately and click on the name of the person with whom they want to meet."

"They can take the ViGO anywhere in the center and plug it into the IP network and when the application is launched the MXM automatically knows where it is and its alias."

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better understanding of the trouble as well as greater ability to give precise instructions."

For multipoint conferences, the MFR has a Cisco 3540 capable of supporting up to 100 concurrent users. "We needed the ability to put everyone in the same meeting," says Cassingham, who has also installed and who supports the T.120 module on the MCU. "Many of the meetings involve application and data sharing so we feel that a personal computer paradigm is really the only realistic solution for our applications."

The MXM has helped Cassingham to provide consistent virtual technical support to the ViGO users in the remote centers. "On occasion we have had systems that need to have the audio settings reset. With the MXM, I can do that remotely. Most of the support issues I encounter with our ViGOs are due to people making changes in the PCs without understanding the impact those might have on their ability to communicate."

Looking forward

In the future, Cassingham is planning to expand the use of videoconferencing to include distance learning applications. He has purchased a gateway and expects to work more closely with the distance learning project which is currently an ISDN deployment. "Many of our locations don't have ISDN and we want to make it easier to offer all our centers consistent and timely training," said Cassingham. "With VCON ViGOs and a gateway deployed, we can connect one ISDN system to our MCU and everyone who will need to can attend training from their desktop."

Cassingham says that as usage increases, he anticipates expanding the ViGO deployment at the request of battalion commanders who require company commanders or others to be enabled with IP videoconferencing technology.

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