

**The Denver Post (CO)**

# **U.S. soldiers tap an old ally for new battles**

## **Green Berets saddle up**

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*Photos by Helen H. Richardson | The Denver Post*

**Flat Tops Wilderness Area** - At sunrise, a hardened Army Special Forces soldier's worried cry rang across a high mountain meadow.

"Where's Coco?"

Trained in all manner of combat, the sergeant nicknamed "Bones" had temporarily lost his frisky black mare.

And this week, with the military beginning a new effort to hone cavalry skills for 21st-century warfare, his wayward steed posed an urgent problem.

The idea is to help America hunt down enemies worldwide. Army leaders see horses and mules - combined with elite troops and the fanciest weapons - as ideal for operations in roadless parts of Afghanistan, the Philippines, Colombia and elsewhere.



Seven members of the 19th Special Forces Group look over a ridge in the Flat Tops Wilderness Area, where they practiced using horses and mules over the kind of roadless terrain they might encounter in Afghanistan or Colombia.



A staff sergeant holds one of the machine guns soldiers learned how to wrap and pack for transport via mule.

Although their training in the Flat Tops Wilderness Area did not include live fire, the Special Forces rode fully armed.

So Bones and a dozen other members of the 19th Special Forces Group were sent camping in the northwestern Colorado wilderness for a new 10-day training program.

They rode in formations across windswept ridges 12,000 feet and higher while talking into radio mouthpieces that left their hands free. They packed and unpacked heavy weapons, including a grenade launcher and a .50-caliber machine gun, onto and off of mules. And they learned to control livestock - coaxing horses into bridles, begging mules to move along cliffside trails where some habitually pause.

The Army initiative grew out of improvised equestrian exploits in Afghanistan. Special Forces troops dropped in from Uzbekistan and met bearded Afghan warlords who immediately gave them horses for transport.



Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld hailed this improvisation as a model for modern combat.

Now it may become more than a one-time adaptation. In June, Army chiefs issued an updated field manual, "Special Forces Use of Pack Animals." And Special Forces leaders contacted Winterhawk Outfitters, a Colorado company that trains guides and leads hunting trips in the Flat Tops.



Owners Larry and Laura Amos saw training Special Forces soldiers as a privilege. They arranged a special permit from the U.S. Forest Service to allow more than the maximum number of people and pack animals in the protected wilderness. No live fire was involved.

But commanders plan to bring more Green Berets for possibly different training next year. A C-130 aircraft could drop bundles of supplies to soldiers camped in the wilderness. Soldiers could fend off simulated attacks.

"I can't imagine getting any better training anywhere else," said the 51-year-old leader of this exercise, a sergeant major named Tom. He and others agreed to let a reporter and photographer ride along on the condition that the soldiers' last names not be revealed, for security reasons.



Melding 19th-century cavalry skills and high-tech weaponry "gives the United States power projection capabilities that it has not had and that other countries don't have," said John Pike, an analyst who runs Global Security, a Washington think tank.



Quick adaptation behind enemy lines is the traditional forte of the Special Forces, among the most elite U.S. soldiers. They speak foreign languages and are cross-trained as experts in explosives, emergency medicine, intelligence and more.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, the soldiers here have been busy from Morocco to Iraq, but they said their work often is about diplomacy.

A sergeant named Dan, 29, reads Middle East history. "If I go somewhere, I like to have an understanding of where people are coming from," he said. In part that's because "understanding other people helps us to win."

In Afghanistan, said the 56-year-old Bones, his team was dropped into a northern region where "the only way we knew if somebody was an enemy was if they were shooting at us." And "we didn't know anything about horses."



They haggled with a trader for three skinny horses for \$350 to \$450 apiece and then rode them on patrols, such as a mission to round up an arms dealer.

The dealer was living in a nearby compound selling rocket-propelled grenades. They mounted their horses, wearing local shalwar kameez smocks over their bulletproof vests, and were able to case the compound for a nighttime raid.



On Monday, troops climbed a narrow trail to the 12,200-foot shoulder of Sheep Mountain - terrain Bones said he never would have attempted to cross in Afghanistan. "We're learning stuff here we didn't know when we were over there," Bones said.

Now, with their mule-packing skills, "we could go out with the heavier guns and set up an outpost."

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