



May 1, 2006

## Mock Iraqi Villages in Mojave Prepare Troops for Battle

By **DEXTER FILKINS** and **JOHN F. BURNS**

FORT IRWIN, Calif. — Three years into the conflict in Iraq, the front line in the American drive to prepare troops for insurgent warfare runs through a cluster of mock Iraqi villages deep in the Mojave Desert, nearly 10,000 miles from the realities awaiting the soldiers outside Baghdad and Mosul and Falluja.

Out here, 150 miles northeast of Los Angeles, units of the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Drum, N.Y., are among the latest war-bound troops who have gone through three weeks of training that introduce them to the harsh episodes that characterize the American experience in Iraq.

In a 1,000-square-mile region on the edge of Death Valley, Arab-Americans, many of them from the Iraqi expatriate community in San Diego, populate a group of mock villages resembling their counterparts in Iraq. American soldiers at forward operating bases nearby face insurgent uprisings, suicide bombings and even staged beheadings in underground tunnels. Recently, the soldiers here, like their counterparts in Iraq, have been confronted with Sunni-Shiite riots. At one village, a secret guerrilla revolt is in the works.

With actors and stuntmen on loan from Hollywood, American generals have recast the training ground at Fort Irwin so effectively as a simulation of conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 20 months that some soldiers have left with battle fatigue and others have had their orders for deployment to the war zones canceled. In at least one case, a soldier's career was ended for unnecessarily "killing" civilians.

"We would rather you got killed here than in Iraq," said Maj. John Clearwater, a veteran of the Special Forces who works at the training center.

The troops who come here are at the heart of a vast shift in American war-fighting strategy, a multibillion-dollar effort to remodel the Army on the fly. Here, the Army is relearning how to fight, shifting from its historic emphasis on big army-to-army battles to the more subtle tactics of defeating a guerrilla insurgency.

The changes in the Army's emphasis are among the most far-reaching since World War II, all being carried out at top speed, while the Iraqi insurgency continues undiminished and political support for the war ebbs at home.

American commanders say publicly that they still believe they can win the war, especially now with a more coherent strategy to combat the insurgency and train their soldiers to fight it.

The lack of such planning — indeed, the refusal in the first months after the invasion to acknowledge the presence of the

insurgency — is at the heart of the criticism leveled recently at Secretary of Defense **Donald H. Rumsfeld** by six former generals.

Beneath the public veneer, some American officers say they believe that public support for the war will probably run out before the changes will begin to make a major difference. The more probable chain of events, they say, is a steady drawdown of American forces from Iraq, long before the insurgency is defeated.

### Education in Counterinsurgency

For the first time in more than 20 years, military planners are revising the Army's counterinsurgency manual, adding emphasis on nation-building and peacekeeping — subjects once belittled by the Bush administration.

At the Army's Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kan., officers are being required for the first time to complete a course in counterinsurgency. In Iraq, American officers entering the country are now required to spend their first week at the sprawling military base at Taji, on the northwestern edge of Baghdad, attending a crash course in counterinsurgency.

Junior officers are being encouraged to take greater initiative to adjust to local circumstances. An old military tradition of chronicling the lessons learned on the front and passing them on to other units has found a vital new outlet in password-protected Internet sites where platoon commanders and more senior officers can exchange combat experiences.

The aim is to see that any new techniques adopted by the insurgents, especially in mounting the roadside bombing attacks that accounted for more than half of all American casualties in Iraq, are made known to all units as quickly as possible, often within 24 hours.

One third of the American troops now stationed in Iraq have been through the course here, and entire brigades — each with 4,000 soldiers, sometimes more — are processed through here every month. But it is still unclear how much effect the new training is having in the field.

Indeed, even as the new training strategy moves forward, American units are substantially withdrawing from Iraq's streets. With the country sliding closer to civil war, Iraqi military units, many of them of uncertain quality, are now taking the leading combat role in nearly half of Iraq's territory.

Plans are in the works to reduce the American troop commitment, to possibly fewer than 100,000 by the end of the year from around 130,000 now.

On some bases, far from trying out a new strategy, American soldiers are staying back more than ever, and grumbling, in some cases, that they spend more time watching videos and eating at base canteens than fighting.

"There is a paradox in the approach," said Kalev Sepp, a former Special Forces officer and one of the most vocal proponents for changing the Army. "The training in the United States and in Iraq is teaching all the right things — decentralization of authority and responsibility to the lowest levels, engagement with the Iraqi population, cultural

awareness and political sensitivity — the full broad range of measures needed to defeat the insurgency."

