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Virtual War

Military brass head to Kansas to learn from the mistakes in Iraq.
By Ben Paynter

On a blustery afternoon in late March, Lt. Col. George Sarabia and retired Lt. Col. Pete Boisson stand along the bank of the Blue River, a creek that cuts through Swope Park. The two Army officers are in a lush clearing that abuts a construction site filled with bulldozers. Sarabia wields a retractable metal pointer. Boisson carries a series of poster-sized maps showing the area's topography. Red and blue arrows illustrate troop movements, as if the men are planning an invasion.

The pair are both former West Point instructors who now teach at the Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. Today they will practice what the Army has long considered crucial to military science: historical role-playing.

Sarabia pretends it's October 23, 1864, in the final hours of the Battle of Westport. The three-day Civil War conflict spread across what's now Kansas City, from Swope Park to Brookside. More than 30,000 troops clashed that day in what has come to be called the Gettysburg of the West. Some 1,500 died, and the victor gained control of the highly contested border state of Missouri.

The Confederates took position at the top of what later was called "Bloody Hill." Union forces had to make a frontal, uphill assault to attack. Such a move would usually mean heavy casualties, Boisson explains.

But the Union forces that day had a tactical advantage with the repeating rifles they carried. The Confederate soldiers had antiquated single-shot rifles. The Union troops could get off seven shots to every one from the Confederates.

"This isn't a game of stump the chump," Sarabia says. It's supposed to be about trusting your gut. "What would you do?"

Because of the tactical advantage, Sarabia says he'd charge. According to the history books, the Union did charge, taking Confederate snipers by surprise. The attack forced the Southerners to retreat. The victory allowed the Union to claim Missouri and helped the North repel the Confederate army's attempt at a western expansion.

Such re-enactments have become common for the instructors at the Combat Studies Institute. The Army's only college for its upper brass has been using these "staff ride" field trips since 1982 to teach battle tactics. About 1,000 Army majors a year enroll in a fall or winter 10-month course. The staff ride program is an elective taken by about 20 percent of them.

Such exercises were first used during the Civil War when generals would revisit bloodied battlefields to learn from the experiences of other military leaders. But the practice of walking the battlefield has become more difficult. Some have been built over; some parts of the Battle of Westport are now covered by midtown neighborhoods, and others rest under a small industrial park that includes a giant Dr Pepper can marking the entrance to a soda bottling plant.

For different reasons, the military has few chances to walk battle sites in Iraq. Many are simply too hostile and unlikely to get any safer anytime soon. And the need for planning against insurgent attacks is becoming only more vital as the country descends into what many are now calling a civil war.

Eric Barton



Using the Army's new battlefield simulator, Col. Timothy Reese travels down the same road as Pvt. Jessica Lynch.

Details

Who / What:

Combat Studies Institute
Leavenworth
Iraq war

So in 2004, the institute drafted ideas for a computer simulator to re-create battle scenes. The Army paid \$270,000 last year to software companies MetaVR and Terrex to build the "virtual staff rides." Each scene is modeled on satellite imagery that shows the features of the scene — everything from desert huts to Baghdad skyscrapers.

So far, they've developed more than 20 battles, including the "thunder runs," the first U.S. troop invasions of Baghdad in April 2003, says Lt. Col. Kevin Kennedy, who is in charge of running the virtual staff ride. Already, 75 officers have taken the virtual staff rides course, and, because of demand, the institute expects to double the program this fall. By then, the classroom should be filled with Iraq war veterans. Some may be studying their own engagements, like football players reviewing postgame tapes.

On a recent afternoon inside Fort Leavenworth's Flint Hall, Kennedy demonstrates the system, standing in front of what looks like a mini-IMAX. There's a theater-sized screen in front of him and two smaller screens beside him. Decked in camo, Kennedy twirls a remote control in each hand. He calls the technology "a gamer's dream."

"I've got to get a holster for these," he quips.

Kennedy clicks a button, and the screens blink to life. He loads the program that re-creates one of the Iraq war's most famous battles: the March 2003 capture of Pvt. Jessica Lynch. In the program, Kennedy is driving in the lead of her 18-vehicle convoy. On the large screen, there's a behind-the-dash view similar to video games like *Gran Turismo*. A digital road winds along a desert landscape marked by telephone poles, shrubs and dusty corrugated-metal shacks. On the smaller screens, there's a map with the crew's intended route and a box detailing the convoy's available arsenal, everything from a large-caliber machine gun to global-positioning devices.

The institute's director, Col. Timothy Reese, and a handful of officers watch Kennedy as he directs the ride like a back-seat driver. He uses his remotes to scroll through information in the side panels. He tells a technician seated at a massive computer terminal in the back of the room when to speed up and where to turn. Onscreen, he's zooming fast through the desolate landscape. Intersections rise and fall. The convoy has spent the past 59 hours on the road traveling from Kuwait, and fatigue has set in.

The roadside hovels turn from sporadic dots to a blur. In less than a minute, the convoy unexpectedly enters a city. Kennedy calls for the vehicle to stop. He wants a look at his surroundings. The technician pans the view from left to right. Every building looks identical in monochromatic khaki. Kennedy duplicates the moves made by Lynch's convoy and turns around to retrace his steps. It's a mistake, he says, because the insurgents saw the convoy pass and are ready for its return. He stops near a series of small buildings, noting that this is the point where the convoy comes under fire.

Onscreen, there are no insurgents flooding the street, no speakers blasting the ricochet of rapid-fire rifle reports. There's no first-person-shooter perspective as in the video game *Doom*, just the same droll landscape panorama. Kennedy explains that this is the point at which the institute's instructors jump in to explain what's happening: insurgents firing from the tops of buildings, bullets showering the vehicles.

He drives forward fast, getting even more lost. Instead of using GPS units and communication systems, Lynch's convoy panics. Soon, the vehicles are separated.

Kennedy points out sniper positions on overpasses and on rooftops. Later, he zooms away to offer a bird's-eye view showing how rows of slums can create an "urban canyon" effect, casting confusing shadows and creating the feeling of being trapped in a maze.

Kennedy explains that 11 soldiers would be killed, nine wounded and seven— including Lynch— taken prisoner. Reese notes that the academic setting allows him to be "intellectually honest" about how screwed-up that military operation became. His critique of the Lynch debacle is blunt: "There was a lot of personal bravery but a lot of things that went wrong at the command level."

He admits that the scenario shows one way in which U.S. forces were unprepared to fight the insurgency: Leaders underestimated the threat posed along supply routes. "We didn't understand the degree that there would be guerrilla forces left behind that wouldn't fight [in major battles] and then would wait for the softer convoys to come up behind and take their chances," he says. With the war in Iraq stretching into its fourth year, Reese says the virtual rides may help understand operational blunders.

"I think the staff ride fits into an Army culture that grew up in the 1980s after Vietnam that said we need to learn from our mistakes. We need to get better. Whether there's a successful campaign or a failure, we analyze it. The

staff ride is part of that better self-critiquing process." **Using the Army's new battlefield simulator, Col. Timothy Reese travels down the same road as Pvt. Jessica Lynch.**