

BRANCHES: MARINES



CPL. SETH ROSENBERG

Marines run in celebration of the branch's 244th birthday at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, in November.

“What will always be a constant is that no matter what the crisis is, our civilian leaders should always have one shared thought – send in the Marines.”

– GEN. DAVID BERGER,
38th commandant of the Marine Corps



LANCE CPL. MORGAN BURGESS

Marine Makeover

Berger: Today's Corps won't cut it for tomorrow's conflict

By Matt Alderton

THE U.S. MARINE CORPS is known as America's “elite fighting force.” Its men and women are recognized for their strength, smarts, tenacity, loyalty and lethality. But can Marines be as agile as they are effective?

Gen. David Berger thinks so. Upon becoming the 38th commandant of the Marine Corps in July, he issued the Commandant's Planning Guidance, a 23-page treatise in which he detailed his vision for the Corps' future. In it, Berger stated that his No. 1 priority is force design, which includes operations and organization. He proffers a bold concession in exchange for his objectives: If he must, he'll trade force size for force capability.

“If provided the opportunity to secure additional modernization dollars in

exchange for force structure, I am prepared to do so,” the treatise read.

It could be a tough pill to swallow. After all, the Marine Corps already has seen its numbers dwindle: It reached nearly 205,000 personnel in 2009 and currently stands at approximately 186,000.

“Berger said he would reduce the size of the Marine Corps, if (needed), to find money for modernization. That's going to be extremely difficult because the day-to-day demands on the Marine Corps are not decreasing,” said Marine Corps veteran Mark Cancian, a senior adviser in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. “The combatant commanders around the world, the secretary of defense, the president — they all keep wanting to send in the Marines, and the Marine Corps has to supply those units ...

I think that puts a floor on the size of the Marine Corps.”

Even if he's bluffing, observers said wagering end strength will help Berger put an exclamation point on his objective: remaking the Marine Corps based on future instead of past conflicts.

“The Marine Corps' focus is on having the most elite, well-trained, well-led capable force we can, and if we have to trade size for quality, we will do that. I don't know if we need to, but the willingness to do that is a reinforcement from me to leaders and to Marines that the No. 1 thing that we owe this country is quality: a very capable, very lethal force that can do what no one else will do,” Berger said.

The basis for Berger's posture is the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which compels the U.S. military to pivot away from the wars of the last 20 years, the

focus of which was counterinsurgency, and toward future wars, the focus of which will be “great-power competition” with the likes of China and Russia.

One way Berger plans to effect change is by returning to the Marine Corps' naval roots. “Recently, we have been a land force that could get on ships. Going forward, we must ... be a naval force that can both fight at sea and go ashore.”

Fundamental to Berger's vision is reimagining the Marine Corps as a force with distributed rather than concentrated forces, and more and smaller ships instead of fewer larger ones.

“For three decades, the Marine Corps has said its amphibious shipping capability must be large enough to land two brigades,” explained Cancian. However, Berger's proposed plan means two-brigade landings are no longer a standard. “Instead, he thinks the Marine Corps needs different kinds of amphibious ships, including smaller ships and those with more defensive firepower. That's a huge change.”

Berger acknowledged that much remains undecided, but he made one thing clear: Today's Marine Corps will not be tomorrow's. “There is still some wargaming we need to accomplish prior to those decisions becoming final,” he said. “But what will always be a constant is that no matter what the crisis is, our civilian leaders should always have one shared thought — send in the Marines.”