

Commandant's Note

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MOUNTAIN OPERATIONS: THE HIGH ALTITUDE CHALLENGE

The global war on terrorism is characterized to a large extent by the harshness of the climate and the terrain in which we operate. We are going after the enemy from the deserts and the maze of streets and alleys in the urban centers of Iraq to the mountains of Afghanistan. In this Commandant's Note I want to highlight the demands placed on our Soldiers and planners by operations in mountainous terrain.

The mountain environment is unique in terms of its steep grades, rough terrain and limited trafficability, the thin air of high elevations, and extremes of weather. Cold, snow, rain, low-hanging clouds and fog often predominate, and constantly-changing winds can restrict the use and effectiveness of fixed and rotary wing aircraft. The climate itself can create non-battle injuries, something that demands constant alertness on the part of the chain of command. Units experienced in mountain operations understand these challenges and are operating effectively in spite of them. Mountain operations highlight the importance of infantry skills trained at Fort Benning and at home station. Among these are the employment of mortars and the long-range precision fire of snipers, designated marksmen, and other infantrymen. We must train and sustain these warriors as well.

Sustainability and mobility are other key components of mountain operations. Units maneuver and operate on foot, by road, or by air. Rotary-wing aircraft can re-supply deployed units and evacuate casualties. Road and foot movements offer better cover and concealment but are in turn vulnerable to ambushes with direct and indirect fire weapons and mines. Predictability means vulnerability; during the Soviets' war in Afghanistan, Mujahideen operatives kept guerillas informed of planned Soviet and DRA operations and convoy movements, facilitating some catastrophic ambushes and complicating logistical operations. We now operate less predictably, but we must maintain tight operations security at all costs.

Cultural awareness is just as important in the mountains of Afghanistan as it is in the desert of Iraq. Today's insurgents move freely among the indigenous population and draw support — whether coerced or freely offered — from it. One challenge in dealing with the scattered mountain populations is their inaccessibility, both physical and social. Tribal, religious, and blood ties and the mistrust of strangers within host nation populations — particularly those among the mountain tribes — may go back generations, and old allegiances are not easily

broken or new ones formed. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan left deep scars and mistrust of foreign military forces. Gaining

the wholehearted support of the indigenous tribes and factions is no overnight matter, but our efforts have already yielded success. Human intelligence has led us to stockpiles of weapons, ammunition and other supplies, and enables us to neutralize ambushes, interrupt the emplacement of mines and IEDs, and disrupt the insurgents' logistical, psychological, and political operations.

Fire support in mountain operations is also important. We have an array of delivery means available. Mortars, artillery, attack aviation, close air support, and high altitude bombing are some of the options available. Global positioning systems and laser designators can facilitate placement of precision fires, but low clouds and fog can also make observed fires difficult. Map reading and terrain association skills remain important, and range estimation is especially crucial in the steep, compartmented mountain terrain where a few meters' difference can place rounds hundreds of feet below or above the target. The logistics of moving artillery and ammunition is accomplished by ground or air within weather and altitude-imposed constraints. As always, we take into account the likelihood and effectiveness of enemy ground fire when conducting these missions. The physical demands that mountain operations place on our Soldiers cannot be overstated. Infantry moves across exposed ground, often on unstable talus slopes that can shift underfoot; over moss or lichen-covered rock; and up, down, or across steep slopes and trails at dizzying heights. Soldier's load soon becomes critical when even the minimum combat load of weapon, ammunition, water, food, and personal gear takes on a whole new meaning in the thin air of mountain ridges, saddles, and peaks.

We will win the global war on terrorism by hunting down the terrorists wherever they choose to hide, and part of that is in the mountains and valleys. Our Soldiers have shown they can fight and defeat the enemy anywhere and at any time, and doing this in mountains remains a core competency of our Infantry.

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