

Army Holds Large-Scale Readiness Exercise In Hawaii For The First Time

Commanders say the Joint Pacific Multinational Training Center drills are likely to continue to be held in the islands, which have more realistic terrain for war scenarios.

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A steady drumbeat of gunfire with occasional percussions of explosives have rocked Oahu and Hawaii island in recent weeks, but it's not real.

It's part of the 25th Infantry Division's large-scale Joint Pacific Multinational Training Center, which assigns troops to realistic war scenarios to practice defending the islands.

The annual training program usually takes place at Fort Polk, Louisiana, but as great power competition increases, the U.S. Department of Defense is focusing its efforts in the Pacific, said Col. Josh Bookout, commander of the division's 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

"There is real competition with China right now and because of that, I think the world is vulnerable," Bookout said.



Army Col. Josh Bookout, commander of the 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, says the large-scale Joint Pacific Multinational Training Center is aimed at training soldiers in realistic war scenarios. Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2021

Since Oct. 12, the Army has been conducting different simulations using blank ammunition and explosive simulators at various hours day and night in areas including Dillingham, Kahuku, Kawaihoa mountain ranges, Helemanu plantation and Schofield Barracks East Range.

More than 8,000 troops — some visiting trainers from Fort Polk and partnering countries Indonesia and Thailand — are currently in the state to support the exercises, which end on Saturday.

The military is cognizant of the disruption to local communities and has taken measures to minimize the noise by scheduling most convoys between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. and 5 a.m. in an effort to minimize traffic

impacts. The military also communicated with neighborhood boards and posted about the exercise on social media a month before training began.

“We are doing these things to protect our freedoms and we appreciate that we have these training lands here to be able to do it.” — Col. Josh Bookout

As of Monday, about 20 people called or emailed to file noise complaints — a significantly lower number than expected — according to Lt. Col. Jaime Dobson, spokeswoman for the 25th Infantry Division.

“We do not take complaints lightly and we try to reduce our impact as much as possible,” she said. “Our commitment is to try and do better each and every time.”

And the community may need to adapt to the annual training program because it’s most likely here to stay, according to Bookout.

He explained that training in the Pacific has given the infantry an opportunity to train in tropical terrain, pushing everyone to learn how to synchronize communications working with transportation units at sea, on land and in the sky.



Army Blackhawks take part in exercises at Schofield Barracks East Range. Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2021

Earlier in the week, logistics officer Maj. Angel Torres directed a company of infantry men on a mission that has never been executed before. The company loaded onto a large vessel in vehicles, sailed from Oahu to the Big Island, drove directly off the vessel to complete a simulated attack and flew back to Oahu once the mission was complete.

Torres explained that his job is to coordinate supplies needed for survival and a strategy for attack. Planning in an “archipelago scenario” has been a challenge, but he said it’s crucial preparation for the possibility of threats to the islands.

“As defenders of the Pacific, I think it’s critical for us to understand that when we go and fight to defend that island or whatever the case may be, we will have to be in vessels and we’ll have battalions in different islands that will

require us to make sure that we forecast and anticipate properly so we can meet our mission," he said.

In addition to the new environment, Bookout said the new training location has also given the Army an opportunity to work more closely with partnering countries Indonesia and Thailand. He explained that troops from both countries bring expertise on how to fight between island chains, offering helpful techniques and advice.

Bookout said he hopes more countries join the training in coming years, noting that it's great practice to work on interoperability, combining arms and overcoming language barriers.

"We do a lot of exercises out in the Pacific every year where we go to their countries, so this is an opportunity for them to be part of this one with us," Bookout said.



Army Spc. Thomas Tulk shares some experiences he had during exercises held at Schofield Barracks East Range. Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2021

For Spc. Thomas Tulk, 23, the past few weeks of training has included much more challenging terrain than Fort Polk. A few days ago, Tulk and fellow

troops walked over 10 miles in Kahuku wearing 55-pound backpacks, body armor and carrying weapons.

While it's exhausting work with little sleep, Tulk said that simulated attacks are also fun. Similar to laser tag, every soldier wears a belt that's vulnerable to the opposing force.

"You're doing real life missions, but there's no chance of you actually dying, so it's not like as exhilarating," he said.

Looking toward the future, Bookout said the plan is to make it "bigger and better" by bringing in more trainers, increasing partnerships with nations throughout the Pacific and tightening missions as they continue to familiarize themselves with the island's diverse ecology.

"We are doing these things to protect our freedoms and we appreciate that we have these training lands here to be able to do it," he said.

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