

The 4th Marine Regiment

The fight tonight force
by Capt Patrick A. Majeski

In the *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG)*, Gen Berger declared the III MEF is the main effort of the Marine Corps as a fight-tonight force against a near-peer adversary.¹ Gen Berger also cites his predecessor to highlight that the Marine Corps is not organized, trained, equipped, nor postured to fight a peer-adversary tonight.² If III MEF is the main effort, then Marines deploying to the 7th Fleet area of responsibility should orient on Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), China, or Russia as their potential adversary. These three countries share baseline tactical methodologies, but more importantly, they share similar environmental considerations: cold, mountainous terrain. In 1950, much of the First Marine Provisional Brigade's leadership were veterans of World War II, and their combat experience against a peer-adversary enabled the Marines to embark in two weeks and successfully engage the enemy at the Pusan perimeter. Today, an overwhelming majority of combat veterans on active duty gained their experience from the Global War on Terror (GWOT), a predominantly counter-insurgency (COIN) fight. If III MEF is called to fight tonight against the DPRK, it will rely heavily upon a veteran knowledge reservoir steeped in COIN warfare rather than conventional warfare against a near-peer adversary. The problem then is how does the Marine Corps prepare deployable units for a short notice conventional war with the DPRK?

To train for a conventional war against the DPRK, the Marine Corps must reconsider its force design to fully exploit the training opportunities of its

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existing infrastructure. Specifically, the Mountain Warfare Training Center (MWTC) in Bridgeport, CA, should not only be a training site for pre-deployment training programs but also a camp to permanently station an infantry regiment. The 4th Marine Regiment, overseas since World War II, is the most logical unit to fill this demand. The first, second, and third battalions of the 4th Mar, scattered amongst the 1st

for a near-peer fight in the projected operating environment. To support the CPG, the 4th Marine Regiment should displace to the MWTC, consolidate its organic units, and provide battalions that are saturated in mountain warfare for rotational deployments to the 31st MEU.

Counterargument

There are two counterarguments to this proposal: one is based on a myth, while the other is a legitimate concern. First, there is a myth that the 4th Marine Regiment is prohibited from returning to the continental United States because GEN Wainwright ordered the regiment to burn its colors

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Mar Div, should consolidate under this parent command as its rightful organic units. These battalions would provide subject matter expertise in mountain warfare during rotational deployments as the GCE of the 31st MEU. Infantry battalions deploying under the unit deployment program (UDP) will execute the Mountain Warfare Training Exercise (MWTX) to establish a baseline capability of operating in this environment. Although it would be a sizeable near-term investment, this change would produce long-term gains that better postures the organization

and surrender to the Japanese during the siege of Corregidor in the Philippines on 26 May 1942.³ The true story is that the Marine Corps created the UDP in 1977 to reduce the number of unaccompanied tours to Okinawa. This was achieved by posting the 4th and 9th Marine Regiments on Okinawa while their subordinate battalions were permanently stationed state-side, rotating to the island on six-month deployments.⁴ Second, if the 4th Marine Regiment is moved to MWTC, there will not be a higher headquarters for units deploying to Okinawa under the

UDP. While this is a legitimate concern, the proposed solution is that both elements would fall under the operational control of the 31st MEU. A MAGTF does not have a standard structure but is rather task-organized to accomplish the mission.⁵ In this case, battalions of the 4th Marine Regiment would be the GCE of the 31st MEU, while UDP battalions would be best used to conduct expeditionary advanced base operations. The UDP should be reinforced with a HIMARS battery to create a competitive advantage and facilitate deterrence pursuant to the CPG.⁶ Aligning both battalions under the MEU improves command relationships and facilitates greater naval integration for littoral operations in a contested environment.

Historical Context

In 1950, the retainer of World War II veterans enabled the Marine Corps to mobilize a brigade in two weeks and achieve institutional lore at places like the Pusan Perimeter, Inchon, and the Chosin Reservoir. On 25 June 1950, 75,000 soldiers of the North Korean People's Army (KPA) crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded South Korea.⁷ On 2 July 1950, the FMF, Pacific was directed to deploy a Marine Air-Ground Brigade for combat employment overseas.⁸ By 14 July 1950, 6,500 Marines of the First Provisional Marine Brigade were loaded and setting sail from the coast of California to engage in combat operations against the KPA.⁹ In 1951, the Marine Corps established the MWTC in Bridgeport, CA, to train follow-on forces in an environment similar to North Korea. Thinking offensively, the Marine Corps should station the 4th Marine Regiment at MWTC to man, train, and equip a mountain warfare centric force capable of thriving in the III MEF area of responsibility.

Sustaining the Transformation

The most glaring requirement to permanently station an entire regiment at MWTC is the construction of bachelor enlisted quarters to berth the several thousand additional Marines. However, this is also a prime opportunity build a camp that—unlike Lejeune, Twentynine Palms, Pendleton, and



The Mountain Warfare Training Center's environment is very similar to the terrain and weather of North Korea. (Photo by Sgt Anthony Ortiz)

Kaneohe—is designed with cohesion in mind. A recruit's first exposure to the Marine Corps is the squad bay where barriers are broken down and horizontal cohesion; the intangible factor that determines success on the battlefield is effectively fostered.¹⁰ But when Marines join their first unit, they are isolated in two-to-a-room dormitory-style berthing that reverses the transformation. Instead, the existing lower base camp at MWTC is the perfect model to build BEQs for the battalions of 4th Marine Regiment. These squad bays are constructed to endure the harsh winters while providing an open floor plan for living, sleeping, and hygiene that forces Marines to interact. In the middle of the squad bay should be locked weapons racks where Marines live with and care for “their best friend ... their life.”¹¹ At the end of the squad bay should be a modest desk for the platoon commander and platoon sergeant to facilitate supervision and vertical cohesion.¹² The squad bays of the 4th Maine Regiment would be built to achieve the principles of *MCRP 6-11D, Sustaining the Transformation*, that adjacent units will seek to emulate.

