

AS US A F I R E B O M B

Roadside bombs.
Hostile insurgents.
1,200 extras in Arab
dress. Welcome
to Louisiana and
the Army camp
known as the Box,
where the violence
is fake but the
fear is for real.

Something seems not quite right about the half-dozen guys creeping onto the ridge in the predawn light. They're dressed like Iraqi insurgents, in kaffiyehs and camo, and they have the haggard look that comes from having spent a bitterly cold night dodging enemy patrols. They're well armed, carrying M16 assault rifles and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. But then there are those boxy little attachments on the barrels of their rifles and the harness-like vests they're wearing. Plus there's the terrain - scraggly pine forest instead of Iraqi desert.

A rumble of approaching motors swells as the sun clears the horizon: It's a supply convoy, the group's target. Then the relative calm erupts as two ponderous, blunt-nosed Apache helicopters come roaring overhead, sending the men scuttling back down into the concealing woods. They get lucky; the choppers pass without stopping. The squad sprints back up the hill just as a column of heavily armored Humvees and supply trucks comes into view.

A skinny insurgent in a dishdasha lets fly with the rocket-propelled



by Vince Beiser photographs by Jay L. Clendenin



Model soldiers: Anti-US graffiti (left) and high tech battlefield dummies prepare recruits for the chaos they'll face in Iraq.

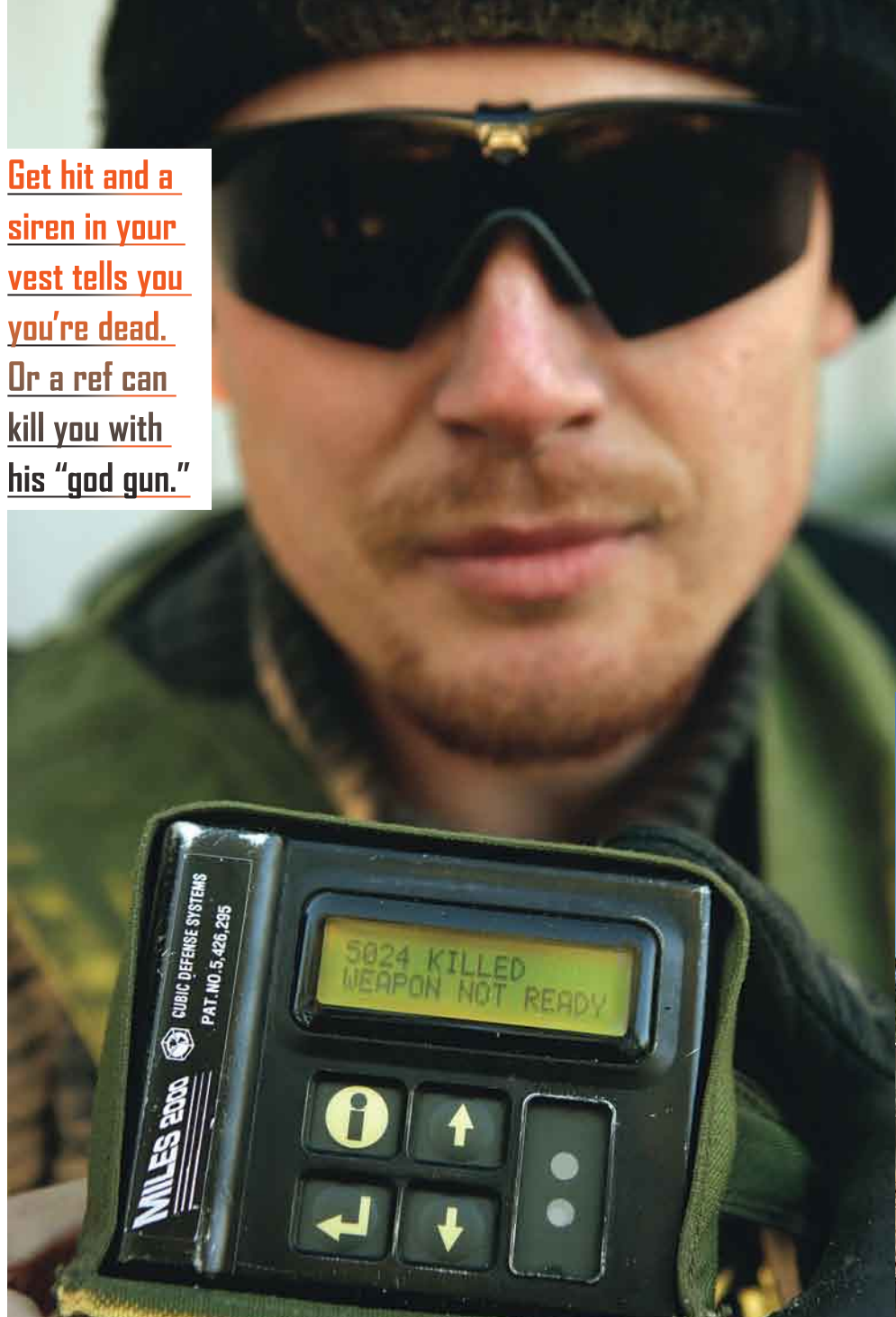
grenade launcher. Then the others start firing, spent shells spitting out of their rifles. The Humvees clatter to a halt and roll this way and that for a minute, utter confusion on the faces of the Minnesota National Guard soldiers driving them. Finally the vehicles' heavy machine guns swing around and return fire. The RPG booms again, and one of the Humvees goes silent. The mock Iraqis scramble off the ridge and scatter into the trees.

