

US Marine Rotational Force - Darwin

Recommended Citation

"US Marine Rotational Force - Darwin", Australian Defence Facilities, September 30, 2013,
<https://nautilus.org/briefing-books/australian-defence-facilities/us-marine-rotational-force-darwin/>

Introduction

Project coordinator: Richard Tanter

Updated: 12 July 2021

Marine Rotational Force - Darwin

- [official website](#)
- [Facebook page](#)
- Email: MRFDMedia@usmc.mil
- Phone: (+61) 08 892 58519
- Commanding Officer (8th Rotation - 2019): [Colonel Giles 'Russ' Boyce](#)

In November 2011 Prime Minister Gillard and President Obama announced the deployment of a Marine Air Ground Task Force to Darwin, commencing with a first rotation of 200 Marines in April 2012. A second rotation of 250 was deployed in April 2013. In April 2014 a third contingent of around 1,150 Marines scheduled to be deployed, and a full contingent of 2,500 Marines was scheduled to be deployed by 2016-17. In fact, by mid-2018, less than 1,600 Marines were deployed.

The Marine Rotational Force - Darwin is an example of what the Marine Corps calls Marine Air Ground Task Forces, of which there are [several different types](#), varying in size and purpose. In order of size (from largest), these include a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), a Marine Expeditionary Brigade, and a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU).

Marine Rotational Force - Darwin is one of three elements of [U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific](#) (MARFORPAC) the Marines component of Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii. In addition to the MRF-D, MARFORPAC is made up of the much larger [1st Marine Expeditionary Force \(I MEF\)](#) headquartered at Camp Pendleton north of San Diego, and the [3rd Marine Expeditionary Force \(III](#)

[MEF](#)) headquartered at Camp Courtney in Okinawa. Historically, most of MRF-D personnel have been drawn from I MEF units, and on occasion have been joined ships and marines from III MEF's [31st Marine Expeditionary Unit \(31 MEU\)](#), including the 40,000 tonne amphibious assault ship USS Wasp and its accompanying ships. The 31st MEU is the only permanently forward-deployed Marine MATG.

MRF-D Composition

Each rotation of the MRF-D in recent years has had [three main elements](#):

- a [Ground Combat Element](#) (GCE)
- an [Aviation Combat Element](#) (ACE)
- a Logistics Combat Element (LCE)

The planned expansion of the US Darwin deployment was delayed due to [disagreement](#) about which side would pay for the expanded infrastructure needed to handle the influx of US personnel and equipment. In October 2016 the US and Australia reached [an 'in principle' cost-sharing agreement](#) to cover more than AUS \$2 billion of planned spending on 'upgrades to airfields, aircraft parking areas, living and working accommodation, messes, gyms and training ranges.' No details were leaked about the distribution of costs.

In 2017, the U.S. [Naval Facilities Engineering Command \(NAVFAC\) Pacific announced](#) that the 'U.S. Military Construction Program in Australia' would spend about USD \$325M in the following five years to FW 2022. A contract for an expanded [Aircraft Maintenance Support Facility](#) at RAAF Darwin was announced in December 2017.

Regional armed forces cooperation and training

The Marine Rotational Force - Darwin is frequently involved in training exercises outside Australia, including the US-auspiced [Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training \(CARAT\)](#) '[designed to promote regional security](#), maintain and strengthen maritime partnerships, and enhance interoperability among participating forces', including exercises with armed forces from the [Philippines](#), [Thailand](#), [Indonesia](#), [Malaysia](#), [Brunei](#), [Cambodia](#), [Bangladesh](#), [New Zealand](#), [Tonga](#), and the [French military force in the South Pacific organised as the New Caledonian Armed Forces \(FANC\)](#), and [Indonesia](#) (Marines).

2021

The tenth Marine Rotational Force - Darwin (MRF-D) began to arrive in Darwin in February 2021, with [a total of 2,200 US troops to arrive by June](#).

