

Battlescape shoots for profit

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MARION — Surrounded by cotton, rice and soybean fields, an exotic oasis is rising in east Arkansas: nine square blocks of downtown Fallujah.

Builders have begun moving dirt for a streetscape modeled after the war-ravaged city in Iraq, complete with a bazaar, a traffic circle, office buildings and a school, all in Middle Eastern architectural styles.

This Little Fallujah will even include the bomb blasts and flying bullets.

“We’ve got to give them what they’re going to experience overseas — there’s no pretending,” said Alan Brosnan, the former New Zealand Army assault group commander who is overseeing the transformation of a 700-acre patch of Delta farmland into a training ground for modern urban warfare.

Olive Group, a British firm that supplies personnel and combat training for armies and corporations in the world’s scariest hot spots, plans to open the first three blocks of its mock city this summer.

It won’t be the only foreign war zone open for business in Arkansas.

At “Little Mogadishu” in North Little Rock, students rappel from a helicopter perched on a 40-foot stanchion and work through a maze of concrete huts and alleyways, shooting at targets and blowing open doors.

Direct Action Resource Center, which opened the 740-acre urban-combat training facility in 1996, gets nearly all its business from the military and other federal agencies, said founder Richard Mason. He declined to name customers or discuss contracts, but said the business is profitable.

“It’s been a major growth industry since 9 / 11,” Mason said.

Iraq especially has been a bonanza, as the government agencies and corporations rebuilding the country

have spent hundreds of millions on protection.

With the windfall have come questions about the conduct of private companies undertaking missions traditionally the province of the military. Critics have also questioned sums paid to some contractors, such as Halliburton, hired to support military operations.

The Government Accountability Office reviewed U. S. contracts last year in an attempt to evaluate the size of the private security business in Iraq. The GAO found that the 22 contracts it reviewed were worth more than \$ 766 million, but said none of the principal agencies responsible for Iraq reconstruction had complete data on their security costs.

Doug Brooks, president of the International Peace Operations Association, a Washington-based trade group, estimated that the roughly 100 companies providing support to the military in Iraq are making a total of about \$ 20 billion a year. He said some \$ 2 billion of that goes to companies, such as Olive, that strictly provide security. Olive Group pulled in more than \$ 100 million of it last year — not bad for a company in business only since 2001, Brosnan said.

QUIET NEIGHBOR The stocky New Zealander, who sports a mustache as thick as his Kiwi accent, founded the Marion training center 15 years ago, as the Tactical Explosive Entry School. The center occupied only 16 acres and was training SWAT teams and military special-operations personnel when Olive bought it last fall for an undisclosed price. Olive also opened a Washington, D. C., office to help establish a U. S. beachhead for operations that span six continents. The company, which maintains its headquarters in Dubai, United Arab Emirates may not be as well-known as its main U. S. competitor, North Carolinabased Blackwater USA. But, internationally, Olive is one of the largest in the business, touting a client list that includes major multinational corporations in mining, banking, communication and other industries.

In Marion, the company quickly acquired 700 acres around the original 16, and is negotiating for 300 more. Its facility, which has been renamed Olive Security Training Center, is about four miles from the location identified for a potential Hino Motors commercial-truck plant.

“I think people are vaguely aware it’s there,” said Kay Brockwell, economic-development director for Marion, who worked to recruit Hino but said she knew little about the training center. “It’s in an area that’s off the beaten path. Unless you’re going there, you wouldn’t see it.”

But the frames of bulletproof shoot houses, firing ranges and other structures are rising on the site. And Olive has already christened the 2-mile track where drivers will learn to shoot guns out car windows, ram enemy vehicles and dodge obstacles such as simulated rocket-propelled grenades and improvised explosive devices.

DRIVING AND SHOOTING Alan Minnick, training manager for the driving courses, floored the accelerator, rocketing backward in his police-package Ford as if to escape an unexpected roadblock.