Score one for the bad guys in the world's most violent theme park. This is the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, deep in the backwoods of Louisiana – a 100,000-acre US Army training facility that simulates the Middle East in minute detail and on a massive scale. Every year, this literal theater of war is one of the last stops for 44,000 Army and National Guard soldiers before they deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan. Their opponents, including my companions in the roadside ambush, are members of the 509th Airborne Infantry, also called the Opposing Force, or Opor. In addition to sniper fire and car bombs, trainees also contend with civilians – 1,200 role-players who act as Iraqi mayors, imams, journalists, humanitarian aid workers, and ordinary citizens (with the appropriate mix of Sunnis, Shites, and Kurds). All of the action takes place amid 18 faux Iraqi towns, complete with mosques, schools, and hundreds of other buildings, detailed right down to kebab stands and street signs in Arabic.

The point of all that is to combine the precision of high technology with the unpredictability of real people. That's the only way to reflect the new military challenge of urban combat in the developing world. "The realities on the ground in Iraq are behind this shift," says David Petraeus, the lieutenant general who led the 101st Airborne into Iraq and now, as commander of the Army's training facilities at the Combined Arms Center, is one of the main advocates of simulation-based war games. "We want to give our commanders the experience before they experience it."

The JRTC has been offering this sort of training since 1993. But in the past three

Get hit and a siren in your vest tells you you're dead. Or a ref can kill you with his "god gun."



years, with the US embroiled in its most complex conflict since the Vietnam War, Pentagon planners have dramatically improved the simulation. The 4,000 guardsmen here for these late-winter exercises will encounter 500 soldiers from the 509th, 500 support staff, a dozen Apache and Blackhawk combat helicopters, 30 tank-like Bradley Fighting Vehicles, and 1,000 jeeps, Humvees, and sundry other things with wheels. Commanders on the ground get video feeds from simulated surveillance planes flown over 3-D maps of the battlefield.

In-game journalists produce three daily newspapers, a radio show, and a nightly reel of video highlights. More than 200 of the role-players are Arab Americans, many of them Iraqis, bussed in from around the US for extra realism. A three-week exercise can cost up to \$9 million.

