For a Better Understanding of the Reserves

The modern reserve establishment brings significant capabilities to the 21st-century battlefield. Understanding and appreciating their service is critical to successful warfighting.

by Mr. Robert A. Jones

On a long-range motorized reconnaissance patrol during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, somewhere in the barren wilderness between northern Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, I almost stranded my entire force reconnaissance detachment in the middle of no-man's land. As a newly promoted captain in charge of a group of highly trained Marines, I was flush with confidence after several successful missions during the prelude to the air war and the trust of my higher command to operate independently far in front of the bulk of the coalition forces marshalling to the south. Tactically, I was sound. Our planning had been thorough and redundant. Air, artillery, and supporting units had been coordinated, and each Marine knew his job. Unfortunately, I did not fully know mine. With the mission complete and heading back to safety, we nearly ran out of fuel. Napoleon said that amateurs talk tactics and professionals talk logistics, and I had just shown myself to be a rank amateur. I was already feeling the embarrassment of what my commanding officer would say when he found out my predicament when, in the middle of the night, somewhere south of the border but far from home with the fuel gauges on E, my little convoy happened upon a small, forward-deployed Army Reserve logistics unit set up truck-stop style, almost intentionally to service those wayward warriors unused to long desert vehicle movements. Sweet relief. Not only did they have fuel, but in an adjacent tent, they had cold drinks and state-side snacks. For free. I half expected to have to sign a voucher or something, but, nope, everything was provided courtesy of the United States Army. I will never forget the Army Reserve E-5 in charge that night: like the 1st Company sergeant-cook Bulcke in *All Quiet on the Western Front,* she was "as fat as a hamster in winter" but she was pleasant, accommodating and had "trundle[d] [her] pots ... right up to the very front line."[1] I could not have been more impressed. Tanks and bellies full, we continued south. I omitted the unplanned fuel stop in my after-action report. Before this chance encounter, I had little understanding of the reserve capabilities of any of the Services. My opinion of and appreciation for the Army in general and the reserves in particular changed.

That respect only increased a few years later when I was assigned as the Inspector-Instructor (I-I) of a Marine Reserve rifle company in Akron, OH. The enlisted men of Kilo Company, 3/25 Mar were mostly college students and local blue-collar workers, and their officers were young professionals at the beginning of civilian careers after initial active-duty tours. They were smart and motivated, and while they fell a few notches below the spit and polish standard I had known in active-duty units, they were proficient with their weapons and liked to train—and they worked hard. Drill weekends started Friday evenings right after most had finished work or school: formation, weapons draw, as much administration as we could fit into a few hours, and then on buses for an all-night drive to the nearest live-fire training base, usually in another state. Upon arrival, the tactical training schedule began immediately and usually proceeded through the next night with minimal sleep and into the next day until the buses showed up mid-morning to haul everyone back to the reserve center, tired and filthy. It was then a race to get weapons clean, gear accounted for, and more admin completed before final formation, usually in the early evening, before everyone could go home—some driving several

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hours. I am amazed that we never lost a Marine due to a fatigue-induced traffic accident. My I-I staff was usually so worn out after drill, I made post-drill Mondays a day off. Most of the reservists did not get that luxury; the Monday after drill was a regular work or school day for them.

At Kilo Company, I learned to appreciate the different skill sets and different ways of thinking and problem solving that these reservists brought with them. During one Friday evening drill weekend muster, as my first sergeant and I casually observed the parking lot from a second story window of the reserve center, both of our jaws dropped as we witnessed a young assault section Marine park his vehicle, open the trunk, and pull out a Mk 153 Shoulder-Launched Multipurpose Assault Weapon (SMAW), which he had apparently brought from home. After his blood pressure stabilized, the first sergeant investigated and learned that it was not an actual SMAW but a complete, non-firing replica that the Marine had built on his own at the plastic fabrication plant where he worked as a civilian. While the SMAW was a good weapon system, the early versions were frequently out for maintenance and unavailable for training, and the young Marine explained that he had built this one to replicate the weight and bulk while on tactical movements in the field. On one occasion, while watching the company's mortar section on a live-fire range, I observed a young Marine double-checking firing solutions, determined back then by a plastic *whiz wheel* slide rule, with a hand-held calculator that he had somehow reprogrammed as an electrical engineering student at a local university.