"But on the ground," Mr. Sepp said in an interview, "the troops are being moved onto these large consolidated bases and being drawn away from the population just at point that they have been trained to engage them." Nowhere are the changes in the Army's thinking more visible than at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin.

Established as a gunnery range during World War II, Fort Irwin served for half a century as the setting for mock warfare that replicated the most threatening scenarios of the cold war.

The Krasnovians, a giant invading force modeled after the Soviet Army, advanced across the valley floor here, simulating an offensive through the Fulda Gap in central Europe.

Riding in American-made Sheridan tanks done up to resemble T-72's, they seized swathes of territory and sparked tank battles so large that they shook the ground for miles.

Today, in a desert region nearly the size of Rhode Island, the network of 12 virtual Iraqi villages are eerie in their likeness to the real things. That is the idea, of course: that American soldiers will find the environment so real that they will make their mistakes here first, so they do not make them in Iraq.

One of the villages is Medina Jabal, a hamlet of wooden huts and gravel roads at the base of a ravine about 35 miles from Death Valley.

It is a marriage of military technology and Hollywood fakery; some 350 Arabic-speaking Iraqi-Americans and plainclothes Nevada National Guardsman live here almost year-round to offer American trainees what one officer described as "a vortex of chaos." The insurgents even get acting lessons, coached by Carl Weathers, best known for his portrayal of the boxer Apollo Creed in the "Rocky" films.

A single afternoon in Medina Jabal crystallizes all the confusions and ambiguities of fighting in Iraq. None of the villagers of Medina Jabal are allowed to speak English, and all encounters must be carried out with an interpreter.

Insurgents lurk inside the town, but as in Iraq, they are invisible. The guerrillas maintain a underground tunnel network, smuggle in weapons, and plot nearly continuous attacks on American forces.

The closest American base, where most of the trainees sleep, is only a few hundred yards away, and the insurgents shoot mortar shells at it every night — just as they do in places like Ramadi.

They plant roadside bombs, booby-trap dead dogs, kidnap soldiers who get separated from their patrols, and drive suicide bombs into American checkpoints. The simulations are so real that they have impressed even those who have seen the real thing up close.

"This is good training for guys who haven't been there yet," said Sgt. Matthew Boone, 25, from Anderson, Ind., while standing atop a desert peak inside the training ground. "I never got anything like this before I went to Afghanistan."

When fighting breaks out, Army trainers who act as referees immediately decide who will be recorded as wounded or killed.

But scoring kills is not the main objective at Medina Jabal; gaining the trust of the locals is. When an American soldier loses his cool and kills Iraqi civilians, a simulated television crew from "Al Jazeera" scurries out to videotape the screaming and grieving Iraqis. The inflammatory video is then broadcast over and over on the villages' television network, just as in Iraq.

"It's very realistic here," said Sgt. Shawn Stillabower of the 10th Division, a Houston native who is going back for his third tour in Iraq after he finishes the training course. "Sometimes, it's really got me thinking, 'Am I in Iraq?'"

In Medina Jabal, nothing is entirely clear, and that is the point.

### The Deadly Mr. Hakim

The most prolific killer of American trainees, for instance, is Mansour Hakim, the Iraqi pseudonym for Staff Sgt. Timothy Wilson, 42, a probation officer from Sparks, Nev. In Medina Jabal, Sergeant Wilson, in an Arab dishdasha robe and checkered kaffiyeh headdress, plays the part of a village hot dog salesman who sells his provisions from a stand called "Kamel Dogs Cafe."

To the amazement of American trainers, Sergeant Wilson has found that nearly every American unit entering the training course falls for his tricks — usually leading to catastrophic results. He figures he has "killed" hundreds of American servicemen in his time here. The trap works like this: When the American soldiers first enter Medina Jabal, they usually head straight for the Kamel Dogs stand for a snack. Chatting up the soldiers, "Mr. Hakim" asks if the Americans might let him sell his hot dogs inside the nearby American camp, called Forward Operating Base Denver, to make some extra money for his family. The soldiers inevitably agree, and before long, Mr. Hakim is ferrying huge loads of hot dogs and charcoal briquettes onto the American base.

In the first few days of the venture, everything proceeds safely; the American soldiers, suspicious of Mr. Hakim, search his truck thoroughly. But after four or five days, having decided that he is one of the "good Iraqis," the soldiers begin to wave him and his truck through their checkpoints.

And that is when he strikes. One day, he replaces the charcoal briquettes with Hollywood-grade pyrotechnics, drives the truck deep into the American base and blows it up.

One of the referees appears on the scene with a "God gun" to determine the radius of the blast. The last time Sergeant Wilson got through, in February, the referees determined that 18 Americans were killed and dozens more wounded. The subterfuge has worked seven times. "I'm a bad guy," Sergeant Wilson said with a grin. "And I'm looking for any weakness I can exploit."

