

# Making it Mountain:

## *Opportunities in Army Mountain Warfare Capabilities*

MAJ TOM KUMES

In the coming months, the 10th Mountain Division is set to undergo a change to its modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) that will make it the only active component U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) entity with a stated focus on mountain and cold weather operations. The division's MTOE will reflect a requirement that additional enlisted positions per brigade are coded for the Special Qualification Identifier (SQI)-E (Military Mountaineer), which will serve as a forcing function to ensure more Soldiers across the division receive specialized training in military mountaineering. In ushering in this change, 10th Mountain Division leaders have made the most significant moves progressing Army mountaineering in the past decade. It is a tremendous start, but we have a way to go in establishing the essential capabilities needed to master the unique operating conditions imposed by the mountains.

The 10th Mountain's addition of designated military mountaineer positions onto its MTOE will help drive the development of their mountain culture and improve the mobility and lethality of their formation. Having more qualified mountaineers concentrated in one organization will make significant inroads in establishing best practices and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Critically, this will bring the force more in line with the principles dictated in U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 252-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for Training and Education 2020-2040*. By nature, an active-duty organization focusing on relevant applications to the contemporary operating environment (COE) will cultivate a much wider talent pool and facilitate "...seamless transitions... into and out of operational units and institutional opportunities."<sup>1</sup> Five years from now, the Army Mountain Warfare School (AMWS) and our sister schoolhouses at the Northern Warfare Training Center (NWTC) and 5th Ranger Training Battalion (RTB) will provide better education thanks to an influx of instructors experienced in mountain operations. During the coming assignment cycle(s), Soldiers from AMWS, NWTC, and 5th RTB should receive priority consideration for leadership assignments within 10th Mountain to drive the cultural shift and ensure that the right training, people, and leadership is positioned to facilitate the organization's success.



A view of the East Alaska Mountain Range as seen by students of the Advanced Military Mountaineering Course in July 2021. (Photo by CPT Edward Kwait)

Prior to the 10th Mountain MTOE change, the 86th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) (Mountain) was the only designated mountain brigade in the Army. The 86th IBCT is a National Guard unit headquartered across the street from AMWS on the Ethan Allen Firing Range (EAFR) in Jericho, VT. Elements of the 86th are spread between Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Colorado. The 86th IBCT has more than twice the density of SQI-E positions than comparable 10th Mountain brigades. In the coming years, additional changes to the 10th Mountain MTOE should be considered to standardize capabilities so senior leaders can better conceptualize the unique skills these organizations bring to the COE.

Currently, there is no additional skill identifier (ASI) available for officers or warrant officers denoting their status as military mountaineers akin to the SQI-E awarded to enlisted Soldiers. As such, there is no requirement for leaders selected for mountain units and training institutions to have attended "Mountain School." This is counterintuitive and easily fixable. While many officer positions are coded for ASI-5S (Ranger Parachutist), Mountain Phase of Ranger School focuses on very different skillsets than the Basic Military Mountaineer Course (BMMC), as evidenced by the fact that all Mountain Phase instructors at 5th RTB go through BMMC as part of their instructor development and risk mitigation plan. In establishing a military mountaineering ASI for the officer community, we will double down on our commitment to the mountain mentality at all echelons. It will aid the Army Interactive Marketplace (AIM) in identifying and selecting those officers who have demonstrated a desire and commitment to mountaineering for the right positions.

There are also considerations of geography in posturing our mountain forces. Gaining and maintaining proficiency in the mountains requires living and training in the mountains. Neither Vernon Parish, LA, nor Watertown, NY, are renowned for their towering peaks and rolling hills. Overcoming a lack of mountain terrain at home station presents a long-term conundrum to 10th Mountain leaders. Compounding this is the struggle to balance required training metrics versus the (currently) unquantified mountain skillsets. Until military mountaineering is tied to specific mission-essential tasks (METs) and a mission-essential task list (METL) is developed specific to mountain units, balancing mountain proficiency against the Regionally Aligned Readiness and Modernization Model (ReARMM)-dictated training gates will remain a challenge. Long term, the Army should examine developing existing training areas along similar lines to what the Marine Corps has done in developing their Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, CA, where they are able to conduct large-scale force validation in an alpine environment.