Kilo Company had a little bit of everything; riflemen who, as civilian mechanics, could do field repairs on my HMMVs and trucks; a machinegunner working for a construction company who offered to help us rebuild the reserve center obstacle course; and the lance corporal English major who "volunteered" to assist writing after-action reports and award citations. One NCO was a police officer who frequently counselled young Marines when they came to him with "hypothetical" brushes with law enforcement. Kilo 3/25 had specialized cliff assault and winter warfare missions, and one of my full-time reservists was an avid rock climber and winter outdoorsman. He relished the opportunity to manage a room full of expensive cliff assault equipment, set up off-duty training for the cadre of climbers and skiers he recruited, and manage the receipt, maintenance, and use of a tractor-trailer's worth of military winter mountaineering gear that showed up every fall. My favorites were two identical twin machinegunners from a farm in Central Ohio who were avid outdoorsmen and literally lived to hunt and who could read trail, predict the weather, and move silently through the woods when employed as a little reconnaissance element. I swear they could communicate with each other telepathically. My reserve company commander worked for an environmental clean-up company that saved my skin once when one of my active-duty staff inadvertently dumped a five-gallon jerry can of diesel fuel behind the reserve center garage right before a Navy environmental inspection.

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The Kilo Company Marines held their own when deployed alongside their active-duty counterparts during their two-week annual training (AT) exercises. Granted, there was always a short period of knocking off the rust, especially with staff planning, but after a few days, no one could tell the difference between active or reserve. Unlike the active-duty battalions, usually on their umpteenth field exercise preparing for deployment, the reservists were able to capitalize on both planned and unplanned training opportunities simply because they were not worn down as much. On one AT at Twentynine Palms, our reserve battalion was billeted in A-frame hootches in the vicinity of an active-duty battalion, which, rightly so, just looked tired. While the argument can be made that the long, pre-deployment work-up periods experienced by active-duty units prepare them better for the rigor of the deployment itself and eventual combat should it be required, it can be hard on the PFC humping 60mm mortar rounds month after month—and harder on his family. My Kilo Marines actually looked forward to AT; one of my sergeants summed it up best: "Hell sir," he quipped one night in the chow line, "no wife, no kids, and I'm getting paid to shoot machineguns and blow shit up. Can I stay longer?" When the active-duty unit next to us had to leave a few days early, my fellow I-Is worked a deal to have our Marines make use of their remaining allocation of ammunition, which Kilo gleefully expended. During a winter AT in Norway, my cadre of winter outdoorsmen skied circles around the active-duty guys and were nearly as good as the Dutch and Norwegian military skiers we exercised with.

Most recently, I have gained additional appreciation for what the reserves do through the experiences of a good friend who was recently selected to command a large Army Reserve military intelligence battalion in the Washington D.C. area after completing a two-year tour as a reserve military intelligence brigade operations officer. A single mother working her way into the upper ranks of a prominent consulting firm, in addition to regular, monthly drills she dedicates a portion of every day and large chunks of every weekend to her reserve responsibilities—as well as attending the Army's non-resident, year-long Command and General Staff College Advanced Operations Course. As she prepares to take command, it is not lost on her that she will soon be responsible for everything her battalion

does or fails to do and that, in a very uncertain world and on short notice, her battalion may be called upon to deploy anywhere in the world. The MOS-specific job functions of her military intelligence unit are complex enough, but pale in comparison to the administrative requirements to maintain a 500+ citizen-soldier battalion and all of its equipment in a state of constant readiness. Interestingly enough, the first two of nineteen standing orders penned by Maj Robert Rogers when he formed his fabled Rangers in 1756—the predecessors to the Army's current 75th Ranger Regiment—were administrative in nature: "Don't forget nothing," and "Have your musket clean as a whistle, hatchet scoured, sixty rounds powder and ball, and be ready to march at a minute's warning." To this day, they are still printed in the *Ranger Handbook*, on the fourth page of mine, issued to me in 1987 as a young Marine second lieutenant lucky enough to be selected to attend Ranger School. I still have it. While I have never been required to employ rule nineteen and "jump out and finish [the enemy] up with [my] hatchet," adherence to the first two rules has paid significant dividends throughout my military service. I argue that they are critical to any reserve unit.

