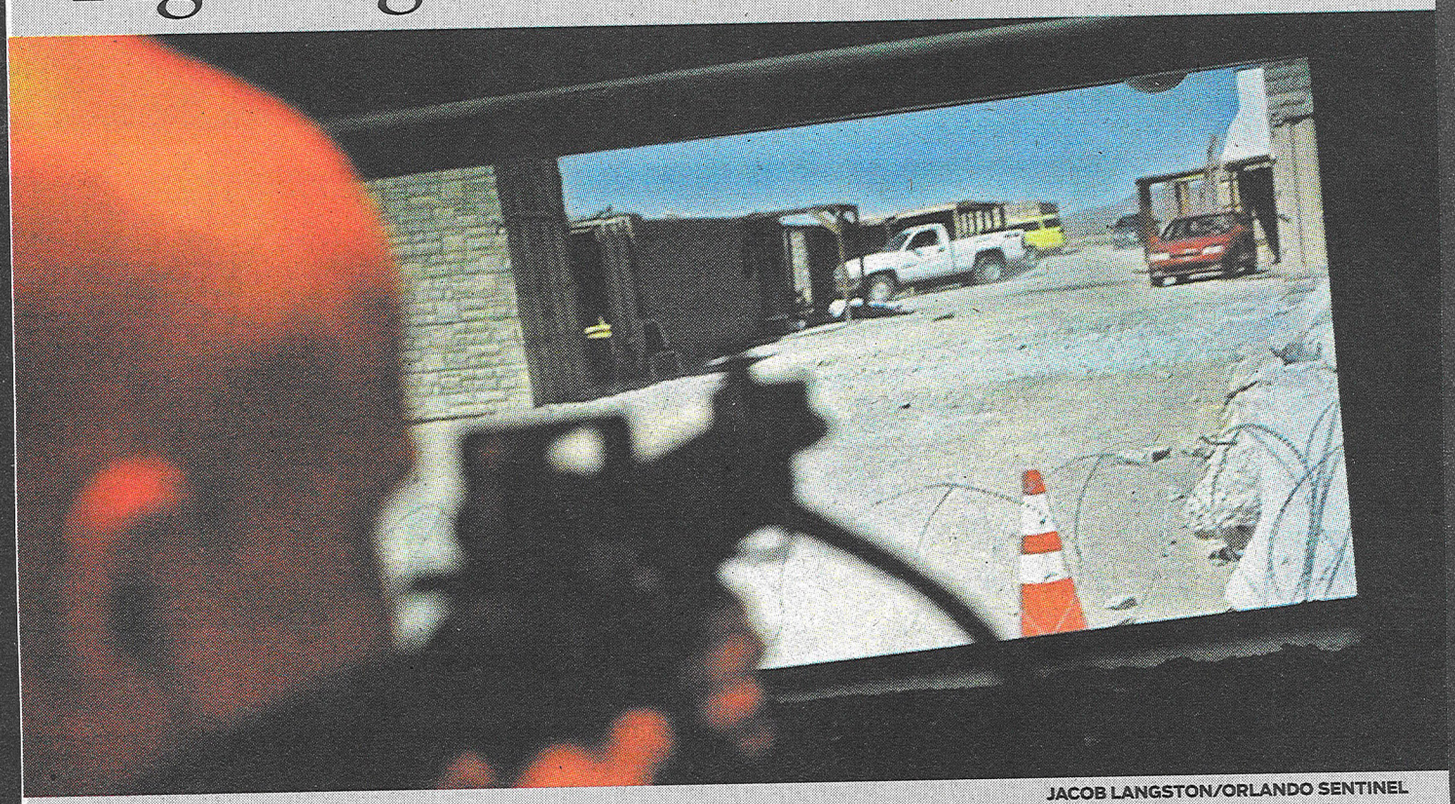
Area high-tech in high gear as Afghan battles intensify

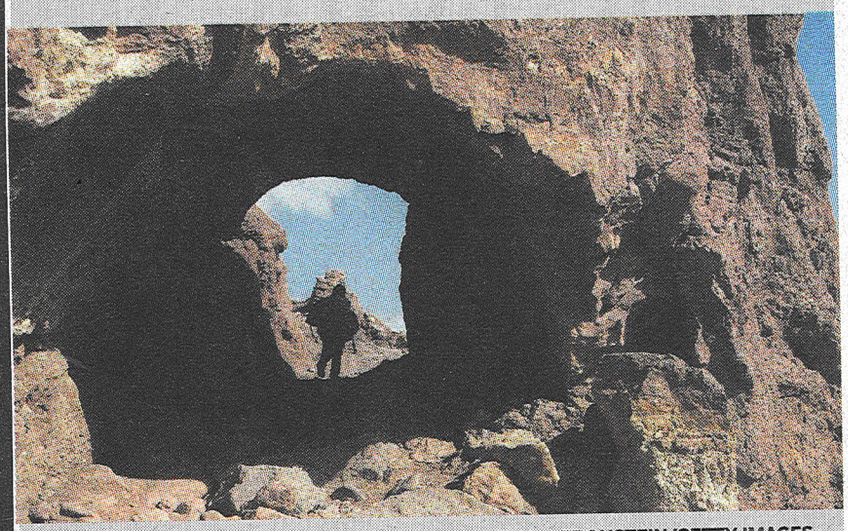
Fighting virtual war here . . .