On other occasions, American soldiers patrolling Medina Jabal have wandered off alone to get a soda or a hot dog at Mr. Hakim's stand. When that happens, the locals seize the soldier, drag him into one of their tunnels, videotape his

interrogation for "Al Jazeera" and sometimes kill him.

The lesson for American soldiers is clear: never trust any Iraqis, no matter how friendly they seem. It is a lesson that, unlearned, has killed many American soldiers on combat duty in Iraq. And if any of the soldiers insist, as they sometimes do, that they really had been searching Mr. Hakim's hot-dog truck, it is easy enough to check: videocameras watch over virtually every square inch of Medina Jabal. American trainers can review every attack and every interaction between an American and a villager to see what really happened.

Despite the elaborate fictions of the place, reality sometimes intrudes. Most of the Iraqi-American actors have family in Iraq, and are terrified of having their identities publicized lest those family members be killed by insurgents back home. None would agree to be interviewed for this article.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the war games is that the insurgent force usually exacts enormous death tolls on the Americans. As in Iraq and Afghanistan, the insurgents at Fort Irwin know the territory better. "It's not even close," said Fuad Bahi al-Jabouri, whose real name is Specialist Anthony Manzanares. He is 46, a native of San Francisco and a disguised insurgent in the villages here. "It's a massacre. We know the terrain. It's our home turf."

### The Looming Challenge

The Iraq war, and to a lesser extent the conflict in Afghanistan, looms over every aspect of the revamped military training, in the classroom and on the training ground. It is the reality against which all the lessons and all the fictions are measured.

At a recent classroom seminar on counterinsurgency at Fort Leavenworth, about 25 Army majors discussed the conduct of the French in the Algerian War of 1954 to 1962. The French, who were trying to hold their colony, lost to the Algerian resistance, even after some French officers endorsed the use of torture to extract intelligence from the insurgents.

In a vigorous classroom debate, the Army majors discussed how and why the French lost. Iraq came up often; four of the majors had already served there and a half-dozen others were scheduled to be deployed there at the end of the academic year. One of the lessons, for instance, is that torture does not work, because of the resentment it generates among the civilian population. The widespread abuse of Iraqi and Afghan prisoners, some of it apparently with official approval, did not come up in class. "Is it applicable to Iraq?" Maj. Sean Smith, a member of the class, said afterward. "That's why we do that in every class."

On the training ground, even though it is fiction, the results can be real and lasting. One battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel whose unit came under attack by insurgents in Medina Jabal, called in an Air Force bombing run on a building from which insurgents had attacked his men. The attack, simulating the dropping of a 500-pound bomb, killed more than 20 civilians, the referees determined. Al Jazeera recorded the scene and broadcast it over and over on the local station. The battalion commander, the American trainers here said, learned his lesson, and he turned out to be one of the savviest graduates of the course.

Not so for another soldier who recently took part in the course. While on patrol in one of the Iraqi villages, the soldier wandered off alone, and suddenly found himself surrounded by Iraqi civilians. He panicked and opened fire, killing several of the villagers. The soldier was given a psychological evaluation and dismissed from the Army, for fear that he would have duplicated the behavior with live ammunition in Iraq. "If a soldier can't be trusted in this environment, then he can't be trusted in Iraq," said Brig. Gen. Robert Cone, who runs the base.

### Potent Lessons

Despite the trouncing that the American soldiers were taking from the fake insurgents, there were signs that the American soldiers were catching on.

One of them came shortly after "Mr. Jabouri" — Specialist Manzanares — was caught trying to evade an American checkpoint. Driving a battered sport utility vehicle, Mr. Jabouri and his companion, Pvt. Lontae Bell, from Newberry, N.C., were impersonating geologists. But when a group of American soldiers spotted Mr. Jabouri in his truck, they pulled him over and searched his vehicle. The soldiers found wire, tools and a Global Positioning System that had the exact coordinates of the American base that had been hit by mortar shells the night before. The Americans decided to detain Mr. Jabouri — a good call, because, as an insurgent, his real mission was to scout the area for weapons that were to be used in an insurgent uprising in three of the villages.

To keep the exercise as real as possible, Specialist Manzanares and Private Bell were ordered locked up and interrogated for at least two days at a nearby American base. The soldiers put flexicuffs on Sergeant Manzanares in a makeshift cage of razor wire on the desert floor, where he sat, looking disgusted with himself. Asked whether he was angry that his cover had been broken so quickly, he shook his head.

No, he said. "This means I'm going to miss the Giants game tonight."

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