

Marine Corps Mortuary Affairs

A Marine Corps Reserve capability leading the way in the Service, Joint Force, and coalition forces in training and service during calamity and combat

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Marine Forces Reserve's Mortuary Affairs (MA) capability, the Marine Corps' only MA capability, has a lineage that can be traced back to the Nation's earliest MA operations during the Civil War. Today, the Marines of Personnel Retrieval and Processing (PRP) Company continue to execute this solemn duty while also supporting the Marine Corps' total force, the Joint Force, and the Nation's allies and partners around the globe.

MA in the Nation's Early Conflicts

As long as mankind wages warfare, there will always be a necessity to recover the dead at the conclusion of hostilities. This is for practical purposes in that unburied human remains bring filth and disease and are an enormous detriment to a unit's morale. There are sentimental reasons as well, as warriors have always sought to honor and celebrate their fallen comrades through memorial ceremonies and burial rituals. In the U.S. military, this process began formalization during the Civil War when the War Department established procedures for the identification and burial of America's fallen service members. These procedures were expanded during America's next conflict, the Spanish-American War, when guidance on the repatriation of remains to American soil became necessary. War Department Order 104, issued 7 August 1917, authorized the organization of a Graves Registration Service (GRS), the precursor to today's MA units. Before the establishment of the GRS, American service members had typi-

cally been buried by their brothers in arms with little guidance from the War Department and minimal recordkeeping as to who had died and where they had been interred. Order 104 marked a formal and essential advance in MA for the U.S. military, as thousands of American servicemen lost their lives on the battlefields of Europe. While individual units continued to handle the responsibility for the immediate recovery and burial of the remains of their fallen, the newly formed GRS oversaw their subsequent recovery from these temporary interments, their identification, and their transfer to either an American cemetery in Europe or back to the United States.¹

As the American military became increasingly embroiled in conflicts around the globe, the MA process evolved to face greater challenges. During World War II, individual units continued immediate remains recovery while the role of the GRS remained largely unchanged at the outset of American involvement in the war. However, the scale of warfare across multiple theaters, the length of the conflict, and the harsh topography and climate of the Pacific campaign posed significantly greater challenges

for the GRS. During the battle for the Tarawa atoll, the 2nd MarDiv lost nearly 1,000 Marines while securing Betio Island. Many of these Marines were buried where they fell—some in individual graves, others in mass interments. The tropical conditions caused rapid decomposition, putrefying remains within a day or two. When the U.S. Army's 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company arrived in 1946, three years after the battle, they were able to locate only about 50 percent of the remains they had been sent to recover. Of that number, only 58 percent could be identified.²

U.S. Navy Inspector General, VADM Charles Lockwood, would investigate the matter, reporting his findings in "Investigation of Burial of Deceased Marine Corps Personnel on Tarawa Atoll." VADM Lockwood determined that the difficulties with recovery and identification of Marines were caused by a series of errors and were compounded by the unavoidable circumstances of combat and the tropical conditions of Tarawa. Rapid burials, inconsistent identification of remains before interment, and insufficiently trained remains-recovery personnel

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at the unit level greatly increased the challenges faced by the 604th. Shortcomings in the 604th's training and preparedness exacerbated these issues, ultimately resulting in the remains of more than 500 Marines being declared "permanently nonrecoverable."³

The Korean War presented similar challenges for the GRS. Not only had the GRS been rapidly reinstated to support the war after being disbanded shortly after World War II, but the mountainous terrain and weather, coupled with constant and drastically shifting battle lines, greatly increased the difficulty of the graves registration mission. Entire cemeteries were sometimes disinterred and relocated so as not to fall into the hands of North Korean and Chinese forces. These challenges, coupled with the lessons learned from previous conflicts, led the DOD to change its policy on personnel recovery and temporary interment. From then on, all remains of those killed in action were to be immediately returned to the United States.⁴

The Birth of the Marine Corps' MA Capability

The Marine Corps Reserve created its first organic graves registration capability during the Vietnam War in the Graves Registration (GR) Platoon, Military Police Company Charlie, 4th Force Service Support Group. Graves Registration Platoon pioneered the evacuation procedures for Marines killed in action during the Vietnam War and continued to develop MA and Fatality Management procedures well into the early 2000s. Graves Registration Platoon spearheaded Marine Corps MA operations throughout Operation DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM and into the early days of the Global War on Terror, deploying in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) in 2003. Around this time, the Marine Corps made the determination that creation of a formalized MA capability was a necessity, as well as to transition away from the graves registration concept. To support this transition, 300 Selected Marine Corps Reserve Marines were activated and subsequently designated as a provisional MA Company. Attached

to the 1st Force Service Support Group under I MEF, MA Company received two weeks of training from the GR Platoon veterans before deploying to Kuwait. They later moved into Iraq to support OIF I operations from 2003 to 2004.