The environment, too, is eerily detailed. Many of the "towns" are rough models: a handful of corrugated aluminum and wood-frame buildings with an

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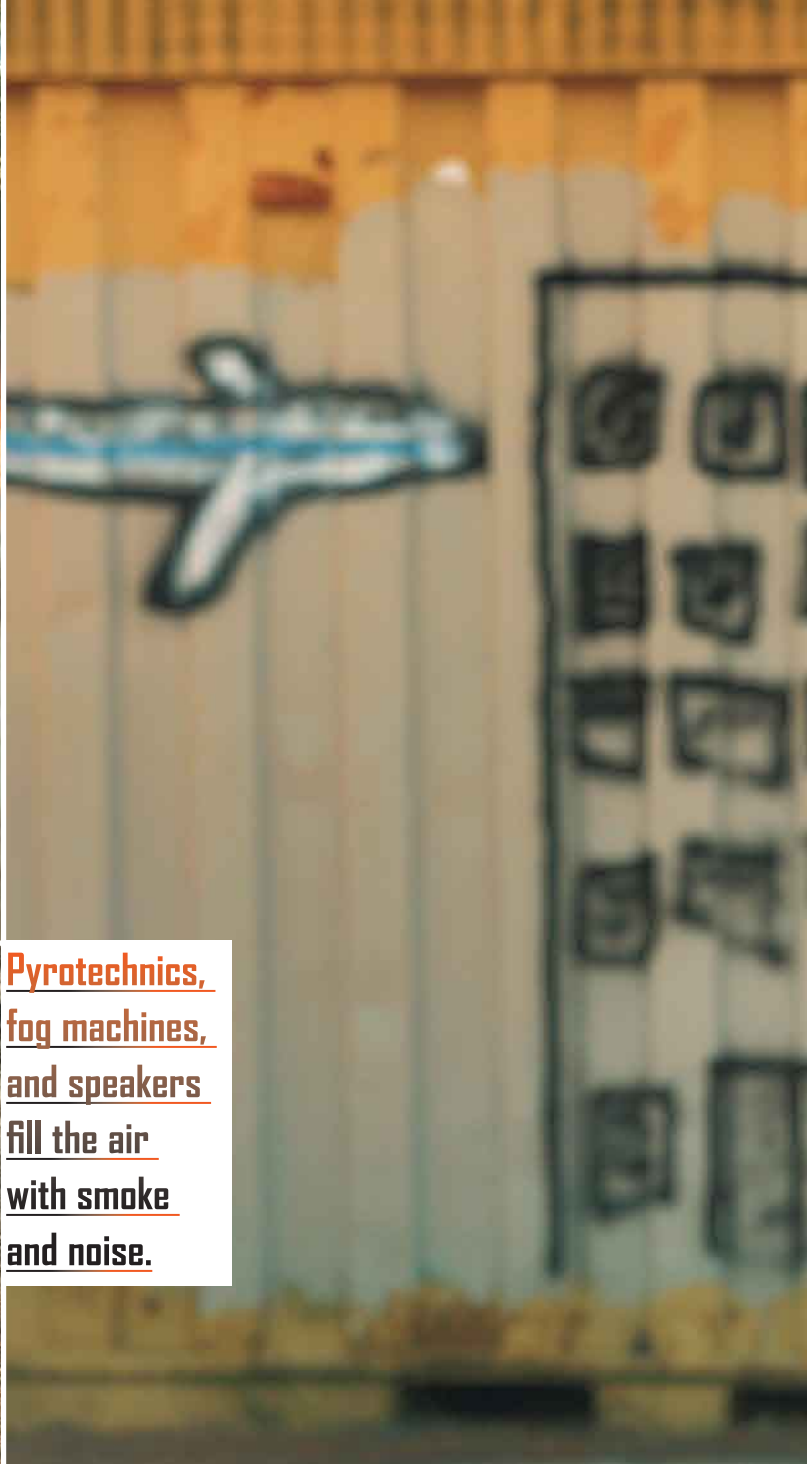


