

Reshaping the Marine Reserves

Opportunities and perils
by Col Mark Cancian

Gen Berger's drive to reshape the Marine Corps is an opportunity to create a more effective Marine Corps Reserves to make it a better partner in the Marine Corps' total force. However, if not done prudently, the result could be misalignment with the demands of future conflicts and frustration with the reserve's inability to provide what the planners had intended. Therefore, in reshaping the Marine Corps Reserves, planners should consider history, lessons learned from past mobilizations, and innovations that other Services have made with their reserve components.

Gen Berger's vision is well known, so there is little need to repeat it here.¹ He seeks

significant change ... to ensure we are aligned with the 2018 *National Defense*

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Strategy (NDS) and DPG [Defense Planning Guidance], and further, prepared to meet the demands of the Naval Fleet in executing current and emerging operational naval concepts.

His vision focuses on great power conflict, particularly against China in the western Pacific:

We are designing a force for naval expeditionary warfare in actively contested spaces. It will be purpose-built to facilitate sea denial and assured access in support of fleet and joint operations ... III MEF will become our main focus-of-effort, designed to

provide U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (U.S. INDOPACOM) and the Commander, 7th Fleet with a fight-tonight, stand-in force capability.

This vision of change extends to the reserves: "Just as our Active Component will change, so will our Reserve Component."²

This article proposes three ways to better align the reserves with the *NDS* and the Commandant's vision: using the reserves as a strategic hedge against the unexpected, adapting to the new budget and security environment, and making the reserves as deployable as possible so they can meet the aggressive deployment goals of the strategy.

Using Reserves as a Strategic Hedge³

The Commandant's guidance expresses skepticism about some reserve capabilities:

It is increasingly clear that the Marine Corps is over-invested in capabilities and capacities purpose-built for traditional sustained operations ashore, including: Surge-layer capacity resident within the reserve component.⁴

Although the specifics are unclear, this guidance may be missing an opportunity to employ the Marine Corps as a "total force." The active duty force may be overinvested in sustained operations ashore. However, the Commandant also desires the Marine Corps to be

the "force of choice" for the President, Secretary, and Combatant Commander—"a certain force for an uncertain



Marine Reserve units must be capable for deploying and operating in any environment just like the active component. (Photo by Cpl Ian Leones.)

world” as noted by Commandant Krulak. No matter what the crisis, our civilian leaders should always have one shared thought—Send in the Marines.

To do this, the Marine Corps must be ready for all kinds of conflicts, not just a great power conflict in the Pacific. As Secretary Gates once said, “In the 40 years since Vietnam, our record in predicting where we would be militarily engaged next, even six months out, is perfect: We have never once got it right.”⁵ A narrowly focused Marine Corps would be too limited to be “a certain force for an uncertain future.” The reserves can help as a hedge.

Do not mirror image the active duty force. Gen Berger’s guidance notes that the reserves are “organized ... congruently” with active duty forces, but that is a choice the Marine Corps has made.

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It does not need to be that way. Indeed, the reserve components of the other military Services are organized differently from the active forces because they fill gaps and complement the active duty forces. Thus, the Navy Reserve, with its many support units, looks very different from the regular Navy.

The mission of the Marine Reserves is to “augment and reinforce active forces for employment across the full spectrum of crisis and global engagement.”⁶ The Marine Corps should take advantage of this broad charter by using the reserve component to not only provide more of what the active force already has but also provide forces and capabilities that the active force lacks. It already does this to a limited degree with units like civil affairs groups and security advisory companies. Expanding these precedents would give the Marine reserves the structural flexibility needed to realign with the new strategy.

Put capabilities for sustained combat in the reserves. As the active duty force transitions to a focus on island

campaigns in the western Pacific, the reserves should fill the gaps for other kinds of campaigns in case the unexpected happens. Here are some illustrative examples:

- The artillery regiment might have five battalions. As the active duty artillery slims down to substitute precision for mass, the reserves could provide the mass.
- The logistics group might have extra support battalions—for example, two motor vehicle battalions and two engineer battalions—to provide the maneuver and sustainment for conflicts such as the Marine Corps fought in Korea, Vietnam, DESERT STORM, Iraq, and Afghanistan.
- Armored firepower—LAVs, ACVs, tanks (if they ever return)—might be concentrated in the reserves after their

reduction in the active duty force. The Marine Corps could not have participated in Operation DESERT STORM in 1991 or Operation IRAQI FREEDOM in 2003 without such firepower.

