

Innovative Readiness Training

Strengthening military readiness through community engagement

by Maj Ricardo Steele Jr. & Capt Andrew S. Trossen

At the intersection of military preparedness and community impact lies a game-changing initiative that is redefining what it means to be mission-ready. The DOD's Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) is a collaborative program that combines military training with community service within the United States and its territories. The IRT program is not just about drills and deployments; rather, it is a bold and dynamic, hands-on approach that delivers joint training opportunities to increase deployment readiness while delivering impactful change to communities across the country. The IRT offers hands-on training in complex environments, focusing on decision making under pressure and resource management while providing rare insights into working within interagency environments and civilian leadership.¹

For the 4th Marine Logistics Group and Marine Forces Reserve (MAR-

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FORRES), IRT is more than a training program—it is a proving ground. In 2024, Marines with Combat Logistics Regiment (CLR) 45 undertook an IRT mission in rural Otterville, MO, supporting the local area with vertical and horizontal construction in an underserved community.² The rugged terrain and unpredictable weather reflected the conditions Marines might face while deployed. Engineers utilized their skills to design and build footbridges and essential drainage systems while adhering to budget and timeline constraints, testing their grit and adaptability. Whether

responding to logistical challenges or coordinating across multi-agency environments, these experiences forge confident leaders capable of excelling in peacetime operations and combat zones and reinforcing their role as reliable warfighters to the Nation.³

IRT History and Governing Authorities

The IRT program continues the U.S. tradition of military-led public service, combining infrastructure development with national defense preparation. This integration of military training and public benefit can be traced back to President Thomas Jefferson's vision for developing roads, bridges, and fortifications critical to the Nation's expansion.⁴ Later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt advanced this idea to provide public works projects to aid economic recovery during the Great Depression while instilling discipline and practical skills in its participants. These historical initiatives laid the groundwork for the modern IRT program, which continues to merge military readiness with community development.⁵ Building on this foundation, the DOD officially established the IRT program in 1992 as part of a broader initiative to enhance military preparedness while



Engineer Services Company, Combat Logistics Battalion 25 tree felling at The RES, Mishawaka, IN. (Photo provided by authors.)

addressing civilian infrastructure and service needs.

Retention, Moral, and Community Connections through IRT

The IRT enhances retention and morale by showing Marines and sailors the direct impact of their efforts on communities. In 2016, Marines and sailors from the 4th Marine Logistics Group participated in the Tropic Care IRT mission in Kauai, HI.⁶ This training provided free medical, dental, and optometry services to residents, many of whom had limited access to healthcare. The mission allowed service members to operate in austere conditions, simulating deployment environments and providing invaluable experience in logistics, planning, and execution. In addition to advancing military readiness, the mission directly improved the health and well-being of the local population, creating goodwill and reinforcing the military's role as a trusted community partner.

Additionally, sailors from the 4th Dental Battalion supported IRT Ola de Esperanza Sanadora in Puerto Rico, where they delivered essential medical services across multiple sites. Navy CAPT James T. Quinn of the 4th Dental Battalion noted the dual benefits of these missions, emphasizing the opportunity for service members to gain hands-on experience and increase mission readiness while delivering critical health care to communities in need.⁷ This mission further exemplified the important role of military personnel in providing humanitarian assistance and supporting the health and well-being of underserved populations.⁸

The IRT increases job satisfaction and professional development among Marines and sailors, aiding retention and talent management, which are key strategic goals emphasized in the *39th Commandant's Planning Guidance*. According to CWO3 Kollin Craig, with Landing Support Company, CLR-45, during his unit's assignments in remote areas like Missouri, South Dakota, and West Virginia, the Landing Support Company often encountered communities where residents had never interacted with Marines. This novelty

sparked curiosity among the locals. At Otterville High School, administrators would say, *I'm going to send so-and-so up here; the Marines would do them some good.*⁹ If even one student decides to enlist because of our presence, it counts as a success. We have also collaborated with local Marine Corps recruiting stations to leverage our exercises for potential recruitment. Marines working in utilities alongside civilians effectively turn IRT into a dynamic recruitment advertisement.

The IRT missions ensure Marines and sailors stay ready for the challenges of both combat and humanitarian efforts by simulating real-world conditions that mirror deployment scenarios. During a significant IRT mission in

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Alaska, members of the 6th Engineer Support Battalion collaborated with National Guard units in horizontal construction for the Shepard Point Marine Tribal Transportation and Oil Spill Response Facility. The partnership between the Army and Marine Corps facilitated the sharing of resources and expertise, allowing both branches to efficiently tackle large-scale projects. The engineers surveyed, cleared, grubbed, and stripped land for the facility, training 79 Marines and meeting 16 essential training requirements while covering 1,738 workdays. The project contributed \$513,000 in labor, helping offset the overall project cost to the community financially. This collaboration showcased how utilizing cross-Service assets and knowledge can enhance mission success and provide vital infrastructure for local tribes.¹⁰

