War games

Ben Hargreaves comes under fire as he travels through the Canadian prairie with members of REME who are training for deployment to Afghanistan

The tail lights of the soldier's vehicle in front are the only man-made illumination in the pool of blackness we seem to be submerged in – though the stars above are spectacular. Driving south-east on the trans-Canada highway from Calgary towards Medicine Hat at night, the escort provided by the British Army is essential for us newcomers, although the road is straight and the landscape – if we could see it – a vast, empty expanse under an enormous sky.

It's a 250km journey along the highway to the army's training base, deep in the Canadian wilderness. Since the 1970s, the British Army Training Unit Suffield (Batus) has provided the military with a unique place to carry out exercises in preparation for operations all over the world. Now soldiers from 1 Close Support Battalion of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) are at Batus in force, having decamped to Canada from their barracks at Catterick in North Yorkshire in April.

Batus is a permanent British base at the south-western tip of a gigantic prairie on which the army carries out training exercises. A semi-arid breadth of dunes, dirt, rough roads and rolling grasslands, which began life as a clutch of farms, it is special because of its scale, unmatched by any of the British Army's other training facilities.

The Canadian military still runs the facility on behalf of the British. The area of the prairie devoted to training, which the Canadians used in the 1950s and beyond to test biological and chemical weapons, is larger than Luxembourg and is said to be the largest base for military manoeuvres in the West.

Unexploded chemical ordnance is still sometimes found in the

Open prairie: The convoy rolls out

REPAIR AND REHAB

Inspection and repair after operations at a protected location such as a forward operating base can be a quick business. Brakes, lights and steering on wheeled vehicles such as Jackals are checked quickly, and the running gear of tracked armoured vehicles like CVRTs assessed and repaired to ensure they are ready to go into battle again. This is intended, explains Major Matt Edwards, to give "a battle group's commanding officer a rapid assessment of vehicle availability".

The extensive process of rehabilitating vehicles, on the other hand, is a targeted and systematic focus. Vehicles of a company or squadron are examined to uncover problems, carry out maintenance, and enhance their readiness for operation. "Rehabilitation can have a massive effect on the battle-worthiness of vehicles," explains Artificer Sergeant-Major Gary Leader.

A command to carry out rehabilitation typically comes from the brigade. REME engineers will then move vehicles through a series of repair lines.

"It's possible for 300 vehicles to go through rehab in about 24 hours," says Leader. "The decision to target a company is dependent on the missions it has been on and mileage." Tracked vehicles require a high volume of maintenance because the terrain is very hard on their suspensions.

REME is supported in the battlefield by a "light aid detachment". It can carry out quick, basic repairs or request for 1 Close Support Battalion to send out a forward repair team for more complex operations.

If the repairs cannot be carried out within two hours, the detachment sends the vehicle back to the battalion.

"My role is basically crisis management," says Staff Sergeant Neil Thompson, in charge of the light aid detachment during the exercise.

"I'm presented with problems at short notice and try to come up with solutions to enable the mission to be completed."

Bits and pieces: A Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance Tracked is cannibalised for spare parts prior to being towed away

grasslands of Batus, which has two wildlife sanctuaries and an oil exploration area on its outskirts. Oil has been produced at the 2,600km^2 site since the 1970s.

The REME battalion from Catterick has been practising basic soldiering skills and firing live ammunition as part of training – one of the benefits of working in such a large area. But on the week of my visit it is the special functions of the unit on the battlefield that are being put through their paces.

Those functions are to provide mechanical and electrical engineering support to the army, from looking after fleets of vehicles – Challenger tanks to Apache helicopters – right down to the most basic cooking utensils. If it needs fixing on the battlefield, then the REME soldiers have the trade skills to do it. And, if they can't fix it right away, they will tow a disabled vehicle – a bogged-down tank or damaged armoured personnel carrier – back to a forward operating base in the field for repairs, even as the battle rages around them.

At Batus late last month, 1 Close Support Battalion was providing the engineering know-how to support soldiers and vehicles from the Queen's Royal Lancers, who were engaged in an exercise designed to prepare them for the demands of both "asymmetric", or terrorist-type, fighting and conventional warfare. Major Matt Edwards, who commands the battalion's 4 Armoured Company, explains that training has to encompass both so that the military is prepared for any eventuality – although it is the asymmetric tactics of the Taliban that his men and women will encounter when they deploy to Afghanistan next spring.

Despite the emphasis on teaching more than one type of soldiering,

current tensions inform the general training scenario. This summer, the prairie has been transformed into the imaginary, opium-rich Islamic country of Pokharistan. In the exercise I witness, insurgents, known as the Banital, are being played by soldiers from the Scots Guards. They are supported by a corps of "revolutionary guards" from neighbouring Samarkistan, who are flooding across the border between the two fictional countries.

For the purpose of the exercise, Edwards draws together troops from across the battalion of two armoured companies and one field company. These, commanded in the field during our visit by platoon commander Lieutenant Mike O'Brien, are supported by the Royal Logistics Corps, critical in terms of the supply of spare parts, as they travel in convoy deep into the prairie. REME engineers attempt to anticipate the need for spare components, such as the power packs for tracked vehicles.

