



## LAVS, LOVS AND LIVE FIRING – THREE WEEKS WITH QAMR

**Canterbury journalism student Helena de Reus recently spent three weeks following the activities of Queen Alexandra's Mounted Rifles (QAMR) personnel during Exercise Jordan. It was, she found, all about getting out of her comfort zone.**

From day one driving to Burnham Military Camp feeling nervous and having absolutely no idea what I was doing, to climbing into a Light Armoured Vehicle (LAV) for a three and a half hour drive to Tekapo, accompanying QAMR as an embedded journalist kept me on my toes as I tried to balance ethics – yes, journalists have ethics – with having a good time.

Being a civilian in a military camp is a strange experience. My civilian dress – which primarily consists of blue track pants and a black puffer jacket – does not exactly blend in among the green and brown camouflage gear of the military. However not having to do sentry, kitchen clean-up and other duties is a bonus. Oh, and sleeping in now and then.

The exercise in Tekapo is one of the few chances the Squadron gets to conduct some LAV live firing. And it's impressive. All seven LAVs zero targets from 1200 metres before moving on to the static firing range where they shoot at groups of drums and cardboard targets. With muffs clamped over my ears, each shot of the 25mm Bushmaster cannon shakes the ground and shakes my bones. I get a huge rush as each cannon blast echoes and the smell of gunpowder lingers in the air.

Some rounds are accompanied by a streak of orange as they burst from the turret. These tracer rounds make it easy to see each shot and, to be honest, they look pretty cool against the backdrop of the snowy range.

In pairs the LAVs react to a mock ambush and both LAVs have a number of targets to neutralise while on the move. Close behind is the Range Conducting Officer (RCO) LAV, advising the crews and ensuring safety rules are adhered to. Following in a Light Operational Vehicle (LOV), phrases like “contact with enemy vehicles” and “target” crackle over the radio as each shot reverberates across the range.



Live firing.





A LAV on the move.

The snow provides a challenge for both the LAVs and the LOV as the vehicles struggle to gain traction. Ahead is a steep slope and the LAVs slip and slide back down the hill as their weight drags them down. Watching the LAVs attempt to get up the hill I feel a bit apprehensive as we approach the bottom of the slope.

Taking a run up, the LOV advances and I brace myself for the wild ride ahead of us. Charging through the snow, we sway from side to side as the LOV weaves a path up the rise. Although the wheels slip and I think we are on the verge of rolling backwards the LOV makes it up the hill in one go. I look behind me at the rise we just conquered. It's an exhilarating feeling and I can't help but feel a bit smug that we made it on our first attempt.

I manage to get in a LAV for the second round of stab runs. The LAV is unlike any other vehicle I have been in. Almost every space seems to have some kind of equipment; bags, helmets, cables, and packed lunches.

The ride is surprisingly smooth apart from the jolting as the LAV brakes and drives over potholes and the occasional rock buried in the snow. I hear the deep whine of the engine which seems loud at first but after 10 minutes it seems to fade into a quiet hum. The driver is guided by the commander who warns of potholes, rocks and approaching targets. It's quite comforting to know that at least two pairs of eyes are guiding this large vehicle through the snowy terrain, particularly as we approach the same hill that proved to be a challenge for the previous pair of LAVs.

Unlike the LOV, the LAV's first attempts to go up the large hill fail. The wheels struggle to gain traction and slip on the snowy incline causing the whole vehicle to lean back. I am thankful for the seatbelt pinning me in place as we all tilt with the LAV. The commander directs the driver to reverse back down the hill and to approach the slope again. Hoping my confidence in the crew is not unfounded, I listen as the commander instructs the driver to take a hard left while maintaining speed in order to have enough momentum to make it up the slope.

I hold my breath as the LAV begins to lean again, grunting as it struggles up the hill, wheels slipping. The commander continues to issue directions and the LAV finally drags itself up the slope. At the top of the rise the LAV opens fire on six targets causing me to jump in surprise. The ammunition clinks as the crew reloads and despite being encased in thick metal, I feel each shot in my bones as the gunner shouts out his intentions and results. The drive back is much quicker and in no time at all I am back at the start point, clambering out of the LAV and into the LOV to do it all over again.