upright drainage pipe serving as a minaret for the mosque, for example. But the most elaborate town, Suliyah – officially named Shughart-Gordon, after two soldiers killed in Somalia – has dozens of multistory concrete buildings, including a school with a playground, an open-air market, and a convincingly equipped hospital. There’s even a cemetery. During exercises, the pumps at the gas station can explode in a 30-foot fireball. Rooftop concussion cannons throw in random bursts of noise and flame. Fog machines and speakers fill the buildings with smoke

and the sounds of gunfire or barking dogs. More than 900 cameras record it all.

The weapons on the field shoot blanks and laser beams. Every soldier and every vehicle carries cookie-sized black plastic receivers that can tell what kind of weapon they’ve been hit with and from how far – the newest versions also have GPS. Get shot at close range and your vest emits an irritating siren: You’re dead. Get caught near a roadside bomb detonation and an Observer Controller – one of the 600 Afghanistan and Iraq veterans who monitor the

In-country: A pretend insurgent from the Army's 509th Airborne Infantry (far left) displays the readout from his laser-tag vest – he's dead. Above, role-players gather in Jarbar Nahar, a mock town complete with a corrugated steel mosque. A blue plastic "god gun" resets an insurgent's vest.



Pyrotechnics,
fog machines,
and speakers
fill the air
with smoke
and noise.

action – might end your life with his “god gun,” a blue plastic pistol that can kill or resurrect anyone wearing a laser vest. Or the OC might decide you’re only wounded and need to be evacuated to the fully staffed field hospital for make-believe care. Medics there also practice on a \$70,000 mannequin that bleeds, blinks, breathes, and makes five different kinds of bowel sounds.

Overseeing the battlefield – nicknamed the Box – is the Joint Operating Center, a windowless warren of offices on Polk property a couple of miles away.

Twenty-four hours a day during a rotation, 200 camouflage-clad staffers there mutter into headsets and tap on keyboards in front of a battery of flatscreen monitors that display the movements of thousands of vehicles and soldiers. The Observer Controllers radio in casualty updates, and every trainee phone call and email crosses JOC desks. Most of the vehicles in the Box have GPS, so after an engagement the JOC can see who was where and who shot whom.

Like Homeric gods, the JOC staffers created this world, see everything hap-

pening in it, and have the power to alter the course of events – but only indirectly. They can set an event into motion, but they rarely know exactly when it will take place and never how it will play out. Says Dan Kirk, an angular major with an amused expression: “We are the keepers of the Matrix.”

The idea of simulating enemy terrain for training isn’t new. The US military built model enemy villages in World War II, during the Korean War, and during the Vietnam War. Now, though, the



simulations are far more realistic. America's disastrous intervention in Somalia's long civil war in 1993 taught the US military that future conflicts would play out in cities like Mogadishu, where soldiers have to contend with not only an enemy but a complex, unfamiliar social milieu. The goal will be different, too. Soldiers won't just be conquering an army; they'll be occupying a foreign land. That requires new skills, "things like manning a roadblock without killing someone or learning how to figure out who to trust so you don't get sucked into local

grudge battles," says Russell Glenn, lead researcher on a recent RAND study of US military training assets. "We'll never win by killing all the insurgents. We have to get the support of the population."

The Defense Department is betting on simulation training to make that happen. In California, Fort Irwin – which used to devote its miles of empty desert to staging mock US-Russian tank battles – has built a dozen Middle Eastern towns in the last two years, with more in the works. The Marine Corps is developing a massive sim city of its

Fire at will: An insurgent carrying a rocket-propelled grenade launcher flees from US trainees, and smoke-pots planted by pyrotechnicians simulate a roadside improvised explosive device (left). The yellow box on the muzzle of the gun (above) is part of a laser system that lets controllers know what kind of weapon has been fired, where it was aimed, and what damage it would have caused.

own in Southern California, at its base in Twenty-Nine Palms.

