Naval Special Warfare ATV TRAINING

BY SCOTT R. GOURLEY

At first glance, a walk through Chris Haines' motorcycle/all-terrain vehicle (ATV) adventure company in Lake Elsinore, Calif., appears similar to some other high-end off-road specialty facilities: well-organized work areas flanked by neat rows of racing and off-road motorcycles; a collection of saddle-seat ATVs; and a neatly parked assortment of Kawasaki side-by-side two-seat and four-seat ATV models. A background of mechanical activity surrounding some of the platforms adds an air of urgency to the modification efforts under way.

But it isn't long before the eye catches a few unique discriminators, like the framed American flag that had previously flown over a special operations compound in Afghanistan, or the challenge coins displayed beside Haines' desk.

"I've been in off-roading for a good part of my life, and I've had the off-road business for 26 years," Haines explained. "I've raced in the Baja 1000 '20-some' times and won the thing 13 times. So I guess with the experience that I had, the special operations folks kind of searched me out. They wanted somebody to train them to ride and drive offroad. They interviewed me and asked if I wanted to help train their operators in the field."

Haines said that he originally started doing that training with the saddle-seat models, adding that the introduction of the Kawasaki Teryx® 750 side-by-side Light Tactical ATV (LTATV) into Naval Special Warfare (NSW) inventories in the 2008 time frame led to an expansion of his training role to encompass the creation of pre-operation documentation and other supporting manuals for vehicle operation as well as the development of an additional training course covering mechanics training.

Haines noted that the majority of his motorcycle training activities currently involve both U.S. Army special operations forces and elements of the British Special Air Service, and that NSW is just starting to move into the motorcycle arena as well.

"But Naval Special Warfare's main focus is on [the LTATVs] at this point," he said.

Along with his NSW training activities on the West Coast, Haines also travels to the Virginia Beach, Va., area to provide training in that area as well.

For the LTATVs, Haines offers one-week courses of instruction for both operation/driving and mechanics. The operation/driving training typically takes place in the Mojave Desert, while the mechanics training takes place in a classroom at the Lake Elsinore facility.

Walking into the shop area, Haines pointed to several Kawasaki Teryx vehicles equipped with a series of military modification kits.

Photo courtesy of Chris Haines

Teaching proper rock-crawling technique in an LTATV.


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Photo courtesy of Chris Haines

Driving and operations training on the LTATVs emphasizes troubleshooting and repair in the field as well as advanced driving skills.

"When we first started training with the saddle-seat ATVs for the rider training, they started talking about introducing these [Teryx] things," he said. "And I bought this one and we'd take it along on the saddle-seat trainings in the desert. They would look at it, try it, and talk about it, and so we started evolving all those [kits] to make it what it is now."

Past a row of civilian off-road and land speed racing bikes, the latter category including a 405-horsepower model capable of speeds of 240 mph on the salt flats, Haines entered the main classroom area used for both motorcycle and side-by-side mechanical training.

"Last week we had 12 students with six of these [Teryx] machines in here," he said. "We dismantled them, put them back together, and went through all kinds of troubleshooting scenarios. We also have these bench motors where we can show the guys how to take the engines apart and put them back together – the whole deal.

"When we started this training, they gave us some requirement guidelines," Haines recalled. "So we started with the requirements for their operators and then tried to introduce some new things. I think part of the reason they hired me was so that I could pass along all the things my eyes have seen in 20-some years of doing this stuff, where maybe I could educate them on things to watch out for in the desert, how to read the terrain, how to get out of a tough spot, how to jury-rig things in the field to get out of there, and those kinds of things that you learn over the years."

Characterizing the results as "unique skill sets," he added, "You can go to classes that someone like me puts out, but there are no other places where you can learn some of those things unless you are doing it for a good part of your life. I mean, how can you tell somebody about some of those things unless you've lived it?"

He continued, "It's also important to know that we are constantly evolving the courses with the feedback that we get from the students, because it is really important to us to teach information that is pertinent to what these guys do. So at the end of each course, we do a full critique where we get their input on what they thought of the course, what they learned, and anything they might have wanted to learn a little more about. Then each time that we get this information we are able to tweak the course going forward a little bit here and there to make it exactly what these guys need."

Asked if he could offer a general example of the kinds of changes that have taken place within the course, he replied, "For instance, on the mechanical side of it, we had a lot of requests for how to troubleshoot in the field and if they had a problem how quickly they could evaluate the problem, fix the problem, and get going in the field. So we put a lot of focus on that now. That's because a lot of the time 'the team guys' are way far away from the main base where they might have the Seabee mechanics. These guys are out there on their own. They may not need to know how to change the pistons in the motor because they're never going to do that. But if they are in the field and the belt goes bad, the valves get tight, or the thing doesn't want to start, they need to know how to deal with it in the field and get going."