IRT Criteria and Restrictions

The IRT improves military readiness and supports community development within the DOD's legal, ethical, and strategic priorities. Focused exclusively

on the United States and its territories, IRT ensures military training directly benefits local communities. The IRT reinforces operational readiness in real-world conditions by requiring projects to meet mission-essential tasks standards, including at least 100 hours of training per participant.¹¹

The IRT program safeguards against conflicts with private industry by adhering to a strict non-competition policy, ensuring military efforts do not displace commercial services. These safeguards are especially important in civil engineering projects, where IRT's focus is solely on training and public service, not competing with the private sector. Regrettably, IRT does not encompass law enforcement duties and disaster response, as these functions are handled under separate DOD frameworks. With its carefully crafted safeguards, IRT ensures military training aligns with national security priorities while also benefiting local communities. The program's domestic focus, mission-essential tasks requirements, and legal constraints reinforce its role as a key component of military preparedness. The IRT maximizes its impact on both military readiness and community service by maintaining these standards.

IRT Aligns with the SECDEF's DOD Priorities

The IRT advances the Secretary of Defense's (SECDEF) vision by focusing on combat readiness, operational efficiency, and revitalizing the warrior ethos.¹² The IRT improves technical proficiency, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability in challenging environments through combat-aligned engineering, logistics, and infrastructure projects, thereby reinforcing the discipline and readiness essential for military success. Per the SECDEF's directive to eliminate inefficiencies, IRT maximizes training effectiveness while minimizing costs.¹³ The IRT ensures training remains cost-effective and relevant to its mission by integrating existing military resources with community-driven projects. The IRT focuses exclusively on military occupational skills vital for warfighting. Many IRT missions contribute directly to homeland security

by enhancing critical infrastructure in strategic locations, such as Alaska and other high-priority areas. These IRT projects improve military mobility, infrastructure resilience, and engineering capabilities, ensuring service members are well-equipped to support national defense efforts during domestic threats or natural disasters. The IRT aligns fully with the SECDEF's vision for a lethal, mission-ready, and fiscally responsible force.

IRT Benefits the Local Community and the Units

The IRT missions have provided crucial infrastructure support, enhancing relationships between Marines, sailors, and local communities.¹⁴ These missions are part of the Headquarters Marine Corps Total Force Integration strategy, ensuring a smooth collaboration between active-duty and reserve components during crises. As seen in 2020, U.S. Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), chairman of the Readiness Subcommittee, voted alongside his Armed Services Committee members to pass the *FY2021 National Defense*



Engineer Services Company, Combat Logistics Battalion 25 Utilities Marines work with John Callan, Scouting American, LaSalle Council to lay conduit. (Photo by GySgt Nicholas Foley.)

tics Group played a crucial role in Arctic Care, a multi-Service humanitarian and training program conducted above the Arctic Circle in Alaska. This initiative provided medical, dental, and veterinary aid to 12 remote villages, some located up to 150 miles from Kotzebue, showcasing the military's commitment to peacetime support operations and disaster relief.¹⁶ The exercise highlighted

and provided invaluable training for military personnel in the Arctic environment, boosting their adaptability, decision making, and capability to navigate the challenges of working in such a vast and harsh landscape.

In 2025, the upcoming Selawik project will present a complex logistical challenge for a small team from Engineer Services Company, Combat Logistics Battalion-25, who will need to access a remote village to enhance infrastructure. The Engineer Services Company team will be converting a vacant medical clinic building into a community shelter and transient lodge, along with improvements to the Tribal office. The challenges in Selawik will highlight the significance of collaboration and integration within the IRT program. Tribal liaisons play a crucial role in facilitating communication and ensuring cultural sensitivity during the planning and execution phases of the project. These liaisons will increase productivity, smooth transitions, and ensure that both military and community needs are met by bridging the gap between military personnel and local tribes.

Through scalable IRT projects, MARFORRES enhances its readiness and builds lasting relationships with remote communities within and across the United States. The IRT missions exemplify how the IRT program supports Total Force Integration goals, providing real-world training opportu-

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Authorization Act to authorize almost \$200 million in military construction and critical infrastructure projects and equipment for Alaska. Sen Sullivan, a retired reserve Marine, noted the bill included “\$30 million for the Innovative Readiness Training program—a 120 percent increase over the president’s budget—and gives direct hire authorities to rural installations like Eielson (Air Force Base), Clear (Space Force Station), and Fort Greely.”¹⁵