Adapting to the New Security Environment

The changing budget, acquisition, and security environments drive some changes irrespective of the dictates of the *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*. The commandant’s initiative is an opportunity to adapt to this new environment.

Create associate aviation units. The high cost of acquiring and maintaining the new generation of aircraft threatens the future of reserve flying squadrons. The F-35 costs about \$100 million per copy and \$34,000 per flight hour. The CH-53K will cost \$110 million per copy and \$9 million per year to sustain (about \$44,000 per flight hour).⁷ Long gone are the days when reserve flying units were just another kind of reserve unit. Costs this high make equipping

reserve flying squadrons difficult. Even if the money can be found, the rationale for having the unit in the reserves evaporates. The high cost (70-90 percent of an active duty squadron) eliminates the major advantage of having a reserve unit, yet the reserve unit is much less available.⁸ Although there are plans to equip reserve flying squadrons with new aircraft in the (distant) future, the high cost may curtail or thwart such plans.

On the other hand, the reserves have a lot of aviation talent that the Marine Corps wants to retain. RAND estimates that it costs \$10 million to fully train an F-35 pilot.⁹ Retaining that investment makes both warfighting and budget sense, and many pilots who leave active duty still want to fly as Marine aviators.

Associate units provide a mechanism to solve this dilemma. Though unused in the Marine Corps, such units are common in the Air Force reserve components. Here is the definition:

A regular Air Force unit retains principal responsibility for a weapon system and shares the equipment with one or more reserve component units. Under the classic associate structure, active-duty and reserve units retain separate organizational structures and chains of command.¹⁰

The concept is that the active duty unit owns and maintains the equipment day-to-day while the reserve unit—organizationally a separate unit—trains on the equipment, helps with peacetime missions, and in wartime provides the personnel needed to conduct 24-hour operations.

From the reserve perspective, this is a second-best solution; it is more satisfying to have fully equipped reserve flying squadrons, but it is better than the progressive elimination of reserve squadrons.

Nationally source units with specialized skills. The custom with reserve units—in all Services, not just the Marine Corps—is that they recruit locally. That is fine for the Army, which has hundreds of units spread across the country so that individuals can usually find a local unit that uses their particular MOS. It does not work for many Marine units with scarce skills that are thinly distributed across the

country. For example, Ordnance Maintenance Company, 4th MLG, is located in Waco, TX, but how many Marines trained in that specialty actually live within commuting distance of Waco? The unit must retrain individuals or accept MOS mismatches. The higher the skill, the more severe the problem because of high retraining costs or the difficulty in using substitutes.

This shortfall is often invisible in peacetime when units focus on military skills and have few opportunities to exercise their specialty skills. Upon mobilization, the gaps in technical proficiency become obvious.

The alternative is to recruit regionally or nationally to bring in those with the right skills from a wide area. The problem is travel to the drill site. Historically, the Marine Corps has put this burden on the individual. While that may make sense for a colonel or lieutenant colonel whose drill pay would cover the high cost of travel, it is insurmountable for most enlisted Marines. Thus, an electronics technician—with years of specialized training and experience—may end up as a truck driver because that is what the local unit needed.

This makes little sense from a talent management perspective. If the Corps has invested over \$200,000 in training and on the job experience to produce a skilled technician, does it not make sense to pay \$300 a month for that Marine to travel to a unit that uses those skills? Just as the Commandant's guidance calls for "global sourcing by the Total Force," the reserves might implement its own version of global sourcing through regional or national recruiting. Marine Forces Reserve now cover some travel by drilling reservists, a great step forward. The program needs expansion to cover a wider variety of skills and billets.

Implement reserve-active alignment, but test before fully committing. The Commandant's guidance proposes greater active-reserve integration: "We will examine the merits of formalizing command relationships between Active and Reserve Component units. As part of our force design effort, we will explore the efficacy of fully integrating our reserve units within the Active Com-

ponent, as well as other organizational options." Close alignment between active duty and reserve units is a good thing. Reserve units see the standard they will need to meet when called to active service. Active duty units become familiar with the reserve units that will support them in wartime.

