

Sailors, Marines Head to Australia for 6 Months of Intense Training, Exercises With Pacific-Area Allies, Partner Nations



U.S. Marines with Mike Battery, 3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, fire an M777 Howitzer at known targets during training last August at Mount Bunday Training Area, Northern Territory, Australia, during MRF-D 2018. Credit: MARINE CORPS / Photo by Staff Sgt. Daniel Wetzel

A combined-arms task force of about 1,700 U.S. Marines and Sailors have deployed into Australia for six months of intensive training and an array of exercises that will involve contact with perhaps a dozen allies and friendly nations in strategically vital Southeast Asia and the southern Pacific.

The deployment, called Marine Rotation Force-Darwin (MRF-D) 2019, will provide the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) a smorgasbord of training – some in jungle and mountain terrain – practicing amphibious and humanitarian-assistance, disaster-relief operations and combined-arms, live-fire drills in a training area the size of Connecticut, said Marine Col. Charles A. Western, the liaison officer to Australian Defense Forces for Marine Forces Pacific.

Asked the value of the Darwin rotations, Western emphasized “readiness.”

Noting that he had made three deployments to Okinawa with an infantry battalion, he said, “When you go to Okinawa, you are at the top of your readiness spectrum when get there,” having conducted all the extensive pre-deployment training, including

live-fire drills.

But in Okinawa “some of the training is circumscribed by what you can fire, by how big the training areas are,” Western said.

What Darwin and the Northern Territory of Australia provides “is the ability to maintain that level of training when deployed, if not increase it. ... When they deploy here, along with the Australians, they focused on their training and their readiness. So, it’s really a great opportunity for them to come out here,” he added.

“Speaking from a tactical level, this is me with my Marine infantry hat on, the biggest reason for us to come to Australia is this big, huge training area – the Bradshaw Field Training Area.”

The MAGTF also will participate in numerous multilateral exercises along the northern and eastern coast of Australia and as far away as Thailand, building relations with close allies and partner nations, Western said.

“That’s one of the pillars of MRF-D, the multilateral engagement. We are arm-in-arm with the Australians in everything we do. And there are 10 or 11 multilateral events that we participate in while we’re here.”

The MRF-D deployments have gradually increased in size since the first Marine Rotation Force-Darwin in 2012, taking advantage of the extensive open area and established Australian bases in the sparsely populated Northern Territory and building on a century of close relations with the Australian military.

“Last year, 2018, was designated the Year of Mateship,” Western said, a play on the Australian habit of calling friends “mates.” Last year marked 100 years since U.S. troops fought alongside the Australian Army in World War I in Europe.

“We’ve been shoulder-to-shoulder everywhere since.”

U.S. and Australian forces also fought together extensively in the southern Pacific during World War II and again in Korea, Vietnam and some of the 21st-century fights against violent extremists.

MRF-D 2019 involves a MAGTF that consists of an aviation combat element (ACE), Medium Tilt-Rotor Squadron 363 from Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii; a ground combat element (GCE), 1st Battalion, 1st Marines; a logistical combat element (LCE); and a command element from Camp Pendleton, California, Western said.

VMM-363, a MV-22B squadron with 10 tilt-rotor Ospreys, will be augmented by four AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters and three UH-1Y Venom utility choppers.

The force of 1,705 Marines and Navy support personnel, such as doctors, nurses, medical corpsmen and chaplains, may be augmented by additional Marines for Exercise Koolendong, the capstone event at the end of the rotation, he said.

U.S. forces began arriving in April and will depart in October.



Capt. Benjamin J. O’Donnell, an infantry officer with 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, views targets while providing indirect fire support from M777 artillery, 81 mm mortars and close air support during training last year at Mount Bunday Training Area, Northern Territory, Australia, during Marine Rotation Force Darwin 2018. Credit: MARINE CORPS / Photo by Staff Sgt. Daniel Wetzel

The GCE and LCE will be based initially at Robertson Barracks in Darwin and the ACE at Royal Australian Air Force Base Darwin. During the rotation, the Marines will conduct training and exercises at the Bradshaw and Mount Bundy training areas in Northern Territory, a jungle training area on the east

coast, and at multiple other locations along the east coast for Talisman Saber 19 and other bilateral and multilateral events, Western said.

