

## THE CONFLICT IN IRAQ

*Marines Trained to React Quickly -- and Ethically*  
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### Document Text

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As squads of Marines venture into the narrow, rutted streets of Wadi al Sahara, roadside bombs explode, women begin scream from windows.

Amid language problems and gunshots, the Marines have to make instant decisions on returning fire and whether to storm a ho much firepower.

But the Marines are not in Iraq, and the snipers are role players firing blanks. The Marines are in the desert of Southern California "Mojave Viper," an intense 30-day training session in fighting an insurgency in which it can be difficult to distinguish militant from civilian

"In a counterinsurgency, it's crucial that Marines have the tools to make ethical decisions on using force," said Lt. Col. Andy Keane, in charge of the training.

Amid military investigations into the killings of Iraqis in the towns of Haditha and Hamandiya, questions about the Marines' adherence to laws of warfare and their own rules of engagement have gained new attention.

Although Marines here will not comment on the investigations, they say young Marines are being trained to realize that their actions have enormous consequences for the U.S. mission and will probably be scrutinized worldwide.

"We're taking 19-year-olds and teaching them to make split-second decisions about the use of force that are going to be analyzed," said Col. Ron Baczkowski, head of one of the training programs.

At their sprawling base here, the Marines have constructed Wadi al Sahara, or Valley in the Desert, consisting of 475 structures, a souk, or marketplace. Made from shipping containers, and spread over 360 acres, the faux village cost more than \$23 million.

Many of the lessons of Mojave Viper are tailored to the evolving situation in Iraq, including the need for greater restraint in the use of force with the assault on Baghdad in 2003 or the house-to-house fighting in Ramadi and Fallouja in 2004.

Role players, paid \$150 to \$275 a day, act the part of Iraqis, some friendly to the U.S., some hostile, some armed, some plainclothes. A woman sitting peacefully could be acting as a spotter for an insurgent sniper.

Role player Khalid Aledani, 40, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in Basra, says his goal is to teach the Marines to be alert but not

"They need to know that not all the people there are bad," he said. "If you give disrespect to people, they will give you disrespect."

Different scenarios test the Marines' ability to adapt. Stress is a good thing in training, because in Iraq it can save the lives of Marines, leaders say.

"I want to make sure we've stressed them enough," said Brig. Gen. Douglas Stone, commander of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force. He runs the village and the training course.

The scenarios are tweaked to conform to events in Iraq, including new ways insurgents are using roadside bombs or planning attacks. When soldiers were abducted and killed recently, the course here was adjusted to include "lessons learned."

But the shift from traditional warfare to insurgency may be the biggest change that training at Wadi al Sahara has accommodated.

The training is meant to prepare Marines for one of the most dangerous and difficult decisions: when to storm a building where hiding. One of the investigations underway involves the killing of 24 Iraqis in Haditha, where Marines were searching, unsuccessful just detonated a bomb that killed one of their comrades.

In theory, the rules for "clearing a building" are simple: The person inside must have been conclusively identified as a combatant confirmed as real.

But in practice, every case is different -- particularly with an enemy that prefers to hide behind women and children, U.S. combat

Marines who fought in Fallouja said later that the mere suspicion that a sniper was in a building was justification for calling in a strike is higher.

"It's not just one suspicion or one event [that is needed], but several," said Lt. Col. Pat Kline, deputy director of one of the training

The presence of civilians also has to be considered when deciding whether, for example, to enter a building by throwing in a grenade. Haditha.

"Because someone is hostile inside a house, that doesn't mean the entire house is hostile," Baczkowski said.

Every Marine battalion bound for Iraq goes through the Mojave Viper training, which ends with a 72-hour field exercise meant to train Marines for the quick decisions that lie ahead.

Said Baczkowski: "They have to be able to take in all considerations in that split second and be dead right -- every time."

**[Illustration]**

Caption: PHOTO: TWENTYNINE PALMS: A Marine escorts a role player posing as a detained Iraqi in a training exercise at the Sahara. Officials say the intense 30-day sessions are being tailored to teach troops to use restraint when civilians are present.; Boston Los Angeles Times

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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