

STATEMENT

OF

GENERAL ERIC SMITH
COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

ON

THE POSTURE OF THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

Chair Reed, Ranking Member Wicker, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to report to you on your Marines and your Corps. Your support has been critical to your Corps' ability to remain the Nation's Force-in-Readiness, all the while modernizing to stay ahead of our adversaries and those who would seek to threaten our Nation or its Allies and partners.

Who We Are and How We Fight

The Marine Corps is, first and foremost, a warfighting organization. We exist to fight and win our country's battles. Everything we do is with that one goal in mind. The character of war may change, but its essence never will – it is the violent struggle between two irreconcilable wills. That struggle is where Marines thrive. We ask for nothing more than the chance to be First to Fight.

We are and will remain a naval expeditionary force that fights from the sea as task-organized, multi-domain combined arms air-ground task forces. With Force Design in progress, we continue our proud history as our nation's expeditionary shock troops who can deliver combat power from sea to land – and we have added the additional capability to project power from land to sea. As a globally present and persistent force, we are inextricably linked to naval campaigns, and we are forward deployed in competition, ready to respond in times of crisis at a moment's notice.

Our foundation as our Nation's expeditionary force in readiness and as its elite soldiers from the sea will not change. But the formations, capabilities, and methods we use against our adversaries must evolve. Combined arms operations today are more than coordinating ground maneuver, indirect fires, and close air support – already the most difficult task for any fighting force to master. To fight and win against a peer adversary, combined arms must now be all-domain, incorporating effects in and from cyberspace, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum. The mastery of this evolution in warfare is what allows us to punch above our weight class. It is what will keep the Marine Corps – a relatively small service – respected by our friends and feared by our enemies across the globe.

Maneuver Warfare, encapsulated in our Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, is integral to how we fight, but our understanding of “maneuver” must evolve along with the changing character of war. Marines at the tactical edge will maneuver under all-domain supporting fires to seize terrain and destroy the enemy. This challenge will require a greater proliferation of capabilities that can provide those all-domain effects down to the lowest level. This requirement includes autonomous systems; precision fires;

intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting (ISR-T); integrated command and control; and increased ground and maritime mobility.

Marine Stand-in Forces are task-organized, mobile, low-signature, sustainable formations, built to maneuver across all domains, sense and understand the battlefield, enable combined kill webs, and apply all-domain combined arms. They persist forward in contested areas, operate alongside allies and partners, contribute to deterrence, and, if deterrence fails, fight to win. Adversaries will attempt to deny and degrade the joint force's ability to see and sense. Marines at every echelon are now using the platforms and capabilities that our aggressive modernization efforts are delivering. Our Force Design efforts have enabled our Marines to conduct all-domain and multi-source collections and intelligence in support of the joint force. We are the eyes and ears for the joint force, ideally positioned within the weapons engagement zone (WEZ) to conduct both reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance, to act as a joint tactical air controller for the combined joint force, and to strike the enemy from land to sea with organic sensors and precision fires.

Sustaining those forces will be both vitally important and exceptionally difficult. Contested logistics can only succeed through a combination of technology and tactics. Forces will have to coordinate the deliberate application of multi-domain fires and maneuver to create the physical and temporal conditions necessary to support logistics networks. Make no mistake – a peer fight requires both the large traditional avenues for supply as well as a global network of tailored nodes to support specialized units distributed across the battlespace. The Globally Positioned Network ashore, including Maritime Prepositioned Forces afloat, will become nodes within a larger, resilient sustainment web that will not rely on single points of failure. This is a wicked problem to solve, but for Marines, it is not insurmountable. We became Marines to do hard things.

Today, across the Indo-Pacific, approximately 23,000 Marines are forward-deployed or stationed West of the International Dateline. Building upon the longstanding ability of III Marine Expeditionary Force to deter, campaign, and respond to crises, I would like to highlight several initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region: a new integrated naval Task Force called TF 76.3; our Marine Littoral Regiments – one of which will be forward postured in Japan's Southwest Islands; an expanded Rotational Force in Australia; and a new Rotational Force – Southeast Asia. This forward posture is a critical requirement for integrated deterrence and reinforces a national source of strategic advantage, our global network of Allies and partners. Just as important, our forward posture contributes to the core mission of the Naval Force – presence.