**An Army Mountain Warfare School student scales the mountain at Smugglers' Notch in Jeffersonville, VT, on 16 February 2016. (Photo by SSG Nathan Rivard)**

A competent mountain organization must be fundamentally organized and equipped differently than their light counterparts. Basic soldier loads must be kept to an absolute minimum to retain mobility and situational awareness. While a step forward, current Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV)/high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV) substitutes like the Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV) and Light Reconnaissance Vehicle (LRV) will often still prove impractical. Sustaining forces in a mountainous environment will require greater reliance on aerial resupply where available and utilization of lighter wheeled platforms than what forward support companies (FSCs) are currently equipped with. The organization of a mountain brigade support battalion (BSB) may need to be examined to incorporate niche skillsets like advanced sling-load operations, animal packing, and tramway construction/operation, or even consolidation of Level II assault climbers into a “mountain guide” element similar to pathfinder formations (think of it as the rigger company equivalent for mountain organizations).

The majority of Army-issued mountaineering gear in the High Angle Mountaineering Kits (HAMKs), Snow and Ice Mobility Kits (SIMKs), and Assault Climber Team Kits (ACTKs) were issued in 2014 and have since expired. Replacement components are often unavailable, or worse, have been sitting in a warehouse for nearly a decade and aren’t safe for use. Commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) solutions are available to bridge the gap, but a deliberate effort is needed to achieve a long-term remedy. There are several pieces of individual equipment that mountain organizations need to be successful including a mountain boot, cold weather boot, and integrated glove system. We have an opportunity and an imperative to standardize solutions across the force so that Soldiers gain equipment proficiency and familiarization that follows them from assignment to assignment.

It’s imperative that across the force we understand that arctic is not mountain. After the publishing of the “Regaining Arctic Dominance” document in January 2021 and reflagging of our Alaska-based units to the 11th Airborne Division “Arctic Angels,” it’s been in vogue to equate these two distinct operating environments and relate proficiency in one to the other.<sup>2-3</sup> While there are some similarities, asking a force to specialize in both, especially in the infancy of its specialization(s), will result in proficiency in neither. Arctic operations primarily require skill in operating in extreme cold weather environments. Many mountains are not situated in cold weather environments. Much of the arctic is flat. I’m writing this from the Huachuca Mountains; the training, equipment, and mindset I need to operate effectively here is vastly different than what I need to traverse a glacier in the Arctic Circle.

Achieving a robust mountain capability will require a more nuanced approach than framing the problem as just another stoplight chart. Change is hard, and the successful development of these capabilities will require fundamental changes to the way some of our organizations look and conduct business. As once noted, “You are either a zealot or a martyr.”<sup>4</sup> Leaders in these burgeoning mountain organizations need to embrace change and uncertainty as we develop the infrastructure to enable our future success.

Mountains make up 24 percent of the Earth’s surface and house 10 percent of the world’s population; a disproportionate amount of armed conflict is fought in the mountains.<sup>5</sup> In terms of our greatest competitor, 33 percent of China’s total area, much of it on their borders and immediate periphery, is mountainous terrain.<sup>6</sup> The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has multiple light brigade-sized units that live and train at elevations upwards of 13,000 feet. They have a medium brigade equivalent stationed above 4,500 feet.<sup>7</sup> They have a tank specially designed to function at altitudes above 15,000 feet.<sup>8</sup> Not known for their robust away game, likely conflicts involving the PLA will take place in the mountains, as recently witnessed in the Doklam standoff on the shared border between India/China/Bhutan and Ladakh incident along the China/India Himalayan border.<sup>9-10</sup> Were China to become expeditionary, their most likely target remains Taiwan. Central and eastern Taiwan is a nightmare of complex, compartmentalized, and severely restricted terrain with more than 200 peaks above 9,800 feet.<sup>11</sup> Outside concerns about our near-peer competitors, we must remember that mountainous terrain remains a corresponding factor predictive of insurgency and civil war.<sup>12</sup> The need for mountain-capable units within our force structure is real and here to stay.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for Training and Education 2020-2040*, 13 April 2017, 16-18.

