Reserves in Service-Level Training

An overlooked gap

by Maj Andrew Bender

>Maj Bender is currently completing the Command and Staff College. His last assignment was with TTECG in Twentynine Palms, CA, where he was integrally involved in SLTE planning. He has over 24 years of service, including both active and reserve duty, and has mobilized twice as a Marine in the Selected Marine Corps Reserve and is currently serving in the Active Reserve.

The Marine Corps is undergoing constant and significant change under Force Design. These diverse and comprehensive changes include technological growth and structural improvements, ranging from Infantry Battalion Experimentation to live, virtual, and constructed training structures through command-and-control systems—to name a few. Despite this transitional period, there remain vital areas that are not addressed by Force Design. Namely, the intersection between the Marine Forces Reserve (MFR) and the Service Level Training Exercise (SLTE) continues to leave a significant gap in our ability to train and prepare our reserve forces. As I have recently completed the planning conference cycle for the upcoming Reserve-SLTE (R-SLTE) and have been directly involved in the past two years' worth of SLTEs for both active and reserve elements, I wish to convey some key facets that are often missed and a few recommendations moving forward that fill the gap identified—all in an effort to enhance our lethality as a Corps.

Active component SLTEs are facilitated by MAGTF Training Command and include four separate training components, including the Integrated Training Exercise (ITX), MAGTF Warfighting Exercise (MWX), Adversary Force Exercise (AFX), as well as the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC) live-fire Mountain Training Exercise (MTX) package.[1] Tactical Training & Exercise Control Group (TTECG) is the Office of Primary Responsibility for the ITX, AFX, and MTX live-fire packages at MCAGCC, as well as being integrally involved in the facilitation of MWX.[2] These varied component training packages are all unique and focus on different training objectives and skill sets. The MTX is on the back end of a unit's training package at the Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, CA, and emphasizes an abbreviated live-fire package without battalion or regimental collective events. The MWX is a force-on-force non-live-fire training event that combines the ITX-slated units versus the AFX-slated units, often with additional reinforcing units. The AFX incorporates the slated adversary infantry battalion (REIN) from the MWX into an urban-focused training package. The MWXs generally vary in size between 6,000–10,000 personnel, granting a unique opportunity to plan and operate against a thinking enemy at a scale seldom reached in a battalion or regiment's normal training calendar. The ITX is focused on integrating the various combined arms within the MAGTF in a multi-domain environment and to "meet training standards in select METs *(Mission Essential Tasks)* and designated supporting T&R events."[3] Functionally, the ITX battalions conduct the largest and most comprehensive live-fire package. The ITX is therefore the model for the R-SLTE with some notable differences.

The active component ITX has an established timeline with a progressive approach meant to build upon each previous event. This approach for the ground combat element begins live-fire training with platoon-supported attacks as well as the Fire Support Coordination Exercise, the latter to enhance the ability to coordinate fires in support of maneuver. This training continuum progresses through company supported attacks, into the Movement to Contact, a company (REIN) exercise over distance, and eventually culminates in a regiment controlled, dual battalion concurrent live-fire event over four days, to include additional virtual and constructed elements to facilitate a regimental security area (MAGTF Distributed Maneuver Exercise or MDMX). Although varying slightly for each respective SLTE, the collective events beyond company attacks at Range 400 usually start around training day fourteen. More holistically, the current Combat Center Order specifies a 29-day ITX, not including the 8 Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, and Integration (RSO&I) days.[4] In practice, the upcoming SLTE (SLTE 5-24) will be a 31-day continuum before the MWX, which is generally scheduled for an additional 6 training days in duration.[5] Taken as a whole, the active component units have eight established RSO&I days, with

TTECG beginning their instruction on the fifth day.[6] Thus, the entire training continuum is 39 days, including the additional 6 days of training associated with MWX.

Although MFR has routinely taken part in the SLTE-Program (SLTE-P) since at least the initiation of the Combined Arms Exercise, there are fundamental differences between an active component SLTE and an R-SLTE.[7] Most importantly, the *Marine Corps Reserve Administrative Management Manual* (*MCRAMM*) limits the standard annual training period to fourteen training days and not more than fifteen days, including travel, as the established standard.[8] In this case, the units slated for R-SLTE travel to MCAGCC in Twentynine Palms, CA. This equates to twelve training days, as stipulated by the Combat Center Order, with an additional two RSO&I days on the front, not to mention the requisite washdown and turn-in on the back end, which is taken out of hide without extra days being attached.[9] Historically, the R-SLTE also occurs during the summer to accommodate the large numbers of Selected Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR) personnel attending college, further enhancing challenges associated with limited acclimation. This upcoming R-SLTE includes a hybrid event called the Reserve Integrated Collective Event (RICE), which seeks to get after combined arms integration at the battalion level within the constraints given in the MCRAMM and MCO on SLTE-P. The R-SLTE schedule does not normally include an MTC or MDMX. Previous iterations of the R-SLTE have included abbreviated attempts to get after a condensed version of the active component SLTE construct with limited success. In summary, the R-SLTE has fourteen total days (twelve training and two RSO&I), which is less than half the time allotted for the active component SLTEs.