2019

The [eighth rotation of the Marine Rotational Force - Darwin](#) will involve 2,500 personnel, bringing the force to its planned full complement for the first time. It was made up of ground, air and logistic elements:

- 1,700 troops from the Camp Pendleton, California-based [1st Marine Expeditionary Force \(I MEF\)](#):
 - Ground Component Element
 - the [1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment](#);
 - an artillery battery from [3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment](#); [Combat Logistics Battalion 1](#)

-
- Logistics Component Element
 - [Combat Logistics Battalion 1, Combat Logistics Regiment 1](#)
-
-
- 800 troops from the [3rd Marine Expeditionary Force \(III MEF\)](#)
 - Ground Component Element
 - from the Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii-based [3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment](#), an adjacent command of III MEF
 -
-
- Air Component Element
 - [Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 363](#) (VMM-363), under MEF III's [1st Marine Air Wing](#) with [Bell Boeing MV-22B Ospreys](#), based at [Kanehoe Bay](#).
 - [Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367](#) (HMLA-367) with [Bell AH-1Z Vipers](#), and [Bell UH-1Y Venoms](#)
-
-
- and a platoon from 1st Combat Engineer Battalion.

10 MV-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft, four AH-1Z Vipers and three UH-1Y Venom helicopters accompany the ground troops.

The [Wikipedia page on the Marine Rotational Force](#) has useful listing of assets by rotation [accessed May 2019]

- MRF-D 19.2 (April - October 2019)
 - Ground Component Element - [1st Battalion, 1st Marines](#)
 - Ground Component Element - India Battery, [3rd Battalion, 11th Marines](#)
 - Air Component Element - [Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 363](#) (VMM-363) with [Bell Boeing MV-22B Ospreys](#). [Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367](#) (HMLA-367) with [Bell AH-1Z Vipers](#), and [Bell UH-1Y Venoms](#)
 - Logistics Component Element - [Combat Logistics Regiment 1](#)
-

2018

The [seventh rotation](#) of the Marine Rotational Force - Darwin commenced in March 2018, bringing 1,587 US marines, eight MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft and an artillery battery of six M777 Howitzers. In addition an [Enhanced Air Cooperation](#) program expanded the number and type of US aircraft coming to northern Australian bases. These forces were announced to be to

participating with more than 15 training exercises and would be joined by personnel from Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand as either participants or observers.

[The 2018 rotation](#) consisted of 1,587 US Marines, including a Ground Combat Element supported by an artillery battery of six M777 Howitzers, a Combat Logistics Detachment and an Air Combat Element including eight MV-22 Ospreys. The MRF-D 18 also includes an enhanced Command Element headed by a COL. Marines from the [2nd Battalion, 4th Marines \(2/4\)](#) participated.

The 2018 MRF-D participated in a number of key training exercises, including:

Indo-Pacific Endeavour;
Koolendong;
Battlegroup Warfighter;
Southern Jackaroo;
Diamond Storm;
Hamel; and
Croix De Sud.

2015: 1,150 Marines mainly from the [1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment](#) deployed from Camp Pendleton in California through Darwin in mid-April, 2015, under the command of Lt. Col. Eric Dougherty. Four [CH-53E helicopters](#) from [Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463](#), Marine Corps Base Hawaii, were also part of the six-month rotation deployment.

During their deployment the battalion-sized MAGTF worked with 1st Brigade, Australian Army, commanded by Brigadier Mick Ryan. [Reviewing the Marine contingent](#) at [Robertson Barracks](#), U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Richard Simcock said

I can't tell you how proud I am to see the Marines of 1st Battalion, 4th Marines standing here executing this rotational deployment... your presence here in the region has a huge impact throughout the Asia-Pacific. The things that you Marines have done over the past six months clearly say that American interests are very important, and our commitment by your presence and the things that we do in training with our host allies here are very, very important."

This reinforced Marine battalion [returned](#) to Camp Pendleton in October 2015.



2014: The [battalion-sized 2014 rotation deployed from 28 March](#) is made up of a Ground Combat Element from [Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines](#), a Logistics Element from COB 3, Hawaii, and an [Air Combat Element](#) (ACE), consisting of approximately 100 personnel, four CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters from Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463 ([HMH-463](#)), Hawaii, and Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 24 (MALS-24). The 2014 rotation commanded by [Lt. Col. Keven](#)

[Matthews](#), working with [Commodore Brenton Smyth RAN](#), commander of Headquarters Northern Command and senior Australian officer in the Northern Territory.

