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Simulated Afghan Towns: US Military Training Grounds Germany

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Hohenfels

Spin Boldoz is an Afghan town in Kandahar province close to the border with Pakistan. As we approach the town – with the US 2nd Cavalry Stryker Regiment – the town's market square is teeming with Afghan civilians haggling over stalls of fruit and vegetables. Smoke from cooking fires and braziers mix with the diesel exhaust of the Stryker Brigade's armoured vehicles. Donkeys, goats and sheep are tethered and ready for sale. The regiment's radios are humming with chatter and overhead an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) buzzes lazily over the town.

Lurching to a halt, the troops dismount from the armoured vehicles to take up defensive positions. Accompanied by Afghan National Police (ANP) and interpreters the ground commander moves into a building occupied by the village elder. Whilst a loose security perimeter is established outside, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Green from Seattle informs the elder through an interpreter that they are here to detain a group of Taliban militants. Intelligence indicates they are located in a building on the outskirts of town.

The village elder speaks urgently in Pashtun – his staccato punctuation indicating concern. Things move rapidly thereafter as US troops begin to fan out and move towards a building at the end of the street. They take up firing positions outside the house and indicate through hand signals that it is surrounded with interlocking arcs of fire. Following an instruction given in Pashtun, troops from the Afghan National Army (ANA) enter the house, calling on the occupants to come forward. As they do so, the market square is rapidly clearing of civilians running for cover.

Gunfire suddenly erupts from a house across the street as a group of men make a run for a nearby tree-line. Their movements are disciplined and co-ordinated. The Taliban fighters use orderly fire and manoeuvre to escape the US perimeter. US troops return fire and two armoured Stryker vehicles move up to provide cover for the knot of ANA personnel exposed on the main street. The 50 Cal machine gun on one of the vehicles lays down suppressing fire as the US troops shout orders, organizing a hasty pursuit. Just then the heavy machine gun jams. As the gunner makes furious attempts to clear the weapon a soldier shouts 'Why is that gun not firing? We've got enemy over here'. A laconic voice from an eighteen-year old soldier inside the vehicle replies, 'Because the gun is jammed. Like we already told ya - dumb ass'.

This breaks the tension and loud laughter breaks out. The 'Taliban' or 'opposing force' re-emerge from the tree-line and walk away for their briefing. For this is not the real Afghanistan, but a complex simulation located at a US military training area in Germany. Spin Boldoz – or Ubungsdorf translating literally as 'training town' – returns to normal. The Afghan 'villagers' re-emerge to smoke cigarettes and drink coffee. The US troops re-organise themselves and prepare to re-enter the village and repeat the exercise one more time. Ubungsdorf is just one of several 'Afghan' towns and villages located at the US Joint Mission Readiness Centre, (JMRC) Hohenfels, Germany. Located just north of Munich, the JMRC covers an area of approximately 40 square kilometers.

Hohenfels is in effect a giant 'simulation' of Afghanistan. The training area consists of a mix of carefully constructed urban and rural settings. There are dual carriageways and roundabouts where improvised

explosive devices (IEDs) are placed by 'insurgents' – or 'opposing forces' whose role is performed by US troops with combat experience in Afghanistan. There are mock-ups of actual US combat posts located in Afghanistan along with open areas and farmland where simulated ambushes and sniper attacks on US troops take place. There is even an insurgent cave complex similar to those in use by the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the Tora Bora mountain range in Afghanistan. In some ways the towns resemble Hollywood sets. On closer inspection, the fruit and vegetables on the stalls are made of plastic. The kebabs are also plastic. The 'extras' however are real.

Recruited by the US 'COBS' – Civilians on the Battlefield Service – several hundred Afghan, Moroccan, Libyan, Egyptian, Turkish and Syrian nationals are deployed or 'in play' on Hohenfels during the entire duration of the 2nd Cavalry Division's training rotation of three weeks. Many of the role players are German nationals recruited through newspaper advertisements. Other nationalities such as Afghans are recruited by word of mouth and through German/Afghan community groups. All of the role players are rigorously security screened. In addition, similar to conventional actors, they are interviewed by COBS and are 'screen tested' – having to pass several casting sessions.

Some play the role of interpreters, some are Afghan police and others act as elders or Taliban spies. According to Stephen O'Donnell, 'Chief of the Civilians on the Battlefield' at Hohenfels, around 17% of the Afghan role-players are female. Each role player has a very detailed 'back-story' or personal history which is reinforced through 'rehearsals' and subsequent 'free-play' or improvisational exercises. According to O'Donnell, 'It is up to US troops interacting with the role-players in any of our scenarios to identify the network of contacts between tribal leaders, Kabul officials and say Taliban sympathisers'. As the troops work through various scenarios such as the arrest scene described earlier, their efforts are filmed by a network of hundreds of cameras discreetly installed throughout the training area.

This real-time footage is analysed at 'the Bank' – a large conference room similar to a tiered movie theater – located at the JMRC Headquarters. Here, in front of a bank of dozens of high resolution cinema screens, the principal staff officers of the 2nd Cavalry Division assess the performance of their troops in the field. All verbal exchanges and conversations between US troops and role-players – in English, Dari or Pashtun – including all fire-orders and all radio traffic is also recorded for after-action analysis. The staff officers are mentored by training staff and other staff officers from units currently or recently deployed 'down-range' to Afghanistan. On the day that the Irish Times visited 'the Bank' there were also a large number of senior British Army officers participating in the simulation analysis. According to Major Nick Sternberg of the JMRC, 'this is a bit like the *Truman Show*. We increase the complexity of the interactions for the troops gradually. We let them get into their battle rhythm and wet their feet so to speak with IED attacks, shootings and suicide bombings'.

Each incident is rigorously scrutinized with an after-action review. According to the JMRC's commanding officer Colonel John Spitzer, 'We encourage self criticism. Our procedures are almost Maoist in their concept. After each incident, we get the troops to put forward three things they think they did well and three things that require improvement or fixing. We call it three sustains and three improves. We are fostering a dynamic learning environment for the troops which is self-directed and we consult all ranks'.

Colonel Spiszer is keen to emphasise that the purpose of the Afghan simulations at Hohenfels is to 'save lives' once the unit is deployed. 'We've got 18 and 19 year old troops with the most complex equipment the US have ever taken to the battlefield. And we are giving these soldiers the power over life and death in Afghanistan. Our experience tells us that our troops have to cope with this complex environment and also to deal with fear. Fear for their own survival. We have to balance the requirements of self defence, protecting civilian lives and engaging in combat with enemy. The training here helps the troops to acclimatise to an environment full of civilians and to ensure we minimise civilian casualties in Afghanistan'. The weapons used by the troops are adapted for the exercises to fire blank ammunition and a laser beam that simulates the trajectory of a bullet. In addition, all of the troops and civilians involved in the exercise wear an integrated laser harness that gives an electronic signal when someone is 'hit'. All exercise 'casualties' –whether military or civilian – are recorded and investigated.

As sunset approaches in Hohenfels, the 2nd Cavalry Division begin to prepare for night patrols and night operations among the Afghan villages and towns. All 3500 troops of the 2nd Cavalry Division will be exercised and tested throughout the month of March at Hohenfels. Including role-players and 'opposing forces' the total number of personnel deployed to the training area is 6,900. According to Colonel Spiszer, the investment in time and personnel reflects the 'difficulty of fighting the counter insurgency war in Afghanistan'. 'As a trade-off' he concludes, 'if it saves even one life, then its worth it'.

Dr. Tom Clonan is the Irish Times Security Analyst. He lectures in the School of Media, DIT.