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Tapped-In Training

Technology lets Fort Dix learn fast from Iraq.

By Edward Colimore, Inquirer Staff Writer

In Haditha, an edgy town in western Iraq, a roadside bomb struck a humvee carrying Marines from Kilo Company, one of countless attacks that almost seem routine during the war.

A Marine communique the next day said the Nov. 19 blast had killed a 20-year-old lance corporal and 15 Iraqi civilians. Eight insurgents died in the aftermath, it said.

The incident, thousands of miles away, reverberated through the Pentagon, now investigating the possible wrongful deaths of civilians in Haditha. And it was also felt at Fort Dix and other military posts, which quickly adjusted the training for soldiers.

Changing as rapidly as the headlines, military training now uses Internet images from the war zone, high-tech communications, and DVD footage of battlegrounds.

The speedy adjustments have made the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan unlike any others fought by the military.

"We want to get inside the cycle," said Army Reserve Maj. Christopher Hingley, a Northeast Philadelphia resident who trains troops for duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Everything is happening quicker in real time. Now we can e-mail a video clip of what's happening. It shows us: 'Don't teach soldiers this. Teach them that.' It's faster than the news."

Haditha, for instance, "immediately had an effect on the theater [of operations] and the highest command," Hingley said. "Within 72 hours, enforced mandatory training was sent to every unit."

Information on the enemy's latest tactics is often sent to American bases in Kuwait, then transferred by Internet to U.S. bases where troops learn to stay alive and avoid killing noncombatants. An online Center for Army Lessons Learned also provides information for deploying soldiers.

The Internet has had "a huge impact" on training, said Hingley, of the 78th Division, Second Battalion, 309th Regiment. "We learn what works and what doesn't work. We don't make assumptions. We know this is not Hollywood, gung-ho, kick-the-door-down stuff."

The major, who said he kept the military's rules of engagement in his helmet, pulled off a Velcro Army emblem from his uniform.

"You have to remember you represent the U.S. Army," he said. "You feel sick in your stomach as human beings" if an action has gone wrong.

In a steamy, sun-washed field at Fort Dix called Champion Main, Hingley watched scores of gear-laden troops last week learn how to survive their deployment.

The trainees crawled over the makeshift battlefield while mock explosions went off around them and smoke obscured the view of a machine-gun chattering away at them with blanks from a hillside. They were trying to avoid mock improvised explosive devices and mines, and provide cover for one another while scaling obstacles, said Army Maj. Scott Fitzgerald, 36, of Vermont.

"The enemy is very adaptive and smart, so we are constantly updating," said Army Sgt. First Class Kenneth Washington, 45, an Iraq veteran and trainer who lives in Philadelphia's West Oak Lane section.

The military has sometimes learned the hard way. In June 2004, four members of a New Jersey National Guard unit were killed on the streets of Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood. Two died when an insurgent's rocket-propelled grenade hit their humvee. Two more were lost the next day when a roadside bomb blew up their vehicle.

All incidents are studied, and countermeasures are quickly devised and introduced into the training. Not every situation calls for the same response. Some convoys may continue barreling through a town to get out of crossfire, while others may choose a different strategy.

"If I can share my experience, it's a privilege, and I will gladly do it for my country," said Staff Sgt. Dwyane Wood, 40, a trainer who lives in New York City. In Iraq, "I was involved in a few convoys that encountered fire, and I've given them my experience. There are different signs of when that might happen and how you should react.

"Once you know an area, you know when anything is strange or out of place. Your spider sense should tingle."

First Lt. Pedro Torres, one of those overseeing the exercise at Fort Dix, was offered the training job when he got back from Iraq and immediately accepted, he said.

"We got hit in a lot of different ways," said Torres, a member of the National Guard in Puerto Rico who served with a military police unit. "We know their M.O. We change scenarios [during the training] so they know what they might face, and we have after-action reviews and let them ask questions. We tell them how to make their own decisions."

Spec. E-4 Guillermo Echevarrid, 28, a trainer who lives in Puerto Rico, noted that "things are changing out there constantly, and we have to keep up with it. This is my family, and we have to rely on each other to survive. You stay alert, and you stay alive."

Echevarrid served with Torres and Spec. E-4 Ricardo Ayala, 22, another trainer from Puerto Rico. "It's a buddy thing. We went to Iraq together, and we're doing this training together."

In another part of the sprawling Fort Dix reservation, other troops were preparing for an exercise in a mock Iraqi village nicknamed Bilad. Role players, including native Arabic-speaking Iraqis with AK-47s, added a sense of realism.

The trainees began their exercise in the so-called glass houses - differently-shaped, waist-high stalls - where they learned to check for the enemy. The height of the walls allowed trainers to observe four-man teams clear the rooms.

Nearby were signs printed with Arabic words and phrases: "Surrender" (Isteslim), "Are there weapons in here?" (Feeh selah?), "Get back" (Irjah), and "Drop your weapons" (Dheb sla-hak).

"These are infantry tactics," said Lt. Michael Williams Jr., 34, an Iraq-bound Center City resident. "I feel more prepared and feel we will be successful."

In a few minutes, the troops would face a new challenge. They would enter Bilad in search of a bomb-maker - a "high-value target," said Sgt. First Class Jose Cintron, 45, a Pennsauken resident overseeing the exercise. The chief political figure of the town would tell them where he was, but they were to be hit by enemy gunfire.

The troops "have knowledge when they come here," Cintron said, "but they're rusty, and we knock off the rust."

Walking through the village, Hingley said the soldiers must be "focused on what they're doing and respond in a positive way. We take all of this very seriously."