Press Release

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Range Branch employees expand Soldiers’ training capabilities with new Convoy Live-Fire Range, Infantry Platoon Battle Course

FORT DRUM, N.Y. – Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division (LI) have additional training capabilities today, thanks to the resourcefulness of a team of employees from the Fort Drum Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security’s Range Branch.

As a Regional Collective Training Center, Fort Drum supports a wide spectrum of training operations for the 10th Mountain Division (LI), Army National Guard and other military units, and law enforcement agencies.

Because of the volume of training supported, J.P. Moore, Fort Drum Range Operations chief, said they were authorized a second Infantry Platoon Battle Course and a new Convoy Live-Fire Range.

The cost to construct the IPBC through Military Construction Army (MCA) was estimated at $10 million, and $11.7 million for the Convoy Live-Fire Range. But with projects across the Army competing for MCA funding, in addition to fiscal constraints, it would be years before work on either range received the go-ahead.

Collaborative effort between Fort Drum Range Operations and Directorate of Public Works determined a way forward where both ranges could be built in-house with Range Maintenance employees, and at a fraction of the cost.

“If you look at the OMA (Operations and Maintenance Army) funds we spent on both of those ranges, it was $200,000 for one range and $190,000 for the other,” said Bill Mandigo, Range Operations support officer. “And that’s what we used to build both those ranges – to build the actual infrastructure that went into the ranges.”

Adding in the cost of the targets – an impressive array of static and moving individual silhouette targets and truck- and tank-sized targets – the construction of both ranges amounted to roughly $1.4 million.

“We’ve had these targets on other ranges, but this one is environmentally-rich of all those targets,” Moore said. “I mean, there’s a lot.”

“For people who haven’t seen this type of range before, you’re going to have these targets popping up all over that are stationary, but then you’ll see a truck target that starts moving,” Mandigo added. “In another area, all of a sudden, you’ll see silhouettes pop up and start moving either back or forth like they’re running toward you or away from you.”

Mandigo said that the project started about the same time as Fort Drum and the rest of the world were responding to the global pandemic, so that became a considerable factor in planning.

“I think that was the biggest challenge of this project,” he said. “We began it with a small, dedicated team just to get things going until restrictions loosened and we could do more.”

“Just when COVID hit and people were being sent home, we had to figure a way we could get this done,” Moore added. “Our ITAM, the Integrated Training Area Management Team, stayed at work. So we had a crew of about six go out and cut down all those acres while everyone was gone just so we could stay on track.”

Moore said that this was a total Range Support Operations project – using the skills and expertise of the entire team – to include Range Maintenance staff and live-fire coordinators.

“It was pretty much everyone having a hand in it at one point or another, and not just one specific area of Range Operations doing the work,” he said.

Moore said that there were certain things they couldn’t move themselves, such as the heavy concrete emplacements, which required the support of the Fort Drum Public Works.

“We had the Environmental team involved a lot, walking the range with us many times and helping us place things where they needed to go,” he said.

They cleared 310 acres of target area between the two ranges, which are in the general vicinity of each other for a purpose. Moore said it was designed to enable a unit to start with squad-level training and build up to platoon and company functions using both ranges.

“That was one of our big focuses, to be able to use all of this at the same time,” he said. “It expedites the process if every part of their unit is out there at the same time doing their required training.”

In comparison, Mandigo said this project was a fraction of the cost it took to build the mock village and shoot house in 2016 that only encompasses a five-acre footprint.

“To really appreciate what we were able to do, you have to go out and look at the amount of area this encompasses, and that’s what we were able to do with $390K,” he said.

“And we were able to do this with our normal staffing while still supporting all the training going on,” Moore added. “There were a lot of days where I’d be upset because we weren’t making any progress, but that’s because there were 40 other ranges that were hot. That’s partly why it took a little longer to finish than it should.”

Moore said that range improvements have been ongoing ever since the 10th Mountain Division arrived at Fort Drum in the mid-1980s. When Moore joined Range Operations in 2009, he said there was a new machine gun range and automated rifle range under construction that seemed to trigger a series of builds and fixes across the training map.

“That was the beginning of a whole lot of work for us,” he said. “I mean, it really took off from there. We tore down every shoot house on the installation, and replaced and rebuilt all of it.

“We move targets around Fort Drum on a daily basis so Soldiers get the type of training they require,” he added. “That’s just what we do, and we’ve been doing that for a long time.”

Eric Wagenaar, deputy to the garrison commander, recently drove out to training area to see the completed ranges, but this wasn’t his first visit.

“Back when I was with DPTMS several years ago, we had actually walked this terrain and thought this would be a good place to put another Infantry Platoon Battle Course,” he said. “From my perspective, this was a project that was kick-started long ago because we recognized there was a training gap, so to speak. It’s good to see it finally come to fruition.”

As a retired infantry officer, Wagenaar appreciates how the new ranges directly correlate to Soldier readiness.

“To me, I think it brings a whole new level of training capability and rigor to platoon live-fires,” he said. “It’s dispersed, it has undulating terrain, and it has multiple target scenarios that will challenge leadership in the tactics of any unit going through that range. The other key factor for me is that it ends on the impact area, where you can actually continue live-fire, close-air support, mortars – every weapon system within a company can be fired into the impact area and observed to see the effects.”

Another reason he went on the site visit was to thank members of the Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security’s Range Operations and Directorate of Public Works for what they were able to accomplish.

“Not everybody can do what they did, and you could see the pride in that,” Wagenaar said. “To build these ranges, at such a high level, it was important just to talk with them and thank them for doing what they did. And when you look at the amount of money we saved to close the training shortfall – it’s just phenomenal.”

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Photo Caption: Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division (LI) can engage a myriad of targets on the new Infantry Platoon Battle Course and Convoy Live-Fire Range in Training Area 15C – a project that relied on the resourcefulness of a team of employees from the Fort Drum Range Branch. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)