

Forging the Arctic Warrior

Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center–Alaska

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Abstract

As defense and security concerns increase over growing access and competitive interests in the circumpolar North, the United States continues to develop Arctic operational purpose and capabilities. The Department of Defense's (DOD) newest combat training center (CTC) in Alaska represents key infrastructure and exercise grounds for US Army forces in Alaska to pursue required military readiness certification. The Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center–Alaska (JPMRC–AK) also facilitates a range of opportunities for combined, joint, and service component forces develop and test Arctic operational capabilities unlike any other training installation in the world. As the fourth established CTC capable of handling brigade-on-brigade (plus) forces in the physical and non-physical domains, JPMRC–AK will serve as the ultimate Arctic training and testing grounds for the US Army as well as sister and allied services. The purpose of this article is to explore these developments and present insights involving the importance of developing DOD's Arctic Warriors and the role of the Arctic CTC.

The United States faces new and increasing security concerns as access expands to the Arctic. Although the circumpolar North has enjoyed notable cooperation for many years, growing competition threatens US interests. While soft-security problems represent much of the daily burden throughout the North, hard-security issues and threats persist. The United States has stated its objectives in the Arctic, is producing and posturing the capabilities needed to secure those objectives, and is actively engaging its partners to manage competition and preclude conflict within the Arctic. The Department of Defense (DOD) and subordinate service strategies for the Arctic illuminate the relevance and importance of the military instrument of national power to a degree not seen since the Cold War.

The need is clear: Russia continues to pursue aggressive Arctic military advancements, accelerating its head start on Arctic land force development. China's Polar Silk Road initiative underpins Beijing's ambitions to become a political and economic global power. Given these circumstances, US Army Arctic advancements remain essential to balance strategic competition in the region. Operational

success always requires joint and total force development emphasizing innovative doctrine, staffing, equipping, and training. But in the Arctic, effective integrated deterrence will require synchronized support from the three regional combatant commands with Arctic equities: US Northern Command (NORTHCOM), Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), and European Command (EUCOM).

The US military maintains defense readiness and superiority through an enterprise of precision-enabled combat- and combined-arms warfare capabilities. For the DOD to meet its Arctic national security, national defense, and national military strategy responsibilities, the US Army must regain Arctic dominance in the region.¹ The operationalization of the US Army Arctic strategy will require significant contribution from all the Army's combat enablers to develop precision-enabled combat- and combined-arms Arctic capabilities. To ensure an Arctic-ready land force, the Army recently activated an airborne division and established a regional combat training center in Alaska. Troops assigned to the new 11th Airborne Division and its enablers will undergo formal training evaluations culminating with a combat training center (CTC) exercise at the nation's newest major training center—the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center–Alaska (JPMRC–AK).

Background

CTCs are training locations that best facilitate required military readiness testing and reporting for tactical-level ground forces (typically a brigade) during either a command cycle and/or when scheduled for a contingency (combat) deployment. Rotations through CTCs allow for optimized, controlled conditions to measure tactical performance of an assigned mission based on the commander's upper-echelon guided *mission essential tasks* (MET). CTCs are capable of hosting and managing a brigade-level force-on-force test of specified METs through the various war-fighting functions, including mission command, movement and maneuver, intelligence, fires, sustainment, and protection.² CTCs basically provide an exercise that is as close to combat as you can get.

CTCs are purpose-built by the Army to deliver large-scale multi-echelon training across all war-fighting functions. Each center employs live, virtual, and constructive environments, a dynamic and capable opposing force, and a cadre of role players to simulate and test a unit. They also feature electronic sensors and expert observers to provide authoritative assessments and feedback to the training units. For combat and contingency operations, CTC certification remains the best means by which to prepare units for the complexities and difficulties of their high-risk responsibilities.

Since 1981, CTCs at Fort Irwin, California (National Training Center–NTC); Fort Polk, Louisiana (Joint Readiness Training Center–JRTC); and USAG Bavaria at Hohenfels Training Area, Germany (Joint Multinational Readiness Cen-

ter-JMRC), have provided the US Army, sister services, and international allies and partners with invaluable, realistic training to prepare for current and future conflicts. However, the introduction of JPMRC-AK in 2022 represents a new model that is optimized for the Arctic mission set in the region.