The R-SLTE construct fails to provide a comparable amount of time or quality in battalion or regimental-level operations compared to the normal active component ITX. This would include live-fire, force-on-force (MWX), and live, virtual, and constructed scenarios. The Reserve Integrated Collective Event, as crafted for the upcoming R-SLTE, comprises two days in total duration and includes a single company offense, with a dual company defense with battalion oversight. While remaining the most aggressive and realistic training continuum given the constraints, this is a far cry from the MDMX's four live-fire days of complicated, simultaneous, and comprehensive actions across the MAGTF. This is fundamentally not the fault of MFR, MAGTF Training Command, or TTECG. This is a system limitation that has been largely ignored. The MCRAMM and SLTE-P MCOs both explicitly provide clear constraints, which the R-SLTE adheres to and endeavors to adjust to. Moreover, much of the *MCRAMM* is based on Title X of the United States Code, which further limits the flexibility of even the most innovative and fastidious planners and commanders. None of this, however, changes the simple fact that the reserve staffs and commanders, from battalions and regiments, are not getting anywhere close to the same opportunity to improve their lethality as a unit. A hybrid two-day collective event encompassing two live-fire training days is remarkably different from six live-fire training days (MTC/MDMX) and an additional six training days of force-on-force (MWX). This gap is further widened when we factor in the R-SLTE's two planning days with the five planning days for the active SLTE.

Although MFR has routinely taken part in the SLTE-Program (SLTE-P) ... there are fundamental differences between an active component SLTE and an R-SLTE.

A brief mention of three points that may be raised by some readers. The first is extended annual training. While an extended annual training period is certainly possible, it also incurs the increased expenditure to fund hundreds of Marines. This makes this course of action inherently dependent on the fiscal environment and cannot be assumed to recur annually. Historically speaking, extending annual training does not normally add significantly to the training periods in R-SLTEs. Another component is there are restraints on forcing individual Marines into training timelines beyond the standard as laid out in Title X U.S.C. The second point is mobilization orders. It is important to differentiate between R-SLTE-slated units and units officially mobilized to support Global Force Management missions because that mobilization supersedes the limitations laid out in an R-SLTE. The reality, though, is that this occurrence only reinforces the overall need to plug the gap more systematically because it likely means that organic battalions are being deployed as organized. The third point is the reduced or prioritized METs for mobilized units. The Total Force Mobilization and Deployment Plan, or what is more commonly known as the Reserve Activation, Integration and Deactivation, states that Plans, Policies, and Operations identifies the particular METs that are necessary (Commandant-directed) for the upcoming activation of the reserves and annotates those METs within the Notice of Intent to Activate.[10] This tailoring facilitates the Unit Readiness Plan executed during Phase 3 of the activation process and effectively prioritizes given METs over others.[11] While prioritization is logical, holistically, we cannot assume the mission will stay consistent throughout the competition continuum. More broadly, an emphasis on tailored posturing does not align with *Force Design 2030's* aspiration to "meet the demands of the *rapidly evolving* future operating environment (emphasis added)."[12] I would also call attention to the limited number of organic battalions within the combatant commands, let alone those in close proximity to our pacing threat.

Beyond question, the reserve component writ large is a vital contributor to our overall Corps' strength and versatility. The operations in Iraq and Afghanistan over the recent decades have once again demonstrated this basic truth. In an age of reduced manpower levels and challenged budgets, the integration of MFR and, particularly, the SMCR is likely to become even more pivotal to our Corps' combat capability. Unfortunately, there is a misalignment between what we are saying and what we are doing. As a baseline, the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* lays out the expectation that once mobilized, the "Reserve Component forces will undergo additional pre-deployment training to achieve the necessary readiness"[13] The idea of course would be to execute some type of pre-deployment training period at an intermediate location like what we incorporated before scheduled deployments in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. The broad-based supportability of this assumption is achievable, but it also carries tremendous limitations. Additionally, it emphasizes small-unit integration rather than battalion or larger integration due to the feasibility of raising units to competency in a single pre-deployment package. Perhaps most pressing, it also carries the inherent limitation of assuming the time necessary to conduct such an extended pre-deployment training program (PTP) in a near-peer fight (our directed pacing threat), as well as the questionable realism of mobilizing multiple battalions and regiments concurrently as part of that PTP. Notably, the creation of the SMCR and our current MARFORRES force structure was a byproduct of the Korean War, which demonstrated the absolute need to have a ready reserve force already postured to support the FMF.[14] After all, the motto of the 4th Tank Battalion, the most recently deactivated SMCR tank battalion, was "53 Days" because that was the length of time between initial notification of activation to their Marines' direct fire combat with the enemy halfway around the globe. Our current construct functionally prioritizes competency at the squad, platoon, and company levels within MFR. This is demonstrated, emphasized, and supported in the conduct of the R-SLTE, which remains the premier live-fire combined arms exercise. Moreover, SMCR units are normally disaggregated to a point that engenders a continued emphasis on company and below operations regarding their normal training calendar. While these truths are understood across the SMCR, we still maintain the same core competencies for both the active and reserve infantry battalions and regiments within the *Training & Readiness Manual* and according to the mission essential task list.[15] For example, the MET assessment for baseline, the lowest accepted level of proficiency for an infantry regiment includes offensive operations "capable of defeating a conventional enemy force, up to battalion strength, in prepared defensive positions."[16] The current R-SLTE fails to facilitate this core MET even remotely due to the limitations on time. Even the infantry battalion's mission essential task list includes the baseline expectation for "defeating a conventional enemy regiment-sized attack ... for a duration of time."[17] The gap between R-SLTE and our guiding documents is clear.