JACOB LANGSTON/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Lt. Col. Charles Stein of the Army's training-systems agency, based in Orlando, demonstrates the Engagement Skills Trainer 2000 this week. 'It's more than ever a matter of winning the hearts and minds of the people,' he said.

. . . aids troops there



PAULA BRONSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES

The terrain in Afghanistan can be more forbidding than that of Iraq, much of which is broad, flat plains and deserts.

By Richard Burnett
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The U.S. military's shift in emphasis from Iraq to Afghanistan has generated a flurry of high-tech work by defense contractors in Central Florida to meet the unique demands of the Afghan war.

The region's defense industry is working on a variety of systems specifically for the fighting in mostly mountainous Afghanistan — from advanced drone technology and long-range surveillance cameras to virtual 3-D maps and urban-warfare trainers.

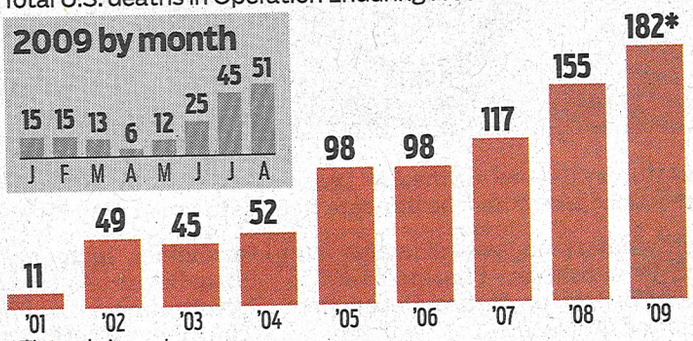
A lot of the new business still involves the guns, missiles and conventional weapons used there during almost eight years of fighting, but some of the latest technology has a much different purpose, one learned in Iraq: training troops to relate to the country's people.

That's more than a matter of teaching soldiers how to speak the language; it's also getting them to understand the social, cultural

PLEASE SEE **AFGHAN, A10**

Rising toll in Afghanistan

Total U.S. deaths in Operation Enduring Freedom



*Through August
SOURCE: The Associated Press

ORLANDO SENTINEL

807 Total U.S. deaths since the start of the Afghan war.

51 U.S. deaths in August, the deadliest month so far.

52 U.S. troops from Florida killed in the war.

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- **Obama's dilemma: Will troop increase erode support?**
- **Blast kills Afghan official**

AFGHAN

FROM PAGE A1

and religious ways of the war-torn country's residents, military-training experts say.

"The rules are different now than when we first went into Afghanistan," said Lt. Col. Charles Stein, a senior official for the Army's training-systems agency, which is based in Orlando. "It's more than ever a matter of winning the hearts and minds of the people. Sure, you want to get the bad guys, but you know you have to protect and save the rest of the population."

Much of the military's cultural training of U.S. troops takes place at a military base tucked in rural northeast Florida. Known as the Camp Blanding Joint Training Center, the sprawling complex has more than a dozen replica villages modeled on Afghan and Iraqi locales. It is there that the National Center for Simulation, an Orlando-based industry trade group, is working with Lockheed Martin Corp. to develop a multi-million-dollar research center designed to find new ways of training U.S. forces to win over the Afghan people.

"The shift to Afghanistan has been a pretty recent thing, and it hasn't been a seismic shift yet," said Ken Kelly, chairman of the national center. "Some of the problems in Afghanistan are the same as those in Iraq, but there are some clear differences, and I think we will see the priorities change significantly in the near future."

Iraq has offered lessons

The U.S. has honed much of its military technology during more than six years of sometimes heavy fighting in Iraq, much of which has taken place on that country's broad, flat plains and deserts. But the stepped-up deployment in Afghanistan is creating demand for new and better systems, said Stein, who has spent time in both countries on training-related assignments in 2006, 2007 and earlier this year.

