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## Airmen practice evasion, escape in Wyoming

Training exercise simulates conditions soldiers might find in Afghanistan

**RUFFIN PREVOST** Of the Gazette Wyoming Bureau

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A group of active-duty Air Force personnel begins a nighttime hike as part of a training exercise that simulates territory by friendly foreigners. The hike earlier this month on Four Bear Mountain near Cody was part of a week-long exercise from Park County to the Colorado border.

RUFFIN PREVOST/Gazette Staff

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RUFFIN PREVOST Of the Gazette Wyoming Bureau

**C**ODY - For five days earlier this month, eight active-duty U.S. Air Force personnel made their way across hostile territory, working with friendly locals to avoid capture by enemy forces and reach the safety of a foreign border 500 miles away.

The enemy country was the fictional "Republic of Wyoming," with the free state of Colorado the closest haven. And if you had no idea that the airmen and dozens of local partisans were operating across the Cowboy State, then they accomplished their goal.

The wide-ranging training exercise offered a little bit of everything that a downed air crew might encounter in a place like Afghanistan, including tense encounters with unpredictable guerrilla forces, in this case played by local residents.

As they made their way across the state, the six men and two women of varying ranks and specialties faced bitter cold, hid in tight crawl spaces, rode in horse trailers and were even challenged to make a meal of rabbits and chickens after days of little food or sleep.

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The Gazette was allowed to observe portions of the exercise over two days in Park County but was not told the names of any airmen or where they were stationed, and the newspaper agreed not to publish photos showing their faces.

"We had former Green Berets and friends of Special Forces helping out from Sunlight Basin all the way to Saratoga," said Jerry Baldwin, a Vietnam War veteran and former parachute and underwater tactics instructor.

Baldwin, who lives in Cheyenne, is co-founder of the Cowboy Chapter of the Special Forces Association. He and others from the tight-knit group of Wyoming veterans volunteered to help with the exercise.

Baldwin said he was contacted by Gary Ingram, a retired U.S. Army Special Forces member now working as an independent contractor helping to supervise and monitor the training.

Wyoming was a good fit for the exercise because of its climate, geography and sparse population, Ingram said, adding that he did not speak for the U.S. military or any other party, but only for himself as a contractor.

Ingram declined to name the private company that organized the training. A letter about the exercise issued by the office of Gov. Dave Freudenthal listed the Wyoming Air National Guard and NEK Advanced Securities Group as organizations involved with the training.

Representatives from both groups declined to comment.

"Wyoming has the altitude and cold weather closest to Afghanistan," said Ingram, who grew up in Pinedale. "My experiences growing up in Wyoming definitely helped me with the cold-weather training I had in the Army."

He said the airmen handled below-zero temperatures well.

"All had previous survival training, and they were able to build shelter to ward off the cold. We didn't have to change any of the activities, and the cold weather made the training all the more effective," he said.

He said the training was designed to put the airmen through many different experiences in a short time.

"Being hidden by local civilians, I wanted to demonstrate the situations they could be in. I wanted them separated, alone in dark, cramped rooms. I had some hidden in rooms right next to a Christmas party, where they faced discovery if they made any noise. I also wanted them put out in the forest where they had to keep warm while preparing food and melting snow for water.

"I also wanted to expose them to different forms of transportation. I wanted them transported in horse trailers, snowmachines, ordinary cars and even just walking," he said.

Ingram said a retired Special Forces medic was on hand throughout the exercise.

Had the exercise been real, the most dangerous moment would have been the first contact between the airmen and their local allies, a group of partisan guerrillas helping ferry them to safety.

According to the Joint Doctrine on Evasion and Recovery, a manual published by the Pentagon, "the moment of contact is very tense because it requires two parties, unknown to each other and located in hostile territory, to meet without being detected by either enemy forces or elements of the local population, and without compromising either party's security."

"Our little team was a group of insurgents or guerrillas who happen to be on the American side," said Jeff Mummery, a former Army Special Forces member who conducted several cross-border reconnaissance operations as part of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group.

