

When Queen Alexandra's Mounted Rifles from Burnham Military Camp went on manoeuvres in Tekapo and Waiouru this winter, journalism student HELENA DE REUS learned about army life - and lots of acronyms.

**M**y brief is short: spend a few days with Queen Alexandra's Mounted Rifles (QAMR) in Tekapo Military Camp, talk to the personnel and take lots of warm clothes. Oh, and be at QAMR headquarters at 0800 on Monday morning.

The gatekeeper at Burnham looks at me suspiciously as I explain my assignment. He questions me about how long I will be in the camp and who I am meeting. The incredulous look on his face when I say I'm going on an exercise with the army to Tekapo gives little comfort.

I look down at my clothes - black puffer jacket, blue track pants and sturdy brown boots - thinking I had prepared well for the trip. Apparently not everyone shares that opinion.

At headquarters, the first thing I see is a row of Light Armoured Vehicles (LAVs), which look similar to tanks. Unimogs and some green six-wheeled vehicles called Light Operational Vehicles or LOVs. There is a flurry of activity as soldiers check over the vehicles and make sure everything is secure. Vehicles move out in groups or "packets" as we begin the 3½ hour drive to Tekapo.

Tekapo is covered in snow. The side of a hill is dotted with huts, reminding me of my school camps. Our boots crunching in the snow, we make our way over to the headquarters.

Being a civilian in a military camp is a strange experience. My civilian dress does not blend in among the green and brown camouflage gear of the military. But not having to do sentry, kitchen clean-up and other duties is a bonus.

By dinner, most of the soldiers have arrived. I'm sharing a room

with three other girls - an air force photographer, and two Territorial Force, one a medic and the other an infantry soldier. Together we pull out our plates and cutlery and make our way to the mess.

The mess is a short walk from our cabin. I am greeted by soldiers with rifles slung across their backs and they begin to line up for dinner. At the start of the line, two army chefs uncover trays of potatoes, mixed vegetables, steak and mushroom sauce.

Each morning begins with breakfast at 6.30am and a choice of cooked or continental breakfasts. Packed lunches are picked up by the troops on their way back to their cabins or as they head down to headquarters.

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 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. There's only so much static firing a girl can take, however, so I'm glad when it comes time for the stab runs.

In pairs, the LAVs react to a mock ambush and both have a number of targets to hit while on the move. Close behind is the Range Conducting Officer (RCO) LAV. He advises the crews and ensures safety rules are followed.

I'm in a following LOV.

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.

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.

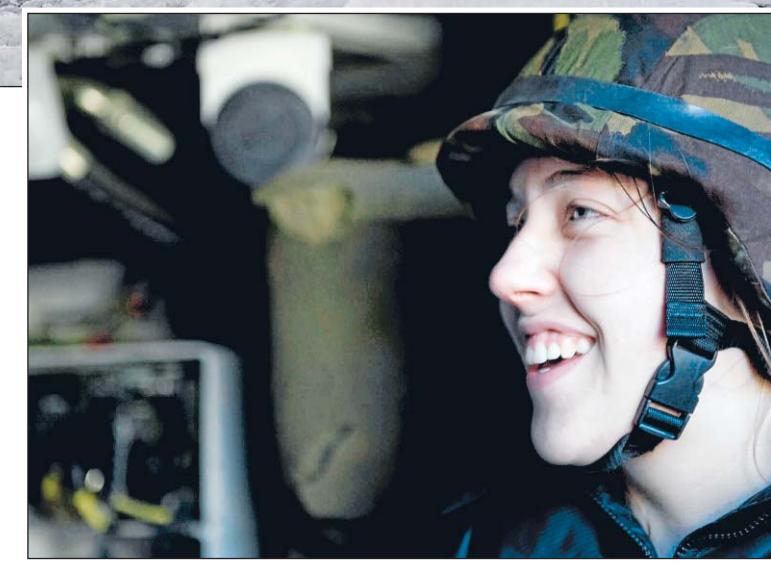
Although the wheels slip and I think we are on the verge of rolling backwards, the LOV makes it up the hill in one go. I look behind me at the rise we have just conquered. It's an exhilarating feeling and I can't help but feel a bit smug that we made it on our first attempt.