- Marines with the I and III Marine Expeditionary Forces continue to reinforce joint warfighting advantages through their ongoing activities across the Indo-Pacific with our allies in the region, including Japan, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea. Exercises RESOLUTE DRAGON and IRON FIST with the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) and Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade are two of the best examples of our active campaigning in the theater. Those operations and activities directly support Japan's efforts to reinforce its maritime domain awareness in the Southwest Islands, enhance its reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance capabilities, and further develop its capability to use land-based anti-ship systems to effect sea-denial. Some of this training occurs at the JGSDF's Camp Ishigaki on a southwestern Japanese island approximately 160 miles east of Taiwan.
- In Australia, Marine Rotational Force – Darwin (MRF-D) continues to demonstrate advanced interoperability between the Marines Corps and Australian Defense Forces (ADF) across each warfighting function, power projection with non-traditional assets, and the ability to overcome mobility challenges in the littoral environment. Because of the years of working closely with the U.S. Marine Corps to address the changing threat, the ADF are developing two amphibious brigades that have much in common with the Marine Littoral Regiment. This year, MRF-D will integrate with the ADF in at least 13 operations, activities, and investments (OAIs), including exercises that seek to validate theater planning assumptions and enhance overall interoperability. The MRF-D 2024 rotation will further focus on simulating and overcoming the logistical challenges we envision facing in a high-end fight in the Pacific.
- The largest bilateral military exercise between Australia and the United States, Exercise TALISMAN SABER, is well known; what is perhaps less well known is that TS23 integrated amphibious vessels from the United States and Japan, as well as German naval infantry, and introduced field training exercises with several Pacific Island Countries for the first time. And, for the first time last year, we were able to include the Indonesian National Armed Forces within our combined training alongside the Australians. We look forward to expanding upon this new opportunity to extend our campaigning.
- In October 2023, we initiated the second rotation of our newest expeditionary force – Marine Rotational Force – Southeast Asia (MRF-SEA), to counter ongoing PRC maritime gray zone operations. MRF-SEA operations and activities included coastal defense training, raid and reconnaissance training, and amphibious operations training with Allies and partners in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.
- Our most important campaigning event in support of deterring North Korean aggression, SSANG YONG, resumed in 2023 and involved an amphibious landing with elements of the ROKMC, 1st

Marine Division, and the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). SSANG YONG 24 is planned for August 2024 to allow for the utilization of the America ARG (LHA 6) and 31st MEU.

- In August 2023, Marines of the AMERICA Amphibious Ready Group and 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) conducted humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations in the vicinity of Papua New Guinea following the eruption of Mount Bagana on 31 Jul 2023.

Our efforts across the EUCOM AOR have also significantly expanded, and now include tailored efforts with NATO's newest members – Sweden and Finland. Since 2018, Exercise ARCHIPELAGO ENDEAVOR has been the primary venue for Marine Forces, Europe, to develop interoperability with the Swedish Marines. Beginning in 2022, the Royal Swedish Navy also offered the exercise as a medium for the Marine Corps to develop and evaluate modern concepts such as maritime domain awareness. This generous offer and the close relationship with America's newest Ally are further evidence of the strategic impact of our network of Allies and partners. In 2023, Low-Altitude Air-Defense (LAAD) Marines participated in exercise ADEX with the Finnish Navy, and Combat Logistics Battalion-6 (CLB-6) participated in Exercises ATRAIN and FREEZING WINDS with the Nyland Brigade (naval infantry). This year, Exercise FREEZING WINDS will be the primary bilateral exercise between the Marine Corps and Finnish Navy and naval infantry forces. In addition to those exercises, Marines from 2d Marine Division conducted several HIMARS Rapid Infiltration (HIRAIN) events throughout the theater, including Finland, Poland, and Greece. These visible demonstrations of combat credibility and operational reach involve inserting HIMARS via fixed-wing aircraft, conducting fire missions using U.S. and NATO C2 architecture, and then extracting via fixed-wing aircraft.

Your Corps' worldwide campaigning activities, alongside the Navy, help nurture our Nation's source of strategic advantage on the world stage: our network of Allies and partners. Through our persistent presence, we are forging close and lasting relationships – every day – and building a network of friendly forces who have common operating concepts and increasingly, interoperable systems and procedures.

Following the terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, the 26th MEU and BATAAN Amphibious Ready Group immediately responded and provided simultaneous contingency support to EUCOM from the Mediterranean Sea and CENTCOM from the Red Sea. Their rapid response demonstrated the ARG/MEU's ability to provide expeditionary sea-based contingency response packages during times of crisis without the constraints and restraints of access, basing, and overflight. Additionally, the 26th MEU(SOC) aboard the BATAAN ARG conducted maritime security operations in vicinity of the Straits of Hormuz to deter malign influence and assure free flow of commerce.

Throughout 2023, Marine Security Guard Augmentation Units (MSAU) operating under Title 22 authorities augmented security at designated U.S. diplomatic facilities overseas to protect U.S. diplomats and prevent the compromise of national security information and equipment. MSAUs conduct on-compound security and defense at these facilities when Department of State (DOS) deems there is a need to augment the resident Marine Security Guard detachment due to an increased threat. In 2023, there were 18 MSAU deployments in support of our diplomats in Ukraine, Central African Republic, Ecuador, Mali, Haiti, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Liberia, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Bangladesh.

All these examples, from maritime security to embassy reinforcement, demonstrate the diverse range of missions that our crisis response forces are ready to execute at any time and place. The breadth of those capabilities is simply unmatched across the joint force and continues to be a source of strategic advantage.