Most importantly, unlike her active-duty counterparts—stationed on a base that exists in many ways to support the needs of soldiers and their families as they participate in lengthy, distant training exercises, prepare for deployment or actually serve in sometimes long, unaccompanied real-world assignments—she must ensure her reservists are prepared mentally and emotionally for mobilization and deployment without that same kind of on-base support. While the military's family readiness and support establishments would certainly kick into high gear should a general mobilization occur, she will be pressed to ensure her soldiers fully understand and prepare themselves, their families and their employers for the strain and uncertainty that comes with a possible short-notice deployment for an undetermined amount of time in an unspecified location facing a hostile adversary. In my over ten years as a Marine infantry officer, the most trying and emotionally difficult period of my career, for me and my family, was the six-week, on-again, off-again, you're going, you're not going lead up to DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM.

Perhaps her most difficult task will be ensuring that her soldiers prepare themselves and their families for the fact that they may be wounded or killed serving their country. While hers is not a front-line, combat command, the proliferation of modern weapon systems enables even the most basic-equipped enemy to strike targets anywhere in a combat theater. On 25 February 1991, three days before the liberation of Kuwait, a SCUD missile fired from Saddam Hussein's Iraq struck a makeshift barracks in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing 28 Army reservists from the 14th Quartermaster Detachment, 475th Quartermaster Group, and 477th Transportation Company. Nearly 100 were wounded. The 14th, headquartered near my hometown of Pittsburgh, PA, lost 13 killed and 43 wounded and had arrived in theater only five days before. It was the Army's single largest combat loss of life since Vietnam. As a Marine casualty calls officer on I-I duty, I had the unenviable but all-important job of conducting initial notification of active duty deaths to the parents and loved ones of Marines whose next-of-kin lived in central Ohio, and I handed folded American flags to grieving wives, mothers, and family members more times than I want to remember. I do not wish those duties on anyone. As her battalion often deploys subordinate units to support active-duty forces overseas, she may take on these responsibilities as well.

This past June marked the 75th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, a milestone in the use of Marine Reserves to augment active-duty forces that collectively fought and won some of the most hallowed battles in Marine Corps history. Five days after Kim Il Sung's (North) Korean People's Army crossed the 38th Parallel, the President received authorization from Congress "to order into active service any of all reserve components of the armed forces."[2] One month after being activated on 7 July 1950, the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade (Reinforced) was engaged in combat operations on the Korean peninsula. At the time of the Inchon landings on 15 September, 3 months later, approximately 28,000 Marines, supported by 1,235 Navy personnel, were in the Korean theater of operations.[3] While mobilization of this scale was not flawless,[4] and "the assignment of newly mobilized reservists to a combat unit in such a short space of time was contrary to both the Marine Corps and the previously established plans,"[5] the success experienced by Marine ground and air forces in 1950 and 1951 would not have been possible without the contributions of the Marine Corps Reserve.

A thorough understanding of how the entire reserve establishment trains, deploys, augments, and supports active-duty forces, as well as understanding the complete range of citizen-soldier capabilities—and challenges—will be key to fighting and winning 21st-century wars.

Notes

1. Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1957).

2. Ernest H. Giusti, *Mobilization of the Marine Corps Reserve in the Korean Conflict 1950–1951* (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Reference Pamphlet, Historical Branch, G-3 Division Headquarters, 1951).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. Upon reporting to Camp Pendleton at activation, only 50 percent of the Organized Reserve were classified and "combat-ready" and immediately deployable. Some units reported with missing or incomplete training records. Thirty-four percent of those found physically qualified at their station of deployment were subsequently disqualified.

5. Ibid.