



Soldiers assigned to the 2nd Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 11th Airborne Division, stand at Pershing Parade Field during the reflagging ceremony of the 11th Airborne Division on 6 June 2022 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. (Photo by Sr. Airman Patrick Sullivan, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Public Affairs)

The 11th Airborne Division Reborn

Arctic Angels

Maj. Gen. Brian S. Eifler, U.S. Army

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The 11th Airborne Division is back! Embracing the newest evolution of its three incarnations, the 11th once again is purpose-built to meet the shifting challenges facing our country. Originally activated in 1943 as the first airborne division to be built from the ground up, the 11th became Douglas MacArthur’s “secret weapon” in the Pacific, conducting multiple airborne assaults while fighting through the Philippines.

As the war ended in September 1945, the soldiers of the 11th Airborne Division “Angels” would be recognized for their ability to rapidly organize into a combat-credible, airborne fighting formation that provided key support to the war effort. Retired Lt. Gen. E. M. Flanagan Jr. notes in his personalized history, *The Angels: A History of the 11th Airborne Division*, that despite being a small division with minimal resources and firepower, they “took on the missions of a full-sized division and proved that heart and courage and training and camaraderie and esprit and loyalty, not only up but down, engender self-confidence and invincibility, making giants of ordinary men.”¹ The 11th Airborne Division especially distinguished itself in the fierce battles to liberate Manila; during a daring raid by land, sea, and air on Los Baños detention camp to rescue over two thousand Allied civilian internees; and in overseeing postwar Japanese occupation forces until 1949.²

As national security needs shifted after World War II, the division was inactivated in 1958 following a deployment to Germany. During the Vietnam conflict, it was incarnated once again, reactivating from 1963 to 1965 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, as the 11th Air Assault Division. The division’s purpose focused on developing the nascent air assault tactics for helicopter operations and subsequently spawned the first units to execute those operations in Vietnam.³

After a fifty-seven-year dormancy, the 11th Airborne Division reactivated in 2022 once again to meet the evolving challenges facing our Nation. The *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, notes that great powers and rising powers fighting for global dominance will set the parameters for future world order.⁴ Department of Defense and Army leaders at every echelon are focused on maintaining global stability as regional competitors become increasingly aggressive and adversarial. Having a division unit of action in a strategic location

to respond to crisis or conflict in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the Arctic fills a strategic gap—thus, the 11th Airborne Division was reborn a third time, at the crossroad of transformation and modernization.

Today, the “Arctic Angels” of the 11th build capability to operate in the Arctic, mountain terrain, and other extreme cold weather (ECW) areas while maintaining readiness for global deployments. To attain these diverse objectives, the 11th Airborne Division (Arctic) concentrates on three distinct sectors of development: Arctic capability, readiness for large-scale combat operations, and interoperability with allies and partners.

Arctic Capability

Our Nation’s strategy for the Arctic continues to evolve, with increasing recognition of China’s desire to expand its sphere of influence throughout the region. The *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* notes that by building economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military partnerships, China has the potential to undermine our national security objectives.⁵ Simultaneously, the strategy acknowledges the difficulties associated with

maintaining regional stability as Russia continues its activities in Ukraine, which effectively stymies formal government-to-government discussions on Arctic cooperation.⁶

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China and Russia, working together, may present even greater challenges as they strengthen their economic partnerships, expand military cooperation, and form mutually beneficial collaborative efforts. Their recently signed coast guard cooperation agreement will likely increase Sino-Russian joint exercise activity across the maritime region.⁷

In response to the growing importance of the Arctic to national security, the Army published its Arctic strategy, *Regaining Arctic Dominance*, in 2021. While there are other service-specific Arctic strategies in the Department of Defense, only the Army has an implementation plan manifested in a new division. For the Army, Arctic capability is more than words on paper. The Arctic is arguably one of the harshest environments on the planet. Recognizing the inherent necessity of ECW training in Alaska, the Army has chosen its forces there to implement the objectives and goals laid out within the strategic and operational framework.⁸ In addition to its responsibilities in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the 11th Airborne Division has been given the task to become the most highly trained, disciplined, and fit Arctic warfighting unit in the world—to not just survive but thrive in ECW and mountainous terrain. Appropriately, the division's home is Alaska, the only state in the Arctic and the only state with land less than three miles from Russian soil.⁹

To regain Arctic dominance requires transformation into a fully operational division, a warfighting command that can conduct and sustain extended operations to, within, and from the Arctic/ECW to project power within the theater. These capabilities can support varied missions, including land force options for a joint force during crisis and conflict, security cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and defense support to civil authorities.