Many of our most influential and recent guiding documents reinforce the idea that we should train realistically, against our pacing threat, and *at all levels*. For example, *Training and Education 2030* states "training conditions must replicate current and future operating environments to ensure Marines and their units are prepared as the Nation's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness."[18] Interestingly, the same document also acknowledges that the incorporation of MWX has "led to a more realistic competition across a multi-domain environment."[19] In fact, the Marine Corps explicitly states that "we must transition from a legacy air-land battle paradigm to a 21st century, all-domain, joint, single battle mindset."[20] As we consider the tremendous changes in everything from command and control (C2) to kill web development, stand-in forces, and integration with naval composite warfare, as well as the technological developments such as L-MADIS and NMESIS, it is evident that current gaps in staff planning and integration will only compound over time, further limiting the scalability of integration of the SMCR. Lest we forget, the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* states, "Forces conducting EABO combine various forms of operations to persist within the reach of adversary lethal and nonlethal effects."[21]

Taken from another perspective, MFR also provides guidance to its forces to train and prepare for combat. The *MFR Campaign Plan 2030*, as an example, seeks to be ready, relevant, and responsive.[22] Specifically, it clarifies that "to be responsive means to be agile, scalable, and tailorable to meet the requirements of the Gaining Force Commander."[23] Notably, MFR also raises the issue of our pacing threat continuing to advance in "the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomy into their C2, weapon systems and platforms, and decision-making architecture."[24] So, holistically, we have both MFR and the broader Marine Corps acknowledging that our pacing threat is continuing to grow and advance, as we are innovating and enhancing our systems, much of which is focused on preparing our forces to operate within range of enemy weapons. Notably, we are already employing our reserve battalions as part of our Unit Deployment Program, at least to a limited extent. Yet, our premier Service-level training package for the reserves (R-SLTE) is limited to a company or two under a single battalion for two days on a once-a-year continuum. This is an absolute misalignment with Force Design and fails to realistically prepare our reserve staffs and commanders for combat.

We can correct this shortfall with a multi-pronged approach. To practically move to rectify the gap, we must utilize the established constructs and systems to exercise the battalion and regimental staffs. First, we mandate each MEF, with the respective SLTEs they are responsible for, to incorporate MFR personnel and units into their training. Ideally, there would be a small detachment from the respective command elements. Specifically, the Active

Reserve Liaison at each MEF must work with either 23rd or 25th Mar to identify a staff planner to augment the respective slated regiment and battalion for the active component SLTEs. Shortfalls in staffs are certainly a routine occurrence with the contemporary active component, so this moves to alleviate that existing shortfall and moves the total force considerably forward regarding competency in planning and C2 from the reserve staffs. This has the corollary effect of enhancing the interoperability of the SMCR and the FMF. The iterations to conduct planning for the MTC, MDMX, and MWX are second to none and remain an established framework to build experience. A mobilization for between 45–60 days is likely sufficient but should be tailor-made for the respective individual Marine. An important factor to remember is that individual augmentees and aggregated detachments are likely to remain a consistent force-providing solution, especially if we are engaged in a prolonged conventional fight. One of the fundamental issues with the SMCR is the fact that the *MCRAMM* is unlikely to change in the near term, and recruitment and retention will limit the feasibility of requiring Marines to activate greater than the duration already required within the *MCRAMM*. Therefore, we must leverage those officers and SNCOs with the flexibility in their civilian employment to allow their activation when they have it. A one-size-fits-all approach sounds equitable, but it is *not* realistic when we are talking training time for the reserve component.