Locations

The Marines are mainly stationed at [Robertson Barracks](#) in Darwin, with aviation elements at [RAAF Base Darwin](#). Most Marine contingents and their equipment enter through the [port of Darwin](#). Officially designated as "US Marine Rotational Force - Darwin" (MRTF-D) is regarded as a "permanent rotation" by the US government, with rotations coinciding with the end and onset of the wet season. Major exercises with Australian Defence Force units take place at [Bradshaw Field Training Area](#) and [Mount Bunday Training Area](#), as well as at Shoalwater Bay in the annual Talisman Sabre exercises. In August-September 2013 Darwin-based Marines were joined by the Okinawa-based [31st Marine Expeditionary Unit](#) for Exercise Coolendong, which took place at [Bradshaw Field Training Area](#) and [Mount Bunday Training Area](#).

MRF-D Composition

Each rotation of the MRF-D in recent years has had [three main elements](#):

- a [Ground Combat Element](#) (GCE)
- an [Aviation Combat Element](#) (ACE)
- a Logistics Combat Element (LCE)

The [Wikipedia page on the Marine Rotational Force](#) has useful listing of assets [accessed May 2019]

- MRF-D 19.2 (April - October 2019)
 - GCE - [1st Battalion, 1st Marines](#)^[13]
 - GCE - India Battery, [3rd Battalion, 11th Marines](#)
 - ACE - [Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 363](#) (VMM-363) with [Bell Boeing MV-22B Ospreys](#). [Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367](#) (HMLA-367) with [Bell AH-1Z Vipers](#), and [Bell UH-1Y Venoms](#)
 - LCE - [Combat Logistics Regiment 1](#)

•

Government sources

Australia

United States

[Marine Rotational Force - Darwin](#), Darwin, Australia, Marines (official website)

[OIC of MRF-D talks about upcoming rotation](#), DVIDS, 25 March 2014

[Press Briefing \[Full Text\]](#), Jay Carney, Press Secretary; Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications; Danny Russel, NSC Senior Director for Asia - Canberra, Australia, November 16, 2011.

“Q. Do you envision permanent bases here? Could it lead to that?”

“MR. RHODES: No, I don't think -- again, the Australians have a robust capability, obviously, through their own military forces. What this is about is enhancing our ability to partner with them and to partner with other countries in the region. Therefore, it can be a deployment of U.S. Marines, a deployment of U.S. aircraft onto Australian facilities, rather than the United States having to come in and develop some separate infrastructure.”

Q Planes? There's no sea element to this, more ships rotating through or anything?

MR. RUSSEL: This particular initiative doesn't involve a ramping up of ship visits or naval cooperation. However, you should remember that this decision is the byproduct of a series of meetings at a high level both between the President and the Australian Prime Minister, but also the annual meetings of the U.S. and the Australian defense and foreign ministers. These were the initiatives that were worked out by the AUSMIN, as it's called, in September of this year. But they were the product and were two of a variety of options that were developed at the initiative of the President and the Prime Minister more than a year ago, as we conducted our respective force posture reviews and completed the first year of a joint U.S.-Australia force posture review. So there may be more to come.

Q -- they won't be permanently attached.

MR. RHODES: There will be a constant rotation, so there will be -- this will be a regular presence of the U.S. Marines in Australia. They will be deployed for different periods of time as a part of that.

[Rotational Force in Australia Paves Way for Big Growth in 2014](#), Donna Miles, American Forces Press Service, Marines, Sept. 24, 2013

With the second rotation of U.S. Marines wrapping up its six-month deployment to Darwin, Australia, later this month, the senior Marine commander on the ground said all systems are go for the next rotation to increase five-fold when it arrives next spring.

Marine Rotational Force - Darwin was the first new rotational arrangement in the Asia-Pacific region designed to bolster U.S. theater engagement in support of the defense strategic guidance released in January 2012. Marine Lt. Col. Matthew Puglisi, officer in charge of Marine Rotational Force - Darwin told American Forces Press Service in a telephone interview. “We had approximately three months to conduct deliberate planning in order to develop a concept of operations that would support unilateral and bilateral training in the region,” he said. “It was a very short planning cycle, but a great deal of work was done to ensure mission success.”

