

URBAN OPERATIONS TRAINING AT THE POWER PROJECTION PLATFORM “WELCOME TO AL WADI”

By Lieutenant Colonel John C. McClellan and Captain Eric M. Noe

Creating challenging, realistic urban-training environments for deploying units requires Army leaders assigned to training support battalions (TSBs) and brigades to adapt and innovate. Early in 2004, 2d Brigade, 91st Division (Training Support) (2-91st TSB), began planning postmobilization training to be conducted at Fort Bliss, Texas, for an Army National Guard brigade combat team (BCT). Accomplishing this goal required some out-of-the-box thinking by the leadership of 1st Battalion, 361st Engineer Regiment (Task Force Redhawk), which is part of 2-91st TSB. This article presents the scenario—and the lessons learned—used to achieve the complex effects of urban terrain and the design and execution of training for a deploying BCT.

Existing Fort Bliss Facilities

Although the Fort Bliss power projection platform (PPP) offered outstanding realism in time-distance factors, desert terrain, and weather, initial reconnaissance of base facilities revealed few that were suitable for patrols, close-quarters combat, or urban-warfare training. The base had range camps that could be converted into forward operating bases (FOBs), but lacked suitable training villages or military operations on urbanized terrain (MOUT) sites. So the observer-controller/trainers (OC/Ts) of the 2-91st TSB began transforming the base into a series of interlinked urban-training sites. These included mock villages, industrial centers, and FOBs capable of supporting squad- or platoon-level patrolling, company and battalion task force cordon-and-search operations, and close-quarters combat operations.

While at Fort Bliss, the 2-91st TSB initially occupied three mobilization base camps that were converted into replicas of the FOBs that deploying forces would occupy in theater. BCT maneuver task forces rotated through FOB Baker, located at Biggs Army Airfield. Two of the five BCT maneuver task forces were housed for 10 days at a time. The 2-91st TSB training concept required Task Force Redhawk to train basic patrolling techniques for the BCT's five maneuver task forces. The training included squad/platoon dismounted security patrols and quick-reaction-force operations and culminated in company raids and battalion task force-sized cordon-and-

search operations. A sister training battalion also trained them on mounted patrols and traffic control point operations.

The location of FOB Baker provided a unique opportunity to develop a training plan that would take full advantage of the only urban terrain available in the immediate vicinity—the base itself. In response, Task Force Redhawk created the fictitious province of “Al Wadi”—a combination of villages and urban areas designed to replicate an area of operations located on the outskirts of a large Iraqi city. The Fort Bliss garrison leadership supported the battalion and, for the first time in recent history, training lanes were created directly on Biggs Army Airfield, the adjacent railhead facility, and portions of the main cantonment area of Fort Bliss. Figure 1, page 8, shows the main post areas used for the urban-patrolling operations.

In order to use these main facilities to conduct training, rehearsals, and force-on-force blank-fire combat patrols, a detailed plan was briefed to the PPP and garrison leadership for approval. Several key controls were put into place to ensure the safety of the Blue Force (BLUEFOR) Soldiers, OC/Ts, permanent party Soldiers, and residents and employees of Fort Bliss. A copy of Figure 1 (along with an explanation of the training concept) was given to the garrison commander to provide situational awareness to all on-post agencies on the times and locations of our training patrols. Advance coordination with the provost marshal, airfield commander, Force Protection Office, Public Affairs Office, and various tenant agencies adjacent to the patrolling areas was critical to the plan's success.

The risk assessment for the operating plan included—

- Alerting Fort Bliss garrison agencies of the areas and times of patrol operations.
- Alerting the garrison Security/Force Protection Office and the Provost Marshal Office of the locations of all patrol routes, emplaced training improvised explosive devices (IEDs), mock ambushes, and drive-by shootings.
- Coordinating closely with the Provost Marshal Office throughout operations.