But alignment is hard. It was tried briefly in the 1980s when reserve infantry companies were designated as the fourth rifle company of active duty battalions, but the concept was quickly abandoned. The problem was that geography and schedules did not align well. Active duty units were far away and often unavailable during the reserve units' two weeks of annual training. Command relationships became confused. If a reserve company was aligned with

One variation of alignment would be to increase the participation of reserve units in major active duty exercises.

an active duty battalion, what function did the reserve battalion headquarters have? Further, upon mobilization, reserve units were sent where they were needed and not where the alignment said they should go. The concept briefed well but fell apart in the face of peacetime schedules and wartime exigencies.

So, this concept should be rolled out in a few units as a pilot program to work out the details and see whether the concept works in practice; where it does, other units can be added. Perhaps, alignment would be limited to specialty units that would, on mobilization, support very particular active duty units.

One variation of alignment would be to increase the participation of reserve units in major active duty exercises. This gets many of the advantages of alignment—pushing reserve units to meet a high standard, active duty familiarity with reserve capabilities, and integration

of different units—without the inflexibility of having to align specific active duty with specific reserve units. During the 1980s, for example, the annual NATO exercise in Norway would pair an active duty battalion with a reserve infantry battalion under an active duty MEB headquarters. Such alignments could be expanded in the future. A beneficial side effect is to increase the number and scope of major exercises that the Marine Corps can participate in.

Preparing for More Rapid Mobilization

The *NDS* envisions rapid deployment to contain and then defeat adversary aggression. A "blunt" layer of forces initially meets aggression, and a "surge" layer rapidly reinforces. Yet, a perennial strategic issue with reserve components—traditionally a major element of the "surge" layer—is that they take time to deploy, and the Commandant's guidance recognizes this limitation:

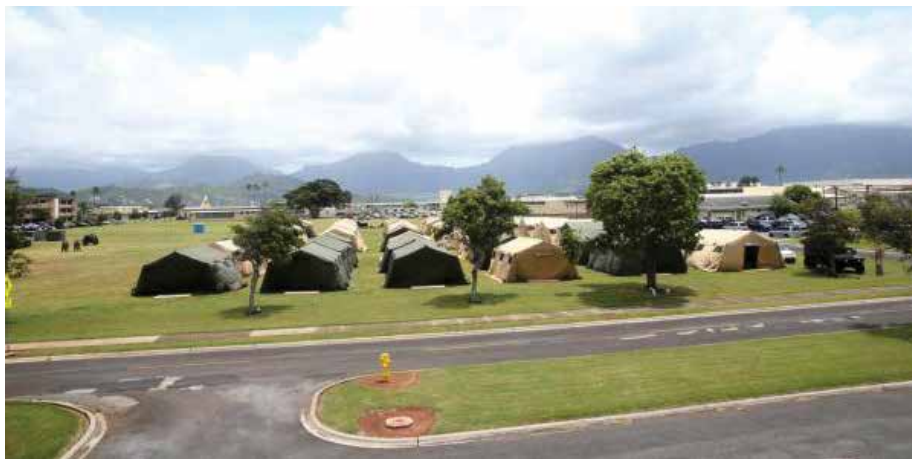
We cannot expect our Selected Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR) units to maintain the same levels of readiness as our Active Component units. What we desire and expect in our SMCR units and Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) are Marines and units 'ready for mobilization.'

National defense strategies like the *NDS* understandably desire rapid deployments to stem adversary aggression before it advances too far and then to counterattack rapidly. Thus, strategists are inclined to favor active duty forces. This was a major issue in 2001, for example, when then-Secretary Rumsfeld proposed a forward-leaning strategy similar to *NDS 2018*:

Detering aggression and coercion by deploying forward the capacity to swiftly defeat attacks and impose severe penalties for aggression on an adversary's military capability and supporting infrastructure.

The emphasis on rapid action and forward presence implied a reduced role for reserve components.¹¹

Whatever its strategic merits, such an approach runs into the twin problems of requiring too many hard-to-recruit active duty personnel and being too expensive. The fully burdened cost



Installations and infrastructure must include the capacity to mobilize Reserve Forces. (Photo by Sgt Alex Kouns.)

of an active duty service member is about \$442,000/year (compared with a reservist cost of \$137,000/year), and that high cost must be sustained in full every year.¹² As a result of these high personnel costs and competing budget demands for higher readiness and equipment modernization, recent service plans for force expansion have collapsed.¹³ Indeed, the Commandant has stated explicitly that the Marine Corps will shrink to provide funds for modernization initiatives.