Building ECW, mountainous, high-latitude, combat-capable forces remains central to the strategy's key tenets and the division's mission. Our forces must have the range, endurance, and protection enablers to conduct sustained operations in the Arctic environment. The 11th Airborne Division must operate and endure across long distances, in ECW, at high latitudes, and at high elevations.

To operate in these environments, the Army requires capabilities that are dynamically employed throughout the coldest part of the year in a strategically

predictable but operationally unpredictable manner. Extreme cold, snow, rugged and mountainous terrain, and persistent light or darkness necessitate new technologies and modernization of existing assets. The Army must develop or refine concepts, doctrine, organizations, and training in the Arctic environment to inform risk-based modernization.

Several years ago, the Center for Army Lessons Learned identified twenty-three capability gaps in the Army's Arctic force, emphasizing that this environment complicates all warfighting functions.¹⁰ The good news is that the division and the Army enterprise have been working to address these gaps, and in some cases have been successful. One overarching finding was that the Army needs to improve its ability to establish and maintain mobile command posts in the Arctic environment. Command and control can be degraded by unreliable communications and dispersion of forces. Tents fail in the extreme cold. Lower tactical internet is limited due to extreme cold and high winds, and upper tactical internet fails due to the low-look angle to equatorial geostationary satellites. Any equipment with a liquid crystal display can be unreliable and fragile in extreme cold temperatures.

Movement and maneuver can be slow and difficult, requiring purpose-built equipment. Extended maintenance times due to environmental conditions and lack of expeditionary temperature-controlled maintenance bays preclude normal operations. Cold-soaking vulnerability limits forward deployment and helicopter maintenance requires access to hangars, so rotary-wing aviation is severely constrained.¹¹

Fires will often be less precise because of unique position, navigation, and timing challenges. Prime mover limitations in uncompacted snow are exacerbated by a wheeled towing system. Firing capability requires power generation, hydraulics, and preparation to fire and actuation procedures that are complicated by ECW.

ECW environments also constrain the capacity to produce, purify, store, and distribute liquid water. Ambient cold freezes critical medical supplies such as plasma and intravenous medicines, rendering them unusable until thawed, and the need for tents limits expeditionary capability.

Increased vulnerabilities associated with Arctic operations can magnify protection requirements. There is increased chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear

vulnerability due to multiple system failures below -25°F . Decontamination requires use of liquid water, which is scarce in subzero temperatures. Personal protective equipment malfunctions: mask valves and canisters freeze; protective gloves crack; and wearing layers of clothing, boots, hats, and gloves for warmth complicates decontamination.

Climate and high-latitude impact tactical collection platforms, and electronic warfare capabilities limit the commander's understanding of the battlefield. Batteries fail in the cold, resulting in multiple platform failures. Climate and latitude limit intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, and the low-look angle degrades satellite communications.

Despite these challenges, the Arctic Angels cannot wait for solutions to be delivered. The strength of the division remains its people; with innovation, determination, and grit, Arctic Angels overcome obstacles and figure it out! It is part of the heritage of the Native Alaskan people who have lived in this environment for centuries, and their support to us cannot go unmentioned.

To become an Arctic-capable force, our units must be equipped to train and live in the environment. We must ensure formations have sufficient opportunities to train at echelon in Arctic environments and develop the expertise required to survive and thrive. This is the only reliable way to understand and mitigate the effects of extreme cold on performance and equipment. By establishing the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center's (JPMRC) regional combat training capability in Alaska, we provide a singular opportunity to train Army forces in the region, in the harsh environment.

The annual JPMRC Alaska event is exactly what our formation needs and the Arctic strategy requires. In its inaugural year, the JPMRC Alaska rotation exceeded all expectations, and 2023 added complexity and tactical challenges. Both iterations took place during subzero temperatures and spanned from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage to Fort Wainwright and the Yukon Training Area 350 miles



1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment soldiers cross train on skis with Finnish RK 62 rifles during exercise Arctic Forge 2023 in Finland. (Photo courtesy of 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment)

north, with numerous strategic missions taking place deep within the Arctic Circle. Both JPMRC exercises leveraged live, virtual, and constructive environments to execute a brigade combat team large-scale combat operation under ECW conditions using the Army's Arctic decisive-action training environment.