At Fort Polk, the premiere facility for this new model of war game, the details are handled by a San Diego-based civilian defense contractor called Cubic. Supplying role-players, props, and laser systems is a lively business: The company provides similar services to the armed forces of Brazil, Britain, Croatia, and the Netherlands. Cubic used to make electronic range finders for surveyors, which led to missile test instrumentation and eventually the wiring of entire training grounds.

Cubic hires most of the actors from nearby towns. During a rotation, these part-time Iraqis spend a great deal of time lounging in lawn chairs, wearing improvised approximations of Arab dress, gossiping, knitting, whittling, waiting for something to happen. Many come in only occasionally, similar to movie-set extras, but for a few of them, like William Jackson, role-playing has become a full-time job. A tall white guy with a handlebar mustache, a swamp mud-thick accent, and a white dishcloth held on his head with a sweatband, Jackson is playing an Iraqi villager in the minimalist town of Baraka. A former construction day worker, he lives in Leesville, just outside the base. Working at the JRTC lets him spend more time with his wife (also a role-player) and kids. The work is pretty steady, and the \$220 a day goes a long way here. "A year ago, I went to Iraq and was doing construction over yonder," Jackson says. "After having been there and seeing how bad it is, I'm glad to be doing this, if it helps keep soldiers from getting shot."

When Jackson arrived at Polk for this particular exercise, Cubic gave him his identity, spelled out on a Dungeons & Dragons-like character sheet. He is a Sunni Muslim Kurd of the Espar tribe who came to Baraka a few years ago after inheriting a butcher shop. He supports the government and will not cooperate with insurgents, but he won't turn them in, either. His character doesn't speak English, so he can communicate with the national guardsmen only if they have an interpreter.

Inside a cement-floored warehouse

just beyond the Box, Cubic assistant branch chief Jack Prevatt, a bulbous former Army sergeant wearing company-issue khaki fatigues, shows me a vast array of fake civilian paraphernalia – Arabic traffic signs, Kurdish flags, burlap sacks of World Food program rice, even Iraqi dinars. Cubic makes it all. "We track what's happening in Iraq to keep it accurate," says Prevatt, who runs the carpentry, sewing, and sign-making shops in Fort Polk. "When the Red Cross pulled out of Baghdad after they were bombed, we pulled out all of our Red Cross role-players."

The Cubic guys work hard for a good fake. They've staged bloody aftermaths of bomb attacks, applying gory makeup to Vietnam veterans with missing limbs to make extra-convincing bomb victims. Teams of "firemarkers" zip around the Box on all-terrain vehicles, rigging up Hollywood-style pyrotechnics for roadside bombs and explosives-laden cars. Prevatt reminisces about a mass grave they created, a charnel pit of bound mannequins with simulated head wounds. "We put a bunch of bones and meat in there and buried it for a couple days so it would smell right," he says.

Each rotation is customized. Kirk began meeting with commanders from the Minnesota National Guard months before the unit arrived at the JRTC. He wanted to gauge the troops' level of training, but he also needed to draft a script that would meet their objectives. In Iraq, he explains, the troops will be primarily providing security for convoys, so the JOC staff assembled a fleet of civilian trucks and put together what a gamer might describe as quests: Keep the area calm, make sure the trucks move from place A to place B, track down the people attempting to blow them up. Oh, and try not to get killed.

It seems straightforward, but making the training realistic is harder than it sounds. "The planning is very detailed, but the execution is very flexible," Kirk says; his team scripts and rescripts scenarios in response to unfolding events. For instance, on about the eighth day of the exercise, the Guard is expected to mount a raid to capture an insurgent leader. The JOC is releasing a steady

stream of information – clues seeded in newspaper stories and among informants – to lead them in the right direction. If the soldiers are on the ball, they may figure out where he is and act sooner. If not, the JOC will make the clues more obvious. And when the troops launch their raid, if they carelessly mishandle an imam or accidentally shoot a civilian, that might trigger an angry demonstration or outright armed rebellion, which could force the troops to mount a more heavy-handed response ... and so on for the duration of the exercise. "We look at everything that impacts operations," says Jay Peterson, the JRTC's chief of planning. "It's the enemy, the media, the people, the government."