The IRT missions in Alaska present scalable opportunities that deliver critical infrastructure support while improving the readiness of reserve units. In 2013, the 4th Medical and 4th Dental Battalions of the 4th Marine Logis-

tics Group played a crucial role in Arctic Care, a multi-Service humanitarian and training program conducted above the Arctic Circle in Alaska. This initiative provided medical, dental, and veterinary aid to 12 remote villages, some located up to 150 miles from Kotzebue, showcasing the military’s commitment to peacetime support operations and disaster relief.¹⁶ The exercise highlighted

the importance of inter-Service cooperation, as service members from the National Guard, Army Reserve, Navy Reserve, and Air Force Reserve joined forces with Marine Corps Reserve personnel. This collaboration fostered seamless integration across military branches, enhancing operational readiness and building stronger relationships with local populations. More recently, in 2024, the 4th Medical and 4th Dental Battalions provided annual, no-cost health care services to Alaskan communities, totaling \$1.3 million in medical services to 1,802 patients across seven communities on Kodiak Island.¹⁷ This IRT mission delivered essential health care

nities for both the reserve and active components. The IRT missions challenge service members by immersing them in operational conditions that mimic deployed environments and underscore the complex nature of modern warfare, as illustrated by Gen Charles Krulak's "Three Block War" concept.¹⁸ This concept emphasizes the necessity for service members to simultaneously be prepared for combat, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance while remaining adaptable in dynamic environments.

While traditional training exercises are valuable, they often lack the unpredictability and realism of actual mission conditions. Unlike training at established military bases, IRT missions require careful logistical coordination. Innovative Readiness Training missions present significant challenges to operational processes. The margin for error is further diminished due to the lack of extensive support infrastructure at central Marine Corps installations. For example, during a Marine-led IRT mission at Custer State Park in South Dakota, the nearest support facilities were roughly 1,000 miles away, eliminating the possibility of quick resupply runs. Despite this and other challenges, Marines with CLR-45 built roads, repaired bridges, maintained firebreaks, and removed invasive tree species while operating from a self-sustaining forward operating base in a secluded valley for 30 days. During this time, the 6th Communication Battalion also seized a unique training opportunity when they noticed an Army Blackhawk helicopter overhead, quickly established communication, and coordinated an impromptu medical evacuation drill.

Furthermore, collaboration with a nearby Air Force base facilitated transportation arrangements, ensuring the timely movement of Marines and sailors to and from the operational area. Innovative Readiness Training missions, whether in remote Alaska, tropical Hawaii, or hurricane-impacted Puerto Rico, also reflect the ongoing commitment of the 4th Medical and Dental Battalions to improving healthcare access and strengthening relationships with local communities.



Engineer Services Company, Combat Logistics Battalion 25 planning team to Selawik, AK, take a photo with 99 year old Johnnie, a veteran of the Alaskan Territorial Guard. (Photo by Azara Mohammadi, Alaskan National Guard Tribal Liaison.)

Military personnel not only enhance their readiness and adaptability but also contribute to the health and prosperity of the populations they serve by participating in IRT missions, solidifying the military's role as a reliable and trusted partner in humanitarian efforts.

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IRT Process: From Start to Finish

The IRT program follows a structured process to ensure military training aligns with community needs while adhering to legal and policy guidelines. This process involves stakeholders, such as community organizations, military

units, and DOD officials, to guarantee mutual benefits and mission success.

1. *Project Proposal Submission:* Eligible organizations—government agencies, federally recognized tribes, and nonprofit groups—submit a project application outlining requested services, location, timeline, and available resources.

2. *Review and Military Unit Selection:* The IRT officials evaluate proposals based on eligibility, geographic restrictions, and training value. Approved projects are paired with military units whose training needs align with the mission.

3. *Military Unit Approval and Planning:* After a unit commits, it submits a military application and supporting documents provided by the Marine Corps IRT Office outlining personnel, equipment, and logistical requirements. A planning phase follows, where stakeholders define roles, coordinate logistics, and address legal and environmental considerations.

4. *Mission Execution*: Service members deploy to the project site to conduct training in medical, engineering, transportation, civil affairs, logistics, or cybersecurity support.

5. *Post-Mission Evaluation*: Upon completion, military and community leaders conduct an after-action review to evaluate training effectiveness, mission impact, and lessons learned. Reports are submitted to DOD leadership to refine future IRT initiatives.¹⁹

By following this streamlined process, IRT enhances military readiness while delivering essential services to communities, reinforcing its role as a dual-benefit program that bolsters both national security and public welfare.

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Conclusion

The IRT program advances the strategic goals of MARFORRES, ensuring its units remain engaged in training that directly supports their mission while enhancing overall operational readiness. Innovative Readiness Training fosters unit cohesion, purpose, and pride by allowing service members to see the tangible impact of their efforts within U.S. communities and territories. This connection to the communities they serve increases job satisfaction and reinforces the Marine Corps ethos of service. It also boosts retention and supports talent management, as Marines gain a greater sense of fulfillment from their work.

The long-term benefits of IRT extend far beyond its immediate impact on training, retention, and community engagement. The program aligns with the 39th Commandant’s priorities, balancing readiness with modernization and leadership development.²⁰ As the global security landscape continues to evolve, IRT ensures that MARFORRES remains a responsive, adaptable force capable of addressing both cur-

rent and future challenges while further strengthening the bond with the communities they serve.

Notes

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10. Department of Defense, *After Action Report: AAR_MR_2024_AK_0002362_Eyak Alaska_Shepard Point*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense Innovative Readiness Training, 2024).

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