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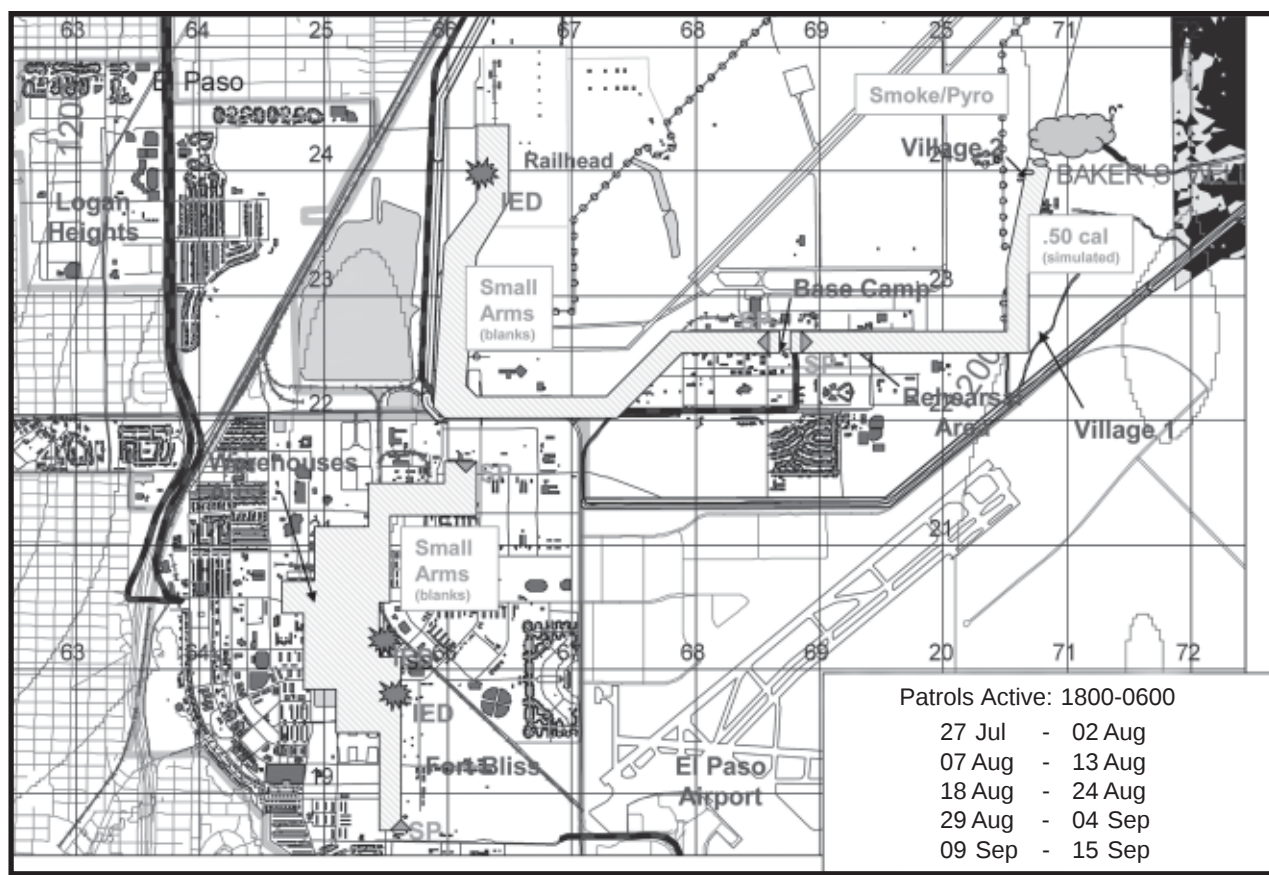


Figure 1. Map of the main post areas used for dismounted patrols

- Positioning OC/Ts in the front and rear of dismounted formations for traffic control.
- Specifying locations where blank-fire weapons, the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES), pyrotechnics, and simulated IEDs would be used.
- Planning routine policing of brass from blanks to prevent hazards to vehicles or pedestrians.
- Training and rehearsing for Opposing Forces (OPFOR) and contracted civilians on the battlefield.
- Adapting exercise rules of engagement to account for military and civilian personnel in the area who were not part of the training (but were a useful backdrop).

In addition, since most of the dismounted patrolling was conducted between 1800 and 0600 hours, limited visibility had to be considered and mitigated.

Creating Al Wadi

Within the Al Wadi area of operations, two major considerations drove the details of the intelligence scenario created to frame the insurgent activity that would operate there. The first was the close proximity of Biggs Army Airfield and the El Paso International Airport, and the second revolved around the Fort Bliss warehouse district and railhead.