Where We Are Going

Upon my assumption of duties as Commandant of the Marine Corps, I outlined my top five priorities: 1) Balancing Crisis Response and Modernization, 2) Naval Integration and Organic Mobility, 3) Quality of Life, 4) Recruit, Make, and Retain Marines, and 5) Maximize the Potential of our Reserves. Those priorities remain at the heart of my direction to your Corps.

Balancing Crisis Response and Modernization

By balancing crisis response and modernization, we will continue our modernization effort under Force Design while remaining unwavering in our commitment to a persistent, global forward presence and to our Marine Expeditionary Units.

Force Design and Modernization. I remain fully committed to Force Design and all its supporting efforts. The following assumptions inform our modernization efforts: (1) The long-standing trend of increasing dispersion on the battlefield will continue and likely accelerate – frontages will increase, battlefield depth will increase, and sanctuary will be difficult to achieve; (2) winning the all-domain reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance fight provides significant warfighting advantage and losing this fight will be increasingly difficult to overcome; (3) the Marine Corps’ ability to task-organize for specific missions will

continue to be a source of competitive advantage for the service; and (4) the future operating environment requires threat-informed modernization of Marine Corps capabilities.

We will continue to provide our Nation with forward deployed Marine forces who campaign and are prepared to respond to crisis alongside our Navy shipmates. Employing our crisis response capability as a subset of campaigning is how we will be postured to deter malign actors and provide our Nation's leaders with strategic decision space. Despite the threats from operating inside an adversary's WEZ, forward-deployed Marines can shape the operational environment and cause our adversaries to think before committing to a course of action. Should our adversaries foolishly choose to fight, Marines will be ready with the tools necessary to destroy and defeat them in combat.

Marine Littoral Regiments: As an example of our dispersed, task-organized units that possess modern equipment for the future of warfare, the 3d Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) – headquartered at Marine Corps Base Hawaii – reached Initial Operational Capability in 2023 and is planned to reach Full Operational Capability in FY 25. 3d MLR is actively experimenting with innovative tactics, techniques, and procedures to enable its unique mission as a distributed unit that must possess resilient communications, air defense, and precision fires. On the other side of the Pacific, the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment – headquartered in Okinawa, Japan – stood up in November 2023.

Contested Logistics: The ability to conduct logistics in a contested environment will underwrite the success of any future naval campaign in the current age of ubiquitous counter-intervention strategies. Contested logistics remains a service priority but will require a combination of solutions from the Service, joint force, and allies and partners. Connecting the industrial base, depots in the United States, and ports of embarkation with forward nodes in theater and tied to a resilient tactical level sustainment web, supported by multi-domain distribution platforms, will take a monumental effort across all the services. The Marine Corps will continue to work in stride with the joint force, Allies, and partners to ensure we have the integrated systems, architecture, global logistic awareness, doctrine, and training to sustain our forces.

The Marine Corps, in close collaboration with the Navy, is currently experimenting with over a dozen new manned and unmanned technologies and potential future capabilities focused on enabling logistics in a contested environment. These operational experiments include well-known capabilities such as the CH-53K, the stern landing vessel (SLV), as well as lesser-known, emerging capabilities like the tactical resupply unmanned aircraft system (TRUAS), the Medium Aerial Resupply Vehicle for Expeditionary

Logistics (MARV-EL), and the autonomous low-profile vessel (ALPV). Concurrently, the Marine Corps has commenced the formal establishment of the first of three near-term Global Positioning Networks located in the Western Pacific.

Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, & Reconnaissance (ISR) Enterprise Transformation: As an essential element of transformative efforts behind our modernization, the Marine Corps ISR Enterprise will continue to expand and strengthen the Corps' dynamic – and growing – cadre of ISR professionals. The Marine Corps exceeded our goals in qualifying Marines to expand signals intelligence and electromagnetic warfare specialties. Integrated within our infantry battalions, some of these Marines have already begun contributing to the Joint and Naval Forces' ability to sense and make sense in complex maritime and littoral environments. Other groundbreaking efforts throughout the Fleet Marine Force include integration and experimentation with innovative maritime sensing capabilities such as surface-search radars, automatic recognition software, advanced electromagnetic support capabilities, and various tactical airborne platforms.

Autonomous Systems at Scale: The Marine Corps is actively engaged, participating, and, in some instances, leading efforts within the Department of Defense's Replicator Initiative, which aims to field attritable autonomous systems at scale and in multiple domains. To accomplish this task, the Marine Corps is aggressively leveraging AI, robotics, and commercial technology. I see Replicator, if managed carefully, as an opportunity to build on the momentum of Force Design to accelerate modernization and alignment with the emergent needs of the Joint Force. The USMC has worked tirelessly to scale some of the identified capabilities already, so we appreciate Replicator's holistic approach to breaking down policy barriers while we strengthen our industrial base. As Replicator continues to rapidly develop, the Service will emphasize unmanned systems that can support a range of military operations in the Indo-Pacific and other geographic regions.

