

The Road to Arctic Proficiency and the Pivotal Role of the Army's Arctic CTC

COL ADAM E. MACALLISTER

Our profession prides itself on its adaptability and the audacity with which it overcomes adversity of all types. Unfortunately, there are some problems, no matter our will power, that cannot be solved without the introduction of specialized units, equipment, and training. The Arctic is one such problem. To that end, the Army has taken significant steps towards the creation of an Arctic-proficient force, the most well-known being the publication of a guiding strategy, the activation of an Arctic division, and the creation of an Arctic Combat Training Center (CTC) — known as the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center - Alaska (JPMRC-AK).

An Arctic-proficient force that is capable at operating in extreme cold weather conditions and mountainous terrain will be a unique but highly versatile tool within the Army's inventory of forces. That force has relevance to U.S. homeland defense, domestic contingency response requirements, competition activities, and large-scale combat operations (LSCO). Clear objectives and firm expectations for this force are noted within the Army's Arctic Strategy, but equally telling is the significant and growing demand signal from multiple geographic combatant commands beyond Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) for which the 11th Airborne Division is assigned. With the wide range of employment scenarios, the hardest questions are fundamental ones: Namely, how will the Army organize and man this force, how will it be equipped and enabled, how will it be trained and certified, and how will that limited resource be employed to greatest effect? Owing to incredible, and arguably unprecedented, levels of effort from the Department of the Army down to the squad level of the 11th Airborne Division, answers to those questions are rapidly forming. That said, highlighting the present efforts to train the Army's Arctic force, amidst the demands of transformation and persistent mission requirements, offers valuable enterprise-level insights into the future of this capability.

Though relevant to all Army units, the manner in which an Arctic formation defines and applies emphasis to predictability, complexity, and innovation is distinct. All three factors will be described briefly with critical emphasis then applied to the decisive point in the Arctic force's training strategy — the Arctic CTC.



Soldiers assigned to 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment scan the Arctic landscape while on patrol during Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center 22-02 near Fort Greely, AK, on 21 March 2022. (Photo by SGT Seth LaCount)

Predictability

Unsurprisingly, extreme cold weather constitutes the most difficult factor to overcome, the process of doing so is a yearlong endeavor, but it centers annually on the training period between October through March. It is within this six-month stretch that the temperatures will remain almost entirely below freezing, often below zero, and reach as low as -50 to -60 degrees Fahrenheit (F). Arctic units will attend Northern Warfare Training Center courses, iteratively execute Cold Weather Indoctrination Courses 1 through 3, advance from squad to company-level live-fire exercises, and execute higher-echelon mission command events. This training progression will then culminate annually with the execution of the Arctic CTC in mid-February to late March to maximize available training time while still exposing the exercise participants to extreme temperatures and conditions.

The time horizon for attaining Arctic proficiency is measured in years not months. Missing a single winter training cycle will significantly impact a unit's proficiency level due in part to the three-year outside the continental United States (OCONUS) assignment cycles in Alaska. Despite being a strong advocate for the Army's Regionally Aligned Readiness and Modernization Model (ReARMM), it has been a challenge to see this two-year design nested cleanly with imperatives like the annual winter training requirements, annual exercise programs, temperate month equipment fieldings, and annual training requirements that can only be executed in warmer months like Expert Infantryman Badge testing.

The high operational tempo experienced by Arctic formations speaks to the consistently high demand placed on Soldiers and Families and the importance of closely managing this unique population by leaders at echelon. As we have all thankfully come to appreciate, disassociating unit proficiency from talent management is a fatal mistake. It is satisfying to see the present multifaceted strategy to simultaneously attract the right Soldiers to live and operate within the "Last Frontier" while investing in quality-of-life initiatives within Alaska that address the inspiring, yet harsh and remote, conditions that define the home of the 11th Airborne Division.

Complexity

We are all contending with heightened degrees of emphasis to introduce complexity into our training in order to achieve objectives associated with LSCO, multidomain operations (MDO), divisions as the primary unit of action, fifth-generation joint capabilities, partner nation integration, and certainly dynamic and increasingly capable threats. The training spectrum for Arctic formations extends from individual survival to joint and combined MDO-enabled division operations. Further, the environment adds high-latitude and high-altitude considerations, which when combined with extreme temperatures, put every warfighting function's efficacy into question.