Based on the experiences of the Marines of the provisional MA Company in support of I MEF, Marine Forces Reserve (MARFORRES) permanently established the PRP Company in 2005. Due to the enduring operational demands of the Global War on Terror, PRP Company Marines continued to support OIF through 2009. Later that year, PRP Marines also deployed in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF), continuing to support OEF deployments until 2014, when the last MA collection point (MACP) operated by PRP Company was determined to no longer be necessary. More than 700 Selected Marine Corps Reserve Marines from the provisional MA Company and PRP Company supported 22 deployments between the OIF and OEF campaigns.

PRP Company Today

The PRP Company continues to car-

ry out the MA mission today, as part of the 4th Marine Logistics Group within MARFORRES. The company's 200 Marines receive their initial training at the U.S. Army's Quartermaster School aboard Fort Gregg-Adams, VA, at the Joint MA Center (JMAC). Enlisted Marines attend initial training at the MA Specialist Advanced Individual Training Course to obtain the 0471 Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). They may then attend follow-on training at the MA Senior Leader's Course and Advanced Leader's Course. The PRP Company officers attend training at the MA Officer's Course, qualifying as either 0407s (second lieutenants-majors) or 0408s (warrant officers through chief warrant officer 5s). The PRP Company Marines are trained for and prepared to carry out the full spectrum of MA operations, from performing remains recovery from the battlefield to establishing MACPs, where they inventory and catalog personal effects and process remains for transport back to the United States. During drill weekends, these Marines practice their skills in a variety of situations, from backyard drills in the Mobile Integrated Remains Collection System to handling actual human remains at local morgues alongside



Marines with 3rd Marine Logistics Group transport a simulated casualty as part of a Unit Recovery Team course during the field training exercise portion of RESOLUTE DRAGON 23 at Camp Kinser, Okinawa, Japan. (Photo by LCpl Federico Marquez.)

civilian medical examiners and coroners in the Atlanta and Quantico areas, to field exercises where search and recovery (S&R) operations are practiced using humanlike dummies.

Unit Recovery Team Courses

Recognizing that large-scale combat operations will produce fatalities at a much greater rate than the Marine Corps has experienced in generations, PRP Company leaders determined their 200 MA specialists could not provide the support required. Learning from the complications experienced during MA operations in past conflicts and anticipating that modern warfare would create additional, yet unforeseen, challenges to the remains recovery process, plans were developed to enable the Total Force to meet these challenges.

“During counter insurgency operations in the last decades, the United States has experienced relatively low fatality rates ... but as we move towards a potential peer on peer conflict, we have to realize that the fatality estimates will also go up,” said CWO3 Andrew Carter, a fatality management officer and PRP Company platoon commander. “In large scale combat operations, with fatality estimates in the thousands, there needs to be an interim fatality capability at the lower tactical level.”⁵

To address this concern, PRP Company leaders developed a concept of support for the Total Force through instruction of Unit Recovery Team (URT) courses throughout the FMF. This initiative was formally incorporated into doctrine in 2022 with the publication of *Marine Corps Reference Publication 3-40G.3*, which specifies that all units of company-sized and greater should maintain a cadre of seven URT-trained Marines, with a non-commissioned officer assigned as team leader.⁶

To meet this requirement, unit commanders may request a PRP Company to support them via a URT course, instructed by a PRP Company mobile training team certified by the JMAC. As CWO3 Carter explains it, “PRP worked with JMAC to develop the URT course. This allows PRP to come out as a mobile training team, bolt on

to an exercise, and participants in the course to graduate with a URT technician certificate. This enables ground combatant commanders at the company level to have an interim fatality management capability, in the event of large-scale fatality operations.”

The course consists of four days of classroom instruction, learning the basic concepts of MA to include the tactics, techniques, and procedures behind S&R of remains, the establishment of MACPs, and the basic DOD forms MA Marines would use to document identifying information and recovered personal effects. Students then spend seven days in a field environment applying the lessons they learned practically, with a simulated mass casualty event serving as a course culmination. Any Marine, regardless of their primary MOS, can attend URT training. Completion of the course results in a Marine receiving certification as a PRP technician. Marines can then be considered by their commander as trained in accordance with doctrinal requirements. Presently, the Policy Standards Division of Training and Education Command is reviewing a proposal to award URT course graduates the 0472 additional MOS, which will enable commanders to better track Marines in their formations with this unique and specialized qualification.