Based at Australia’s Robertson Barracks outside Darwin, the inaugural rotation laid important groundwork for follow-on rotations, he said. While working through the logistical and administrative requirements and launching new training programs, they immediately began forging new relationships with their Australian hosts, he said.

Initially the training focused on basic, company-level sustainment training. But mid-way through

the rotation, the Marines began their regional outreach during the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training 2012 exercise, hosted by Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Puglisi emphasized the importance of the rotational force in helping regional partners build capacity and as a quick-reaction force to regional crises. “The proximity of the Northern Territory to Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean enables Marines to more effectively train, exercise and operate with partners across the region,” he said. It also positions them, if needed, “to respond more rapidly to humanitarian and natural disasters and crises throughout the region.”

The second rotation of about 250 Marines arrived in Australia in April, building on initial progress with more bilateral activities in Australia and platoon-level engagements in New Zealand and Tonga, Puglisi reported. “They had a very challenging and aggressive training and exercise employment plan,” he said, concentrating on small-unit infantry exercises and assessments of local range capabilities. Among the highlights was a deployment to Australia’s 3,300-square-mile Bradshaw Field Training Area, a premier training environment about 400 miles from Darwin. There, the rotational Marines, joined by about 750 members of the [31st Marine Expeditionary Unit](#), conducted Exercise Koolendong 2013 with the Royal Australian Regiment’s 5th Battalion. The training, the first of its kind for Marine Rotational Force – Darwin, included maneuver, mounted and dismounted operations, a vertical assault scenario and a six-day live-fire exercise. It served as a “proof of concept” that affirmed the range’s capacity to support battalion-sized, live-fire events, Puglisi said, broadening the opportunities for future Marine rotations.

As the second rotation of Marines leaves Australia next week, they have set the conditions for a far larger rotation to arrive next spring, Puglisi said. A battalion-sized Marine Air-Ground Task Force of about 1,150 Marines is expected to deploy to Darwin, complete with an infantry battalion, logistics and aviation detachment.

Most of those Marines will be based at Robertson Barracks, but a 130-member aviation support contingent and four medium-lift helicopters will operate from Royal Australian Air Force’s Base Darwin, Puglisi said. Planners are evaluating what other temporary structures might be needed to accommodate the incoming rotation, he said.

As the Marines provide an increased U.S. presence forward and increase their engagements with regional partners, Puglisi said they’re returning to their roots as an expeditionary force. “We are an expeditionary force, and we can operate anytime and in any place,” he said. “This is something in our toolbox. So we just look at this as an extended exercise period. We go to different places, rotate through, conduct training and then leave. That is the Marine Corps way.”

The takeaway, he said, is increased interoperability between U.S. and Australian forces and new relationships developed during the rotations. “We share the same interests here in the region and globally,” he said. “That has an important impact in terms of security in the region.”

[Hawaii Marines to Participate in Historic Australia Deployment](#), DVIDS, 25 March 2014.

[Marine Rotational Force – Darwin](#), Darwin, Australia, Marines (official website)

[Australia and US strengthen relationship in Darwin](#), Australian Defence Magazine, 27 Sep 2013

The second rotation of 200 US Marines departed Darwin for Hawaii after a six month

deployment to Australia's Northern Territory. During this time, the Hawaii-based Marines conducted bilateral training with the ADF and their own Marine-specific training. "The second iteration of the US Marine Rotational Force - Darwin has been highly successful in fostering cooperation and inter-operability between our two militaries," he said. "Building on the achievements of the first rotation, this rotation of US Marines worked more closely with troops from 5 RAR, pushed their training further afield - including into the Bradshaw Field Training Area for the first time - and developed close ties to the Darwin community. The ADF and the Marines worked together in a number of small-scale exercises and also last month's Exercise Koolendong at Bradshaw, south-west of Darwin.

The US Marine Corps six-month rotations through northern Australia will increase to around 1150 personnel from 2014. The majority of the Marines will be accommodated at Robertson Barracks, with a smaller aviation support contingent of around 130 personnel at RAAF Darwin, along with four heavy lift helicopters.

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/briefing-books/australian-defence-facilities/us-marine-rotational-force-darwin/>

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org