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## Simulator Helps Teens in Europe Learn to Drive

By Christie Vanover  
Special to American Forces Press Service

MONS, Belgium, Jan. 12, 2009 – Teenagers here are learning to drive in the rain, in the fog, and 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.



*Justin Wainright, 18, nearly slips off a mountain pass while driving in a U.S. Army Garrison Benelux, Belgium, simulator. Ten driving simulators were installed throughout Europe to enhance driver's education programs for teenage children of servicemembers and Defense Department civilians. U.S. Army photo by Christie Vanover (Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.*

They are the first students to use one of Installation Management Command Europe's new driving simulators. Ten simulators, including one at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe here, were installed throughout the region to enhance driver's education programs for teenage children of servicemembers and Defense Department civilians.

At first glance, students are pumped by the multi-panel monitors, which include a rear-view 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, said he 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 here. About midway through the course, Justin hopped into 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. Though he completed the two-minute exercise with no faults, toward the end of the lesson he was startled by a sudden curve with no guard rails. Had he been going too fast, he would have slid down the side of the mountain.

"I think it 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 ed 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 hydroplane. He can change the drive from small towns to freeways, forcing students to merge into traffic. He can even add elements of surprise, such as deer and children 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 Crotts, another graduate of the class, happened to ace the test on the reading assignments that day, but when he got into 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 asked Kappenmon if he was supposed to swerve or stop.

It's that immediate lesson that Kappenmon said is invaluable. 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?"

(Christie Vanover works in the U.S. Army Garrison Benelux public affairs office.)



*Teens who drove in a driver's education simulator at U.S. Army Garrison Benelux, Belgium, receive instant feedback about their performance. U.S. Army photo by Christie Vanover*

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