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DOLOMITE PEAKS CHALLENGE U.S. ARMY EUROPE, ITALIAN SOLDIERS TRAINING FOR MOUNTAINS OF AFGHANISTAN

By Staff Sgt. David Hopkins

Southern European Task Force Public Affairs Office

TONALE, Italy -- Amongst the jagged, snow-covered peaks of the Italian Dolomites, U.S. Army Europe Soldiers are training alongside Italian troops, learning to survive a cold-weather environment.

The group of 11 Soldiers from the Southern European Task Force, U.S. Army Garrison Vicenza and the 13th Military Police Company, all based at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, began the four-week winter survival course in early January.

“At the end of this training the Soldiers will better understand how to move in the mountains in Afghanistan,” said Capt. Davide Maghini, a training section chief in SETAF’s operations division and winter survival instructor. “They will use these skills and will better be able to manage the bad weather and be able to move on snow.”

The Soldiers are learning about avalanches, rescue techniques and equipment, building snow shelters, snowshoeing, day and night skiing, and identifying and treating cold-weather injuries.



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U.S. Army Europe Soldiers from the Southern European Task Force, U.S. Army Garrison Vicenza and the 13th Military Police Company, all based at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, make their way up a snowy path in the Italian Dolomites during a four-week winter survival course that began in early January. The USAREUR troops are training alongside Italian Soldiers to train in conditions similar to that on which the two forces are fighting together in Afghanistan.

Training officials say the location of the course was the highest front line of World War I and a good location for the school, because it offers a harsh environment that challenges the Soldiers.

“The environment is very hard,” said retired Italian Command Sgt. Maj. Domenico Greggio, a ski master and trainer for the Alpini -- Italian mountain soldiers.

“You have a sort of natural selection, because you can reach your limits here. When they leave here -- if they make it -- they can soldier better because of what they’ve been through,” Greggio said.



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Sgt. Margarita Gutierrez of U.S. Army Europe's 13th Military Police Company shovels snow on a shelter to provide some natural insulation from the cold, during a four-week U.S.-Italian winter survival training course in the Dolomite Mountains of northern Italy.

The sergeant major said the training is important is because it resembles the terrain American and Italian forces are now fighting on together in Afghanistan.

“We are preparing people to fight in Afghanistan,” said Greggio. “This looks like Afghanistan in the mountains. Working with the Americans here is good, because we will be working side by side with them there.”

Course officials said one of the toughest challenges the Soldiers had to face

was learning to ski, but all made considerable progress during the training.

“After just three weeks, with little or no skiing experience, the Soldiers are all going down (extremely difficult) slopes with no problems,” said Capt. Andrew Lutz, a training officer in the SETAF operations division and officer-in-charge of the survival training for the American Soldiers. “We have all come a long way.”

After all the classroom and hands-on training is complete, the Soldiers must pass one final test that challenges them and proves they are truly worthy of graduating.

“The last week of the training will be the toughest,” said Maghini. “[The Soldiers] will have to build a snow shelter and spend the night. Then they will have to do patrols in the dark using their learned skills to move safely on the snow.”

And while the American troops train and prepare for that moment of truth, they are gaining something else of value that wasn't on any lesson plans.

“I've made friends with a lot of the Italians over the last three weeks,” said Sgt. Jaime Green of the 13th MP Company. “They are always willing to talk with us, even if they don't speak much English. It's a great training environment here with the Italians.”



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