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Soldiers

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Life as an Army 'brat'

The military through children's eyes

Army values a way of life

Soldier's family survives Hurricane Katrina

Believe in tomorrow

Help for families of critically ill children

'Deal or No Deal'

Soldier competes in popular game show

April: Month of the Military Child



* Kids' Puzzle—Page 27

* 2009 Earth Day Poster enclosed



C. Todd Lopez

SIMULATOR HELPS teens in Europe learn to drive

Story by Christie Vanover

TEENAGERS are learning to drive in the rain, in the fog, even on narrow mountain roads at night. They're driving while their friends talk and laugh behind them and even while their cell phones ring. But because of new technology, their lives are in no way at risk.

They are the first students to use one of Installation Management Command-Europe's new driving simulators. Ten simulators, including one here at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, were installed throughout the region to enhance Driver's Education programs for teenagers of service-members and Department of Defense civilians.

At first glance, students are pumped by the multi-panel monitors, which include a rearview mirror, side mirrors and a lifelike perception of peripheral vision. Once they get behind the wheel, however, they're faced with

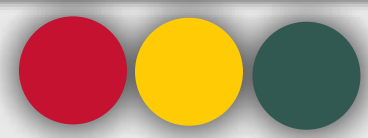
all the complexities of an automobile.

Gavin Wainwright, the father of three teenagers, was glad to hear that U.S. Army Garrison Benelux was getting one of the simulators. "I thought it was one of the best things they brought to the community in a long time," he said. "I know it's a lot better than what I went through.

"I was considering sending one son back to the States last year so he could go through drivers' training and then get his license," he said. "It would be a lot more expensive to send him there than this inaugural program, which is free."

His sons, Gavin Jr. and Justin, were among the first graduates of the Driver's Education course. About midway through the course, Justin hopped in the simulator, buckled up and asked the teacher to challenge him on the winding mountain pass.

He chose to use the simulator in



manual mode, forcing him to shift as he went up and down hills. While he completed the two-minute exercise with no faults, toward the end of the lesson, he was startled by a sudden curve with no guardrails. Had he been going too fast, he would have slid down the side of the mountain.

"I think it (the simulator) makes them more aware of some of the challenges of driving," his dad said. "They're learning how to be defensive as well as offensive and how to balance that behind the wheel."

Kregg Kappenmon agreed. He has taught driver's education for eight years and said this simulator adds a realism that he's never been able to teach before.

He can add weather elements, which require drivers to use their wipers and adjust their speed so they don't



Christie Vanover

The simulator is accurate down to the instrument cluster. It displays speed, rpm, miles traveled and indicators for blinkers and high beams. It will also warn students if they are low on fuel or if they have a battery or oil problem.

asked Kappenmon if he was supposed to swerve or stop.

It's that immediate lesson that Kappenmon said is invaluable. Additionally, everything the students do in the trainer is recorded, so Kappenmon can evaluate their driving patterns, reactions and habits to help them progress throughout the course.

Because of that feedback, Kappenmon said students learn early on that this isn't a video game. "I get results," he said, and from those results, combined with 18 tests based on his lecture and videos, students either pass or fail.

"My philosophy is they must have 80 percent or better," he said. "I don't want anyone out there with my family, if they scored less. Do you?"

The next Driver's Education course scheduled for the spring is completely filled up. Kappenmon is working with Child and Youth Services on SHAPE to schedule summer classes and to coordinate programs for teens at USAG Schinnen and USAG Brussels. ♦

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hydroplane. He can change the drive from small towns to freeways, forcing kids to merge into traffic. He can even add elements of surprise like deer and kids running into the street.

"The first time they see it out there, it won't be the first time," he said. "It's very, very, very realistic. It gets them to feel the car."

Caleb Crofts, another graduate of the class, happened to ace the test on the reading that day, but when he got in the simulator, he faced an element of surprise. As he was driving, someone on the side of the road opened their car door unexpectedly.

"Weather is usually the big hazard talked about in the book," he said, admitting that he didn't know how to respond to the situation. He veered to the left and passed the car safely with an acceptable reaction time, but after finishing the drive, he immediately

After students were quizzed on a chapter of their text, instructor Kregg Kappenman discusses the answers. Kappenman has taught driver's education for eight years.



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Justin Wainright, 18, nearly slips off a mountain pass while driving in the simulator. Scenarios like these make the digital training experience invaluable to teens learning to drive in Europe.



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Caleb Crofts tries a more challenging course that presents elements of surprise along the route. Through each phase, he aims at finishing with zero faults.



After teens finish a run through the driving simulator, they receive instant feedback about their performance. The teacher uses the feedback to analyze a student's performance throughout the course.



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