Warfighting

MCDP 1, Warfighting, states, “the purpose of all training is to develop

forces that can win in combat.”¹³ Understanding the environment is critical to comprehend the impacts of terrain and weather on military operations.¹⁴ MWTC is strikingly similar to the mountain ranges of the DPRK, characterized by steep slopes, higher elevation, and heavy snowfall.¹⁵ From a maneuver perspective, winter weather in the mountains significantly challenges mobility but also masks the movement of friendly forces. Resupply in this environment will be constrained, and fires assets will have limited ordinance to prosecute high payoff targets. However, the environment can be used to increase the effects of fires. In the winter, indirect fire systems can be employed to set off avalanches in enemy maneuver corridors.¹⁶ In the summer, tactical employment of Mk-77 bombs will enable controlled wildfires to divert enemy units onto preferred avenues approach.¹⁷ Command and control (C2) in the mountainous environment will further require adaptive thinkers to effectively employ mission tactics and vintage high frequency assets that may be unfamiliar to Global War on Terror veterans. Force protection may be a broad category, but an essential training objective is to provide warfighters with firsthand experience on how to protect themselves against the fierce attacks of

winter weather. Through this experience, the inputs of the 4th Marine Regiment may inform updates to programs of record and acquisitions, such as updating cold weather gear or maybe the Jetboil®. Stationing a regiment to train in this environment will produce more mountain warfare subject matter experts that, as they progress in their careers, will carry forward their informed perspectives to the rest of the fleet.

Orienting on the enemy is a fundamental aspect of maneuver warfare to attack the enemy system.¹⁸ The 4th Marines can study KPA tactics which oversimplified involves a 3:1 troop concentration at a specific point supported by indirect fire with a preference for maneuver during adverse weather and periods of darkness.¹⁹ Testing offensive and defensive tactics against the perceived threat is optimized by training in an emulative environment. Upon deploying as the GCE of the 31st MEU in support of the 7th Fleet, battalions of the 4th Marine Regiment will be well prepared to thrive in the projected operating environment against a tangible enemy. Additionally, these mountain warfare battalions trained in DPRK tactics will provide outstanding red cells and red teams for units undergoing MWTX. Red cells can allow operational planning teams to identify strengths and weaknesses of their plans, but it relies heavily on the competency of the red cell.²⁰ Red teams can similarly provide outstanding training value but require a high degree of professionalism and understanding of enemy tactics. The training value of stationing the 4th Marines at MWTC is not limited to providing highly capable units to the 31st MEU but also highly competent opposition forces to exercising units during MWTX.

Conclusion

In 1951, the Marine Corps deduced that Bridgeport, CA, was a suitable location to train Marines to thrive against a fight with the KPA. Nearly 70 years later, the MWTC continues to provide a mountain warfare block for pre-deployment training programs, but this is merely scratching the surface of the potential that this location can serve

to support the CPG. The transition from COIN to conventional warfare is a monumental shift in tactical focus. Waging a conventional battle in cold, mountainous terrain presents additional challenges including environmental and human factors that can determine success or failure. Our projected adversary, the KPA, has the advantage as they train to employ the environment to support their scheme of maneuver. To gain an advantage, the Marine Corps should consolidate the 4th Marine Regiment at MWTC with its organic battalions to man, train, and equip mountain war-

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fare-centric fighting forces. If existing command relationships are retained, the 3d Mar Div will have two fully manned organic regiments to support III MEF. 3dMar is stationed on an island, and 4th Mar will be stationed in the mountains, both are complementary environments to conduct combat operations in the Pacific area of operations. Leaving the 4th Mar in Okinawa does not posture the Marine Corps for a fight tonight with a peer-adversary. Although their presence in Okinawa looks good on a C2 diagram, it does little to provide units that are effectively prepared for their perceived adversary. The 4th Mar should move to MWTC to man, train, and equip mountain warriors capable of winning battles in the III MEF area of operations.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington DC: July 2019).
2. Ibid.

3. Matthew Burke, "Honor vs. Dishonor: The Story of the Pacific's 4th Marine Regiment," *Stars and Stripes*, (April 2018), available at <https://www.stripes.com>.

4. Jason Bohm, *From the Cold War to ISIL: One Marine's Journey*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019).

5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington DC: 1997).

6. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

7. Victor Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the United States Marine Corps*, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1984).

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 6-11D, Sustaining the Transformation*, (Washington DC: 1999).

11. William H. Rupertus, "Riflemen's Creed," *USMC Press*, (n.d.), available at <http://www.usmcpres.com>.

12. *MCRP 6-11D, Sustaining the Transformation*.

13. *MCDP, Warfighting*.

14. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

15. Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, *North Korea Country Handbook*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

16. Robert Rice Jr., et al, "Avalanche Hazard Reduction Using the Avalanche Guard: A Cache and Mortar Technology," (Merced, CA: University of California Merced, 2005).

17. Jordan Golson, "The Flame-Throwing Helicopter That Fights Wildfires," *Wired*, (August 2015), available at <https://www.wired.com>.

18. *MCDP 1, Warfighting*.

19. James Minnich, *North Korean Tactics*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and Staff College, 2001).

20. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 5-10, Marine Corps Planning Process*, (Washington, DC: 2016).