The feedback mechanism is also reinforced by a supporting follow-up communications environment.

"Along with all of the digital documentation, they have all of our contact information," Haines said. "And sometimes our secretary walks out into the shop and says, 'Hey there's a guy on the phone from Afghanistan who wants to talk to you.' And they're calling on satellite telephones for advice about a particular issue. And we welcome those calls."

In terms of training challenges, he observed, "Sometimes it's a little bit of a challenge to get these guys to drive a little more conservatively. One of the reasons they have the job they have is because they are kind of special people to begin with. And many of them 'want to go fast' from the beginning. In fact, everybody wants to go really fast. But what we try to teach in our training is that you can go fast, but do it because you have the skill set to go fast – not just because you can. We teach that

if you have all the skills for operating then the speed comes by itself. And you're safe at the same time. So that's our biggest challenge: Sometimes you have to go slow to go fast."

Haines said that the operator course starts with driving basics, "because sometimes we have students that have never operated any vehicle offroad – whether it's a motorcycle, ATV, or anything else. So we generally have to start out with some basic skill sets: how to read the desert terrain; when to use four-wheel drive or two-wheel drive; and when to use high range or low range. Most importantly, we teach them about knowing the vehicle capabilities so they won't get themselves into a position that they can't get out of. So if you come up to a big rocky hillside you would be able to evaluate whether or not it was something that your vehicle could do.

"We take them through the training with the vehicles both weighted and unweighted," he said. "We do a lot of driving at night. With night vision, things appear a lot differently and you don't have the depth perception you would have during the day. We also teach things like winching and rock crawling.

"So it's all just about learning the vehicle, knowing what it can do, and having seat time to where you can react to any situation," he said.

As an example of the "rock crawling knowledge" underlying the LTATV training, Haines noted, "A few years back we went with a couple of the master chiefs and took five of these [LTATVs] over the 'Rubicon Trail' [through the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Northern California's Eldorado National Forest] and made it in two days with no failures. And that's a tough deal with wheels that are this small. But we did it to show that it could be done and that the vehicles would survive a challenge like that."

Completely separate from the training aspects of his business, Haines has also used community feedback in the development of a series of specialized hardware kits for modifying the platforms to tactical configuration.

"These are options and accessories that they have fitted onto the vehicles by different contractors," he said. "But those are installed under another contract where a contractor gets the basic vehicle, then gets kits from me, tires from somewhere else, and something else from someone else, and then assembles the vehicle."

A Teryx LTATV with typical modifications such as stowage for spares and fuel, skidplates, spare tire racks, and more. Because they are often also used on civilian vehicles, parts are readily available from suppliers like militaryatvparts.com

Examples of the LTATV accessories developed by Haines include: skid plates, quick-release fuel can mounts, exhaust shields, front bumpers, suspension modifications, storage shelf kits, GPS accessory crossbars, and spare wheel carriers.

"The tire rack system is probably our most popular kit," he said. "Actually at this point, it is a requirement that they have to have it on the vehicle."

One recent hardware activity involved the development of a new off-road trailer design.

"They said, 'It would be neat if we had a trailer.' So I've been working on it for about eight months," Haines said.

"We have delivered two of them to Naval Special Warfare already," he noted. "These are full-suspension trailers for the LTATVs. They have fold-down sides that use the same Teryx wheels as the LTATV. It's got an adjustable tongue and we've used that to test the trailer behind a Toyota truck – because they use a lot of those now. And this will go behind one of those as well.

"We were trying to make it very strong and very light at the same time," he added. "So most of the undercarriage is all carbon steel and everything above that is all aluminum for weight savings. For payload, it can carry a little over 500 pounds when it's being towed by an LTATV, and if you pull it with a truck you can go up to 750 or 800 pounds. You could also do that behind the LTATV, but it would be challenged by the power and the brakes."

Haines said that the user community is currently performing an evaluation on the two prototype trailers.

One possible glimpse into the future of the LTATV program could be seen in the presence of a new four-seat ATV model in Haines' workshop.

Characterizing it as one possibility being explored by some elements in the special operations community, he observed, "It's got 15 percent more power, a little bit bigger throttle bodies on the injection, and a little different engine management. But this thing goes pretty good, and with a longer wheelbase it has a little bit more stability [than the LTATV]. I've only had this thing about two weeks – but I'm taking it out with one of the team guys on Friday.

"We really take our training role very seriously," Haines concluded. "It's much more than a job to me. I'm an ex-Navy guy myself. I wasn't in special operations but I really admire the commitment these people have. They make it possible for all of us to do what we do every day. Whether most of our population knows it or not, these guys are keeping the bad guys on the other side."