Advising the Total Force

In addition to creating PRP technicians who can continue to spread their MA knowledge once returned to their parent units, supported units can receive additional benefits and training from PRP Company instructors. Included within the URT course are various sub-courses that any Marine may attend, and by sending non-URT students to periods of instruction that are not exclusive to a prospective PRP technician, units help to better prepare themselves for MA operations they may be required to conduct in combat. These courses are the S&R Augmentee course and the Dignified Transfer Augmentee course. The URT instructors run these periods of instruction every two hours during the field training portion of the URT course. Supported or ad-

jacent units may send any Marines not enrolled in the URT training to either or both courses, thereby increasing their preparedness for the execution of S&R operations as well as the rendering of honors to their fallen. The URT course includes practical application periods on recovery of remains in a Chemical, Biological, Radiation, and Nuclear (CBRN) environment, which includes a CBRN chamber and training in Mission Oriented Protective Posture equipment. On the course dates that include the CBRN chamber, PRP instructors welcome non-URT course students to partake, aiding supported units in meeting annual training requirements and deployment preparedness.

MA in Support of the Active Component

Over the last few years, PRP Company has enabled units throughout the Corps to meet the doctrinally mandated requirements by instructing URT courses at exercises around the world. Courses have been instructed throughout the United States as well as in Morocco and Japan, with another scheduled in Norway during fiscal year 2026 in support of Exercise COLD RESPONSE. Each URT course leverages the unique topographical features and local resources available in the training area to ensure the training remains realistic and relevant to the supported unit's mission. For example, students of the URT course instructed during AFRICAN LION 24 in TanTan, Morocco, were able to practice remains recovery from desert terrain as well as both beach and river shorelines, while students of the URT course instructed at the 12th Littoral Logistics Battalion received greater time during practical application in hilly jungle terrain. The company's largest and most enduring support is provided during Exercise NORTHERN STRIKE aboard Camp Grayling, MI, where PRP Marines have instructed a URT course annually since 2019. In 2024, 35 Marines were certified as PRP technicians at NORTHERN STRIKE, and another 274 Marines, sailors, soldiers, airmen, and allied service members completed S&R Augmentee and Dignified Transfer Augmentee training. NORTHERN

STRIKE also offers its most realistic training environment, as cadavers are procured for use during the practical application and field portions of the URT course. This exposes students to actual human remains for the first time, preparing them as accurately as possible for the duties they will be asked to undertake in combat.

The Marines of PRP Company provide a wide range of support to entities throughout the Total Force beyond URT courses. In 2024, PRP Marines used their annual training periods to serve as MA advisors to commanders in all three MEFs during Exercises STEEL KNIGHT (I MEF), JOINT TASK FORCE Exercise (II MEF), KEEN SWORD and RESOLUTE DRAGON (III MEF) in addition to advising during FREEDOM SHIELD (Marine Forces Korea). The PRP Marines also provided MA planning expertise in support of Marine Forces Pacific during their Logistics Rehearsal of Concept exercise, as well as at Marine Corps Logistics Command's Logistics Staff Training Exercise. As the sole source of school-trained MA experts, PRP Marines support the active component of the Marine Corps to the greatest extent possible.

PRP Company in the Joint Operational Environment

As MA operations are inherently Joint, PRP Company collaborates closely with other branches of the U.S. military, particularly during Joint exercises such as NORTHERN STRIKE. In recent years, the Army has sent an increasing number of students to the NORTHERN STRIKE URT course, and in 2024, nearly 20 percent of the participants were soldiers. This enduring joint training led to an important development when the Army's 377th Theater Sustainment Command (TSC) requested Marine Corps instructors from PRP Company to train and certify their own URT instructors, aiming to adopt a similar training model to what PRP leaders had developed. In response, a PRP platoon supported the 377th TSC's Combat Support Training Exercise during their annual training period in June 2024 aboard Fort Hunter-Liggett, CA.

"In real world operations, Fatality Management is a Joint effort. (PRP Company) has the first certified instructors in the DOD, and so they are certifying the Army's first instructors," said Capt Stephanie Ramos, a Theater Fatality Management Officer with the 377th TSC.⁷ As a result of this Joint training, nineteen Army URT instructors were certified, allowing them to continue expanding MA knowledge within the Army through internal URT courses. The S&R augmentee and dignified transfer augmentee courses run concurrently to the URT course, additionally enabling 565 soldiers to receive this vital training during the exercise.

Support to other branches extends beyond exercises. In the spirit of Joint operations and knowledge-sharing, a PRP Marine is currently activated on a three-year active-duty operational support assignment as an instructor at the JMAC, teaching newly assigned soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines how to conduct MA operations during their initial MOS training. The PRP Company has also historically provided an enduring presence to the Army regional mortuary for Europe and Africa, located in Landstuhl, Germany. These PRP Company augmentees

have worked side-by-side with Army MA specialists to assist in the processing of remains of service members from all branches who were either killed in action or during training.