I manage to get in a LAV and almost every space seems to have some kind of equipment; bags,



**On the charge:** An army LAV races across the winter landscape.

Photo: NEW ZEALAND ARMY



**Bump and whine:** Helena de Reus heads for Tekapo inside a LAV.

helmets, cables and packed lunches. Thankfully, 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.

The deep whine of the engine is 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 a challenge for the previous pair of LAVs.

On the LAV's first attempt to go up the large hill, 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 down the hill and to approach the slope again.

I hold my breath as the LAV begins to lean again, grunting as it struggles up the hill, wheels slipping. The commander issues directions and the LAV finally drags itself up the slope.

At the top, the LAV opens fire on six targets, causing me to jump in surprise. The ammunition clinks as the crew reloads and the gunner shouts out his intentions and results.

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Arriving at Waiouru Military Camp a week later, the Queen Alexandra's Mounted Rifles are based at their former headquarters in a large metal hangar. They are a hunter-killer group and the enemy are a group of officer cadets.

The walls of the command post at the camp are dotted with intelligence on the enemy.

Weather, weapons and other details of the cadets' sections are

constantly updated as units in the field call in information they gather. The command post is busy with the constant sounds of static from the radios, voices crackling over the radio, and ring tones on cellphones.

It seems something is always happening here and when it is quiet, it is the calm before the storm. Then the command post bursts into life again, the radios crackling furiously and people coming and going.

One thing I constantly struggle with is the extensive use of acronyms. Think of any group, name or phrase and there is probably an acronym for it. I lose track of all the NAIs, RRTs, UAVs and so on.

I may not have been able to score a helicopter ride but I did manage to get rides in two of the Cessna aircraft. Watching two tall men fold themselves into the front seats of a tiny plane is pretty amusing even when I have to somehow clamber into the back.

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).

The ride itself is a good way to overlook the whole Waiouru training area and we spot a few groups of officer cadets trying to avoid detection, and even catch a few 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 nauseating induced haze.

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 command post or at a range.

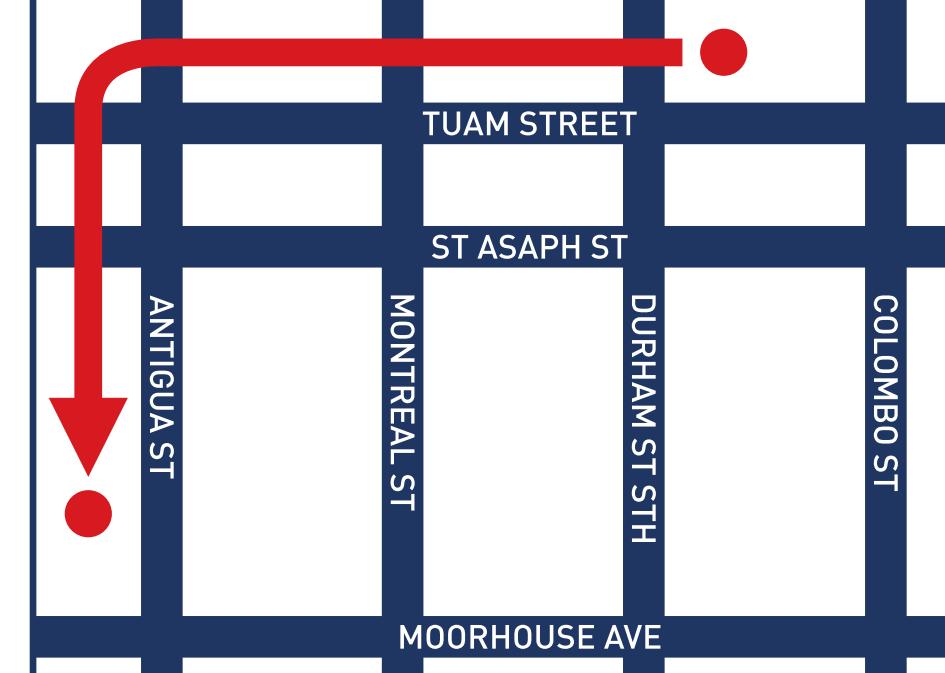
As an embedded journalist with QAMR, I met a bunch of new people doing a job I knew nothing about. By the time I left, I wasn't getting lost around either camps. I learned over 30 acronyms - just about the army - and discovered it's a pretty long drive from Burnham to Waiouru.

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