<sup>2</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, “Regaining Arctic Dominance: The U.S. Army in the Arctic,” 19 January 2021, accessed from <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/03/15/9944046e/regaining-arctic-dominance-us-army-in-the-arctic-19-january-2021-unclassified.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Joe Lacdan, “Army Re-activates Historic Airborne Unit, Reaffirms Commitment to Arctic Strategy,” Army News



Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment move up a mountain to establish an observation post during mountain warfare training with the Italian Army's Alpini Brigade on 2 October 2022. (Photo by SSG John Yountz)

Service, 8 June 2022, accessed from [https://www.army.mil/article/257356/army\\_re\\_activates\\_historic\\_air-borne\\_unit\\_reaffirms\\_commitment\\_to\\_arctic\\_strategy](https://www.army.mil/article/257356/army_re_activates_historic_air-borne_unit_reaffirms_commitment_to_arctic_strategy).

<sup>4</sup> Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife* (NY: Penguin Books, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Hans Schreier, "Mountains: Source of Water, Sites of Poverty and War," Population Reference Bureau, 9 August 2002, accessed from <https://www.prb.org/resources/mountains-sources-of-water-sites-of-poverty-and-war/#:~:text=Facts%20About%20Mountains,percent%20of%20the%20Earth's%20surface>.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin McCauley, "Himalayan Impasse: How China Would Fight an Indian Border Conflict," The Jamestown Foundation, 20 September 2017, accessed from <https://jamestown.org/program/himalayan-impasse-how-china-would-fight-an-indian-border-conflict/>.

<sup>7</sup> Frank O'Donnell and Alex Bollfrass, "The Strategic Postures of China and India: A Visual Guide," Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, March 2020, accessed from <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/strategic-postures-china-and-india-visual-guide>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Episkopos, "Introducing China's New Type 15 Tank. Here's What You Need to Know," *The National Interest*, 1 January 2019, accessed from <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/introducing-chinas-new-type-15-tank-heres-what-you-need-know-40297>.

<sup>9</sup> Ankit Panda, "Geography's Curse: India's Vulnerable 'Chicken's Neck'" *The Diplomat*, 8 November 2013, accessed from <https://thediplomat.com/2013/11/geographys-curse-indias-vulnerable-chickens-neck/>.

<sup>10</sup> Soutik Biswas, "India-China Clash: 20 Indian Troops Killed in Ladakh Fighting," BBC, 16 June 2020, accessed from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476>.

<sup>11</sup> Staff Writer, "Taiwan's Most Breathtaking Mountain Landscapes," *Smithsonian Magazine*, accessed from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/sponsored/taiwan-mountain-landscapes-hiking-ecotourism-nature-travel-180972646/>.

<sup>12</sup> Paul J. Tompkins Jr. and Nathan Bos, *Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds in Insurgencies*, Second Edition (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command and the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 25 January 2013).

**MAJ Tom Kumes** currently serves as the operations officer for the Army Mountain Warfare School (AMWS) on Ethan Allen Firing Range, VT. His previous assignments include serving as chief of the Training Division, AMWS; commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 172nd Infantry Regiment (Mountain) in Jericho, VT; and the S2 of 1st Squadron, 172nd Cavalry Regiment (Mountain) in St. Albans, VT. MAJ Kumes

earned a bachelor's degree in communication studies from the University of Montana and a master's degree in organizational leadership from Brandman University.