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Actors, fake bombs help prep solidiers

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A Massachusetts National Guard soldier takes part in training at Camp Edwards in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan.

Cape Cod Times/Paul Blackmore

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CAMP EDWARDS — Justin Pothier barked out orders from behind a barricade as two other soldiers checked an SUV for explosives at the entrance to their base.

The two men, dressed in traditional Afghan clothing, ignored Pothier's commands to get back in the vehicle, and as the soldiers retreated, an explosive went off. The two Afghan insurgents were killed and one of the retreating soldiers was injured in the blast.

Minutes later reinforcements arrived to secure the gate, the injured soldier was carried to safety and the two dead Afghan men were checked for more explosives.

Yesterday was only a test, but within three months, Pothier, a fresh-faced 23-year-old from Plymouth, and 2,000 other soldiers at Camp Edwards are headed to places where the threat is real.

The Massachusetts National Guard soldiers are going through an intense three-week training exercise to prepare them for deployment to Afghanistan. It's the first time this training, which combines military scenarios with role players and technology, has been held at a Massachusetts base.

"This is training that's essential to readiness and survivability," Maj. Gen. Joseph Carter, adjutant general of the Massachusetts National Guard, said. Previously, Massachusetts soldiers would be sent out of state for this type of training, he said.

The three weeks of training represents the largest buildup of troops at the Upper Cape base since World War II, according to the guard. Along with the soldiers, there are hundreds of military trainers and civilian actors getting them soldiers ready to face the real-life scenarios of war.

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"I feel incredibly more prepared for over there," said Pothier, a private with the 181st infantry taking part in his ninth day of exercises. "We're improving every day."

All across the 22,000-acre military installation, there were units going through scenarios in makeshift villages. They'll continue through the end of next week.

"As it progresses, it gets increasingly tougher — as it should," said guard spokesman Lt. Col. Jack McKenna.

What separates this training from others is that military leaders are tracking the soldiers' every move with Enhanced Dismount Instrumentation, known as "Eddie" packs. The 9-pound backpacks contain GPS units that allow military leaders to ferret out problems and tweak battlefield strategy. The battlefield scenarios are recorded and synced up with video and audio in a barracks turned recording studio. The finished product is shipped to training officers for evaluation.

"This gives them feedback on what they did right and what they did wrong," said Brian Wright, an employee of SRI International, which provided the elaborate communications system. "We know who is firing and who they are firing at."

Inside the studio, the Army tracks movements on screens that give it the feel of a video game.

"We can evaluate our training mode a lot better," Sgt. John Jennings said pointing to a screen where soldiers names are printed in blue. The enemy is depicted in red and civilians are in yellow. "Seeing it in action, we can make changes."

There are other ways the military is making this training more realistic. Through the use of role players like Michael "Caveman" Spina, who was pretending to be an Afghan elder near the village of Ghazi, soldiers are prepped for language barriers and the evolving battlefield.

Though the military hired more than 100 local people to play civilians, Spina is among those who travel from base to base to help with training. "We'd rather (the soldiers) make the mistakes here than over there," he said. "I take this very seriously because it's about keeping people alive."

And, for the first time in 13 years, troops at Camp Edwards are hearing the real bang of explosives as they train. Pyrotechnic grenades were approved for use just months before this exercise. The weapons were banned in 1997 because of environmental concerns.

"It has that loud report," McKenna said after three explosions startled a crowd of onlookers and sent soldiers scrambling for cover. "That's the reaction we're looking for."

Ultimately, the idea is to get the soldiers ready for whatever they might encounter, said Thomas Clark, company commander of one of the units in the 181st.

The instant review is something that improves readiness, Clark said. "The soldiers will learn and get better," he said.

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