JPMRC Alaska, executed in the heart of winter, incorporates critical elements of a traditional combat training center, and culminates the yearlong training cycles of the division's two brigades. The exercise design features professional observer controller/trainers, an Arctic capable and dynamic opposing force, and an expeditionary, full-instrumentation package. Integrated airborne joint forcible entry operations amplify complexity. Last year's JPMRC exercise also validated a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System expeditionary strike package that involved Canadian and U.S. lift aircraft as well as fifth-generation sensors from U.S. Air Force F-35 fighters.

JPMRC offers several critical advantages. It ensures our units' highest density of training takes place during the ECW months of October through March. It is always joint and multicomponent with Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, National Guard, and Army Reserve



"Arctic Wolves" with 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, conduct a platoon live-fire exercise 9 November 2022 at the Yukon Training Area in Alaska. Platoons trained on multiple weapons systems while executing battle drills to perfect the art of Arctic lethality. (Photo by 1st Lt. Daniel Isakoff, U.S. Army)

units. It incorporates Arctic allies and other partners to improve interoperability and learn from foreign armies who are experts at Arctic operations. Lessons learned, especially in the areas of sustainment and communications, inform improvements to Army equipment and tactics necessary to win in the harsh conditions. We are demonstrating the high value of over-the-snow mobility, dismounted maneuver, and the effective integration of fires and effects. By training in the region and with our regional partners, we remain postured to rapidly deploy in support of Pacific theater requirements before, during, and after the exercise—not losing people and equipment for months due to transit to the continental United States. Most importantly, JPMRC reflects the environment and conditions where 11th Airborne Division soldiers are likely to deploy and operate.

Readiness for Rapid Global Deployment

Although the Arctic region is drawing considerable attention as Russia and China extend their presence

and influence, sustaining a free and open Indo-Pacific theater remains a top national priority. The 11th Airborne Division has a foot firmly in each region by virtue of both mission and geography. Sitting at the nexus of both regions, the division routinely executes expeditionary and multidomain operations in support of combatant commanders across the globe while building Arctic expertise. The 11th Airborne Division is assigned to U.S. Army Pacific in support of the Indo-Pacific Command, and it can supply a credible force in crisis, conflict, and competition.

The division's rapidly deployable airborne and air assault brigades function as the Army's Indo-Pacific response force by offering the joint force commander geographic proximity coupled with readiness. The division's strategic location provides the shortest distances to potential crisis both in the Pacific and over the North Pole to Scandinavian countries. The division's mission, roles, and expertise meet the demands of both the operational environment and the joint force commander. Last year's approved conversion of



Soldiers of 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment "Bobcats," 1st Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, conduct a company live fire at Yukon Training Area, Alaska, as part of Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center rotation 22-02 on 15 March 2022. The brigade reflagged on 6 June 2022 as an element of the 11th Airborne Division. (Photo by Benjamin Wilson, U.S. Army)

the Stryker brigade to light infantry optimized the unit for rapid response.

Follow-on transformation efforts should see the introduction of sustainment, fires, and aviation enablers as well as the improved equipping of the force for its Arctic mission. The Army is deliberately planning and executing this transformation, which will be synchronized and integrated with our enduring priorities, requirements, and training objectives.

We are training various options for over-the-snow mobility, including skis, snowshoes, snow machines, and soon, the Cold Weather All-Terrain Vehicle. We will continue to test solutions for the identified Arctic capability gaps and provide feedback to the Army enterprise on the best investments going forward.

Allies and Partners

Having strong partners is a cornerstone of the national defense strategy and is integral to the Army's success. We are committed to building relationships

with the joint and total force and our partners and allies to be ready in competition, crisis, conflict, and change. We have actively pursued this objective, engaging and training with India, Japan, Mongolia, Malaysia, and Australia, as well as Norway, Finland, and Sweden.

The division's brigade combat teams' routine deployments across the Pacific theater and the Arctic demonstrate the value of multilateral solutions and cooperation. In 2023, the division participated in eighteen major exercises. Our units are on the ground with our foreign partners and allies, articulating the valuable role of the U.S. Army in enabling multilateral activities, exercises, and training events. The broad and deep exercise participation serves to expose the criticality of logistics and sustainment for military operations in the region while simultaneously revealing our Army's unmatched abilities in these arenas.