There is also a political dimension, in that reserve components have strong support in Congress because of their local ties—though this is more a National Guard phenomenon than a Marine reserve issue. For example, when the Army tried to cut its reserve components in the late 1990s, Congress responded by making the reserve commanders three-star billets. All the Services, then, including the Marine Corps, need to figure out how to use reserve forces more effectively rather than indulging strategic fantasies about an all active duty force.

The way out of this conundrum is to make reserve deployment more rapid so they can meet the demands of the strategy. Further implementing the many lessons learned from the mobilizations of 1991 and 2003 would help. This requires some cost in peacetime but not too much. Here are two lessons learned among many:¹⁴

Prepare bases to support mobilization. The Commandant's guidance notes, "Once mobilized, our Reserve Com-

ponent forces will undergo additional pre-deployment training to achieve the necessary readiness for deployment and employment." This additional training is unavoidable; in peacetime, reserve units receive 38 days of training a year. That is enough to maintain individual skills but not enough to maintain the full range of unit capabilities, particularly at the battalion level and above.

Post-mobilization training time has not been an issue during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because there was no rush to get units deployed. The long timelines allowed careful synchronizing of the flow of forces and coordinating of post-mobilization training. However, post-mobilization training will be an issue in a great power conflict when timelines are tight, and there is competition for ammunition, transportation, and training areas. Post-mobilization training that reserve units received in 1991, the last large-scale mobilization, was inadequate. One senior reserve officer noted:

Reserves had been told that they would get 30 days of [post-mobilization] training. That did not happen. They basically deployed to this war trained to the level they had attained through [annual] ATDs and monthly drills.

As a result, battalion-level performance in DESERT STORM was disappointing. Gen Boomer, commander of I MEF during DESERT STORM, commented that "company and below were great, battalions were marginal, regiments were ineffective." Indeed, weak

performance at the battalion level was the main reserve shortcoming in 1991.¹⁵ Though battalion performance was better in 2003—fewer battalions were called up and revised procedures, like the integration of the I-I staff, improved preparation—post-mobilization training was still poor. Only nineteen percent of reserve Marines rated it "excellent" or "good."¹⁶ Better post-mobilization training is needed if reserve battalions are to perform to active duty standards in the next mobilization.

These post-mobilization problems are solvable but must be faced in peacetime. Once mobilization begins, it is too late. Above all, the Marine Corps needs to avoid the experience of Korea where the chaos of active duty units deploying, reserve units arriving, and personnel reshuffling resulted in reservists receiving little or no training before landing at Inchon.

Over-staff reserve units to prevent cross-leveling. Cross leveling is the practice of taking personnel from a later deploying unit to bring an earlier deploying unit up to strength. It occurs in any unit, active or reserve, that is understrength in peacetime. The practice is extremely damaging because the receiving unit picks up personnel unfamiliar with their leaders, and the losing units are now far understrength. In mobilizations, there can be a cascading effect, so that the last units have lost so many personnel that they are unusable.

Thus, for rapid mobilization, it is better to have ten units at full strength than twelve at 80 percent. Having twelve understrength units makes sense in a World War II situation when a long preparation time allows understrength units to act as cadre for force expansion. It does not fit today's strategy.

The best solution is having 9 units at 110 percent. That way, when the medically non-deployers, the hardship cases, and those pending discharge are left behind, the unit still has all its necessary personnel.

In 1991, some units filled the personnel gaps by taking officers from the IRR, but that had mixed success. One commander complained that these volunteers were "Rambos" who "scared the hell out of him." When the unit could

interview volunteers and be selective, the results were positive. In any case, the numbers were limited. Such joins occurred informally when individuals contacted reserve units directly. The reserve personnel system was far too slow to access the IRR systematically before deployment.¹⁷

Over staffing is hard because personnel are limited. Marine Corps Reserve end strength will likely stay at around 38,000. Growing larger might be attractive in theory but has failed in the past because of difficulties in recruiting and retaining a larger force. So, trade-offs will be needed. The first place to look is at units that have not been mobilized during the recent wars. Higher headquarters—regiments, groups, division, wing, MLG—stand out here. Although some peacetime command and control structure is needed for reserve battalions and squadrons, these headquarters may not need all the personnel and capabilities that active duty equivalents have.