Complementing these efforts, the Marine Corps takes advantage of the Rapid Defense Experimentation Reserve to rapidly transition promising prototypes into production. An example of one such initiative is the Marine Corps' XQ-58A Valkyrie, a highly autonomous, low-cost tactical uncrewed air vehicle, which successfully completed two test flights, one in October 2023 and the other in February of 2024. These flights mark key milestones in the Marine Corps' Penetrating Affordable Autonomous Collaborative Killer – Portfolio (PAACK-P) experiment. Future test flights will inform Marine Corps requirements for the Marine Air-Ground Task Force Unmanned Aerial System Expeditionary (MUX) Tactical Aircraft (TACAIR) program. The XQ-58A will complete six planned test flights with objectives that include

evaluating the platform's ability to support a variety of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions; the effectiveness of autonomous electromagnetic support to crewed platforms; the potential for AI-enabled platforms to augment combat air patrols; and other manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) capability objectives. We are committed to the development of a robust Combat Collaborative Aircraft capability and think this model of manned-unmanned teaming is just as relevant on the sea and under the sea. We are exploring options that would provide our future MEUs with such capabilities.

Training and Education. Last summer, the Navy and Marine Corps team conducted our most expansive and stressing live and virtual training to date in Large Scale Exercise 23 (LSE 23) using Carrier Strike Group 2, anchored on the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69), to help us better understand how we would fight the next war at sea. We were able to connect six carrier strike groups (two live, four virtual), six amphibious ready groups (two live, four virtual), and an additional 25 live and 50 virtual ships. To add to the realism of the event, exercise planners added 25,000 sailors and Marines to the exercise with very little additional preparation outside of normal training. All these factors make both the learning and findings more authentic. LSE 23 required the use of nine Maritime Operations Centers. Testing warfighting concepts and challenging ourselves at this scale is exactly what is required to generate the warfighting readiness we need in the future against a peer threat.

Readiness. Critical to our ability to remain forward postured and ready for any crisis is our commitment to operations and maintenance funding of ground and aviation training, maintenance, safety, and readiness. This funding allowed us to respond to the many crises around the world in 2023, and it will help ensure that we are organized, trained, equipped, and forward-postured to do so again this year and into the future. We will continue to emphasize the importance of a full and predictable budget to fund modernization programs, advance our logistics capability, which is the pacing function, and advance the role of our installations as power projection platforms.

Unmodified Audit Opinion. As we invest in new platforms, barracks, and training, it is our responsibility as good stewards of taxpayer funds to continue to prove that when the Corps is provided a taxpayer dollar, we can show exactly where and how it has been invested – a responsibility I take very seriously. Following a rigorous two-year audit, the Marine Corps achieved an unmodified audit opinion, the best possible outcome – and the first time in the Department of Defense's history that any service has received an unmodified audit opinion. These results demonstrate how seriously the Marine Corps takes its stewardship of taxpayer funds and our ability to account for and put to best use every dollar trusted to the service. This audit supports what we have believed for a long time – when Congress provides the Marine

Corps a dollar, we invest it wisely, and we can tell you exactly where and how it was spent to further our Nation's national security objectives. The Marine Corps worked with Independent Public Accountants to validate budgetary balances and records and to audit physical assets at installations and bases across the globe. These actions included counting military equipment, buildings, structures, supplies, and ammunition held by the Marine Corps and our DoD Partners. The audit's favorable opinion was only possible through the support and hard work of numerous dedicated Marines, civilian Marines, and many other partners across DoD. Nonetheless, we will not rest on our laurels; the audit report pointed out some areas for improvement, and we will use these recommendations to make our fiscal practices even better.

Naval Integration and Organic Mobility

The Marine Expeditionary Unit remains our crown jewel, and the Navy's Amphibious Warfare Ships and surface connectors are key enablers in campaigning, crisis response, and contingency response. Our MEUs remain in high demand by Combatant Commanders, Allies, and partners alike; our MEUs respond to crises all over the globe and prevent crises from turning into a larger conflict. Amphibious Warfare Ships enable our global, persistent presence – that presence has been the guarantor of peace and worldwide prosperity for the better part of the last century. No platform or unit is capable of a more diverse set of missions from the low-end to the high-end of military operations. No other unit is purpose-built for campaigning and deterring maritime gray-zone operations. No other part of the fleet is purpose-built to satisfy the naval presence mission. Bottom line, Amphibious Warfare Ships with embarked Marines are the only tool in the U.S. arsenal that can strengthen our relationships with Allies and partners across all domains while being capable of rapidly transitioning to crisis or conflict. As an assurance for Allies and partners, the Navy and Marine Corps ARG/MEU team has no equal and is a primary source of strategic advantage.