Talisman Saber is a U.S. Pacific Command exercise, held every two years, that will involve U.S. Navy ships, the MRF-D Marines, Australian, Japanese and Canadian forces and “a bunch of other nations participating,” Western explained.

“A big chunk of Talisman Saber is really about sea power, with the Marines and Australians and the Japanese Army amphibious forces.” U.S. Marines will embark on U.S. or Australian amphibious ships and conduct combined amphibious operations with the Australian landing forces.

“All the [U.S.] services are involved. It’s a joint and combined exercise with the Australians,” Western said. “So, the U.S. Air Force is coming down.

“The MRF-D is really just a small part of that,” he said, providing forces to the Okinawa-based III Marine Expeditionary Force, which will command the combined landing force.

MRF-D also will participate in exercise Southern Jackeroon, which will be conducted in the Australian training area, with Australian, Japanese and U.S. Army elements, Western said. They also will provide some subject matter expertise in engineering to the Australians, “a train-the-trainer kind of thing. And we are participating aboard the HMAS Canberra, one of their LHDs [amphibious assault ships] in an exercise in Thailand.

“We are providing some Marines to PacFleet for one of their CARAT exercises, which goes throughout the Pacific area,” he added.

CARAT, or Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, is an annual series of bilateral exercises conducted by the Pacific Fleet with countries of the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN). Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand have participated in previous CARATs.

Other multilateral exercises the Marines will participate in include Exercise Carabaroo, with the Philippines and Australia; Southern Jackaroo, with Japan and Australia; and Indo-Pacific Endeavor, Western said. Carabaroo, which combines the names of the Philippine carabao and the Australian kangaroo, is an urban warfare training exercise conducted in Australia.

Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert B. Neller said in a March 18 memo to Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer that the unbudgeted assignment of Marines to the Mexican border, the unfunded Pentagon-directed force increase for MRF-D, the need to repair more than \$1.7 billion in damage to two East Coast Marine bases and other unexpected activities are “imposing unacceptable risks to Marine Corps combat readiness and solvency.”

The unexpected diversion of personnel and funds could force him to reduce support for Talisman Saber and cancel several planned international exercises, including two with Indonesia, Neller said in the March 18 memo.

Western said he is “tracking the possible impact of budget shortfalls. They will not affect the bulk of MRF-D that begins flowing in next month, just the possible Force Enhancement deployment of the Hawaii-based infantry battalion later in the summer.”

Some of the MRF-D Marines will take advantage of their deployment to conduct training at the Australian jungle training center, experience that could be increasingly important given the growing focus on Asia.

“Koolendong is really our capstone exercise, a combined force exercise with the Australians,” Western said. It comes at the

end of the deployment, so they can demonstrate the skills built up during the six months in Australia, he said.

“We bring all elements of the MAGTF together to conduct a live-fire exercise” in the vast Australian training area. “It’s an opportunity to do a MAGTF-level live-fire event,” something that is difficult to achieve in other training ranges.

Although Koolendong is conducted primarily with the Australians, French troops also will be involved, Western said. “They send a platoon out every year” from their base in New Caledonia, he said.

The level of international engagements by MRF-D is increased because Australia makes a point of inviting the militaries from nations in the region to participate in or observe their exercises with the U.S. forces, Western said.

“It’s their country, and we are more than willing to work with the Australians in their efforts to invite multiple countries to come down and participate. Every year, they have an international observers program in which they bring senior international military officers from the region down to Darwin to see what the Marine Corps and the Australians are doing. It is a bit of outreach,” he said. “Regional engagement is one of our pillars for the MRF-D program.” ■