JPMRC-AK addresses a key limitation inherent in the brick-and-mortar CTC design: as fixed-base sites, their climate and geology cannot be easily modified. Because JPMRC is exportable, it affords units the opportunity to train under the environmental conditions in which they are most likely to be employed. This is particularly relevant for Arctic forces, as the extreme cold weather and mountainous conditions can be as dangerous as the enemy they may encounter. Training in those same challenging conditions is essential for Soldier and unit readiness. JPMRC-AK offers other key benefits. Training within the region avoids costly and timely shipment of equipment, integrates and assures regional partners, enhances local joint interoperability, and applies a model where more than just the priority training brigade garners readiness and proficiency. It also keeps units and their equipment in the region, ready to respond to crises as opposed to being unavailable for three to four months.

To prepare for operations in an Arctic environment, JPMRC-AK facilitates unique training in extreme cold weather as well as mountainous and high-latitude environments. JPMRC-AK can offer training executed at scale (brigade or above) because 11th Airborne Division controls exceptionally large and diverse training ranges. 11th Airborne Division manages 10 percent of the Army's total training lands, with a multitude of unique terrain types, restricted airspace that equates to the size of Florida, and few concerns for encroachment on local communities. Outside of Alaska, exercise locations hosted at Camp Grayling, Michigan, are used for Northern Strike 22-1 and are very effective for small unit training.³ But Grayling's relatively small size (147,000 acres), lack of ranges and emitters, remoteness from Arctic units, insufficient opportunities for joint forcible entry operations, limited resources, mild climate, and flat terrain limit its use for Arctic-level training. JPMRC-AK offers ample maneuver space within the 655,000 acres of the Donnelly Training Area and 257,000 acres in the Yukon Training Area (YTA). Within the largest US all-domain training venue, JPMRC-AK also offers experts in cold weather and mountain operations at the Northern Warfare Training Center (NWTC).

The Road to the Arctic Combat Training Center

In May 2022, the DOD announced that US Army Alaska would be redesignated to the 11th Airborne Division. On 06 June 2022, two ceremonies were conducted to redesignate 1-25th Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) to 1/11th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) as well as 4-25th IBCT (Airborne) to 2/11th IBCT (Airborne).⁴ With this reflagging, the 11th Airborne

Division is effectively enabled to develop a high-level tactical staff with a defined Arctic operational purpose. Additionally, the 11th Airborne Division headquarters has been empowered to review and contribute vertically and horizontally to all elements of its transformation. As it becomes a fully resourced and trained Arctic force, the 11th Airborne Division stands ready to address all elements of Arctic strategies and plans in its sphere of influence.

Assigned missions can include top priority plans and named operations. The 11th Airborne Division ensures trained and ready forces for its missions through seasonal training nested within the Army's Regionally Aligned Readiness and Modernization Model (ReARMM) cycles. ReARMM features a two-year, three-phased readiness construct evenly divided between modernization, training, and mission phases. Modernization includes the fielding and training of new equipment and is limited to individual and lower collective training and involvement in select theater security cooperation exercises. The training phase progressively builds toward higher-level collective training, culminating in the iterative execution of cold weather and rugged mountainous certification and experimentation. The mission phase includes the highest density of exercises with partners and allies in INDOPACOM, NORTHCOM, and EUCOM; contingency employment; and rotational force deployments.

Preparing for Arctic missions must include training and confirmation of expertise in acclimating and operating in extreme cold environments. Justification is simple: a person is significantly more likely to die from cold than heat.⁵ According to research involving defined categories of extreme cold (usually specified by various temperature ranges), it can take between 2–3 weeks to physiologically adapt,⁶ which could help to inform the kind of training needed for individuals to survive and thrive in the Arctic winter environment. In addition to the physical demands, Arctic experts, such as the cadre at the NWTC, know that the cognitive aspects of Arctic survival are often more important than physical. JPMRC–AK provides the ideal conditions in which to operate and train for these challenges.