Biggs and El Paso Airports

The training scenario presented a growing insurgent threat to coalition air operations at the two airfields that included anti-Iraqi force surveillance and fence line breaches, IEDs on coalition supply routes within the sector, and rocket/mortar attacks aimed at the FOB and the airfields. These activities disrupted coalition air operations and delayed the reopening of civilian air traffic (an interim government priority) at the “Al Wadi International Airport,” still under coalition military control since the initial seizure. Thus, task force elements would need to patrol these areas, check fence lines, develop pattern analysis, conduct crater analysis, and locate insurgent firing positions in order to defeat the IED threat and rocket/mortar attacks and restore stability. BLUEFOR dismounted patrolling operations from the FOB included mounted quick-reaction force missions to reinforce dismounted security patrols, react to local demonstrations, or conduct downed aircraft rescue missions in the open desert military training areas east of the airfields.

To support the airfield threat scenario, Task Force Redhawk identified the need for outlying urban settings from which the insurgents could recruit and operate. The task force constructed two small Iraqi villages with basic structures that included centrally located homes and businesses, a school, a police station, and a cafe. The villages were built by the OC/Ts out of pressure-treated lumber and plywood purchased by the brigade through the Fort Bliss Directorate of Public Works and Logistics. While many of the buildings were simple



Figure 2. Village of Al Mattr, main street

one- or two-room structures with a single entry, each village had some complex floor plans and a two-story mosque. Later, several old storage buildings were added that the garrison commander made available. A contract provided soil stabilization of the roads, which started out as off-road tire tracks in the Fort Bliss sand. The northern village of “Akbar-Kristalad” consisted of 41 tightly grouped structures, and the southern village of “Al Mattr” consisted of 63 structures dispersed over a wider area (see Figure 2). The sizes and geography of the two villages allowed different tactical challenges for the commander to consider, including security patrols, raids, or cordon-and-search operations. The construction of the two villages took approximately 6 weeks and cost about \$300,000.

Sand-colored paint, courtyards (formed with concrete barriers), junked cars, operational streetlights, and realistic Arabic signage on structures used by role players enhanced the basic plywood construction of the village. Key structures—a mosque, police station, town square, coffee house, and schoolhouse—were treated like the sets of a stage play. A few carefully placed items—Arabic inscriptions and prayer rugs in the mosque, a desk and a bulletin board with police patrol routes in the police chief’s office, and a few desks and a map of the Middle East in the school—made these structures complete. Our contracted civilians on the battlefield spent considerable time there and were encouraged to add anything that would make the villages more real. Some of the civilians brought additional furniture, desert plants, and framed artwork, and one industrious El Paso woman made two authentic Iraqi flags! They also cooked food over open fires and played indigenous music. The addition of these features not only maintained the morale of the civilian workforce but made the task of searching rooms and buildings more difficult. Weapons caches were dug into the sand, then they were covered with a carpet and a desk. Maps, photographs, and computer disks were stashed behind pictures.

Task Force Redhawk also inherited the use of a previously constructed “terrorist training camp” that was ideally situated near the two villages (see Figure 3). This complex was surrounded by a 4x2 double-apron barbed wire fence and

included a tower, bunkers, an abandoned bus, and a mock building. The complex—dubbed “Camp Al Qaeda” by the OC/Ts—replicated an insurgent staging area and was an ideal target for platoon or company raids, frequently containing a weapons cache or other intelligence indicators for the patrols to discover, search, confiscate, or destroy.

Fort Bliss Warehouse District and Railhead

The Fort Bliss warehouse district and railhead, the second major factor in the scenario for Al Wadi, replicated the northern edge of the city. Several square blocks of large storage warehouses became the local storage and distribution center for humanitarian relief supplies by various nongovernmental organizations. Operating among the legitimate organizations, the task force inserted the “Islamic Children’s Relief” agency, an insurgent front whose primary purpose was smuggling weapons and explosives to support attacks on coalition main supply routes and the airfields. The training task forces therefore patrolled the warehouses, checked local (armed) Iraqi security forces posted there, and attempted to uncover evidence of insurgent infiltration and covert weapons smuggling.

From the FOB, patrols moved either east (parallel to the Biggs Army Airfield and the north) in and around two new MOUT villages, or west and then north to the Fort Bliss railhead area. The southern patrolling area encompassed portions of the Fort Bliss main post, including a warehouse district that was ideal for the operational scenario. Through coordination with the garrison, Task Force Redhawk gained access to the warehouse grounds and the interior of selected buildings to portray insurgent operations in this area, eventually leading up to raids or cordon-and-search operations at the company or task force level.