Suddenly, he slammed on the brakes and wrenched the wheel. The squealing Crown Victoria pivoted sharply and kept going in the same direction — only now pointed forward. A staple of action-adventure movies, Minnick's "J" turn would appear to be the gut course in the driving curriculum. "Another important, extremely marketable feature is being able to drive and shoot," the instructor said matter-of-factly. Trainees will fire at targets while speeding over a course with a straight-away long enough to hit 115 mph in a standard police sedan. But drivers will have to negotiate surprises, such as "off-camber" curves — banked in the wrong direction — and "decreasing-radius" curves that begin gently only to bend sharply at the apex. "This is reality when you get to Third World countries where they don't really have highway departments," Minnick said. On a skid pad, drivers will create and correct skids. They will learn to ram enemy cars in such a way that they can break the opposing driver's axle without disabling their own vehicles. "We tear up some cars in the name of training," Minnick said. Hidden behind berms in the infield, Minnick can deploy attack vehicles and burning vehicles as part of driving scenarios. The training center plans to combine the work on the track with exercises in the bulletproof "shoot houses" and "breach houses" under construction nearby. There is a school bus for hostage scenarios. Plans call for a model ship for maritime exercises. An existing airstrip — once used by a crop duster — will accommodate landings. But the hub of all operations will be the mock city.

MEETING A NEED Conducting a military-style briefing in one of the classrooms on site, Brosnan crisply described details of the fullscale streetscape as electric guitars wailed a Sammy Hagar soundtrack and a computer model flashed highlights: a peddler's cart, a tower, stairwells leading to the rooftops of buildings as tall as four stories.

The details are authentic down to the curbs, Brosnan said. The mock city is an extract of Fallujah flavored with architectural impressions that military personnel now working for Olive brought back from other Middle Eastern trouble spots.

Burning cars and role players wearing Middle Eastern garb will animate the set.

The bullets whizzing in the mock city will be real, as will the explosions. But Brosnan said not to worry: "We don't set up mininukes here. This is small, surgical stuff."

Gary Laing, vice president of operations, said private versions of such urban-training villages — called "MOUT" sites for Military Operations on Urban Terrain — are in demand partly because the military's own training facilities are stretched to capacity. "We see the opportunity to provide a service," he said. The military has its own mock villages on Army and Marine bases, but private companies can win contracts with specialized training that complements what the military does, Laing said. For instance, he said, the military farms out a lot of its specialized driver training. In a recent press release, Olive touted its planned Arkansas center, saying it will be larger than similar training sites on U. S. military bases, and the first to replicate building types and logistical layouts found in the Middle East.

AFTER IRAQ ? But people in the business acknowledge demand will fall off when the U. S. pulls out of Iraq. "One of the reasons we came to the States is to diversify, and not be reliant on Iraq as a source of

funding, because — let's face it — eventually that has to go away,” said Mike Smith, senior vice president in Olive's new Washington office.

Olive recently won its first U. S. government contract — as a subcontractor to Bechtel Corp. providing security along the Gulf Coast. But the company's big play in the U. S. is training, said Smith, who like many Olive employees signed on after a stint in the U. S. Special Forces. “They're outsourcing more of their training — the facilities and instructors,” he said. The military's own expansion plans eventually may shrink the need for private contractors, however.

In Twentynine Palms, Calif., the Marines are building a huge urban-combat center that the February edition of National Defense magazine said may be the biggest in the world. The Marine center, in the Mojave Desert, ultimately will consist of several complexes of buildings all modeled after Iraqi towns and villages.

Susan Horsfall, whose California-based Allied Container Systems got the contract to build a 22-square-block facility on the site last summer, said government purchases of Allied's steel containers for such training grounds have grown to represent most of her company's business over the past year.

“It's because of all the new wars we're having, unfortunately, including the war on terrorism,” Horsfall said. “They're not being fought on historic-type battlefields. They're being fought in cities.”

Laing said most urban warfare training sites around the country are outdated, however, and the number of soldiers needing the training is still high. He said Olive also hopes its expansion of the Marion training center will build more business with police agencies and attract a corporate clientele that it hasn't had before.

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