"Obviously, we have to adapt to the Afghan terrain, the people and the tactics of the insurgents," he said. "That is something we're doing successfully, and we believe it is saving lives."

In bringing the realities of Afghanistan to military-training simulators, defense contractors are incorporating detailed surveillance video of its mountains, towns and Taliban-held villages into interactive wargame programs such as the Engagement Skills Trainer, a virtual firing range developed by Cubic Corp.'s Orlando-area training unit.

Area contractors already reconfiguring their training systems for the war in Afghanistan also include Lockheed Martin Simulation, Training & Support in Orlando (convoy operations) and SAIC's Orlando division (armored-vehicle operations). But the local simulation-training industry expects many more companies to get involved as the war in Afghanistan moves to the top of the Pentagon's annual budget.

Lifesaving gadgets

In addition to training technology, Central Florida contractors are working on new tactical systems for U.S. troops in the field.

Lockheed Martin Missiles & Fire Control in Orlando has developed a system for fighter jets than can send real-time battlefield-surveillance video to ground troops, potentially warning them of ambush threats or other enemy action. The video downlink has been installed on F-16s and other aircraft in Afghanistan that use Lockheed's Sniper weapons-targeting and navigation system.

Melbourne-based Harris Corp. is working on communications for ground troops, too: hand-held, digital radios that receive real-time video images from unmanned aerial vehicles. Developed specifically for use in Afghanistan's mountainous terrain, the first batch was delivered earlier this summer, Harris spokesman Jim Burke said.

"It is designed to give the troops real-time situational awareness and enable them to react more quickly to what the UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle] is seeing — sometimes hundreds or thousands of miles ahead," Burke said.

Such systems can be lifesavers, said Richard Smith of DeFuniak Springs, an Afghan war veteran and editor of the Internet blog VetVoice.com.

"I wish we had those kinds of links to the ground troops when I was there," he said. "I'm sure it would have helped save some lives."

'Deluding themselves'

Critics of the stepped-up U.S. presence in Afghanistan say the military will need much more than updated technology to prevail.

One of the main lessons of Iraq was the value of the U.S. military's strategic "payoff" of that country's Sunni minority, which converted that part of the population from foes to allies, said Winston Wheeler, a defense analyst for the Center for Defense Information, a Washington think tank. That had more of an effect on the Iraq war than any high-tech weapon or training system, he argues.

"Everybody talks about how technology will remove the fog of war from the battlefield and give us the ability to dominate," said Wheeler, a former analyst for the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress. "But they are deluding themselves. We've been trying this technology in Afghanistan for a long time, but things have just gotten worse there."

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RAHMAT GUL/AP PHOTO

A U.S. soldier stands guard at the scene of the bombing in Afghanistan on Wednesday.

Blast kills Afghan official

By M. Karim Faiez and Laura King
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

KABUL — In the most serious strike at Afghanistan's security apparatus since presidential elections two weeks ago, a suicide bomber on Wednesday killed the country's deputy intelligence chief and at least 22 other people.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, which took place outside a mosque in Laghman province about 60 miles east of the capital, Kabul.

Authorities said the blast occurred as the intelligence official, Abdullah Laghmani, and his entourage were leaving the mosque where they had gone to pray during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Two senior provincial officials were also reported to be among the dead.

The attack came amid rising tensions over the outcome of Afghanistan's Aug. 20 presidential vote. The latest count, released Wednesday, put President Hamid Karzai in the lead with 47 percent of the vote, close to an absolute majority but not enough as yet to avoid a runoff with his main rival, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah.

Authorities so far have released the results from about 60 percent of polling stations. Most of the allegations of vote-rigging that have emerged after the vote have been aimed at Karzai and his supporters. Investigating the complaints could take weeks.

Wednesday's explosion wrecked several vehicles and damaged the mosque the Afghan officials were leaving in the town of Mehtar Lam. American troops deployed in the area swiftly moved in to cordon off the scene after the blast.

The attack was evidence of the insurgents' ability to target even heavily guarded senior officials of the Afghan government. Nearly all top figures in the central and provincial governments are at risk of assassination, part of what Western officials say is a Taliban strategy to erode faith in Afghan authorities' ability to govern.

Faiez reported from Kabul; King reported from Istanbul.

lking@tribune.com

U.S. tries to calm concerns

U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke tried to play down worries about Afghan President Hamid Karzai on Wednesday as mounting charges of election fraud raised questions about years of costly international efforts to help his country.

Holbrooke, America's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, was joining 26 other envoys for talks about international aid and how to deal with the ballot-stuffing charges tarnishing the man who long embodied the world's hope for the country and its democracy.

— —Associated Press