A column of Humvees rolls into a town called Jarbar Nahar under a rainy sky. Goats and geese meander in the muddy streets, and dark-eyed men in kaffiyehs watch the soldiers grimly from the doorways of buildings plastered with posters of mujahideen. The 509th Opfor teams have staged a series of ambushes in Jarbar Nahar over the last couple of days, and the commander of the nearest US base has come to investigate.

Inside a spartan room serving as the mayor's office, the commander, with a squad of soldiers in full battle gear behind him, sits down at a table across from the town's mayor, police chief, and a handful of other notables. "Is there someone in this village with ill will toward my soldiers?" the commander demands. He waits while an interpreter translates his question.

"Not that I know of," the mayor replies in Arabic.

"Who has been attacking them, then?" "Foreigners," the mayor deadpans. "We can't secure the area outside the town where they hide. You have to give us weapons and vehicles so we can keep it safe." Furthermore, the mayor wants to know why the village still doesn't have electricity, as the Americans promised.

Outside, dozens of villagers are flocking around the Humvees, babbling incomprehensibly at the increasingly tense soldiers. Suddenly, a burst of gunfire. The civilians scatter, screaming; the soldiers take defensive positions near the **198** ➤



Vietnam War
veterans with
missing limbs
make awfully
convincing
bomb-blast
victims.



Special forces (from left): An explosives-laden truck blows up outside of a mock US base; firemarker George Belton wires a fake suicide bomb that will go off soon after the truck detonates; and a role-player has a nasty wound applied by makeup artists.

◀190 Humvees, looking around wildly for the source of the volley. The commander and his men run out of the hall, jump into their truck, and roar off, the villagers jeering. The whole encounter is unglamorous, frustrating, inconclusive – much like a real day in Iraq.

Of course, things aren't always this exciting. The JRTC expends enormous resources on elaborate scenarios that try to replicate, predict, and manipulate human behavior. That can mean gunshots, but more often it means subjecting troops to hours of entirely prosaic jobs. Trainees at Polk spend days guarding gates, maintaining security at demonstrations, and placating civilian leadership. "It's all about building and developing

"It's the best training I've had," says a veteran of two tours in Iraq.

relations with the locals," says Petraeus of the Combined Arms Center. "Knowledge of the cultural terrain is as important as knowledge of the physical terrain."

The Opfor insurgents have to learn the same lesson – though they have a lot more fun in the process. A goofy Renaissance Faire atmosphere reigns as I amble from town to town with them. People crack each other up talking in snippets of Arabic and *Aladdin*-esque gibberish: "Yahabla blanabla!" one greets another. "Mohammed jihad!" comes the reply. We say hello to a trio of Korean women in black chadors selling plastic fruit at an open-air stand, then stop in for coffee at the town restaurant, swapping chit-chat about the weather, football, whether the National Guard has come through recently, and what happened when they did. On one level, my insurgent escorts are just making time-killing small talk. But at the same time, they're gathering intelligence to help them plan their next attack. Even when the soldiers aren't around, the game keeps running.

The six Opfor guys I'm with are all in their twenties, permanently stationed here with the 509th. Guardsmen and other trainees who rotate through the

Box spend their days under regular military discipline, human cogs in their division's machinery. But the Opfor guys roam pretty much at will, dressed in Arab head scarves and robes to blend in with the role-players, smoking cigarettes and swapping stories of alcohol-abetted misbehavior in between attacks.

