

# Commandant's Note

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## ADAPTABILITY — THE KEY TO SUCCESS IN MOUNTAIN OPERATIONS

The Infantry goes after the enemy wherever he chooses to fight or to hide. For the past six years, terrorists have maintained operating bases and today are now increasingly seeking refuge in the mountains of Afghanistan. Despite the daunting challenges of the terrain, the Infantry has learned to beat the enemy at his own game. There are certain skills that require little adaptation, such as our standardized battle drills and individual soldier skills. Through repetitive practice at our home stations and during mission rehearsals in the combat zone, infantrymen continue to hone these skills to find, fix, and destroy the enemy. Under other circumstances leaders and Soldiers have quickly learned how the enemy and climate differ from what they have known and have adapted accordingly. In this Commandant's Note, I want to highlight some of the demands and challenges of mountain operations and the importance of adapting to meet the unexpected.

Today's Soldiers are learning adaptations to marksmanship, small unit tactics, casualty evacuation, indirect fire support, and resupply that will aid them in mountainous regions. Above "timberline" (11,000 feet or higher), vegetation is sparse or nonexistent, and Soldiers can see and engage targets at longer ranges. We are training snipers and our other marksmen to engage not only targets at greater ranges, but also those above and below them, where a rifleman may overshoot or undershoot. Even with the latest and best optics, range estimation becomes even more critical in the long ranges of the mountain fight, and Soldiers are learning and reinforcing this skill. The Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) is sharing a wealth of information on lessons that emerged from the 10-year Soviet-Afghan War, from Operation Anaconda in 2002, and from current mountain operations. British actions during the Falklands War in 1982 and the Eighth Army's campaign against the bitterly contested Gothic Line in 1944 all offer their own lessons on tactics and logistical operations. CALL Lessons Learned cells across the Army are gathering critical data and making it available to the entire force.

Resupplying units operating in the mountains was a challenge during both World Wars and in Korea and it is a challenge today. Units assured of reliable resupply of food, water, and ammunition can travel lighter and arrive less fatigued than those having to pack more essentials in with them. Aerial resupply is only a partial answer, however, since aircraft operating in the thinner air of higher elevations will consume more fuel, must carry smaller payloads, and must deal with unpredictable winds and visibility. Units have adapted to uncertain conditions by such measures as pre-packed contingency supplies that they can load and airdrop

on short notice. Depending on the enemy situation, securing of drop zones and landing zones may be problematic, and ultimately ground movement may be the only way, but this will mean securing roads and trails and the passes that restrict them. Resupply by ground moves slowly on ATVs, on pack animals, on hand-drawn sleds, or on the backs of men. This is where the support of the host nation population becomes critical.

The indigenous population in mountainous regions may be friendly, uncommitted or hostile, and we need to understand what has shaped their character and loyalties and what causes them to choose sides. Cultural awareness affects much that we do in the global war on terrorism, and the need for our understanding of the local tribes and communities remains constant. It enables the infantry Soldier and leader to build relationships with the local populace, yields intelligence, and helps in all aspects of the counterinsurgency fight. Region-specific cultural awareness training adapted to specific needs will remain a core element of preparing Soldiers and leaders for present and future deployments.

As we have adapted our tactics, techniques, and procedures to the global war on terrorism, manuals such as FM 3-97.6, *Mountain Operations*, and FM 3-97.61, *Military Mountaineering*, reflect current thought on how we can best operate in this dimension of warfare. It is common for a single operation in the mountains of Afghanistan to include both mounted and dismounted elements operating together. In a mountainous environment, squads and platoons may find themselves conducting patrols great distances from their supporting elements or higher headquarters with attachments such as engineers, tactical human intelligence teams, interpreters, or host nation forces. These elements may be called upon to administer first aid, detain enemy personnel, or call for indirect fire from artillery, mortars, or close air support, along with a myriad of other tasks. For our nation's continued success in this war, our Soldiers need to be able to conduct these standard tasks. These tough Soldiers are built through realistic training, and by the examples set by resourceful, adaptive leaders who can build tough, cohesive teams capable of accomplishing any mission.

We are winning the global war on terrorism because we can adapt, maintain our warrior skills, and carry the fight to the enemy.

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