

## TRANSLATION, NEWS ARTICLE

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TRANSLATED BY: BRIGITTE O'PRESKA, OCPA

### HEADLINE: **The biggest war games**

At great expense, real life emergency scenario is being practiced at the Grafenwöhr training area. American soldiers are being prepared for their deployment to Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. They call it the Truman Show.

By Peter Badenhop

The mask is being dropped for a brief moment. For more than one hour, the provincial governor conducted the meeting between the American commanders and the reps of the re-construction team. An interpreter translated from the official language Dari into English. The meeting, which was attended as well by other dignitaries in traditional garb, deals with the precarious security situation in the Paktika province. Servants serve tea and cookies; there are fresh flowers and trays of fruit on the table.

When all at the table have spoken, the governor wants to make a brief statement – and suddenly reverts to German: “I should mention one things.....”, he says, stops, apologizes and then continues in Dari. Those attending smile - then the game continues.

For LTC Jayson Gilberti and the other three officers at the governor's table, this is the preparation for emergency situations. In only a few weeks, they will deploy with their unit, the 172<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade, to their post in Paktika Province in southeast Afghanistan. All others are actors or training partners: The Afghans are being played by Afghans, men like the governor who came to Germany from Kabul in 1980, is a former finance official and now lives in Bonn with his family. The members of the civilian re-construction team are played by officers of the Czech Army; the Afghan military securing the building are really Polish and soldiers from Bosnia-Herzegovina play the role of the Afghan Police.

For four weeks, the roughly 4,300 soldiers of the 172<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade have to play this game and familiarize themselves with the unsteady Afghan-Pakistani border region in this Bavarian province between Bayreuth and Regensburg. On about 40,000 hectares, the US Army maintains one of the most modern and largest training areas in the Grafenwöhr and Hohenfels in Upper Bavaria. Even during the Cold War, American and other NATO soldiers were trained on the huge area. Nowadays, military members of more than 30 countries are being trained here on a regular basis in small and large exercises. The main focus is on training units about to be deployed to the Republic of Kosovo, to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The time and effort that is put into this in Grafenwöhr and Hohenfels to create a realistic training scenario is gigantic. The enormous and divided area the size of a third of a German county consists of three airfields, more than a dozen training villages and thousands of cameras making everything transparent for the trainers. More than 1,300 additional soldiers participate in the training of the 172<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade: Americans, Afghans, Poles, Frenchmen, Romanians, Slovaks, Czechs and Bosnians. They play Afghan soldiers and policemen but also Taliban and other insurgents. The villages which are no backdrops but built of real buildings, have mosques and bazaars and are named after existing towns are being inhabited by a total of 450 “civilians” – from the governor to the carpet dealer. There are staged assaults, attacks, accidents, unrests, radio and TV programs and even press conferences to train commanders in dealing with local and international press.

LTC Gilberti is under stress. He has had two other appointments on this sunny morning before his meeting with the governor and his people. Even though he knows that it is all a game, he cannot escape the illusion which is almost perfect. Early in the morning, he held a “BUB”, a Battle Update Briefing, with the staff of the 9<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion whose commander he is. Situational briefs are given, reconnaissance information, new orders from the Brigade headquarters are passed on. The atmosphere is tense and the situation downrange is unclear.

About an hour later, however, things get a lot worse for the Lieutenant Colonel. With an interpreter and an adjutant, he hurries to a meeting with the local police chief and is thrown out by the latter only moments later. The night before, a group of Afghan policemen was searched at a checkpoint by American soldiers and held for more than one hour. The Police chief, a man with a dark complexion and wearing a golden necklace, is outraged. The interpreter can barely keep up with his tirades. LTC Gilberti apologizes sheepishly but cannot smooth the Police chief’s ruffled feathers.

“I suspected something like that when I first heard about the incident this morning”, he says a few minutes later on his way back to the camp. He asks his interpreter how he assesses the situation and which “cultural acceptable form of apology” to the Police chief and his people – the Bosnians – would be acceptable. The interpreter suggests a written apology – from all soldiers involved in the incident. Gilberti accepts grudgingly.

The interpreter, a big, lean Afghan with a dark mustache and alert eyes, actually comes from Frankfurt. In real life, he now works for a security firm after having worked for Siemens. He applied for the four week long role playing in Hohenfels through an agency specializing in the recruiting of “Civilians on the Battlefield” and took annual leave to do so. He does not want to give his name because he fears for the lives of his family members in Afghanistan. He says that in the evening, he sits together with the Police chief and the other actors in their billets. “There, I do tell him every once in a while how he can improve himself to come across even more convincing”.