Building on success. The Marine Reserves, like the active duty Marine Corps, need to adapt as strategy and circumstances change, but changes should build on past success. The Marine Corps Reserve is not a failing organization in need of immediate reform. It has a record of success. In DESERT STORM, the Invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the long stability operations since then, Marine reservists have mobilized, deployed, and fought alongside their active duty comrades. After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, Gen Hagee, then-Commandant, recognized this accomplishment: “Our Marine reservists are Marines first, and there was absolutely no difference in performance—on the ground, in the air, in logistics.” This was not an idle boast. An in-depth study by the Institute for Defense Analysis validated this judgment:

Analysis of SIGACTs, THOR/MISREP, and mobility data indicate that RC forces did what they were tasked to do, with no sizeable differences in performance from that of their AC counterparts. Combined with analysis of deployment data, casualty data, and mishap data, findings depict a shared burden and shared risk.¹⁸

Notes

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

2. Quotes from *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance* and from Gen David H Berger, “Notes on Designing the Marine Corps of the Future,” *War on the Rocks*, (December 2019), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

3. Mark Cancian, “Don't Go Crazy Marine Corps,” *War on the Rocks*, (January 2020), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

4. “Notes on Designing the Marine Corps of the Future.”

5. Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014). Arguably, the DOD has done a bit better than Gates' pessimistic assessment, anticipating a conflict with Iraq after 1991, but the point is nevertheless valid.

6. Marine Corps Reserve Mission Statement is available at <https://www.marforres.marines.mil>.

7. “Costs from DOD's Selected Acquisition Report F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter,” (December 2018), available at <https://www.esd.whs.mil>; and “Selected Acquisition Report CH-53K King Stallion,” (December 2018), available at <https://www.esd.whs.mil>. Procurement cost is Average Unit Procurement Cost. All costs escalated to FY 2020 dollars. CH-53K flying hour cost calculated by taking the annual operating cost and dividing by the average number of flight hours ($\$9.4M / 12 \times 17.9$ hours per month = \$44,000). SARs are official DOD reports to Congress on acquisition costs and plans. Although there are different ways to calculate these costs, the bottom line is the same: the new generation of aircraft is expensive to procure and operate.

8. Cost from Department of Defense, Total Force Policy Report to the Congress: Supplement, 1992 based on data from RAND analysis: Adele Palmer et al., *Assessing the Structure and Mix of Future Active and Reserve Forces: Cost Estimation Methodology*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992). The study found that a Marine reserve helicopter unit cost 73 percent of and active duty unit when equipment was included (52 percent without equipment), Air Force fighters cost 77 percent of an active duty fighter, and Air Force tankers actually cost more because of high usage.

9. Michael G. Mattock, Beth J. Asch, James Hosek, Michael Boito, *The Relative Cost-Effectiveness of Retaining Versus Accessing Air Force Pilots*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019). The study analyzes Air Force training costs but Navy/Marine costs would be similar since they produce a similar product. Indeed, costs for training Navy/Marine Corps pilots are likely to be higher because of the need for carrier qualification and shipboard operations.

10. Air Force Reserve Command, “Glossary of Air Force Reserve Terms,” available at <https://www.afrc.af.mil>.

11. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2001*, (Washington, DC: September 2001).

12. Reserve Forces Policy Board, “Update Report to the Secretary of Defense: Requiring the Use of Fully Burdened and Life Cycle Personnel Costs for All Components in Total Force Analysis and for Budgetary Purposes,” (Washington, DC: September 2019). Figures cited are FY 2018 costs to U.S. government, DOD, plus other agencies like the Veterans Administration.

13. For a discussion of budget tradeoffs and the low priority of force expansion, see Mark Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (November 2019), available at <https://www.csis.org>.

14. These recommendations are drawn from the author's previous research on the mobilization of reserve forces: LtCol Mark F. Cancian, “Marine Corps Reserve Forces in Southwest Asia,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: September 1991); and the latter in Cancian et al., “Marine Corps Reserve Forces in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: July, 2004).

15. “Marine Reserve Forces in Southwest Asia.”

16. “Marine Corps Reserve Forces in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.”

17. “Marine Reserve Forces in Southwest Asia.”

18. Joseph F. Adams, Amy A. Alrich, John Brinkerhoff, Rachel Dubin, Ann Gilbride, Lance Hancock, Jeffery Jaworski, Drew Miller, Daniel Nakada, Pete Picucci, et al., *Sharing the Burden and Risk: An Operational Assessment of the Reserve Components in Operation Iraqi Freedom*. IDA Paper P-8177, (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2016).

