

Navy, Marine Corps Wrap Exercise of Littoral Combat Forces in Adverse Arctic Conditions



U.S. Marines with Marine Wing Support Squadron 371 prepare to provide fuel to aircraft during Arctic Expeditionary Capabilities Exercise in Adak, Alaska, on Sept. 18. U.S. Marine Corps/Lance Cpl. Tia D. Carr

About 3,000 servicemembers took part in the Arctic Expeditionary Capabilities Exercise (AECE), which just concluded in Alaska.

AECE is a manifestation of the joint Navy and Marine Corps Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) concept, issued in 2017, which calls for the creation of Littoral Combat Forces (LCFs) of various units to conduct specific missions.

The exercise commander was Rear Adm. Cedric Pringle, commander of Expeditionary Strike Group Three. The LCF construct provides a multifunction command and control force that can be ashore or embarked at sea or both.

For AECE, the LCF headquarters was established at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage, and the operating forces were divided into Littoral Combat Groups 1 and 2, with those commanders embarked aboard USS Somerset (LPD 25), carrying a Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force

(SP-MAGTF), and USS Comstock (LSD 45), respectively.



A landing craft temporarily moors to the stern gate aboard the amphibious dock landing ship USS Comstock during AECE 2019. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Nicholas Burgains

Speaking to reporters Sept. 23, Pringle said AECE was a “natural evolution” of the Pacific Blitz exercise, held in March in California, which exercised the LCF construct. But, he said, AECE was conducted in “unfamiliar territory,” with wider range of assets than what he usually has available to him with his expeditionary strike group and more adverse weather conditions.

Like Pacific Blitz, the Navy-Marine Corps team was fully integrated. But as the exercise was planned, both U.S. Air Force and Coast Guard assets were included.

The U.S. Alaskan Command hosted the AECE command element at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage. Operations were taking place in Seward, about 125 miles away, and Adak, 1,200 miles away, as well as off the Silver Strand at Coronado, California.

AECE included mine-clearance operations at Seward and an air assault on the airfield at Adak to establish a site for fueling and rearming of P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft. Support at Anchorage was provided by the Alaska National Guard. The Coast Guard embarked an MH-65 Dolphin helicopter on USS Somerset, and an HC-130 Hercules from Coast Guard Air

Station Kodiak

supported AECE with search-and-rescue capability and aerial refueling,

respectively. Coast Guard Cutter Douglas Munro (WHEC-724) supported search-and-rescue

operations and securities and enforcement in Adak. The Air Force C-130 aircraft

was able to fly to Adak with a medical team aboard to quickly evacuate a Sailor

in need of a higher level of care.



Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer (left) speaks with Cmdr. Kevin Culver, commanding officer of the amphibious dock landing ship USS Comstock, following a tour as part of AECE 2019. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Nicholas Burgains

The exercise provided an opportunity to use platforms in nontraditional roles and to bring together forces that do not usually operate together.

“We had to find a way to have unity of command and effort,” Pringle said. “This was all new.”

A key element to expeditionary operations is logistics and what Pringle called the “ability to push fuel to forces ashore.” AECE

included the deployment of the offshore petroleum discharge system (OPDS) and a forward arming and refueling point (FARP).

“To be able to get here, do expeditionary operations and test our logistics capabilities made AECE a phenomenal opportunity to exercise muscles we don’t usually exercise,” Pringle said.

USS Comstock transported the ABLTS system from San Diego to Seward – the first time an amphibious ship was used to

transport the ABLTS –
and demonstrated the capability by pumping water from a barge
to a “fuel farm”
consisting of three 20,000-gallon bladders.
The system can support combat operations or provide
humanitarian
assistance as a part of the Navy’s Defense Support to Civil
Authorities (DSCA)
mission.



A U.S. Coast Guard C-130 participates in forward arming and
refueling point operations during AECE in Adak, Alaska, on
Sept. 18. U.S. Marine Corps/Lance Cpl. Tia D. Carr
“If a natural disaster were to take out a coastal town’s
power, gas stations or drinkable water anywhere in the world,
we could fill a
barge and send it to the affected region,” Pringle explained.
“Systems like
ABLTS and our ability to transfer thousands of gallons of
liquids like drinkable
water or fuel are critical during contingencies, crises
response or
humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.”

Adak offered challenging and variable wind and sea
conditions. “The winds and seas dictated changes almost faster
that we could
execute,” Pringle said. “One day we had winds up to 50 knots,
with 15-foot
waves and a ceiling below 1,000 feet, and the next day it was
clear and calm,
with 2-foot seas.”

Pringle said the equipment held up well in the harsh
surroundings. “We had one issue with a helicopter, but that
actually was a good
thing, because we got to flex our maintenance capability.”

He said the Navy and Marine Corps learned a great deal from their Air Force and Coast Guard counterparts. "The Air Force and Coast Guard are always here. They know the environment better than we do."

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Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer

Apart from the periodic submerged Ice Exercise (ICEX) submarine transits of the Arctic Ocean, the sea services do not have a significant amount of current experience in extreme latitudes. The Navy and Marine Corps participated in the multinational exercise Trident Juncture last fall in and around Norway, and the Marines work with their Norwegian counterparts on a regular basis. But the last major exercise in Alaska was Kernel Potlach in 1987, and that was the first winter amphibious operation in the Aleutian Islands since the end of World War II.

Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday and Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz all visited Alaska to see AECE firsthand.

"Alaska is one of the best training venues we have," Spencer said while in Seward. "The location is tremendously strategic when it comes to protecting the homeland, and training here is extremely important to the Navy's Arctic strategy. We need to conduct exercises like AECE to continue pushing our joint force into the future and continue pursuing

innovation within
the force.”

Vice Adm. John B. Alexander, commander of the U.S. 3rd Fleet, also came to Alaska to see the exercise. “AECE provided our Navy and Marine Corps team an opportunity to test our collective ability to plan, communicate and conduct complex amphibious and expeditionary combat support operations in a challenging austere environment,” he said. “The training and experience we gained from AECE will help ensure that we remain a lethal and capable fighting force and that we are able to conduct defense support of civil authorities in the event of a crisis or disaster at home.”

While the conditions in and around Alaska were more challenging than what might be encountered off California, Pringle admits it could have been worse. “This is September. We understand it’s not this nice here in winter.”

But, he said, that’s the point.

“We need to find hard venues and prove we can do it.”