Amphibious Warfare Ships. The CNO and I have locked shields, and there is no space between us on the requirement for Amphibious Warfare Ships – to include construction, maintenance, and modernization, and the availability of ships for training and deployment. The Fiscal Year 2025 Thirty Year Shipbuilding Plan continues the LPD Flight II Program on 2-year centers and LHA production on 4-year centers across the FYDP. This includes full funding for LPD33 in this FY25, the CY24 delivery of LPD 29 USS McCool, and funding to maintain a scheduled delivery of LHA 8 in FY26 – sustaining no fewer than 31 amphibious warfare ships. The CNO and I continue to work to improve amphibious warfare ship readiness to ensure global, persistent presence of MEUs in support of Combatant Commanders' demands.

Amphibious warship procurement, like other Navy shipbuilding programs, can benefit from multi-ship procurement contracts that stabilize the industrial base and provide significant cost savings for the Department. New ship acquisition using authorities already granted by Congress yield potentially significant cost and schedule benefits, accelerates delivery of amphibious warfighting capability to the Fleet, and provides critical stability and predictability to the shipbuilding industrial base. By procuring the amphibious warfare ships in the 30-Year Shipbuilding Plan (3 LPDs and 1 LHA) on a multi-ship procurement contract, the Department can save hundreds of millions of dollars for the American taxpayer. Multi-ship procurement supports the industrial base and is a critical tool for reaching and maintaining the amphibious warfare ship requirement and meeting the objectives of the 2022 National Defense Strategy, as long as industry produces those ships on schedule and on budget.

Littoral Mobility. Mobility is a critical requirement to enable the dispersion and persistence of stand-in forces. In the case of MLRs in the Indo-Pacific, littoral mobility will be essential to maneuver through the complex geography of the region. We recognized this capability gap early as we developed concepts for the Indo-Pacific and designed the associated Medium Landing Ship (LSM) as a critical enabler for this theater. Separate and complementary to the Amphibious Warfare Ships, the LSM is a maneuver asset and, as a shore-to-shore vessel, is unique and critical to expeditionary littoral mobility. LSMs facilitate campaigning and can support diverse missions such as security cooperation, humanitarian assistance / disaster relief (HA/DR), logistics support, and the launch and recovery of uncrewed systems for maritime domain awareness.

Quality of Life

When we improve our Marines' Quality of Life (QoL), we do right by our Nation's most precious resource – our Marines and their families – and we retain our lethal edge by retaining our top talent. To this end, we have recently undertaken several targeted efforts to improve our Marines' QoL and further promote the retention of our best Marines:

- Rapid execution of “Barracks 2030,” the most consequential barracks investment plan we have ever undertaken.
- Improvements in quality and accessible healthcare.
- Acceleration of investments in Marine Corps Total Fitness and focused investments in our gyms, chow halls, Child Development Centers, and family housing.
- Increased creative incentives for overseas and Pacific-based Marines.

Our recent Talent Management efforts are data-informed and comprehensive. Additionally, we recognize that Quality of Life does not just mean facilities and incentives. Talent Management drives us to make better data-driven institutional decisions and personnel policies for our Marines and their families. All Marine leaders know instinctively that we have a sacred and personal responsibility to lead, mentor, and care for our junior Marines, but there is still more the institution can do to help our youngest Marines.

Barracks 2030. The Marine Corps has recently initiated Barracks 2030, our strategy to pursue improvements in our unaccompanied housing. This strategy codifies many initiatives the Corps began in February 2023 and is certainly informed by the 2023 Government Accountability Office report on barracks. The Marine Corps' Barracks 2030 strategy takes an aggressive approach in improving housing for our Marines along three lines of effort: Management, Modernization, and Materiel. Our strategy is data-driven – to the “room level.” I recently directed the inspection of the over 58,000 barracks rooms in the Marine Corps – not as a replacement to our junior leaders' weekly inspections for cleanliness and repair – but to establish a systematic approach towards barracks maintenance using a standardized repair checklist. In the coming weeks, the data from this inspection will inform our prioritization of efforts and future year budget requests.

As an example of our management efforts, and as directed by the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, we plan to implement a civilian management structure in our Military Housing Offices by October of this year, followed by civilian and contractor management of each of our barracks in the next two years to improve responsiveness to maintenance requests. Ultimately, we will return more than 500 Marine non-commissioned officer barracks managers to their primary military occupational specialties. We further intend to consolidate family housing and barracks oversight within the Military Housing Offices, which will streamline leadership and management of all Marine Corps housing.

Our Modernization plans extend beyond new structures and include modernizing systems to enable right-size inventory and deliberate, proactive maintenance. Over the last six years, the Marine Corps has averaged over \$200 million annually in restoration and modernization projects for barracks exclusively. In Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, we renovated 30 barracks, improving the quality of life of 8,116 Marines. In Fiscal Year 2024, we approached Congress with a funding request to renovate 13 more barracks to improve the living conditions of 3,517 Marines. We are leveraging a tier-based readiness approach to lifecycle management to prioritize investments for the most critical facilities. Every dollar spent will be targeted to where it will have the greatest impact. Future modernization efforts include installing new air

conditioning systems for barracks in the warmest of climates and targeted demolition to remove buildings not suitable for our Marines.