I join the convoy, escorted by armoured vehicles, in the cab of a giant Foden truck driven by REME recovery mechanics as it moves out to a distant forward operating base. Deep in the wilderness, where the Queen's Royal Lancers are with their battlegroup, the base is where O'Brien and his men and women will launch the battalion's three most crucial tasks: recovery of vehicles, inspection and repair after operations, and rehabilitation of vehicles (see box previous page).

Progress across the prairie is slow, with the sun beating down and clouds of dust thrown up by vehicles ahead. It's not hard to imagine Afghanistan here. More than three hours into the journey, the dust is enveloping our Foden, which has a giant winch for recovery of vehicles, when we are suddenly attacked from the right by the enemy.

The insurgents, Scots Guards here but played by the Queen's Royal Lancers at other times, have standard SA80 rifles fitted with lasers and attack firing blanks. Both Banital and the REME engineers have laser sensors on their helmets and body armour that inform them if they have been hit, how badly they have been hurt, and whether they are "dead" and out of the exercise. Soon the attack is repulsed, but a tracked vehicle has been disabled and must be towed onwards to the forward base by a REME recovery crew.

At the forward base, it turns out that life is tough. The recovery mechanics pitch tents against the sides of three Foden trucks. It's four to a tent at night, boil-in-the-bag rations, and washing and shaving in cold water in a plastic bucket in the morning. Toilet facilities are a hole in the ground or a Portaloo. During the night, engines rev and vehicles come and go, making it difficult to sleep. On the first night, REME engineers are instructed, out of the blue, to carry out a rehabilitation operation on vehicles of the Queen's Royal Lancers.

I found three days of this lifestyle a test – but the recovery mechanics and other REME engineers spend 43 days on the prairie for the exercise, in all weathers. "It gets to be about stamina," one says.

After the vehicle rehab, Corporal Gus Wilson is just behind the Fodens preparing a recovery variant of the Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance Tracked (CVRT) for a return convoy. The vehicle, he adds, is often the furthest forward of REME craft in the battlefield. "We get out there and fix it and if we can't fix it, it becomes my trailer," he smiles. Wilson is sanguine about the conditions, but says he is looking forward to some creature comforts. "Living on the prairie is an entirely different beast to Catterick," says Edwards.

Brigadier Richard Felton, a former Apache pilot who is preparing to take charge of all British forces in Afghanistan next April, tells me that Batus helps to transform "wide-eyed" soldiers into the finished article. "We do demand a lot from our soldiers, and I'm impressed with their dedication, commitment – and the passion they show for the job," he says.

Felton says the base is helping to prepare the army for both conventional warfare and the types of early 21st-century scenario seen in Afghanistan with its "battle of perceptions".

"Our soldiers need to be able to engage with and influence local leaders, protect the Afghan people, extend security, and prevent collateral damage. You need an understanding of the people and the culture," he says.

Batus simulates the situation on the ground in Afghanistan with groups of locally based Afghans from the Calgary area taking part in exercises and simulated suicide bombings and attacks using improvised explosive devices. The battle of perceptions includes perceptions in the media: some missions this summer have featured an "embedded" television crew and reporter who follow the soldiers to produce news reports.

Felton says he hopes that when he takes charge, the situation in Afghanistan may have changed for the better following the recent torrid period for British troops. He cites this week's Afghan presidential elections and the US troop surge in Helmand province and southern Afghanistan as factors that may help to improve things.

"I'm hoping we won't get involved in as much kinetic activity, and that will be a sign of progress," he says.

"But, although we can do development, increase security and all of that, we have to be trained to use lethal force, and that is what Batus gives us – writ large."

This is the second in a series about REME in Afghanistan that started in the 29 April issue of *PE*

REALITY CHECK

REME engineers learn basic trade, maintenance and combat skills at Batus as well as supporting battlegroups. They will engage in more mission-specific training for deployment as part of Operation Herrick, the British mission in Afghanistan, later in the year in the UK.

Major Matt Edwards says: "Batus gives us three things: time, space and the opportunity to operate in a combined arms environment. The exercise involves six weeks living on the prairie, where you attain your basic field skills and discipline. It's hot and dusty today; two weeks ago we had torrential rain and high winds. Most of the locations we were in were flooded and we had to dig drainage ditches around the tents.

"If people's basic hygiene and field skills aren't swept up, they quite quickly become ineffective – a casualty in this sort of environment. For a lot of our tradesmen it's the first time they have spent this long on exercise.

"Next, the sheer space allows us to practise with the scale of what we do on operations: you can carry out long convoy moves. The scale puts things in context.

"The third factor, the combined arms environment, is working with the infantry, armoured corps, gunners, engineers and logistics. It brings all the component parts of the army together, operating in the same way we would do on an operation. When we exercise in the UK we tend to exercise discretely as REME.

"A combined arms environment produces all the friction you would get on operations: the real-time spares issues and repairs."

Settling in: REME recovery mechanics clean their rifles (left); a Foden truck acts as a support wall to a tent