

**Special Forces take a horse course**  
**LEE HILL KAVANAUGH**

**In Afghanistan, the U.S. Army learned fast that its soldiers are greenhorns when it comes to horses.**

**Not a good way to win hearts and minds in a country that cherishes its equines.**

**But Saturday, at the Fort Leavenworth stables, a couple dozen soldiers from the Command and General Staff College tried to change themselves into tenderfoots with saddle-sores at a basic horsemanship class for Special Forces soldiers.**

**The soldiers, who served in Afghanistan, grimaced when asked if the Americans were ever teased about their lack of skills.**

**"Oh yeah," said Maj. Steve Marks, 35, of Columbia, Mo. "The Afghani soldiers really laughed."**

**Marks is deploying again in a few months, and he doesn't want to go through that humiliation again. Familiarizing soldiers with horses was his idea.**

**"This (knowledge) creates credibility as you go in there and work with the locals whose cultural background is with mules and horses," he said.**

**He asked Lt. Col. Mike McFarland, an avid horseman at the fort, if he could teach the class to people who had never touched a horse, let alone ridden one.**

**Horse virgins, most all.**

**McFarland took on the challenge. He owns three horses himself. Each year he travels to study with master horsemen at clinics, including the horse specialist trainer Buck Brannaman, a technical adviser on the film "The Horse Whisperer."**

**Under the warmth of the springtime sun, McFarland tried to pass on the most basic of information he thought the men could remember, ignoring their snickers each time a horse relieved itself.**

**Watch a horse's tail, he told them. If it's flicking around, it means the horse is worried.**

**A horse will feed off your confidence ... or fear, he said.**

**When do you hit a horse?**

**"Never, never, never."**

**After his lecture, half the group learned how to pack a horse; the other, how to ride. But McFarland warned them about the horses they would ride: "These horses aren't mosey trail horses." The horses they were going to ride were working animals, all privately owned.**

**Each of the 10 soldiers seemed a little pale as their four-legged challenge approached. Maj. Jerry Kung, 35, was joking a little too much. A San Francisco native, the closest life experience he had to riding a horse, he said, was riding a surf board.**

**"But I've seen pictures."**

**One soldier asked McFarland what two or three nuggets of information a soldier should remember before approaching a strange horse.**

**"You make the sign of the cross," McFarland answered, and grinned.**

**One by one, each man saddled up, easing his body down on his horse's back, remembering not to have a death-grip on the saddle horn. Still, the soldiers' arms and legs were giving these horses several different commands at once. Although McFarland wanted them to ride in a circle, just 3 feet from the fence, a few horses went their own way.**

**Voices of stressed riders echoed across the dirt: Back up! ...Whoa! ... Come on, buddy...turn around!**

**McFarland watched and barked instructions: "I want you to have control of the horse! Don't let it wallow around! ... If you want to be a passenger there's a horse at Wal-Mart you can ride for a quarter!"**

**A horse named Doc decided his back itched and rolled in the dirt. His rider managed to jump off in time.**

**Kung waited until everyone else was riding before he climbed on Skinner, a horse that instantly knew the person on his back was a newbie. Skinner decided he'd rather lick his front leg than trot around in a little circle like the others.**

**When the group graduated to riding outside the arena, Skinner took off a bit faster. Kung bounced up and down like the true city-slicker he was. But he managed to get out just a few last words as the group disappeared around the trail:**

**"This is not like surfing AT ALLLLLLL!"**

**To reach Lee Hill Kavanaugh, call (816) 234-4420, or send e-mail to [lkavanaugh@kcstar.com](mailto:lkavanaugh@kcstar.com).**