The outburst of the Police chief is part of the game.”We deliberately put our people under a lot of stress”, BG Allen Batschelet says, the person responsible for the deployment

readiness of all units stationed in Europe at the Army headquarters in Heidelberg. “We don’t constantly shoot at them, but they are confronted with an array of tasks and problems which puts them under a lot of stress in no time”. What the units learned and trained separately during the last months will now be put together in one joint large-scale exercise. “This is extremely complicated. We want them to make their mistakes here – and not in Afghanistan”, the brigadier general says.

Batschelet is in conference with the instructors of the Joint Multinational Readiness Center. At the operations center in Hohenfels, they observe and analyze in detail the progress made by the commanders and soldiers of the 172<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade. In the so-called Star Wars Building, all pieces of the exercise come together. “The Box”, as the instructors call the training area, is being watched and checked around the clock. “It’s a bit like the Truman Show”, Batschelet says, grinning – “only in this case for 4,300 people”.

The Star Wars Building also houses the script writers – military personnel, historians, diplomats and other experts who in the months prior wrote the detailed schedule for this exercise: from the general scenario to individual attacks and activities of insurgents to the CVs and instructions for each of the civilian actors that the soldiers will be confronted with. The 400 OCTs, Observer Controller Trainer, are coordinated here; they are the military observers who are always and everywhere behind the soldiers of the 172<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade ready to annotate and film whatever they observe and to discuss with units afterwards.

SPC Derek Burton is under constant observation as well. He does not sense the difficulties his commander, LTC Gilberti, will face this morning. He and his comrades are busy to keep their eyes open. Shortly before four a.m., their captain had them gather in front of their vehicles. They are to move in a convoy to FOB Sharana-West to clear the roads from the main camp to the Forward Operating Base off IEDs. Along with four other soldiers of the 172<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade, Burton, in full gear with helmet, bullet-proof vest and protective goggles, sits in a “Buffalo”, an armored vehicle equipped especially for mine clearing and stares into the dark Bavarian through the bullet-proof glass.

The tiring and dreary task is called “window licking”. 21 year old Burton has been through more than a hundred of these route clearance missions. In order to not fall asleep, he starts to sing “Ring of Fire” and “Hotel California”. The others tell jokes and make fun of each other. In walking pace, the six to eight vehicles roll across the gravel road through the woods. When daylight breaks, the team of a vehicle in front notices something. What looks like a vehicle track at the side of the road at first glimpse could be a buried mine or explosive device. The “Buffalo” is moving to the front and Burton works the area at the side of the road with the remote-controlled robotic arm. “They are watching carefully what we’re doing”, Burton says and digs a deep rut into the road with the robotic arm. “But there’s nothing there; any little kid can see that.”

When the convoy arrives three hours later at Sharana-West, a heavily secured camp in view of the town of Sharana, all hell breaks loose. Mortar grenades make impact

between the tents and on the square in the middle of the camp. CPT Christopher George, a small and wiry man who constantly spits because he has a black-brownish clump of chewing tobacco in his mouth, is responsible for camp security. He yells instructions into his walkie-talkie. Every few minutes, soldiers run into his tent and ask what they should do. The captain has the camp secured, puts up guards and brings marksmen into position. He requests air support and sends off a patrol. A bit later, Apache helicopters arrive and fly low over the camp. An observer is nearby and takes notes. "They're doing pretty well – but they should have put on their helmets and bullet-proof vests faster", he says quietly. "Had this been a real attack, they would have gotten hurt badly".

While there are incidents throughout the day at Sharana-West and while CPT George has to fend off another mortar attack and organize the arrest of suspects, there is peace and quiet in Orgun. Jörg Schumacher and Alex Götz are sitting by the side of the main road of the village. The two from Bremen, 40 and 32 years old, wear long white garb and have been here before. This time around, they are carpet dealer Daoud Amin and barber and newspaper seller Osman Rah. There is not much more in their VCs they got for their role – no secret missions, no important positions. And so both sit around, bored, in front of their Bazaar stands and wait.

A few hours earlier, soldiers of the ANA, the Afghan Army, arrived and installed a checkpoint at the entrance to the village. Even though they wear Polish uniforms and do not speak Dari or Pashtu amongst themselves but Polish, they do take checking of the civilians pretty seriously. The soldiers are observed warily from the porch of the "Internet Café" where a few men play backgammon, drink Cokes and smoke a water pipe. A few meters down the street, flatbread is baked over open fire; two women in blue burkas walk down the street and a man with a wheelbarrow rests in front of a warped market stand. The houses have definitely retained their central European look. The onion-shaped tower above the "provincial administration" communicates a last bit of Bavarian serenity.