The training objectives mentioned above do not diminish the continued importance of weighting small unit tactical proficiency. However, our readiness generation models will increasingly emphasize the effective resourcing of large-scale collective training events executed at an increased frequency if we are going to see battalion through division staffs and commanders effectively enabled to meet the demands of the future battlefield. For our purposes in the Arctic, this is realized through the annual execution of JPMRC-AK, which is, by both necessity and design, a multi-echelon training event.

Innovation

Hand in hand with complexity is the presence of innovation and initiative, both of which are enabled by effective knowledge management, expertise, resources, and leader emphasis, to name a few. What is understood is that there is an absence of formalized requirements to fight and win at scale within an Arctic environment, and so the present onus is on our tactical formations to discover the hard lessons to inform our Arctic force's future composition. What is also known is that the majority of Army systems are not regularly tested at or engineered to function below -25 degrees F, which leads to a progressive waterfall of capabilities at different temperature thresholds that have to be overcome or mitigated to a degree greater than the elevated risk to forces and mission that this reality induces.

Critical to innovation in the Arctic is the U.S. Army's ability to leverage local and tribal leadership, Arctic-based industry partners, and the armies of Arctic-proficient nations to expedite the learning curve. That said, few of our partners place the same emphasis on expeditionary combat capabilities. This simply highlights the need for continued internal collaboration amongst engaged conventional forces, special forces, and the U.S. Army's diverse innovation enterprise, ranging in scope and scale from the Army Futures Command to the Cold Regions Test Center.



Leaders attending the Cold Weather Orientation Course conduct snowshoe training at the Black Rapids Training Site in Alaska on 17 November 2021. (Photo by SSG Christopher B. Dennis)

The Army's Arctic CTC — JPMRC-AK

Beyond the activation of the 11th Airborne Division, the creation of JPMRC-AK is the most significant investment the Army has made towards attaining the objectives of the Arctic Strategy. The initiative was spearheaded by the commanding general of the U.S. Army Pacific Command (USARPAC) and his staff, but its successful inaugural rotation in March 2022 is a credit to the entire Army enterprise, with particularly significant contributions coming from the Department of the Army Management Office - Training (DAMO-TR), Combined Arms Center (CAC)/Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM), and the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). JPMRC is not designed or resourced to replicate JRTC, the National Training Center (NTC), or even the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Europe — it is a uniquely flexible design that accommodates the specific operational requirements of the INDOPACOM area of operations. Through the growing capabilities of the 196th Infantry Brigade, I Corps, and USARPAC-aligned forces and the Army-managed training resources and lands within Alaska and Hawaii, USARPAC is able to annually deliver three fully enabled brigade-level readiness generation exercises in the Arctic, in the jungle, and/or west of the international date line.

In addition to training our forces in the environments in which they are most likely to operate, the design prevents lost readiness due to the multi-month equipment shipping timelines to and from the major training centers and realizes significant cost savings for the same reason. The execution of these events within the region demonstrates an elevated level of commitment to our mission, purpose, and identity and reinforces joint and multinational habitual relationships as well as growth in our interoperability.

The five-pillar CTC design used by JRTC and NTC remains applicable to JPMRC. Each rotation features live, virtual, and constructive training environments; is fully instrumented; possesses a professional cadre of observer-controller/trainers (OC/Ts); uses a regionally trained and capable opposing force; and in the case of JPMRC-AK, leverages the newly constructed Arctic decisive action training environment or Arctic operating environment.

Since JPMRC is not anchored to a fixed installation, the specific live-training environment is selected solely on the training or experimentation objectives for that year. As an example, the inaugural rotation in Alaska utilized the Donnelly Training Area near Fort Greely where the terrain was ideal for assessing at scale the over-the-snow mobil-

ity of a Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT) under extreme cold weather conditions, whereas in 2023 the rotation will leverage an active Army airfield at Fort Wainwright to accommodate a contested airborne joint forcible entry operation and then apply the highly restrictive mountainous terrain of the Yukon Training Area to advance offensive and defensive training objectives for an airborne BCT with a full complement of enablers.

Planning and coordination follows a 10-month joint exercise life cycle with participant resourcing increasingly accommodated through traditional processes at the Army Synchronization and Resourcing Conference (ASRC). Though the core function of these rotations will remain the preparation of units for entry into the mission phase of the ReARMM cycle, the realized benefits can also be usefully binned under predictability, complexity, and innovation.