Like the real insurgents they have a huge home-field advantage, but they're still under some constraints – only a certain number of roadside bombs are allowed per day. "Otherwise, we'd massacre them," says John King, the 509th's commanding officer, a taut Afghanistan vet with close-cropped brown hair and Arafat-like stubble who joined us for the convoy attack.

As immersive as the environments may be, they're nowhere near perfect. Artillery and aerial bombardments can't be simulated with any visceral realism. Even the most elaborate fake cities can't replicate the density, variety, and squalor of a real one. The laser vests are buggy, prone to spontaneously "killing" their wearers. (As I stroll through a town with the Opfor squad, a sergeant's vest inexplicably goes off – for the fifth time. "Night-night!" cackles his commander, a skinny blond lieutenant from California named Eric Heely.)

The laser systems can also teach the wrong lessons. Lasers can't penetrate drywall or foliage; bullets can. The laser vests, according to the RAND report, "equate concealment and cover, a dangerous lesson for ground forces who sometimes demonstrate a frightening ignorance of the difference between the two." (The JRTC sometimes uses paintball-like "simunitions," but they don't have the information-gathering capabilities of the lasers.) But perhaps the biggest problem is that the ratio of clandestine insurgents to civilians at the JRTC is 1 to 5 (only half of the 509th's troops play insurgents) in any given exer-

cise; in Iraq, it's probably more like 1 to 10,000. Learning to treat the local population as if one-fifth of them are enemy fighters could teach the troops to be overly aggressive, Glenn says, which is "a great way to create new adversaries."

For all its flaws, though, "the evidence is that soldiers come out more confident and better prepared for what they'll see when they hit the streets in Iraq," says Glenn, the RAND researcher. At least some soldiers second that. "I'm sure it could be improved, but it's the best training I've had," says Zachary Scott-Singley, a veteran of two stints in Iraq and one at the JRTC who often criticizes the Iraq war on his military-oriented blog, *A Soldier's Thoughts*.

The experience of going through a realistic scenario complete with live humans does indeed provide training that far exceeds laser tag and simulated carnage. At one point during the night I spend with the Opfor squad, we hear a scuffling of feet coming toward us through the trees. We drop to our stomachs, the mock insurgents holding their rifles tight against their bodies. We lie motionless, keeping silent, breathing shallowly. Two National Guard soldiers, wearing body armor and holding M16s, emerge from the brush and head toward us. I can sense the guys around me tensing, their fingers curling around triggers, bracing for the inevitable shootout ...

Which doesn't happen. To our collective astonishment, the pair walk right on by, not 10 feet away, passing us lying amid the leaves and pine needles in the clear, pure moonlight.

"That was ... *novice!*" gasps Heely, his voice ragged with suppressed adrenaline. King, the Opfor commanding officer, shakes his head, ticking off the amateur mistakes they've made, which the Observer Controller trailing them will point out later: walking in single file rather than parallel to each other; not even using the night-vision goggles on their helmets, most likely because the gear is awkward and uncomfortable. "They were probably tired and cold and just looking forward to getting back," Heely says. "They were slipping on basic stuff. They'll learn."

Better here than there. ■ ■ ■

Assignment Letter

Story name:

Writer:

Writer contact info:

Word count:

Rough deadline:

Summary:

Charts/Infographs/Sidebars [Describe any additional editorial entry points that might benefit the story.]:

Art Request Form

Progress Description [Note if/how the story has changed from the original assignment letter.]:

Illustration request [If you feel the story might benefit from an illustration, please describe what the illustration might depict.]:

Overall visual recommendation [Describe central characters, key locations, general look & feel, etc.]:

Photo request [List (in order of importance) people, objects and/or environs in the story for possible photo shoot(s).]

Subject 1:

Description:

Contact name:

Contact info [phone #s, email]:

Subject 2:

Description:

Contact name:

Contact info [phone #s, email]:

Subject 3:

Description:

Contact name:

Contact info [phone #s, email]: