



GLOBE PHOTO/STEPHEN HOWIE

A soldier climbing an icy slope on Mount Mansfield, near the Mountain Warfare School in Jericho, Vt.

## On a mountain, visions of war

### Army camp in Vt. trains soldiers for severe Afghan winter

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**S**TOWE, Vt. — More than halfway up 4,393-foot Mount Mansfield, Vermont's highest peak, a soldier methodically worked his way up a 100-foot cliff of ice, carefully sticking ice picks and kicking crampons into the glassy mountainside.

"Ice!" he called out, as a 5-pound chunk slid down the cliff and landed next to his training partner. His partner has learned to keep his head down — and not look up — when he hears "Ice!" and to keep the rope taut in case anything goes wrong.

The two soldiers were in the midst of a grueling, 15-hour-a-day training course at the Army's only military mountaineering school, tucked in nearby Jericho, in the

heart of the Green Mountains in northwestern Vermont. During their two-week stay, which will end tomorrow, they have skied while dragging 200-pound equipment sleds, slept in canvas tents through temperatures in the single digits, and hiked mountain passes with zero visibility.

Every year, hundreds of soldiers attend the Mountain Warfare School to learn how to navigate treacherous terrain and fight in extreme weather conditions. That training takes on added significance with the war in Afghanistan lingering in the midst of the Afghan winter.

One military analyst recently referred to the conditions in Afghanistan as "Vietnam with snow." In January, the average temperature in Kabul drops below freezing and the snow averages close to a foot thick. The jagged mountain

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# Soldiers prepare in Vermont for war

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range that cuts through northeastern Afghanistan is notorious not only for its cold, but also for wet weather that turns roads to mud.

Although this Afghan winter has been warmer than usual, harsh conditions are in the forecast. That makes the training in Vermont ever more essential to troops serving in Afghanistan or on their way there.

Terry Lambert, commander of the Mountain Warfare School, said he could not specify how many of the school's graduates are now deployed in Afghanistan. But he did acknowledge the school's close relationship with the legendary 10th Mountain Division out of Fort Drum, N.Y., whose soldiers are securing and repairing airfields and infrastructure in Bagram and Mazar-e-Sharif.

In addition, the school sent a team of instructors last month to the Colorado Rockies expressly to train forces on how to operate successfully in Afghan-like conditions. The request for winter-weather training — against the backdrop of Colorado's higher elevations — was the first the school has received related specifically to the war in Afghanistan. It is not likely to be the last.

"Falling!" the climber shouted as his ice picks popped loose and his crampons scraped down the ice. He slipped a few feet before the rope caught him with a jolt. He hung there for a moment, his full camouflage outfit set in sharp relief from the clear ice that rose 70 feet above his head.

The Mountain Infantry Battalion is headquartered at the school. The Army's only battalion fully trained in military mountaineering, it was formed in 1982. The Vermont National Guard opened the Mountain Warfare School the next year, custom-fit to the needs of the battalion.

Lieutenant Colonel Michael Bullock, the battalion's commander, said his training takes the survival techniques learned at the school and adds the combat element. "We not only have to sustain ourselves in cold weather and get to the fight, but when we get there we have to actually do the fighting," he said.

A few hundred feet up from the ice climbers, along a sloping ravine of deep snow, another team of soldiers simulated an avalanche rescue. At the point where the slope dropped off, a camouflaged soldier hung from a rope over the edge. Twenty feet above him at the other end of the rope, his partner rigged a pulley system while an instructor with the school looked on, evaluating their efforts.

Student Gregg Langevin, a 31-year-old Army National Guard captain from Southbridge, Mass., had just completed the same maneuver. Standing off to the side, he talked about how the training is boosting his confidence.

"I'm not going to say I'm an expert, but I'm professional enough not to get myself killed," Langevin said. When he's not rescuing avalanche victims and climbing 100-foot ice faces, Langevin is a financial advisor in Springfield.

The Mountain Warfare School serves a variety of Army personnel — including active-duty soldiers, National Guard members, and ROTC cadets. Langevin's 48-member class over the past two weeks included Army Rangers, Special Forces, and 10 members of Bullock's Mountain Infantry Battalion.

"For a lot of us, this is the first time in this environment," said Mark Purdy, an Army Ranger captain stationed in Georgia. "Although we've been in the cold, living in it is different." During the previous night, the temperature had dropped to 7 degrees.

To guard against the cold, a heater is run in their tents through the night, with someone on "heater watch," ready with a fire extinguisher in one hand and a knife in the other, in case the canvas catches fire and an emergency exit has to be cut.

"What we do is inherently dangerous, but it's not unsafe," Bullock said.

Lambert points out that New England features "some of the worst weather on the face of the Earth." Mount Washington, 80 miles to the east, has sustained the highest wind velocity ever recorded, 231 miles per hour.