



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Dispatches from Bavaria

There is a grim certainty of purpose among the 30-odd professional military officers gathered in the room.

We are at the orders briefing, in a non-descript hut among a village of huts, berms and concrete fortifications built into a forest straight from the pages of "Hansel & Gretel." It's late, and after days of continuous and tough rehearsals — involving scenarios from mounted vehicle patrols to complex IED attacks — even the air feels tired.

This camp is meant to represent Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, where men of the Georgian 32nd Light Infantry Brigade, along with their U.S. Marine liaisons, will deploy at the end of this training. They started back in February, in the small nation of Georgia. There is one week remaining, and everything they have learned is about to be sorely tested in a grueling, non-stop, seven-day final exercise.

This briefing is part of the overall performance and readiness evaluation, and everyone knows it.

The men here are a direct reflection of the building

itself, built for function over form. On the far wall the five-cross Georgian flag hangs next to Old Glory, and a sign says "Strength in Unity." The ancient Georgian script looks like grapevines.

Perhaps the toughest job here belongs to the interpreters, known by their monikers "Fish" and "Coach." Nobody knows where Fish got his name. One presumes "Coach" comes from the 40-year-old Georgian's proclivity for wearing track-suit hoodies. The "terps" must translate the briefings from Georgian into English and back again. Proper understanding can hinge on the interpretation of a single word. It has to be right.

The pressure is palpable, and the Georgians mean to impress. Georgia wants into NATO — there are Russian tanks and mobile artillery 30 kilometers from their capital of Tblisi — and after the U.S. they are the largest contributor of troops to the effort in Afghanistan. Fish says they have been fighting off the designs of foreign empires for thousands of years. Now, he says, they want to be left alone.

The officers don't slow down. The terps struggle to keep up and remain accurate and clear. The exchanges are often complex. The terps spell each other after particularly long sessions, which have a visibly deleterious effect — it's like watching a wax candle gutter.

It is hard to know it, but we are at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, or JMRC, near

Hohenfels, Germany. This region of Bavaria has known the presence of professional warfighters since the Roman Emperor Augustus, who sent his legions here to stop the southward advance of Celts and Gauls. There is a castle on the base dating from the year 1000. In 1641 it was nearly destroyed by lightning that struck the gunpowder tower.

Napoleon was here. The Nazi's housed prisoners of war from Poland, Russia, Belgium, France, Britain, and America here. The U.S. 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment liberated the camp in 1945.

It still belongs to the U.S. Army, and in this most recent incarnation serves as a host for combat units from around the world, who receive some of the most advanced pre-deployment training available anywhere.

I am with the U.S. Marines of the Georgia Deployment Program, who for the last six months have been training the Georgians to NATO standards for their downrange deployment to Bagram. This program, in various forms, has existed since May 2002, when U.S. Special Operations Forces were given \$64 million to spin up four battalions in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. In August 2009 the Marines took over.

The briefing is comprehensive, and endless. Military briefings at this level are worse than watching concrete dry through a microscope. Nothing is left out. The various section leaders must cover every



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

Georgian troops are training in Germany in an elaborate mock-up simulating conditions in Afghanistan.

conceivable contingency, from relations with local Afghan mullahs and police to suicide prevention, from VIP visits to pre-combat inspections, from the rules of engagement to how many rolls of toilet paper a battalion of soldiers will use.

But there is a certain unreality to it all. Everyone knows the maxim: no plan survives the first contact with the enemy.

Still, it's better to have one.

The Marines love working with the Georgians. They are gritty, professional, highly motivated, and smart. They don't drink water and they smoke constantly. They learn fast. They are fighters. Still, some cultural differences remain. Marines never break training for meals; for them, "chow is continuous." The Georgians insist on it. Meals might last an hour or more in the middle of peak training time.

These are among a thousand small frustrations

for Marine liaison teams who will deploy with the Georgians.

Somewhere in the middle of the intelligence portion of the brief, where we learn that there is a lot we don't know, Coach melts all the way down. He is fatigued to the point of collapse. He interrupts his own translation, looks at the Georgian colonel and the mixed bank of senior officers at the head of the table. He says, in English, "I beg your pardon," and leaves the room. Fish immediately steps up and replaces him.

During a break I find Coach. He's been doing this non-stop for 10 years, he tells me. He's in a state of raw exhaustion. He has two young boys and a wife back home in Georgia, where the specter of a belligerent Russia looms large and peace is far from certain.

"It's my blood pressure," he says, looking into the medieval Bavarian night and lighting a smoke. "Not the best."

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