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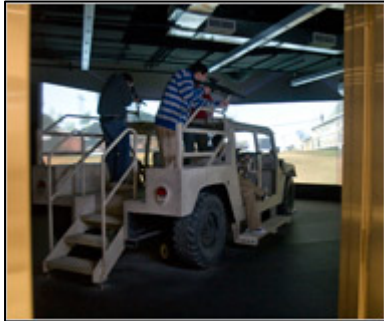
Urban Tool in Recruiting by the Army: An Arcade

By JOHN LELAND

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PHILADELPHIA — Amid the last-minute shopping bustle, the voice in the Black Hawk helicopter simulator shouted with an urgency that exceeded even the holiday mall frenzy.

“Enemy right! Enemy right!”



Jessica Kourkounis for
The New York Times

The \$13 million center, opened in August, replaced five smaller recruitment stations.

Triggers squeezed. Pixels exploded. Shopping waited.

At the Franklin Mills mall here, past the Gap Outlet and the China Buddha Express, is a \$13 million video arcade that the Army hopes will become a model for recruitment in urban areas, where the armed services typically have a hard time attracting recruits.

The Army Experience Center is a fitting counterpart to the retail experience: 14,500 square feet of mostly shoot-'em-up video games and three full-scale simulators, including an AH-64 Apache Longbow helicopter, an armed Humvee and a Black Hawk copter with M4 carbine assault rifles. For those who want to take the experience deeper, the center has 22 recruiters. Or for more immediate full-contact mayhem, there are the outlet stores.

The facility, which opened in August, is the first of its kind. It replaces five smaller recruitment stations in the Philadelphia area, at about the same annual operating cost, not counting the initial expenses, said Maj. Larry Dillard, the program manager. Philadelphia has been a particularly difficult area for recruitment.

The Army recruited 80,517 active personnel in the fiscal year that ended in October, slightly surpassing its goal of 80,000, though as in recent years it fell below its goal of having 90 percent of recruits be high school graduates.

In recent years the Army has tried a number of ways to increase enlistment, including home video games, direct marketing promotions, a stronger online presence and recruitment-themed music videos. In 2007 it added bonuses of up to \$2,000 for Army reservists who signed up new recruits. Civil liberties groups have criticized the Pentagon for its efforts to reach high school students.

But while recruitment remains strong in rural areas where there are military bases, it is weak in cities like Philadelphia, Major Dillard said. “The question is, how can we get our stories out to urban centers where most of the population lives, but where we don’t have a big presence?” he said. He added that the center did not recruit anyone under 17.

On a recent afternoon, about a dozen more-to-less-likely recruits stepped away from the mall’s screaming markdowns to try the simulators and play free video games, including Madden football and Rainbow Six: Vegas.

Mikel Smith, 19, and Jovan McCreary, 21, sat at Alienware game stations, maneuvering the camouflaged antiterrorist troopers of Rainbow Six through a series of casinos under siege. Muzzles flared on screen; sounds burst in their headphones.



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About 35 visitors have enlisted.

"We're just here to play the games," said Mr. Smith, who said he was not considering enlisting in the Army. At the sign-in desk, where visitors fill out an information sheets and receive bar-coded photo identification cards, he indicated that he did not want to be contacted by a recruiter.

Beside Mr. Smith, Mr. McCreary leaned back in his black mesh chair. "I got the same game at home, but it's better here," he said. He, too, was not interested in the Army Experience Center's other purposes. "We're going to college next year," he said.

First Sgt. Randy Jennings, the supervising officer on this day, said the center's intent was not just to recruit personnel, but also to inform young people about the Army, in an area where they have little contact with service members. Most recruits live near rural bases.

If the program is deemed a success, the Army might replicate it in other cities.

"We want to put people in the Army, but that's about our third priority," Sergeant Jennings said, gesturing to a kiosk with descriptions of 179 jobs in the Army, including details on salaries and benefits. "Most people think joining the Army means being a grunt, and that Iraq equals death. We try to show them that there's more to the Army than carrying a gun. If people come in here and they learn that but they don't join, that's O.K."

Most of the staff — both military and civilian — wore casual clothing; there was no hard sell. Conversations with recruiters might take place in an adjacent room or the central lounge area, where there were comfortable leather chairs and a soundtrack of Jane's Addiction and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. But on this afternoon, the only action was on the video games and simulators.

The three simulators play out missions to support the delivery of humanitarian aid in Iraq or Afghanistan; unlike in the video games, the participants do not come under fire.

In recent years, the Army has had great success with using video games like America's Army to attract recruits. But for the Army Experience Center, the results so far have been less than spectacular. Since it opened, about 35 visitors have enlisted. That is slightly below the previous recruitment rate at the five smaller stations, Sergeant Jennings said, at a time when the slumping economy would be expected to drive more people to enlist.

"We're not at the point where we can say this is an effective strategy," Major Dillard said, adding that the Army had not set a numerical threshold for success for the center.

"We won't be measured by the number of people we put in the Army," Sgt. Jennings said. "We're basically a learning lab for the military, a way for us to interact with kids and find out what they're interested in. People are going to join the Army, whether we had this or four or five recruitment stations."

At another video console, Graceson George, 29, a graduate student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, led a squad of Army special forces through the battle zones of the game Ghost Recon. He said that he was considering enlisting, but that he had spinal problems that might limit his ability to serve.

"I just wanted to see exactly what they provide," Mr. George said. "We got a briefing on what the Army is all about. It's a great experience serving this country, and it takes commitment and determination. They said there were other areas I can get involved. So I said, give me time."

Mr. George said he did not think the video game accurately conveyed the combat experience.

"In this one, you can die as much as you like, but in real war it's not possible," he said. "The reality of military service is beyond what you think. Here you can go back and replay, but in real life if you get shot you get shot. So it's an entertainment, but it makes you think."

He turned back to the combat on the screen. In the cocoon of the headphones, he did not hear the sound of prices hitting the floor.