Predictability

Annual execution of a major crucible event at the conclusion of the winter cycle gives purpose and focus to our unit training plans and provides an imperative to progressively grow and leverage Arctic proficiencies. Though the focus brigade will serve as the rotational training unit, every Alaska-based Army unit is involved in its annual execution as either a training audience or a supporting element. The predictability of anchoring the event in February and March each year allows for Arctic partners whether joint, multi-component, or partner nation to coordinate and expand their involvement. To not lose sight of the human dimension, especially given the high operational tempo (OPTEMPO) of Alaska-based forces, the predictability of this event allows Soldiers and Families to plan and prepare.

Complexity

The I Corps commander serves as exercise director, and the senior trainer for JPMRC rotations is the supported division commander. The division commander and his/her staff have the additional responsibility of providing the higher command functions for the training units, making JPMRC a division-level operation in every sense of the



A paratrooper prepares to land during a joint forcible entry operation as part of Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center 22-02. (Photo by John Pennell)



A Soldier assigned to 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment provides security during JPMRC 22-02 in Alaska on 21 March 2022. (Photo by SPC Aaron Downing)

term. This is assessed as ideal for the way it contributes to division proficiency outside of the traditional warfighter exercise construct.

Owing to over-the-pole mobility and proximity to the Arctic region and Russia, a high density of relevant joint capabilities are stationed in Alaska. Proximity of these capabilities to the execution of JPMRC-AK rotations creates incredible opportunities for integration, particularly as all services are applying emphasis on LSCO, competition in the Arctic, and the importance of competitive messaging. The same principle extends to multinational partners but is amplified because of the increased relevance that extreme cold weather and mountainous terrain offers to their respective nations. For example, the fiscal year 2023 rotation will include representation from the partner nations of four distinct geographic combatant commands.

Innovation

The space for innovation in the Arctic is as wide as the enormity of the challenges the environment poses. Though we naturally gravitate first to the material issues centered on the individual equipping of Soldiers and small unit tactical operations, every warfighting function requires advancements at echelon if we are to achieve the proficiency needed to survive, fight, and win in the harshest environment on the globe. CALL published the Arctic Gap Quick-Look Report in 2021 that highlighted at the unclassified level 23 capability gaps. That effort now enjoys an annual waypoint through the execution of JPMRC to assess meaningful progress. In tandem to addressing equipping and capability limitations, the Arctic force must develop and refine its tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to meet the demands of its assigned mission. JPMRC-AK and the associated unit training plans leading up to it provide the annual catalyst for Soldiers, Program Managers, and contractors alike the opportunity to experiment and innovate.

Put a different way, have you ever considered what it would be like to conduct maintenance on your vehicle at -20 degrees F without the benefit of a warm space; how about a helicopter? Have you ever asked yourself what the right density and type of skis are for an infantry company? Have you ever wondered how to sustain a maneuvering battalion with water or treat a casualty with blood or saline in sub-zero temps? All innovation starts with a problem, and there is no shortage of challenges within an Arctic or mountainous environment.

Conclusion

If you want a credible force capable of overcoming extreme cold weather and mountainous terrain, you must be able to train it — in it. Owing to the extensive training spaces in Alaska and the advent of JPMRC-AK, the Army has the ability to not only do so but to do it extremely well. The Army's Arctic CTC will continue to deliver increasingly proficient Arctic forces capable of meeting the demands of a joint, multinational, multidomain, large-scale battlefield. Thanks to JPMRC-AK, the Army's Arctic force will see complexity and innovation increased each year. And

thanks to the emphasis from senior leaders of the military, the momentum of the last two years will overcome the Arctic atrophy experienced over the last two decades and as the Army Strategy directs — regain Arctic dominance.

COL Adam E. MacAllister currently serves as the G3/5/7 of the 11th Airborne Division. Commissioned as an Infantry officer through the U.S. Military Academy, through five deployments he has led Soldiers in combat at every echelon from platoon to squadron and, with the exception of the corps level, has held positions up to a geographic combatant command. COL MacAllister has served in the interagency, is a joint-qualified officer, and as the valedictorian holds a Master in Statecraft and National Security Affairs from the Institute of World Politics.