



MILITARY TRAINING ON PIGS RAISES CONCERNS

PETA, Filner say using the live animals
at East County facility is unnecessary

STEVE SCHMIDT • U-T

It's about training the finest medics in the world.

It's about cruelty to animals.

When it comes to the goings-on at secluded Covert Canyon, an outdoor training facility near Alpine, there's little that the two sides in the issue agree on.

As often as four times a month, live pigs are used in combat simulation exercises designed to sharpen the skills of Navy and Marine Corps medics — skills the military says could save lives in places like Afghanistan.

But the group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, a physicians organization and at least one local policymaker — Rep. Bob Filner — say the use of animals is unwarranted and call on the military to use alternatives.

"Why put (the animals) through suffering if there's a better way?" asks the



Marc Halcon owns Covert Canyon, a backcountry training facility near Alpine that uses live pigs to train Navy and Marine Corps medics. Halcon says the pigs are anesthetized and are monitored by veterinarians. JOHN GASTALDO • U-T PHOTOS



Two friends of Marc Halcon, owner of the Covert Canyon training facility, practice their skills last week at the range on the property. Halcon bought the 160-acre site on High Glen Road near Alpine in 2005.

PIGS • Training facility near Alpine allows Navy and Marine Corps medics to hone their skills

Democrat, who is running for San Diego mayor.

Marc Halcon, who owns the East County facility, believes Filner and other critics are losing sight of what's important.

"The only question that needs to be asked is what's best for our wounded soldiers?" he said, steering his Range Rover through the dusty canyon last week.

The military training issue is another flare-up in the ongoing debate over animal rights, a subject that cuts deep as concerns over creatures have increasingly come in conflict with the way many Americans live and work.

Halcon bought the 160-acre site on High Glen Road in 2005. He said the so-called live-tissue training is conducted as part of a contract with the U.S. Department of Defense and unfolds on 12 acres of the property.

A Marine Corps spokesman said it was believed to be the only program of its type currently in San Diego County, although the military conducts similar live-tissue exercises in other parts of the nation.

Halcon and his staff said the pigs — numbering from a handful to dozens per class — are trucked in and anesthetized. The animals are monitored by veterinarians, who make sure the pigs remain deeply sedated throughout the training.

Both new and veteran medics, prepping for overseas deployments, use the pigs to practice skills that could prove invaluable following a traumatic injury in the field, perhaps from a roadside bomb or a sniper's bullet.

In some cases, a sedated pig is shot or cut to simulate a major combat injury, Halcon said. Medics are instructed to stop the bleeding and treat the wound. They also practice inserting chest tubes to allow air to the lungs or try out other procedures.

"The emotional and physiological response to training with live anatomy and the stress of keeping a specimen alive for many hours best prepares Marines for actual casualties in stressful combat conditions," said Col. Sean Gibson, a spokesman with the Marine Corps Combat Development Command in Quantico, Va.

Filner, however, has introduced a bill in Congress that would phase out by 2016 the use of live animals in combat simulations.

While U.S. military officials haven't embraced a ban, other nations with sizable defense forces have dropped live-tissue training in favor of alternative methods, according to the congressman and others. "Everybody in the world, except for the Department of Defense, has switched," he said.

According to Filner's bill, the military uses more than 6,000 live animals annually "to train physicians, medics, corpsmen and other personnel methods of responding to severe battlefield injuries."

Dr. John Pippin, with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nonprofit health organization, said there's no justification for the use of the animals, given the emergence of products like the "cut suit."

Strategic Operations, a San Diego-based firm that develops training programs for government agencies, has created a lifelike body suit that can be worn to train combat first-responders.

Each cut suit, or Human-Worn Partial Task Surgical Simulator, weighs 30 pounds and includes simulated bones and organs under a thick layer of fake skin.

Pippin said the suit has been used at some military installations and allows troops to practice a range of procedures.

He said conducting the same procedures on live animals is less valuable, given the differences in anatomy. "You want to replicate as much as possible what you may encounter in battlefield situations," he said.

A 2009 report issued by the Department of Defense predicted the emergence of

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high-quality simulators, but there are concerns over the cost of such devices and some experts believe live-tissue remains the best option.

Gibson said the courses are staged at Covert Canyon instead of Camp Pendleton largely because they include contract instructors, veterinarians and others. Bringing those civilians on base poses logistical hurdles.

The exercises are held near an area that includes three shooting ranges and a dirt airstrip.

In a recent letter, PETA asked San Diego County officials to deny a major-use permit that Halcon is seeking to expand the type of courses offered on his property. The county Planning

Commission is expected to take up the permit issue sometime this year.

Justin Goodman, a PETA associate director, called the use of the pigs “arcane.”

Halcon’s closest neighbor, Robin Williams, has also been highly critical of the training. The two property owners have been locked in a bitter and long-running zoning dispute tied in part to the military courses.

The county recently agreed to look into assertions by PETA and Williams that elements of the live-tissue course violate land-use rules. County officials have told Halcon that the medic classes are allowed on the property.

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