Training for ground operations in Arctic/ECW environments with allies and partners hones our ability while increasing interoperability. In May 2022, the



Spc. Adrien Dutter, a forward observer assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, out of Fort Wainwright, Alaska, retrieves skiing gear during the polar plunge portion of winter survival training 19 February 2023 at Arctic Forge 2023 on Sodankylä Garrison, Finland. Exercise Arctic Forge 23 is a U.S. Army Europe and Africa-led umbrella exercise that leverages host-nation exercises Defense Exercise North in Finland and exercise Joint Viking in Norway focused on building capabilities and cooperation in support of the U.S. Army's Arctic strategy. (Photo by Sgt. Austin Baker, U.S. Army)

Spartan Brigade went to Norway for Swift Response, executing an emergency deployment readiness exercise for a battalion task force and an in-flight rig for an airborne operation over the North Pole, and training force-on-force with multinational partners. Exercises like this ensure we are prepared to respond to threats or crisis in cold environments while reinforcing the enduring bond of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Also demonstrating our potential to support operations in the European Command, 1st Brigade, 11th Airborne Division Infantry Brigade Combat Team (1/11 IBCT), sent a battalion tactical command post and an infantry company to Arctic Forge 23 for cold weather training with the Finnish Defence Forces. This winter warfare training event featured ski training, a biathlon, squad tactics, and Arctic survival skills—intensive challenges that strengthened partnerships and increased readiness to meet shared responsibilities in the Arctic and other ECW locations.

In November 2022, we deployed an airborne battalion to opposite side of the world, traveling to India's Himalayan mountains. Paratroopers from 2/11 IBCT (Airborne) took part in the Yudh Abhyas 22 training exercise, operating at ten-thousand-foot elevation alongside soldiers from the Indian Army's 9th Assam Regiment. This was an extraordinary first that really got the attention of our competitors on the world stage.

The division's air assault brigade is likewise building a strong relationship with the winter soldiers of the Northern Army of the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force. They participated in a bilateral exchange for North Wind 23, with the 1/11 IBCT "Arctic Wolves" deploying a battalion to Hokkaido to train alongside the Japanese in harsh winter conditions. The division also went to Japan for Yama Sakura 83 in December, and we are deep in planning for Yama Sakura 85 this coming winter. These exercises increase our countries' mutual combat readiness to respond to a wide range of crisis contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region.

Another key Indo-Pacific partner is the country of Mongolia. Khaan Quest in June 2023 was a multilateral exercise hosted by the Mongolian Armed Forces. We participated in tough training at the Five Hills Training Area, sharing practices for peacekeeping and stability operations while promoting regional security. While our soldiers exchanged lessons and techniques, it was also a clear demonstration of the U.S. strategic commitment to maintain international stability.

All these exercises focused on training alongside our partners and allies to advance our technical and procedural interoperability as well as to build a cohesive team operating in the Arctic and Indo-Pacific environments. Taken as a whole, these exercises and shared training events are contributing to global security and increasing mutual military trust.

Arctic capability and mission readiness ultimately depend on our greatest resource, our soldiers. People have been and remain our top priority, with a focus on taking care of soldiers, families, and our Army community through leadership and connections. On 6 June 2022, the 11th Airborne Division activation properly aligned identity, purpose, and mission for our soldiers, and the chief of staff of the Army charged us with reestablishing the proud reputation of this storied division. This was a huge missing piece of the puzzle. We improved soldiers' and family members' quality of life by clearing away the previous "Frankenstein-like" creation that was cobbled together with various patches and units. The best quality of life program in the Army remains tough, challenging, training as part of a cohesive unit—and that must remain foundational.

This past June, the 11th Airborne Division celebrated its first anniversary since reactivating. Observing a full week of activities focused on the proud legacy of the division, we conducted Angel Rendezvous Week, during which we honored the sacrifices of the brave men and women who served before us and celebrated the contributions of those that still wear the uniform today.

We have codified our approach in the Arctic Angels Standing Orders, with a tip of the hat to Robert Rogers' Standing Orders; using our moniker "Arctic Angel" as an acronym, we provide eleven precepts that define our approach to leadership, training, readiness, and mission execution:

Angels have grit and are physically tough! These are required regardless of equipment and resources. A unit will be victorious where soldiers' willingness to accept hardship is the norm. Maintaining a positive attitude regardless of conditions can be the difference between survival or death, victory or defeat.

Realistic training, morale, and stamina are the foundation of an Arctic warrior that no equipment or technology can replace. A winter-trained soldier is also good in the summer, but the reverse is not true.

Cold weather requires a plan A, B, and C to survive the cold. Extra layers and tents are always a must. Never wait to be cold to put on an extra layer or set up a tent or it will be too late. Wet clothes will lead to hypothermia; if you sweat, you die, so stay dry!

Trusted leadership prevents cold weather injuries! A squad must carry the necessary equipment to withstand any temperature and be ready to autonomously treat cold weather injuries. Cold weather injuries are a failure in supervision, planning, and training. Leadership, no excuse. Be Arctic smart!