In the near term for Material, Marines can expect to see common space furniture replaced three times faster than in years past and replacement of lock systems across the entire barracks portfolio within the next two years. We are also committed to replacing room furniture, washers, and dryers at a much greater frequency through a centralized procurement system.

Health Care. Quality healthcare for our Marines is the minimum standard for readiness and is vital to the All-Volunteer Force. Overseas, and primarily in Japan, network care in the civilian community is not as readily accessible at the standard set by the Department of Defense for our Marines and their families. In recognition of this fact, the Marine Corps conducted a data-driven area assessment on delayed access to care. Guided by the results of this assessment, the Marine Corps is working with Navy Medicine and the Defense Health Agency to identify the location and need of specialties and develop a plan to address them. We are thankful for Congress' support for the Defense Health Agency implementation and its support to address the gap between DoD contract healthcare labor rates and the civilian market.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response. Sexual assault is a crime, and the Marine Corps always focuses on assisting victims with care and support and holding alleged perpetrators appropriately accountable. As of December 2023, the Marine Corps Office of the Special Trial Counsel is fully staffed and operational worldwide. This program will professionalize prosecution of special victims offenses and strengthening victims' confidence in the military justice system. The Marine Corps continues to hold its commanders and senior enlisted leaders responsible for the command climate of their units and for fostering a culture of respect for all.

- Our Training & Education Command has undertaken a comprehensive review and modification of our training covering the career of a Marine – from the first instance a poolee commits to the Corps to training for our Colonel-level commanders. Foundationally, this training review and implementation has leveraged the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC) training requirements.
- In FY23, the Marine Corps worked to hire 358 positions across the enterprise and another 92 in FY24 in support of IRC recommendations approved by the Secretary of Defense and prevention efforts. This hiring is in addition to the previously authorized 120 Marine Corps full-time equivalents (FTE) in prevention and response. As of January 2024, 162 employees have been onboarded, and another 273 hiring actions are in process. We remain unsatisfied with the pace of

our hiring, especially in certain locations where labor and workforce factors limit our available pool of applicants. We will continue to work with Congress to develop policy initiatives to accelerate this effort.

Marine Corps Total Fitness. Marine Corps Total Fitness is the summation of physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness programs that equip our Marines with the tools of resiliency and fortitude required to fight at their highest potential and prevent unnecessary loss due to factors ranging from non-EAS attrition to the tragedy of suicide. The Marine Corps takes a holistic approach to total fitness, understanding that fitness is more than simply possessing high physical fitness or mental aptitude scores. Upon assuming the duties of the 39th Commandant, I immediately directed simple but effective measures to supplement our already robust total fitness initiatives – a renewed focus on Quality of Life by improving the quality of our living spaces, our chow halls, and 24/7 access to on-base gyms. Further, I will continue to ensure access to the programs available to our Marines using force-wide person-to-person engagement programs such as Unit Marine Awareness and Prevention Integrated Training, which every Marine in the Corps receives annually.

As a Corps, we apply a public health approach to prevention, focusing on ensuring the health, safety, and well-being of the entire Marine Corps community. Our efforts aim to strengthen protective factors that reduce the risk of individuals experiencing harmful behaviors. For example, social connections, social support, and positive social relationships are protective factors against a spectrum of issues including child abuse, domestic abuse, hazing, sexual violence, substance abuse, youth violence, and suicide-related behavior. Skill-building is an essential component of prevention and equips Marines and their families with the tools needed to cope with stressors before they become overwhelming. Examples of skill-building include building problem-solving, coping, anger management, and healthy relationship skills.

Over the last year, the Marine Corps Behavioral Programs Office has implemented several efforts to combat the factors contributing to harmful behavior and suicide. Their efforts include the third iteration of our annual Wellness Symposium to inform unit Suicide Prevention Officers, Suicide Prevention Program Coordinators, and uniformed leaders. The office also partnered with the Lejeune Leadership Institute to reinforce prevention efforts at our Marine Corps Recruit Depots through leadership and ethics courses. Our Safety Division has also updated our Cognitive Behavioral Therapy curriculum. We have initiated a deliberate service-wide messaging campaign targeted at Total Fitness and suicide prevention. In fact, the second message to the entire force that the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps and I recorded was specifically aimed at addressing mental health and suicide prevention directly.

Safety. Safety is a critical component of our Corps and a key indicator of a unit's discipline. Operational excellence is the professional, efficient, and expert execution of our warfighting missions, functions, and tasks. It demands a culture of continuous improvement and the pursuit of the highest standards. Safety is not a restriction or obstacle to realistic or challenging training – it is a requirement. Many mishaps are preventable when we comply with established procedures and take action to stop unsafe acts before they occur. Our safety culture is strong but must be doggedly maintained and actively inculcated into our youngest Marines. When I became Commandant, I directed the assignment of a General Officer to lead our service safety initiatives and provide the requisite level of oversight and leadership. I am grateful to Congress for the additional authorization of a general officer that enabled this assignment.

