



## Training gives glimpse into conditions in Iraq 'Mojave Viper' sharpens Marines' urban warfare skills on desert base

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The Desert Sun  
April 23, 2006

Staff Sgt. Michael King peers down the dirt road, quickly ordering those behind him to stay close as he searches for insurgents who might be hiding in the rows of windows and empty doorways.

Chants of prayers can be heard from the mosque. The sharp pop-pop-pop sounds of gunshots are in the distance.

King keeps the group moving. It's tense and fast-paced, with staccato orders from the group leader.

Without notice, an explosion jolts the group.

A scene from the battlefield in Iraq? Not quite.

This "town" is just 55 miles from Palm Springs and only four miles from the rest of Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center.

The whole experience - from the prayers and gunshots to the explosions - is part of "Mojave Viper," an extensive monthlong training program that uses more than 250 role players and two working towns to test thousands of Marines on urban warfare and the rigors of the desert.

Because it's the only Marine base with this type of training, every deployed unit sends at least one member here.

"This is as real as you can get," said Gunnery Sgt. Kelly Crawford, an explosives technician who has served in Iraq twice.

President Bush was expected to tour the training during his visit here today until a last-minute schedule change. He'll still attend church at the base and eat lunch with Marine and Navy families.

### Marines secluded in town

Mojave Viper, which has evolved from decades of Marine training techniques, makes troops feel like they already are in Iraq.

The Marines are stationed away from the rest of the base, in housing known as Camp Wilson, with nothing but open desert around them.

It's here that troops undergo everything from live-fire training and detection of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to patrols of the vast desert either by foot or in convoys of seven-ton armored trucks.

"(It's designed) so they're not doing it for the first time in Iraq," said Capt. Misty Posey, an engineer who helps oversee the IED training.

### ADAPTING TECHNIQUES

**Improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, are the deadliest danger in Iraq, so Marines at Twentynine Palms spend a lot of time learning to spot them.**

**The compact, powerful explosives are commonly hidden at night in trash, buried in the dirt and even used in vehicle bombs. They have been detonated with cell phones or remote controls.**

**Typically having the power of 20 pounds of TNT, they can lift even large military vehicles off the ground and be felt even 80 meters away.**

**The explosion causes a crater in the ground.**

**Twentynine Palms Marines are hosting awareness days, hoping business leaders and veterans can provide suggestions that help develop new fighting strategies. Two such sessions are scheduled this week.**

**"I need to have one month's advantage on the enemy to save lives," says Brig. Gen. Douglas Stone, the commanding general at the Twentynine Palms base. About 11,000 active-duty Marines and sailors are stationed at the 932-square-mile base in Twentynine Palms. Someone from every unit sent to the war in Iraq must train at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center before departure.**

The IED training is especially critical. Since 2003, nearly 20,000 incidents involving the destructive bombs have occurred in Iraq, military officials say.

Early today in Afghanistan, four Canadians died following an IED explosion.

Marines spend hours in simulated scenarios of Fallujah or Baghdad, sitting in one of four Humvees surrounded by projection screens, practicing communication and shooting at insurgents.

About half of the Mojave Viper training is spent in the two towns, known locally as Wadi al Sahara and Khalidiyah.

Spanning about 300 acres, these towns are essentially shipping containers arranged to be different-sized buildings and made lifelike thanks to shops, mosques and electricity.

Marines who have grown their hair and beards out, as well as civilians hired at \$150 a day, dress in traditional garb and speak only Arabic phrases and broken English.

Even the signs are in Arabic.

## Practicing desert patrols

These role players live in the town for days or weeks at a time, depending on the length of the training. They run stores and even hold town hall meetings, led by a designated mayor, voicing concerns such as a lack of water so the Marines can get used to public service parts of the job.

One minute, a role player might be an Iraqi shopkeeper. The next, he might be an insurgent.

"It's a very adaptive fight we're fighting over there," Crawford said.

Khalidiyah, the smaller of the two towns with about 100 buildings, opened in 2004. Wadi al Sahara debuted in September 2005 and has nearly 400 buildings.

They cost roughly \$23 million. Plans call for them to be expanded over time.

The vast open space on the 932-acre base also gives Marines ample opportunity to practice desert patrols.

Riding in the seven-ton trucks across the gravel and dirt terrain is bumpier than an old wooden roller. The sand kicks up so thick it nearly blinds anyone trying to peer out across the landscape and spot insurgents or bombs hidden along the roadway.

Marines sometimes practice live-fire exercises during these patrols, approaching buildings made out of reinforced concrete buildings with plastic green figures that pop up dressed as either a civilian or enemy.

The Marines call them "green Ivans," a throwback to the Cold War era.

Though some basics remain the same, the Mojave Viper training changes frequently. Officials say the entire war has been a constant adapting game, with insurgents catching on to the Marines' techniques and trying to beat them.

Marines such as King say it is as real an experience that troops can get on American soil. An IED injured the South Dakota native Aug. 4, 2005 in the Fallujah area.

"You ever heard of flashbacks?" he asked as the convoy approached Khalidiyah during an exercise Thursday.

"Sometimes it happens."

### DID YOU KNOW?

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