Inclement Arctic conditions give a 10:1 advantage to the defender; force your enemy out of his positions and entrenchments by outmaneuvering him out of contact and then you'll own the advantage. Roads, trails, and cut lines are the enemy's engagement areas; if it is easy, you are walking into a trap; if it is hard, you are winning. Be Arctic tough!

Combat-ready, small, mobile units that can move in difficult terrain will defeat larger formations that are less mobile and holding terrain. Arctic winning units are experts at raiding and ambushing. Master the Ranger skills and adapt to your environment. See the enemy first and be the "white ghost"!

Arctic patrol bases must be established in less than an hour and broken down in less than ten minutes. Always have your equipment ready to march. Don't leave your tent up if you are not actively refitting or resting. The minimum safety is always one squad per patrol base for roving and sentries. The track discipline is the most sacred element of your patrol base security; if it is broken, you are packing! Be ready to march at a minute's warning.

Never compromise your security! When advancing in enemy territory, prioritize security, manage the effort and workload. In close terrain when you are forced to travel single file and break trail, spread out at least one

moose to one bear apart. When halting, stay in trail to avoid being counted and set frequent ambushes to eliminate possible trailing foes.

Graceful and stealthy movement over snow is only mastered through tough, repetitive training. The Arctic soldier always carries snowshoes and is the master of complex terrain mobility skills. When you need to close with the enemy, use your snowshoes; when you need to go fast, use your skis; when you need to bring supplies forward, consider the use of snow machines or small unit support vehicles.

Equipment maintenance is vital to surviving in the Arctic. Take care of your equipment; your life depends on it. Check and test your squad support system before heading out. Keep your weapon dry and don't take it inside unless you are cleaning it.

Learned lessons in the cold are acquired by harnessing tough repetitive training and exposure. Expect hardship but place as much consideration to the sustainment, support and refitting of your force as you do for maneuver. Arctic resupply can be precarious, be prepared to be self-sufficient for a week at a time.

Looking Forward

Arctic capability, readiness for large-scale combat operations, and interoperability with allies and partners will continue to be the division's path to regaining Arctic dominance. With people our most valuable resources, we must maintain our focus on servant leadership, discipline, and tough training. Building cohesive teams on a foundation of mutual trust and strong connection is essential to personal and unit readiness.

The Army must continue to build this division based on the mission and requirements, gaining more robust functionality in logistics, aviation, intelligence, and fires—becoming a stronger, more versatile asset in the joint commander's arsenal. We must continue to operationalize the division headquarters and develop our warfighting skills that will be paramount to our preparation for any conflict or crisis. Most importantly, our focus on tough, crucible training at company levels and below must not waver. A ready force is a deterrent, and we must be positioned to fight so that we do our part to deter war. ■

Notes

1. E. M. Flanagan Jr., *The Angels: A History of the 11th Airborne Division, 1943–1946* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1989), 395.

2. "Our History: The 11th Airborne Division and the Army in Alaska," 11th Airborne Division, accessed 5 July 2023, <https://11thairbornedivision.army.mil/History/>.

3. Ibid.

4. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 6 February 2023), 4, accessed 5 July 2023, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

5. The White House, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2022), 6, accessed 5 July 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/National-Strategy-for-the-Arctic-Region.pdf>.

6. Ibid., 5.

7. Elisabeth Braw, "Arctic Harmony Is Falling Apart," *Foreign Policy* (website), 15 May 2023, accessed 5 July 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/15/russia-china-arctic-cooperation-svalbard/>.

8. James C. McConville and Ryan D. McCarthy, foreword to *Regaining Arctic Dominance: The U.S. Army in the Arctic*, Chief of Staff Paper #3 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 19 January 2021), accessed 5 July 2023, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/about/2021_army_arctic_strategy.pdf.

9. "Yesterday and Tomorrow Islands," Earth Observatory, NASA, 27 January 2018, accessed 5 July 2023, <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/91638/yesterday-and-tomorrow-islands>.

10. Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), *Arctic Gap Quick-Look Report: Enabling Arctic Dominance* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CALL, 2021).

11. Cold-soaked equipment generally means all aircraft components, metals, composites, and fluids are the same temperature as the ambient air. The solid components as well as rubber bushings become brittle, liquids become viscous or solid. In extreme cold weather (-40° C/F), it is near impossible to conduct maintenance or start the cold-soaked aircraft. Cold-soaked aircraft must be brought into a warm hangar or work space (above freezing) for an extended period of time, up to seventy-two hours, before significant maintenance can be conducted.