Arriving at Waiouru Military Camp a week later, QAMR and its attached personnel are based at the old QAMR headquarters. During the five days officer cadets and the hunter-killer force are deployed in the field, all units rely heavily on communications with each other and the control post back at camp.

The walls of the command post (CP) are dotted with intelligence on the enemy, the officer cadets. Weather, weapons and other details of cadets' sections are constantly updated as units in the field call in any information they gather. The CP is busy with the constant sounds of static from the radios, voices crackling over the radio, and ring tones on cell phones. It seems to me like there is always something happening here and when it is quiet, it is the calm before the storm. Then the CP bursts into life again, the radios crackling furiously and people coming and going.

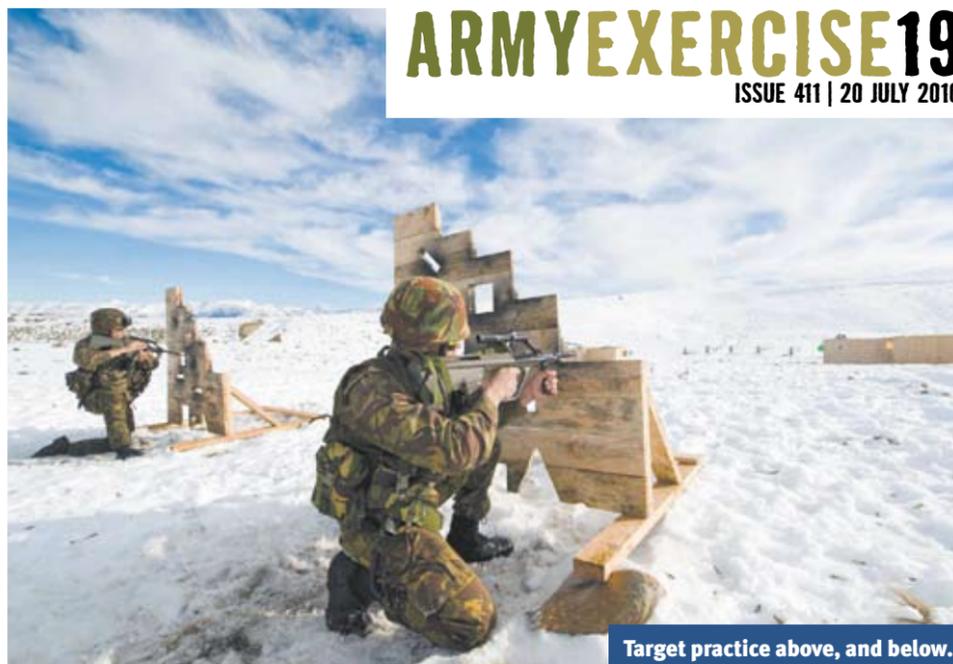
Key players crouch over a map and act out their changes in positions and what they plan to do in that area. Different shaped blocks, plastic army men and paper planes are used to mark units on the map drawn in chalk on the floor of the hangar. The map stays on the hangar floor for the entire week with the blocks shifting periodically. This may or may not correspond to the location of units in the field, but I guess I will never know for sure.

Those paper planes covered a surprising amount of that map. I manage to get rides in two Cessna planes. Take-off is a whole lot bumpier than your usual passenger plane but the view is worth it. Each gust of wind sways the plane but the pilot seems to have it under control. All eyes are on the lookout for insurgents (officer cadets) but looking through binoculars doesn't actually help spot movement to my inexperienced eyes.

We spot a few groups of officer cadets trying to avoid detection, and even catch a few completely by surprise. As we orbit the officer cadets, I discover I'm not a huge fan of this circling business and I spend the rest of the flight in a nausea-induced haze. Despite the queasiness, the flight is amazing and spotting the camouflaged soldiers in hiding is rewarding.

It's easy to lose track of what time and even what day it is with the Army. Being in the field can cause time to both drag and fly. The entire morning can pass in the back of a LAV and 10 minutes can drag while sitting in a CP or on a range. As an embedded journalist with QAMR, I have met a bunch of new people doing a job I knew nothing about. By the time I leave, I'm not getting lost around either camps, I have learned more than 30 acronyms – just about the Army.

And I have discovered it's a pretty long drive from Burnham to Waiouru.



Target practice above, and below.



Canadian soldier on exchange fires the M72.



Soldiers disembark from the RNZAF Iroquois.

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A South Island sunrise.