The tactical challenges of the “Al Wadi warehouse district” were the centerpiece of the training. Complex urban features included multistory buildings, deep box-culvert drainage ditches, 90-degree blind corners, loading docks, fenced compounds, streetlights, and dumpsters. Since Fort Bliss is an active military base, real-world traffic added realism to the



Figure 3. Mock terrorist training camp at Biggs Army Airfield

environment. OC/Ts ensured that traffic was unimpeded by the training operation, although the confusion and gawking from post personnel and families as they drove past the training site effectively simulated some of the same conditions found in Iraq.

Patrol routes (5 to 7 miles in length) were controlled by mandating designated checkpoints. These checkpoints, typically power or water substations, required security checks because they provided essential services to the local villages and were routinely sabotaged by insurgents to discredit coalition efforts. Units on patrol would encounter sniper fire, drive-by shootings, informants, rock-throwing crowds, and eventually firefights with armed insurgents found caching weapons inside one of the warehouses.

For the OC/Ts, the checkpoints served to keep multiple, simultaneous patrols “on time, on target” with the established master event list in order to accomplish the training objectives each night. Several squads and platoons could be on patrol at the same or nearby routes, offset only by a later start time. OC/Ts used internal communications to maintain situational awareness and patrol intervals. Squads and platoons were chosen from separate companies to minimize radio collaboration while on a patrol designed to train squad leader and platoon leader instincts.

Using this combination of varying urban terrain and the supporting threat scenario gave the task force the opportunity to interact with friendly villagers and enemy insurgents, apply rules of engagement, hone their patrolling skills, and practice the battle drills they would need to survive these situations in theater. Junior leaders quickly developed decentralized thinking since communications were challenging in their operating environment. At the same time, company command posts and task force tactical operations centers were able to refine tactics, techniques, and procedures; develop link diagrams, pattern analysis, and graduated response matrices; and track the location and status of their small units while outside the FOB wire.

Lessons Learned

Urban terrain available for training with battlefield effects is limited at most Army bases. The 2-91st TSB constructed its own and convinced post leadership to allow it to fire blanks and use pyrotechnics in what was essentially the cantonment area of Fort Bliss. The combination of the railhead, warehouses, airfields, and mock villages became a highly effective patrolling environment once occupied by interactors tied together with a realistic provincial intelligence backdrop.

Traditional Army MOUT sites can be highly effective training for some small-unit tactics, patrolling, and close-quarters combat with simulations or blanks, but full-up “shoothouses” of the type the 2-91st TSB constructed at Fort Bliss are needed to advance training squads and platoons all the way through live-fire close-combat clearing rooms and buildings. What most Army MOUT facilities lack is suitable

size; variety of interior layouts; and actual basements, sewers, streetlights, and other features that are found in a real city.

Existing or abandoned urban settings, such as multiblock warehouse districts or housing areas, are extremely effective for large-scale urban-operations training such as company- and battalion task force-sized cordon-and-search operations. A consideration for the Army in this next round of base realignments and closures might be to hold onto one or more suitable areas for this kind of training.

The Army needs an urban warfare center, on the scale of the existing combat training centers, suitable for audiences up to battalion task force level and manned by a dedicated team of observer-controllers and OPFOR who are experts in close-quarters combat and insurgent tactics. An urban operations and counterinsurgency school of thought for mid- to senior-level staff officers and commanders could also be added. In addition, an urban warfare school could be established on par with the Northern Warfare or Jungle Warfare Schools, along with potentially changing a phase of the Ranger School to accommodate an urban-center rotation.

Summary

As 75 percent of the world’s population moves to urban areas within the next 10 to 20 years, urban combat will become more prevalent and will increase our Army’s need to properly train for it. The province of Al Wadi developed into a highly effective urban and complex terrain training area for a task force in a BCT. The Al Wadi villages have now been relocated; however, before they were moved, elements of this scenario were used again for a second deploying BCT and several separate companies. And United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and United States Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) tenant units and a number of government, joint, or international organizations also used the villages to support training on numerous occasions.

Sharpen the Edge!



Lieutenant Colonel McClellan served with the 2-91st TSB for eight months as the brigade executive officer before assuming command of the 1st Battalion, 361st Engineer Regiment, in June 2004. Previous assignments include platoon leader, company commander, and battalion S-3. He has served combat tours in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom and has had extensive overseas experience in Europe, the Balkans, Korea, and Central America.

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