

For recruits, final test no trip to Disneyland

Using all the tricks of their trade, theme park experts are building the Navy a state-of-the-art simulator to provide a lifelike training exercise
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Near the end of boot camp at Great Lakes Navy base in North Chicago, would-be sailors undergo a training challenge called Battle Stations that is grueling but bears little resemblance to an emergency at sea.

Singing odd ditties such as "I'm a Little Teapot" to break the tension, recruits run back and forth between buildings. They fight a faux fire with hoses that aren't turned on.

They jump into a swimming pool to simulate orders to abandon ship. They crawl around in gravel and dirt looking for life-size rag dolls meant to represent wounded shipmates.

This scenario, however, is about to change.

Starting next year, Battle Stations will take place on a three-story replica of a guided missile destroyer called the USS Trayer, where recruits will smell faux sea air, hear foghorns, feel the fleshy weight of their comrades, crawl through smoke and even see moonlight streaming through a hole blasted through their ship.

To create this far more realistic experience, the Navy is employing the kind of technical wizardry normally found at theme parks such as Universal Studios.

"When you ride the Superman ride for a minute and a half, they want you to think you are Superman," said Capt. Mike Moran, commanding officer of Recruit Training Command Great Lakes. "When the recruits board this ship, we want them to think they are taking a U.S. Navy warship to sea. And when the terrorist attack happens, we want them to think they are actually fighting to save the ship."

Officials at Great Lakes, which houses the Navy's only boot camp, and those involved in the USS Trayer project say they can barely wait to watch through specially designed one-way mirrors as the recruits experience the new Battle Stations for the first time.

"You're talking Hollywood vs. locally built," civilian project engineer Peter Livas said, standing inside the behemoth ship amid a bevy of construction workers.

Battle Stations comes toward the end of the Navy's nine-week boot camp. The rite of passage began in 1997 and is modeled on the Marines' nightmarish "Crucible," which involves 54 hours of strength training, crawling under barbed wires and a mind-numbing lack of sleep.

More than the graduation ceremony, this is the night recruits look forward to. If they complete the exercises successfully, they receive a ball cap emblazoned with the word "Navy," signifying that they have made the transition from recruit to sailor.

The exercises, while mostly serious, mix in silliness that is otherwise not allowed during boot camp. During recent exercises, one trainer asked a recruit to perform pirouettes, and recruits were told to answer questions with a "si"--yes in Spanish--for the rest of the night.

"All of these weeks, it has been, 'Get in line, shut up.' Tonight is kind of a release," said Chief Petty Officer Erik Olson, a Battle Stations trainer.

Man behind the magic

Construction on the \$82 million Trayer is expected to be complete in June 2007.

Behind the theme park magic is technical director Robert Cortelyou. The Los Angeles-based tech guru's resume includes building rides such as Indiana Jones' Adventure for Disneyland. He is in charge of all the scenery, lighting, audio, props and graphics on the Trayer.

Cortelyou said that when he first received the Navy's wish list of what they wanted for the new Battle Stations, he wondered, "Can we do it?"

The ship's realism will be uncanny, he said. It will be surrounded by 130,000 gallons of water, and an ocean scent pumped into the ventilation system will make it smell like the open sea.

Several of the events the recruits will experience will be especially intense--a flooded room, for example--but the fire scenario might be the most startling, Cortelyou said.

Recruits will open the hatch to a galley storeroom and be confronted by a flash of fire lasting three seconds. Then, they will notice a continuously burning fire coming from a storage shelf in the same room and fight the blaze.

The potential for a frightened recruit to drop a hose loaded with 100 psi of pressurized water is a concern, so a facilitator will be stationed in the room with a ready finger on a "deadman's switch," which would turn off the water and fire and turn on the lights, Cortelyou said.

"A lot of things could happen, especially when you are 18, and you have never seen this kind of thing," he added.

During debriefings in one of the berthing compartments, a fake CNN channel will show mock news images of the events happening to the recruits.

Several times, recruits will be physically jolted by the sensation of "missiles" hitting the side of the ship, created with bass speakers under the decks. That will lead into an emergency event resembling a mass casualty and based on the terrorist bombing of the USS Cole on Oct. 12, 2000, in which 17 sailors were killed.

Injured sailors will be represented by anatomically correct mannequins that will weigh about 120 pounds, will feel like real people and will have realistic-looking injuries. They also will talk and moan.

The mess decks will jut out at awkward angles and look like they have collapsed, just like they did on the Cole. A whistling wind will blow through a gaping hole on the side of the ship, courtesy of a machine.

Even under the more low-tech conditions in use now, Battle Stations is intense and emotional.

Before the exercises began on a recent night, Petty Officer 1st Class Jason Geiler instructed the 40 men in his group to look at a wall of names--the sailors killed on the Cole--and asked what was familiar about them.

"They were all junior personnel, just like you," Geiler said.

"Your ship has just been attacked by terrorists," he continued. "Can you save your ship?"

Moments later, the lights were turned off and a noisy compact disc came on. Over and over for the next 25 minutes, recruits heard sirens, crashing noises and agonized screams as they searched for injured sailors--represented by weighted, oversized rag dolls--and made their way through a maze of multiple rooms, sometimes crawling on gravel through darkness, smoke and deafening noise.

By 2:30 a.m., the high-energy recruits were showing some signs of fatigue. When it came time to fight a simulated fire, a group of gung-ho young men rushed in, but Olson called them back.

"What is one piece of equipment you are missing?" Olson asked.

They looked at one another, dumbfounded.

"The hose?" a recruit finally volunteered.

"That's right. You need the hose to fight a fire," Olson said.

Finally the sun came out and it was 7 a.m., time for the capping ceremony--the true graduation to sailorhood for these recruits.

About 150 sailors stood at attention, staring straight ahead. Most were caked with sweat and grime.

They listened to patriotic speeches and watched videos about the courage of the sailors out at sea, fighting a war they would soon join.

Sailors at last

Dry eyes were scarce when they received their Navy caps. But for Dunia Hernandez, a 22-year-old from Miami, it wasn't only emotion that made her weep. She was in pain.

"I pulled a groin muscle that night," she said later. "That was part of the reason I was crying during the ceremony."

An ambulance waited for her outside.

Days later, the sailors were still talking about what happened during the exercise and what it must have been like on the Cole more than five years ago.

"Just the fact that [the Cole sailors] were our age made it seem more realistic," Hernandez said. "It made you want to try hard."

Tyler Wedan, 19, of Shingle Springs, Calif., said he was grateful that the exercise allowed him to be a part of an emergency situation without any of the real-life consequences.

"I didn't have to worry that if I didn't do it right, [somebody] would get killed," he said.

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[Illustration]

PHOTOS 4; Caption: PHOTO (color): Navy recruits at Great Lakes Naval Station gather after exiting an events area during Battle Stations, a lengthy, grueling exercise that simulates an attack on a ship. Upon its conclusion, recruits are officially dubbed sailors. PHOTO (color): A recruit gets help adjusting his helmet for the simulated attack, intended to resemble the USS Cole bombing that killed 17 sailors in 2000. PHOTO: Recruits don Navy caps for the first time, having completed the Battle Stations exercise successfully. This is the moment recruits have been waiting for: They are now officially sailors. PHOTO: Construction on Battle Station 21 is expected to end in June 2007. Theme park experts were brought in to add realism to the exercise. Capt. Mike Moran said, "When the recruits board this ship, we want them to think they are taking a U.S. Navy warship to sea." Tribune photos by Charles Osgood.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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