Childcare. Our Child and Youth Programs (CYP) provide high-quality, accessible, affordable care aboard 16 Marine Corps installations and through contractual partnerships. Some of the benefits CYP offers include Child Development Programs, the Community-Based Child Care Fee Assistance Program, and Youth Programming. We continue to make progress in recovering from the effects of COVID-19 on our childcare network. The Marine Corps Child Development Center's (CDC) unmet needs list continues to shrink, with the current total at 962 spaces.

We are addressing childcare waitlist issues by emphasizing hiring efforts and a non-competitive childcare employee transfer program.

- Beginning in FY23, we added over \$100 million to the Child and Youth Program portfolio to hire more employees at increased wages to help retain a professional workforce. Our average CDC employee salary is now higher than those outside the gate at most installations.
- In FY23, direct care employees' salaries were increased beyond the federally mandated \$15 per hour. The minimum wage of an entry-level employee is \$18.20 per hour. Childcare employees with children enrolled in the program now receive a 50 percent reduction in fees for the first child and a 20 percent reduction for subsequent children.
- Our current staffing turnover rate is 20 percent, a marked improvement over the FY21 and FY22 turnover rates of 34 percent and 45 percent, respectively. Departing employees listed "relocation" as the primary reason they resigned in about a third of cases, which is explained by the fact that many CDC employees are spouses who move alongside their servicemember. Military spouses comprise 40 percent of the Marine Corps' Child and Youth Programs employees. Spouse employment is important for many Marine Corps families and can be a significant factor in their financial security, readiness, and retention. Family Member Employment Assistance Program is

available at each Marine Corps installation and provides employment related referral services, career and skill assessments, career coaching, job search guidance, portal career opportunities, and education centers referrals/guidance. We also reimburse eligible Marine spouses up to \$1,000 for state licensure and certification cost arising from relocation to another state. We appreciate Congress' recent expansion of this program and continued support. To address the challenge of PCS cycles, we have implemented a CDC employee non-competitive transfer program that allows employees to transfer from their current position more seamlessly to a similar one at a different installation. This single initiative has enabled us to retain more than 180 spouse employees, whom we may have otherwise lost.

- To mitigate waitlists, we also offer childcare fee assistance for eligible Marines assigned to an installation with a significant waitlist. Over the last three Fiscal Years, the rate of fee assistance utilization has increased steadily for both community-based childcare providers as well as children served. In Fiscal Year 2023, over 1,600 children were enrolled in the fee assistance program at over 620 community-based providers, at a total cost of \$6.1 million. We recently increased the maximum amount of fee assistance, which will undoubtedly help our Marine families, especially those in high-cost areas.

We appreciate Congress's support to improve childcare delivery in all its forms. Access to and affordability quality and reliable childcare enables Marines to focus on their duties, which directly impacts our readiness and lethality.

Overseas and Pacific Marines. The Marine Corps has established a Pacific cell to focus solely on improving the quality of life and morale for our Marines, civilian workforce, and families throughout the Indo-Pacific. This cell is engaged with units stationed in the Pacific and has solicited direct feedback. One idea we are studying is the adequacy of policies regarding shipment and storage of privately owned vehicles for Marines stationed overseas. Those changes would improve spouse employment, access to childcare, and other quality-of-life priorities. We are considering other monetary and non-monetary incentives to reduce the cost and stress of executing orders to overseas locations.

Recruiting, Making, and Retaining Marines

Recruiting. Our success in maintaining an elite force begins with recruiting young men and women who possess the character, mental aptitude, physical and psychological fitness, and desire required to earn the title, "Marine." Recruiters face a challenging environment. Labor market challenges, historic lows in qualification rates, and lower propensities to join have made it increasingly difficult to maintain our

recruiting momentum. Nonetheless, we do not ask young men and women to join us, and we do not promise them an easy life – instead, we challenge them to try out for and earn the privilege to wear the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. Those who meet and sustain our high standards deserve our best leadership. We are a proud organization that welcomes and judges all based on one standard - the Marine Corps standard.

There is no better visible example of our disciplined warriors than our recruiters. We send our very best to recruiting – our recruiters are often the first Marine a young person ever meets. One in four of our general officers have been recruiters during their career, and we pride ourselves in assigning a sergeant major to every recruiting station. We value the mission – not only for the immediate results of recruiting the best fighting force for our Nation – but also for the professional development and leadership that such rigorous duty instills in a Marine leader. As it is such a challenging duty, we are paying particular attention to the quality of life for our recruiters. Incentives like monetary bonuses help, but we understand that non-monetary incentives often make the difference. Additionally, and in keeping with Marines’ tenet of “exploit success,” I recently directed an increase of several hundred recruiters to ensure our continued success in accomplishing our mission and sustaining the momentum in re-building our Delayed Entry Pool.