In March 2022, Alaska's US Army forces participated in the first-ever extreme cold weather CTC rotation during exercise JPMRC 22-02.⁷ Nearly all 12,000 Soldiers of US Army Alaska were involved. JPMRC hosted the 1/25 SBCT from Ft. Wainwright, Alaska, as they faced the opposition forces (OPFOR) led by the 4/25 IBCT (Airborne) from Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska, in the fictitious scenario country of Olvana. Canada, our principal Arctic ally, provided airborne and reconnaissance forces into this combat-focused exercise. Separate from the JPMRC 22-02 scenario, one infantry battalion from 1/25 SBCT executed company-level combined-arms live fire exercises in the YTA. This unprecedented training event represents the first authoritative step to define

an Arctic readiness model for generation of Arctic-ready forces available to combatant commanders for operations.⁸

Preliminary Perspectives—The First Steps to Army Arctic Dominance

For the participating brigades, the primary purpose was to build expertise in sustained operations in Arctic conditions. For the Army, JPMRC 22-02 did more than provide a military-readiness rating to national authorities. It was a comprehensive capstone training event in an extreme cold weather environment where temperatures dropped to -37 degrees Fahrenheit. Lessons learned during this pivotal training will inform refinement and development across doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy. Some of the challenges involve optimizing equipment, gear, and weapons. Units were required to maximize tactical proficiency at the squad to company levels, including small-unit Ranger tactics and the integration of all supporting arms, to close with the enemy in complex terrain and difficult conditions. However, the principal lesson learned revolved around the importance for “Soldiers to be masters of their craft in Arctic warfare, not just to survive but to thrive in extreme cold weather and mountainous terrain.”⁹

Conclusion and Recommendations

JPMRC-AK was established as the regional training center to comprehensively challenge America’s Arctic Warriors and allies and partners in their operational environment. The CTC will be the premier location in the region for our allies and partners to train with US forces—to train like we will fight as a joint, multinational team. Coupled with JPMRC-Hawaii, these regional CTCs will enable unique and essential training, much like the other CTCs have proven invaluable in certifying the readiness of the US military during combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the 11th Airborne Division reactivated, the “Arctic Angels” must remain ready for threats across INDOPACOM and the Arctic, all while piloting, experimenting, and testing force structure and equipment to optimize the capabilities of America’s only Arctic fighting force. Effective training, equipping, and manning are critical to success moving forward.

Total force development takes many years, and the Arctic represents the newest region of security concerns that requires preparation now before the process lags too far behind to meet even the most basic threats. JPMRC-AK and reactivating the 11th Airborne Division in Alaska are only the beginning. The Army will continue to refine force structure and equipping for the harshest environment on

the planet. Continuous efforts to engage with our Arctic partners and allies like Canada, India, Nepal, Mongolia, Japan, Korea, and Norway and reconnecting with the Alaskan Native Tribes and the Alaska Defense Force will enhance the necessary experience and structure to regain Arctic dominance.

Finally, to manage service member Arctic assignments and expectations, we must continue to develop effective programs for recruitment, retention, identification, and certification of Soldiers. It takes a special breed of Soldier to thrive in the Arctic; service members must be recruited and retained. The Army should also establish an Arctic division force structure to accommodate the unique skills required. Special skill/qualification identifiers should be emplaced for key positions throughout the ranks of the division structure that require Arctic and mountain skill sets. This will require an increase in the size and throughput of the NWTC but will significantly increase the expertise and maintain continuity of experience across the division—mandatory to regain Arctic dominance. The Army has embarked on this path and remains committed to success. It must continue to adjust and adapt to ensure the Army is ready to thrive, fight, and win in the most challenging environment on the planet. ★

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Major General Eifler assumed command of US Army Alaska on 21 July 2021 and the 11th Airborne Division on 6 June 2022. He previously served as Army Chief Legislative Liaison, Deputy Commanding General of the 10th Mountain Division (Light), CJ3 for Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq. A native of Michigan, MG Eifler graduated and commissioned as an Infantry Officer from Central Michigan University. While at Central Michigan, he graduated from Airborne and Ranger school. Major General Eifler's education includes a bachelor's degree in interpersonal and public communication from Central Michigan University and a master's in strategic studies from the United States Army War College. He is also a graduate of the MIT Seminar XXI National Security Studies Program.

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Notes

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