Mummery led a small group of fellow Cody-area residents who contacted the airmen in Sunlight Basin after they had spent a cold night hiking and camping, then hiding the next day to avoid detection by locals.

Part of Mummery's group hung back while he and an "interpreter" gave a signal near the airmen's campsite for one of the Americans to come out and be identified and authenticated.

"I explained that we were going to have to blindfold and handcuff them until we could validate who they were," Mummery said, playing the role of an insurgent wary of having his group infiltrated by spies.

"I told them that - unlike them, who would be killed if we were caught - not only our group would be killed, but also our families. So our risk was substantially greater," he said.

Such a guerrilla group might protect and hide Americans until they could be picked up by helicopter, or it might transport them out of hostile or rugged terrain where U.S. recovery teams can't operate safely or secretly.

The Cody guerrillas moved the airmen to a secure spot nearby and verified their identities. That process involved asking the airmen questions that would have prearranged coded answers, transmitted to the guerrillas by U.S. commanders.

The airmen were told to shed their Air Force uniforms and get rid of any items that would identify them as American military, even though their appearance or language would likely give them away in a place like Afghanistan.

They donned civilian clothes bought at a thrift store, with some articles too large, others too small, and none warm enough for prolonged exposure to the extreme cold.

The guerrillas then loaded the airmen in two vehicles, covered them with tarps and blankets and drove them to a mountain cabin near Wapiti, a two-hour drive along winding backcountry roads.

"When they got to that cabin, one or two of them said it seemed like the Taj Mahal," said Todd Churchill, a wrangler and horse trainer who played a Cody guerrilla.

The airmen got a little bread and salami, probably enough for four, but "not one single person complained," Churchill said, adding that "everybody ate something, and when they went to bed, there was still more left on the table."

He described the airmen as professional and unified and said they spoke little of the "real world," other than an occasional comment about looking forward to a favorite meal at the end of the exercise.

The second night, the airmen left the cabin, above 8,000 feet elevation, and hiked more than three miles in the moonlight to the highway in the valley below.

"My experience of walking around the mountains in the dark is that you can get in a big bind in a hurry if everybody is not on the same page, so it was not a soft experience," Churchill said.

The group stuck to the trees and brush to avoid detection, and the steep hills and scattered snow and mud made for a challenging slog over slick, uneven ground.

"I gained a much greater appreciation for the importance of the training for people we send into perilous territory," said Mike Schumacher, a Cody bank executive who played the role of interpreter for guerrilla leader Mummery.

Schumacher has two sons who have served in the military, with both having been deployed to Iraq.

"I really have been proud of my sons' direct accomplishments, and I've tried to be a good parent of a military family, but I've felt a little frustrated that my contributions were so indirect," he said.

The training was a way to tangibly help active-duty personnel, Schumacher said, adding that he struggled with "balancing respectful treatment of them with an effective training exercise."

Finding the right tone while playing a potentially hostile guerrilla without being abusive was something many of the role players struggled with, said Sam Krone, a deputy Park County attorney and member of Mummery's team.

"You realize you have to play a role, and in reality, these guerrillas may not be that open and warm and friendly," he said.

"But what struck me most was how difficult it would be for our military personnel to be in a real-life situation like that. It was cold, rugged terrain and they had no idea where they were or if anyone was coming to help them.

"It makes me appreciate them even more, and how difficult it must be," Krone said.

During the exercise, the airmen had little idea what was coming next, when their next meal would come or what they might be required to do. Even local teams had few clues about what groups in other towns had planned.

At one "checkpoint" out of Cody, Mummery told the airmen that he had to "bribe" local authorities to ensure their safe passage. He demanded something of value in return and took the watches of some of the airmen.

Because the airmen were split into two groups, each team of four was not sure whether the other team had safely made it through the checkpoint. Each group was concerned about the other.

"I think they did a pretty good job, and the biggest thing from my perspective was the team-building aspect of it all," Mummery said.

"They did something that was very difficult, and hopefully they gained some confidence from it and learned that to survive, if you keep your head down and follow some pre-laid plans, you stand a good chance," he said.

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