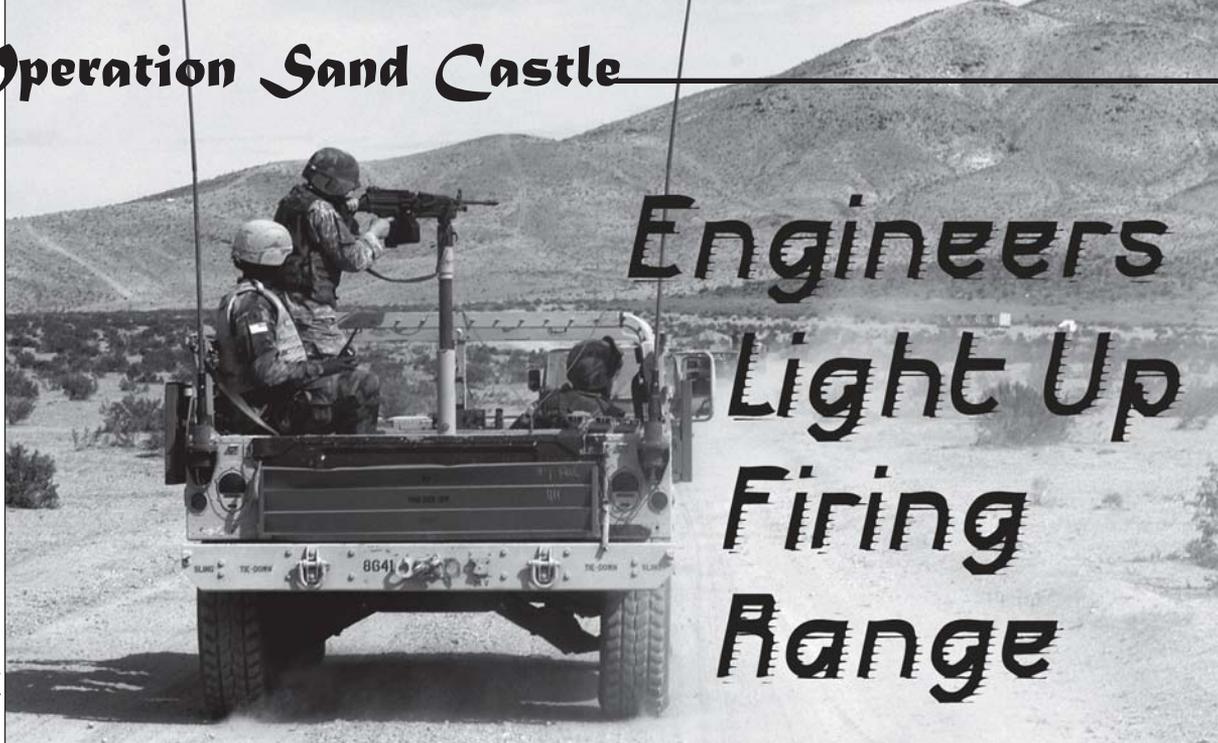


Operation Sand Castle

Photo by Specialist Matt Wisniewski



Engineers Light Up Firing Range

By Specialist Matt Wisniewski

As the convoy stopped, a hush fell over the nine Army vehicles. The reality of the situation set in as the four gun trucks tested their weapons systems. Soldiers looked forward a bit nervously to what lay before them. Ahead of the convoy was a city with more than a hundred enemy targets. Improvised explosive device (IED) attacks were expected. The Soldiers' task was to conduct a 20- to 30-minute assault on the city without injuring any civilians. Safety was the most important part of this mission. The Soldiers were technically proficient on their weapons and would need to rely on their training to get them through this assault. Suddenly, a cloud of dust washed over the convoy as it began to move.

The assault was on a live-fire range at NTC, as part of the Soldiers' three-week annual training during Operation Sand Castle 2007. They had been working hard under tactical conditions—constructing bridges, buildings, and roads—while others supported these missions. The culmination of the exercise was the two-day weapons training.

The first day was spent teaching Soldiers to operate the M-2 .50-caliber machine gun and the M-249 squad automatic weapon (SAW). The training was invaluable because during a deployment, any Soldier might need to use these weapons. The familiarization was important to maintain the safety not just of individuals but of entire units. After the familiarization classes, Soldiers fired live rounds from both weapons, including a ball and tracer mix from the M-2.

The second day was the real test. Soldiers shot both blank and live rounds from moving vehicles at targets on the live-fire range. The training gave Soldiers a good idea of how to engage the enemy from a moving convoy. The landscape of the realistic range was rocky and included plastic sheep, shopkeepers in their stores, and families in their homes. IEDs exploded at various distances from the convoy along the course. Throughout the town, enemy targets were in hiding or out in the open. It was a great training opportunity that taught Soldiers how to react in situations when force is needed. 

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Photo by Specialist Matt Wisniewski

A combat engineer Soldier teaches his fellow Soldiers how to correctly operate and clear the M-2. The class was conducted in preparation for a live-fire training exercise at NTC.