

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Marine 'battle' readies troops for real thing

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By SHAWN HOPKINS - Bulletin Staff Writer

For a few hours Thursday night, the DuPont facility in Henry County was a mock battleground, a site for a large-scale training exercise for Marine 24th Expeditionary Unit from Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, N.C.

As far as the Marines were concerned, the DuPont facility was an al-Qaida terrorist training camp in the fictional country of Micah, a home to the equally nonexistent Rocky Mount Resistance terrorist group.



Marines, playing the role of terrorists, took part in a training exercise at the former DuPont site on Thursday.

Under the exercise, a two-man reconnaissance team had watched the about 20 Marine role-players, all dressed the part in middle-eastern looking garb and carrying weapons, for two days as they carried out their daily routines in the camp.

These included prayers, the work of the training camp and visits from “high value” targets that the Marines later would try to find inside the building, and the intelligence was used by commanders of the operation to plan their assault.

The routine was shattered — according to plan — shortly after 7 p.m. Thursday when a Marine sniper fired a live round into a dummy target, taking out the stand-in for a shoulder-fired rocket operator identified in the intelligence phase.

The area soon was swarming with aircraft, from large planes standing in as bombers overhead, to Cobra and Huey attack helicopters serving as lower air support, to six transport helicopters that thundered out of the night sky to make combat landings on pad from a demolished plant and warehouse complex and dropped off the rest of the about 104 Marines who took part in the exercise.

Some of those Marines secured the area, “killing” any resistance outside with blanks from their machine guns and setting up a landing area to evacuate wounded.

Another force breached the door of one of the unused DuPont buildings with a specialized type of sledge hammer and crowbar. Using nightvision goggles and flashlights, they methodically searched the building, looking for targets, killing resistance and attempting to capture the “high value” targets for interrogation.

The exercise also included the evacuation of three Marine “wounded.” It took about two hours, after which the transport helicopters, which had refueled at the airport in Danville, landed

again and the Marines left for Ft. Pickett in Blackstone.

Gunnery Sgt. Carlos Orjuela, who served as a platoon sergeant during the exercise, was one of the first Marines on the ground and stayed with the force that secured the outside.

He said the Marines found a primary target, an SA7 rocket, inside the building, but did not find the two “high value” role-players they had been shown pictures of as far as he knew.

He said he felt the exercise provided good training for the Marines, partly because it makes them adapt to an unfamiliar environment. In such exercises things “never really always go as planned,” he said, so Marines also have to quickly adapt and respond to the unexpected.

Cpl. William Pruitt, one of the al-Qaida role-players, said he also thought the training exercise was helpful and hoped the Marines could get benefits such as learning from any mistakes made during the exercise. He said the role-players tried to get as “deep” as they could into the terrorist personas they were playing, although he had not picked out a terrorist name for himself.

Marine Maj. Ron Jones said the training was part of six months of combat training the Marines will go through before they are deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Much of that training takes place on bases, he said. He said the Marines were appreciative that they were allowed to use the DuPont facility because there is “no way, no how,” bases can completely replicate the types of obstacles Marines might have to deal with in real urban combat situation.

Erich Parker, global public relations leader for DuPonts division dealing with safety-related items, said DuPont was proud to allow the Marines to use the facility for training. The U.S. Government was DuPont’s first customer, for gunpowder, more than 200 years ago, he said. And many of the soldiers were wearing Kevlar vests or other items containing fibers DuPont makes, he said.

Dale Wagoner, Henry County director of public safety, said the training exercise had been planned in Henry County for about six months. He said he spoke to FBI Special Agent Bob Myrick, who was scouting sites, and told him the DuPont facility would be perfect.

Since then the county has worked with the military to make sure they had what they needed during the training, he said, which also included a couple of weeks of combat helicopter landings in Martinsville and other areas before the mock attack.

The county also volunteer fire and other personnel on the ground during the incident in case anything went wrong. The assistance and support was something the county personnel provided gladly, he said.

“They’re protecting our freedom,” Wagoner said. “And they’re learning to do it right here in Martinsville and Henry County.”