

Training in Arctic Warfare

by BGen Carl E. Mundy, Jr.

Marines are coming on strong in cold weather training without sacrificing global readiness capabilities.



During the six years I've been involved in the planning for or in command of U.S. Marine forces training for potential employment in Northern Norway, I've read a continuing stream of articles from inside and outside the Corps lamenting our funny boots, our lack of mobility, the limited duration of our cold weather training, our failure to "fence" a cold weather brigade and return the same faces to Norway each year, and a host of other criticisms of things we need to do better. Many of those articles have been a catalyst in helping us become more effective in the extraordinary condition of extreme cold, and a lot of the suggestions were valid; but we're fast outgrowing them, and it's time for even well-intended critics to do their homework before demeaning our abilities in cold weather combat. The simple fact is that U.S. Marines are coming on strong in arctic warfare without sacrificing our global

readiness capabilities. Some points and counterpoints:

Assertion: U.S. Marines spend too little time training for operations in the extreme cold each year.

Facts:

- Last year, the bulk of our Marines who deployed to Norway for Exercise COLD WINTER '84 trained in the snow for 9½ weeks prior to the exercise, frequently in temperatures and snow depths more extreme than those they encountered during the exercise.

- The British and Dutch Marines, considered some of the finest arctic warfare troops in the world, trained 10½ weeks.

Assertion: The same people/units don't return for training in Norway annually.

Fact: Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 1/2 has trained in Northern Norway for

three of the past five years. BLT 2/2 is in trace by one year. The Headquarters of 4th Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB), Regimental Landing Team (RLT) 2, Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 14, and Brigade Service Support Group (BSSG) 4 have deployed to and trained there for the past three. The present MAB commander returns for his third deployment in five years this year; the incumbent RLT commander returns for his second consecutive year; and his predecessor was there for the previous two years. These leaders are reflective of an increasing number of two and three arctic "pump" Marines resident in Fleet Marine Force Atlantic units.

Assertion: We're training too few Marines in cold weather operations each year. We need to "fence" a full MAB, orient it strictly toward and train it for the Northern Norway contingency.

Fact: Starting last year and continuing in future training plans, II Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) is training in extreme cold weather operations each year about twice the number of Marines it is authorized or can afford to deploy to Norway for annual exercises, and as I mentioned earlier, the weather conditions in our northern and western U.S. training sites are frequently more extreme than those we've encountered in Norway. For example, this winter, about 6,000 Marines will undergo extensive training at our Mountain Warfare Training Center in California and in up-state Wisconsin before deploying an exercise contingent to Norway. This is up from the roughly 3,000 trained last year, and it is intended to grow each year. This means that on any given day of the five months of potentially extreme winter conditions, there are among our east coast FMF units, in training, or trained as recently as the previous winter, a significant number of units to form the components of a MAB deployed on short notice.

Opinion: Desirable as it may sound, we can't "fence" a MAB for arctic operations, and I don't believe we'd want to if we could. Fleet Marine forces are operational forces, not static units based in CONUS waiting for something to happen. We deploy, through rotation of Marine air-ground task forces and individual units, forward-deployed-afloat or forward-deployed-ashore components of the U.S. Fleets for locked-and-loaded commitment today. We can't



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slice a specific-mission MAB out of the rotation base needed to maintain that core of deployable units. Even if we could, the Nation can't afford for us to lose the ability to do what its Marines are for: go wherever, whenever, and do whatever is required.

Assertion: Marine Corps units lack mobility in the snow and terrain of Northern Norway.

Fact: In Exercise COLD WINTER '85, a U.S. Marine infantry battalion skied tactically for the first time. They enveloped, surprised, and overran. Their supporting helicopters put them in places the opposing forces never detected or suspected. They moved supplies, equipment, and command posts cross-country in the tremendously capable, Swedish all-terrain vehicle, the BANDVAGEN. Put simply, they outmaneuvered their opponents. They were mobile. The much-maligned M198 howitzer has previously been seen only in northern photographs with one wheel in a ditch alongside the road. With the new, narrow tire, studded chains, the M900 series prime-mover, and a 10,000-pound TEREX to maneuver the guns into position, the direct support battalion took second to no one in maneuverability, outranged everyone, and put no wheels in roadside ditches during a 3-week stint in Northern Norway.

Assertion: Marine Corps clothing is inadequate in combating the arctic cold, and the vapor barrier (Mickey Mouse) boot is clumsy and can't be skied in.

Fact: In three weeks in Northern Norway last year, one Marine was evacuated for a cold-related injury: a reoccurrence of frostbite of the hands he had suffered on a previous deployment.

There were no cold-related foot injuries, and Marines skied throughout the exercise area in "VB" boots. Troops skiing in Northern Norway next winter—and all those in infantry companies will—will wear new, simpler, more durable and reliable ski bindings. They will assault on smaller, more mobile snowshoes; dry, warm, and rest their feet in down-filled "tent socks"; wear warmer and drier polypropylene underwear; and carry a smaller, lighter weight, arctic sleeping bag. In a quantum sense, these seem modest steps forward, but they are in fact, significant steps in increasing mobility, survivability, and the very important individual ingredient—confidence. Moreover, they reflect effective, affordable, and calculated improvements in what we have, rather than a sometimes advocated, over-zealous throwing-out-and-starting-all-over approach to our equipping of Arctic-bound units. There are other improvements underway and yet to be made, but they're being undertaken on a proven requirement rather than whimsical basis.

Some readers will be unimpressed by the above, holding the view that despite some modest equipment improvements and an expanded training program, we still don't have a fury-capped, dedicated MAB peering at the downhill run over 13,000 pairs of ski-tips and wearing feather-light clothing and equipment straight out of High Country Outfitters, Ltd. To them, I would respond that we don't need 13,000 skiers; we need about 2,500 in a MAB—the infantry and recon companies together with some assorted detachments. These skiers need lighter, more mobile equipment, and we're get-

ting that. The rest of us do pretty well with the DOD standard extreme cold weather issue. I would also note that operating in extreme cold weather and deep snow is unique and does demand special training and some special equipment, but the amount of each varies with type units. Infantry troops are most affected because they are in the most direct physical confrontation with the elements on a continuous basis. A communications company, by comparison, deals with some phenomenal technical communications problems derived from the geography, but it has a less-personal confrontation with the effects of weather. The type and extent of training and special equipment required by the two is different. Limited personal survival training for the communicators or aviation technicians or ration platoon members may be sufficient compared to intensive over-snow mobility, combat skills and personal survival training essential for infantry. In other words, desirable as it might be, we are not lost if every one of the thousands of Marines on the MAB roster doesn't receive two or three months of training in extreme weather conditions each year. Even if we thought it equally necessary, the limitations of training funds, strategic mobility assets, and ability of the Norwegians to support extensive training of a full MAB each year make such an endeavor not reasonable. We must apply balance to the well-intended, but overenthusiastic view that every man on the muster roll must be ready to scale Mount Everest before we're ready to go.

In summary, we're making significant progress in honing our fighting, surviving, and moving skills in the extreme conditions of the Arctic. We are not yet masterful, but we're well beyond the apologetic stage, and we're moving out at high port. Remember also that we didn't start from a flat-footed stance. Our seven-league boot helicopters give us a maneuver mobility that the finest skiborne infantry in the world envies.

The land commander in Northern Norway and the Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces in Northern Europe said, respectively, all there is to say about our forward movement toward mastery in their postexercise comments following last year's exercise in Northern Norway: "About the U.S. Marines, we can only say, 'outstanding.' You have surprised and impressed us."

We're continuing the march. USMC