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Defense Primer: Organization of U.S. Ground Forces

Overview

The Army is the U.S. military's primary ground force. Title 10, Subtitle B, Part I, Chapter 307 of the *U.S. Code* addresses the organization of the Army. The Marine Corps serves as the Navy's land-based fighting force. Title 10, Subtitle C, Part I, Chapter 507, Section 5063 addresses Marine Corps composition and functions. For the National Guard and Reserves, see CRS In Focus IF10540, *Defense Primer: Reserve Components*.

Organizational Levels of U.S. Ground Forces

The Army and Marine Corps are organized as hierarchies of units, with each type of unit commanded by a noncommissioned or commissioned officer of a specific rank. These units are described from smallest to largest.

Squad/Team/Section: A squad is led by a sergeant and consists of 4-12 personnel. Squads can be further divided into teams or sections.

Platoon: A platoon—which is led (Army) or commanded (Marines) by a lieutenant and includes varying numbers of subordinate squads, teams, or sections—may vary from 16 to 50 personnel. Heavy platoons also have armored vehicles (such as tanks or infantry fighting vehicles, depending on the type of platoon).

Company/Troop/Battery: A company is commanded by a captain and includes two to five subordinate platoons (usually three or four). It has about 100-200 personnel. Cavalry (air or ground reconnaissance units) companies are called troops (Army only); artillery and air and missile defense companies are called batteries.

Battalion/Squadron: A battalion is commanded by a lieutenant colonel and usually includes three to five combat companies and one support company. It has about 500 to 900 personnel. Cavalry battalions are called squadrons.

Brigade Combat Team/Support

Brigades/Regiment/Group: Army brigades are commanded by a colonel and generally are configured as a brigade combat team (BCT), a functional support brigade (FSB), or a multifunctional support brigade (MFSB). Each brigade has about 3,900-4,100 personnel. Army cavalry brigades are called regiments; some types of support brigades are called groups. Marine Corps units at this level also are called regiments. (The term *Marine expeditionary brigade* [MEB] refers to a regimental-size task force, which is larger than a standard Army brigade).

Division: An Army division is commanded by a major general and includes two to five BCTs (usually four), an aviation brigade, an artillery brigade, an engineer brigade,

and a logistics brigade. Army divisions consist of 12,000-16,000 personnel.

Corps: Corps are commanded by a lieutenant general and include two to five divisions and numerous support brigades and commands. Corps have about 40,000-100,000 personnel. The Marines do not have designated corps, although a Marine expeditionary force (MEF) is similar in size and also is commanded by a lieutenant general.

Army: An army is the highest command level in a given theater of operations and typically has 100,000-300,000 personnel. It is an element of a joint command structure, with the Army's component commanded by a general. An Army's operational theater is established to support one or more corps and includes numerous support brigades and support commands.

Army Brigades

According to the Association of the U.S. Army's (AUSA) *Profile of the United States Army 2018*:

The Brigade Combat Team (BCT) is the basic combined-arms building block of the Army. It is a permanent, stand-alone, self-sufficient, and standardized tactical force of about 4,000 soldiers. At present, the Army is realigning BCTs to better address the threat of near-peer competitors and this realignment is planned to be completed by FY2020.

The Army has three types of BCTs: Infantry BCTs (IBCTs), Armored BCTs (ABCTs), and Stryker BCTs (SBCTs).

Infantry BCTs (IBCTs) include three infantry battalions, a reconnaissance and surveillance cavalry squadron, a field artillery battalion, a brigade engineer battalion, and a logistics support battalion. IBCTs also are organized to be airborne or air-assault capable. By FY2020, the Army plans to have **13** Active Component and **20** National Guard IBCTs.

Armored BCTs (ABCTs) include three armor/mechanized infantry battalions, an armed reconnaissance cavalry squadron, a field artillery battalion, a logistics support battalion, and a brigade engineer battalion. By FY2020, the Army plans to have **11** Active Component and **5** National Guard ABCTs.

Stryker BCTs (SBCTs) are centered on the Stryker, an eight-wheel-drive armored vehicle. SBCTs consist of three infantry battalions, a cavalry squadron for reconnaissance and target acquisition, a field artillery battalion, a brigade support battalion, a brigade engineer battalion, a military intelligence company, an engineer company, a signal company, an antitank company, and a headquarters company. By FY2020, the Army plans to have **7** Active Component and **2** National Guard SBCTs.