Our performance speaks for itself. As you know, Marine Corps Recruiting Command achieved its Fiscal Year 2023 recruiting mission while sustaining our high standards. Last fiscal year, over 98 percent of our recruiting accessions were high school graduates, exceeding the Department of Defense’s standard of 90 percent. While we are authorized up to 4% of accessions from the CAT IV mental group, we have deliberately chosen not to do so and did not access any CAT IV applicants in 2023. In addition, the average Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) score for Marine recruits was over 60 – which remains well above the AFQT average score of 50; sixty-six percent scored in the top three tiers of the AFQT, exceeding the DoD standard of 60 percent. Marine Corps Recruiting Command has also successfully made our shipping and contracting missions every month this fiscal year. Of note, we have also surpassed the Fiscal Year 2023 total number of Prior Service Enlistment Program (PSEP) re-accessions back into the Active Component. So far, in Fiscal Year 2024, we have already attained 126 PSEPs in comparison to the 121 total in Fiscal Year 2023. For our Officer mission, we have accessed 639 officers so far this fiscal year, which is on-pace to meet or exceed the mission by category and component.

Retention. Over the past 12 months, we have implemented five major reform initiatives: 1) the Commandant’s Active and Reserve Retention Program, 2) the Expanded First Term Alignment Plan

(FTAP) Retention Model, 3) the Small Unit Leader Initiative, 4) Promotion Allocation Fulfillment, and 5) Marine Corps Graduate Education Program (MCGEP) Enlisted Pilot. These programs provide demonstrable results, and I am prepared to provide the Committee with detailed briefings on each. As just one example of the impact these initiatives are having, we entered FY23 with a persistent shortfall of approximately 2,000 Sergeants across the force. Via implementing the Small Unit Leader Initiative, we not only decreased that shortfall to 150, but also secured the retention of the top talent within our E4 ranks for years via early re-enlistment.

In FY22, we successfully re-enlisted 5,918 (22%) of the eligible first-term population of 26,221 Marines. In FY23, we expanded those efforts and successfully re-enlisted 7,070 (27%) of the eligible first-term population of 26,121 Marines. Most importantly, 5,670 of those re-enlisted remained in the FMF to provide greater unit cohesion. With even greater goals in FY24, we anticipate continued high re-enlistment rates, particularly among first-term Marines. In FY23, we initiated a pilot program targeting our infantry community, seeking to create greater unit cohesion and individual Marine and family stability via 60-month infantry-only enlistment contracts. Due to the success of that effort, on 1 October 2023, all infantry contracts became 60-month contracts. Within the first quarter of this FY, we have already exceeded our monthly mission goals, and for the year-to-date, we have shipped 149% of the requirement. We will meet and exceed our annual infantry recruiting mission of 2,579 this year.

It is important to note that as the Marine Corps shifts from a “Recruit and Replace” to an “Invest and Retain” model, the service must incentivize the retention of the highest quality Marines, regardless of occupational specialty. The idea that “there is always boat space for talent” is our guiding principle. However, if not diligently managed, MOS-agnostic retention may result in uneven retention across occupational specialties. To ensure the even distribution of retained talent across the force, we will continue incentivizing lateral move opportunities for qualified Marines by reducing administrative barriers to lateral moves and offering targeted bonuses for high-demand, low-density skills. Moreover, within the next year, we can expect the delivery and enhancement of the Talent Management Engagement Portal and AI/ML enabled models such as the Retention Prediction Network, Talent Marketplace, and Modernized Enlisted Staffing Goal Model that will allow us to better identify the highest quality Marines for targeted retention.

Optimizing Employment of our Reserves

By Maximizing the Potential of our Reserves, we continue to forge a lethal Total Force that is greater than the sum of its parts while taking stress off the Active Component. To maximize the potential of our reserves, we must appropriately resource our AC end strength to 172,300 and RC end strength to 32,500; research the necessary policies and authorities required to enable AC and RC permeability; and return to historic National Guard Reserve Equipment Account funding levels to ensure the modernization and readiness of our Reserves. The Selected Marine Corps Reserve (SMCR) is a service-retained force and reservoir of capabilities similar to our three active-duty MEFs. Our world-class Marine Corps Reserve routinely provides forces to satisfy service needs from training to generate readiness, build partner capacity in SOUTHCOM and AFRICOM, and augment traditional global force management requirements. Purpose-built to augment, sustain, and reinforce the active component, our SMCR units, Individual Mobilization Augmentee (IMA) Detachments, and Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) are sources of competitive warfighting advantage.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps will be ready to respond to any crisis or contingency in the future, just as we have in the past. I remain committed to ensuring the Marine Corps remains our Nation's Force-in-Readiness. We will never lower our standards or sacrifice the reputation associated with the sacred title, "Marine" – and will remain innovative and agile in our approach to warfighting. With your help, we will ensure your Marines are provided with world-class training and improved quality of life and are enabled with the capabilities required to win our Nation's battles against any adversary. I promise you that every dollar invested will give you the greatest return to realize our modernization strategy, build a more lethal force, and take care of your Marines and their families. I thank the Committee for your continued advocacy and support for your Marines. Semper Fidelis.