Support to Allies and Partner Forces

While support to the other branches of the U.S. Armed Forces remains a priority for PRP Company leaders, they have also emphasized sharing MA knowledge with partner nations.

"In a joint operation, where we have host or Allied nation forces, it is important that we are equipped to provide fatality management in a Joint combat scenario. This means that we need to preemptively work side-by-side in our areas of responsibility with those potential host nation forces so we understand their TTPs [tactics, techniques, and procedures] and they understand ours ... that we honor their fallen, as we would expect them to honor ours,"⁸ said CWO3 Carter.

During exercises RESOLUTE DRAGON in 2023 and 2024, PRP Company advisors assisted the Japanese Ground Self Defense Force in refining their bilateral MA standard operating procedures, as well as assisted the Japanese Ground Self Defense Force with iden-



Marines from Personnel and Retrieval Processing Company, 4th Marine Logistics Group, worked with Macedonians for Medical Training Exercise in Central and Eastern Europe 2011 to teach foreign military services how the U.S. military conducts mortuary affairs. (Photo by LCpl Joseph Altemus.)

tification of areas throughout Japan suitable temporary interment operations in a combat scenario. Similarly, during AFRICAN LION, six members of the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces attended the URT course and later applied the knowledge gained to assist in refining their nation's own MA procedures.

Support for World Events

The support provided by PRP Company Marines to the Total Force has not been limited to exercises and training. At various times, they have been called upon to perform their duties in support of real-world events outside of combat conditions. In July 2017, when a KC-130T crashed in Mississippi, killing fifteen Marines and a Navy sailor, PRP Company Marines activated on short notice to respond to the crash site at the request of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner's office. Within eight hours of receipt of the request, PRP Company Marines were on site with all equipment required to conduct S&R operations. This response team was attached to the Mississippi National Guard response force and liaised with local, state, and federal officials to coordinate the effort to recover the remains of all U.S. service members. The seven PRP Marines who answered the call searched a ten-square-kilometer crash area and recovered the remains and personal effects of all service members for further processing at the MACP they established on site. Their efforts and expertise were crucial to the crash response and investigation, as no local authorities had experience in remains recovery at a military crash site.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Marines of PRP Company were again called upon to aid civilian authorities, as the Federal Emergency Management Agency requested MA capabilities to support the New York City office of the coroner and medical examiner. As the threat of COVID-19 grew, Commander MARFORRES authorized PRP Company to assemble and conduct a pre-deployment training program (PTP) to prepare to further aid the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the national COVID-19 response. The Marines of PRP Com-

pany were notified of the PTP and the potential for follow-on taskings, and more than 200 volunteered to activate. In less than a week, 100 Marines had assembled at their home training center and were receiving orientation and specialized training in pandemic response measures. A few days later, nearly 100 additional Marines arrived

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at the home training center as part of the second rotation to receive an identical PTP. While PRP Company never received a formal mobilization request to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic beyond their initial orientation classes and PTP workup, the fact that nearly every PRP Marine was willing and able to put their personal lives and civilian professions on hold and their safety on the line, while mobilizing in under a week, demonstrated their commitment and dedication to their Marine Corps profession and the entire Nation.

Conclusion

The PRP Company leaders have identified the Marine Corps' critical vulnerability regarding MA operations: a troop-to-task ratio that would be insurmountable in large-scale combat operations, given the expected casualty rates. To avoid the mistakes made in previous wars and to appropriately honor the Nation's fallen service members, the timely recovery, processing, and evacuation of remains are necessary. This can only be achieved with a greater number of trained and experienced MA personnel throughout the force. Fortunately, a force multiplier was created in conjunction with the JMAC, and PRP Company Marines can be found throughout the Marine Corps Total Force, the Joint Force, and even in part-

ner nations. They share their unique knowledge and expertise, creating additional MA capabilities at the unit level. At the time of writing, PRP Marines are activated or executing their annual training periods at Fort Gregg-Adams, VA, Camp Lejeune, NC, Camp Mujuk, South Korea, and Marine Corps Base Twentynine Palms, CA. Through their efforts, every MEF headquarters, every Marine Corps combatant command, and the overall Joint Force are better prepared to take on the solemn duties associated with MA. The Marines of PRP Company stand ready to execute their duties anywhere in the world, both in peacetime and in combat.

Notes

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4. John Cook, "Graves Registration in the Korean Conflict" *The Quartermaster Review*, March-April 1953, <https://www.quartermasterfoundation.org/graves-registration-in-the-korean-conflict>.
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