Functional Support Brigades

FSBs are designed to plug into operational formations at the Army Service Component Command (ASCC), corps, division, or

theater level. Once deployed, these brigades conduct operational or theater-level support. There are several types of FSBs, including air defense, artillery, engineers, military police, cyber, signal, explosive ordnance disposal, medical support, and aviation.

Multifunctional Support Brigades

Similar to FSBs, MFSBs are designed to plug into operational formations, but their purpose is to support BCTs. There are five types of MFSBs: combat aviation, combat support, sustainment, fires and battlefield surveillance, and tactical-level task and support.

Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs)

(For more information on SFABs, see CRS In Focus IF10675, *Army Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs)*, by Andrew Feickert.)

SFABs are capable of conducting Security Force Assistance at the tactical (brigade and below) level. In May 2018, the Army announced it would establish six SFABs—five in the Active Component and one in the Army National Guard (ARNG). To date, the Army has activated two Active Component SFABs and is in beginning stages of activating the ARNG SFAB. SFABs consist of about 500 soldiers, with most being officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs). The Army also plans for SFABs to be expanded, if the need arises, into fully operational ABCTs or IBCTs capable of conducting major combat operations. In this case, SFAB personnel would serve as cadres who would accept the expansion of personnel and equipment required to transform the SFAB into either an ABCT or IBCT.

Marine Corps

Adapted from the Congressional Budget Office's *The U.S. Military's Force Structure: A Primer*, July 2016, pp. 45-46; and *The U.S. Military's Force Structure: Fiscal Year 2019 Update to Personnel Numbers and Costs*, August 15, 2018, at <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/54136>.

The Marine Corps is a hybrid service, with units that engage in combat on the ground and in the air. The Marine Corps organizes its forces into task forces, each with a *command, ground combat, air combat, and support* element. The largest such task force, a Marine expeditionary force (MEF), includes a ground combat division, an air wing, and a support group. The active component of the Marine Corps has three MEFs, including a total of three divisions, three air wings, and three logistics groups. The Marine Corps Reserve contains one division, one air wing, and one support group, although they are not organized into a fourth Marine expeditionary force. The MEFs, divisions, air wings, and logistics groups are not standardized units but instead vary in size and composition.

The Marine Corps currently has **24** Active Component and **8** Reserve Component Infantry Battalions.

How the Marine Corps Organizes Its Operational Forces

Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF)

The MAGTF is the Marine Corps' principal organizational construct for conducting missions across the range of military operations. MAGTFs consist of *command, ground combat, air combat, and support* elements.

Ground Combat Element (GCE)

The GCE conducts land-based and amphibious operations, including offensive, defensive, humanitarian, reconnaissance, and security operations. Unlike Army BCTs, Marine infantry battalions are light-infantry organizations and are not intended to operate independently. Typical operations include amphibious assault and raid, reconnaissance and surveillance, hostage recovery, disaster relief, and non-combatant evacuation operations.

Marine Corps Combat Organizations

There are four types of MAGTFs: the MEF; the MEB; the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU); and the Special Purpose MAGTF (SPMAGTF).

Marine Expeditionary Force

MEFs are the primary warfighting force for larger operations. Consisting of 46,000-90,000 Marines and sailors and commanded by a lieutenant general, MEFs are composed of a Marine division, aircraft wing, and logistics group.

Marine Expeditionary Brigade

MEBs are task-organized for specific missions, consist of 4,000-16,000 Marines and sailors, and are commanded by a brigadier general. MEBs have a regimental-size ground combat element and are embarked aboard amphibious assault ships.

Marine Expeditionary Unit

MEUs consist of 2,200 Marines and sailors and are a forward-deployed crisis-response force. MEUs deploy as part of an amphibious ready group (ARG) and are commanded by a colonel.

Special Purpose MAGTF

SPMAGTFs are task-organized to accomplish a specific mission, operation, or exercise. They can conduct a variety of operations ranging from peacetime missions, training exercises, and responses to contingencies and crises, including disaster response and humanitarian assistance. Smaller, land-based SPMAGTFs—Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR) units—are dedicated to geographic combatant commands and can conduct limited crisis response, contingency, theater security cooperation, and enabling operations.

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