Second, we increase the reserve throughput of personnel through the Advanced Maneuver Warfare Course facilitated by the Marine Corps Tactics and Operations Group. This course is designed specifically to build competency for operations officers, operations chiefs, intelligence officers, and intelligence chiefs. Focused on operational planning, this course is valuable and already exists; we simply need expanded opportunities for the SMCR. This could even look like a tailored reserve Advanced Maneuver Warfare Course to ensure compliance with the *MCRAMM* and alleviate funding concerns. Currently, an individual must be either slated for or currently serving in one of the key billets listed above. The result for the SMCR is that the majority of reserve battalions are unlikely to have more than a single graduate on their staff. This is insufficient. While active component battalion and regimental staffs may also be limited in their pool of graduates, they have far more opportunities to leverage their collective education due to the sheer number of training days throughout the training calendar as compared to the reserves. Post company command captains would make strong candidates, regardless of whether they are slated to fill an assistant operations officer or another billet within the battalions. Essentially, removing or at least broadening the billets for the SMCR will open opportunities. Of note, with the identified shortfalls in C2 proficiency at the battalion and regimental levels for both active and reserve components, it may be prudent to enhance the throughput across the board.

Third, we must incorporate verbiage in the next annual update for Force Design to include the importance of scalability of the reserve component to include the battalion level (planning at a minimum) to force the MEFs and MFR to prioritize the staff preparation and interoperability of the reserve battalions. Without prioritization at the higher command levels, it is too easy to maintain the status quo. Let's face it, the contemporary environment has ample factors to discourage risk. The reality, though, is that a fight with a near-peer enemy, especially one within the construct of EABO, will very likely result in high casualty counts and delays in support for those forward units. This means units will have to endure extreme challenges for an unknown period under unforeseeable circumstances. We owe our Marines the best opportunities to prepare and be ready. Gaining buy-in at the command level, especially the general-officer level, is the first major step toward ensuring manpower and funding facilitate its accomplishment.

The final recommendation is to update the MCRAMM for the contemporary operating environment. The MCRAMM is outdated and constrains our ability to man, train, and equip our Corps to fight our adversaries. Understanding this is largely a Title X issue and recognizing the inherent implications for both recruitment and retention; as a Service, we must start the process of finding a more adaptive guiding document that helps enable our success rather than inhibiting it. Even if it takes years to attain, the sooner we can move to enhance its applicability, the better prepared our future Marines will be.

History confirms the futility of assuming time to train and prepare units before combat operations. Our reserve component is integral to our Corps' overall combat capability, and we must ensure they are ready for the fight, at all levels—and not just company and below. While some have argued that smaller reserve units should fall under an active component parent unit, that is certainly not the way the SMCR or MFR more broadly is currently constructed and would likely require even more profound changes in force structure and funding than what I am proposing. Whether as an organic unit, a detachment from a unit, or as individual augmentees, a near-peer fight will likely exact a tax in blood that will necessitate tapping into the reserve component much quicker than any of us would prefer. Moreover, the scalability at all levels provides more depth in our bench and therefore improves our versatility and resilience as a Corps. We must do all we can to prepare our warriors now. The idea that the active component will handle a full-on conflict with our pacing threat without integration of the reserves is not realistic. While the MCRAMM may limit the opportunity for larger collective staff training, we as a Corps must do a better job of leveraging our existing structures to provide scalability and a better-prepared and ready reserve force. We do not choose the clime and place of our next fight but merely adapt and overcome given the limitations, constraints, and restraints we must endure. While we have little to say as to the next time we will be required to fight, it is incumbent upon us to make positive change in areas where

we can when we do have some control. The time to broaden our expectations for the reserve component has come. We have danced around the facts for too long already. We are in our prep time!

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 3500.11G,* (Washington, DC: July 2021).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, *CCO 3500.16A*, (Twentynine Palms: May 2020).

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1001R.1L,* (Washington, DC: March 2018).

9. *CCO 3500.16A.*

10. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 3061.1-V3,* (Washington, DC: June 2022).

11. Ibid.

12. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030,* (Washington, DC: March 2020).

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

14. Staff of the Marine Reserve Centennial Project, "History of the USMCR," *Marines.mil*, n.d., https://www.marforres.marines.mil/usmcr100/history; and T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

15. Headquarters Marine Corps, *NAVMC 3500.44D,* (Washington, DC: May 2020).

16. Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, *Training and Readiness Manual*, NAVMC 3500.44D (07 May 2020).

17. NAVMC 3500.44D, Headquarters Marine Corps, *Training and Readiness Manual*, Washington, DC, (07 May 2020).

18. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Training & Education 2030,* (Washington, DC: January 2023).

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Tentative Manual on Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations 2nd Edition,* (Washington, DC: May 2023).

22. Marine Forces Reserve, *MFR Campaign Plan 2030* (New Orleans: May 2023).

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.