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U.S. Soldiers Push Network In Desert Trials

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WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE, N.M. - U.S. Army leaders have taken the service's new network of radios, computers and smartphones out of the hands of engineers and handed them to soldiers like Capt. Phillip McCoy, who have endured deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, to give each system a combat reality check.

Soldiers here are blunt when it comes to equipment that has made their jobs harder during the first three weeks of the Network Integration Evaluation (NIE). Caked in sand and enduring 100-degree days, they don't care how many millions have already been invested, or whose congressional district might benefit from a new Army contract. They just care if it works.

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Ground Mobile Radio (GMR), a product of the canceled Future Combat Systems program, fails that test.

"GMR has been nothing more than a heavy paperweight," said McCoy, the battle captain for the battalion tactical operations center. In field tests here, he said, the radio has consistently overheated and left soldiers disconnected from the network.

"They need to go back to the drawing board on that one because I wouldn't want to take that out of here," he said.

The Spider XM7 Network Command Munition fared better, according to soldiers.

Capt. Matt Davis, a battery commander for 4th Battalion, 27th Field Artillery Regiment, said he has seen progress since he tested GMR last year, but said his soldiers must constantly run their vehicle's air conditioning at full blast even when the truck is parked to keep it from overheating.

It's this sort of feedback Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the Army's vice chief of staff, expected when he led the charge to institute the NIE. The exercise has brought what used to be a disjointed set of separate tests of the Army's different network systems under the umbrella of a semiannual exercise here.

Chiarelli's theory: Better that the radios and computer systems fail in a war game in New Mexico than when it counts in combat in Afghanistan.

"The vice took a look at this and said what a lot of people were thinking: 'This doesn't make sense, we need to change this and get these systems in the hands of soldiers before they make it to combat.' We needed that person to lead the charge," said Col. John Wendel, deputy program executive officer, integration.

GMR is just one of many network systems that service officials will evaluate. Others include the Joint Tactical Radio System (JTRS), the Mounted Soldier System, the next-generation Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below

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system, the Network Integration Kit, the JTRS Handheld Manpack Small Form Fit radio and the Spider XM7 Network Command Munition.

Early results show soldiers have been impressed by the Spider XM7. Command Post of the Future received lower marks by the soldiers interviewed for this article.

Most officials and soldiers at White Sands said it was too early to judge results, but they have received plenty of feedback. Whether the network works flawlessly isn't the objective, Wendel said. The point is to identify problems early.

"The Army isn't here to buy radios. We want to find out what works best," he said.

About 3,800 soldiers in 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division, will run the evaluation, as it is the first brigade taken out of the typical deployment cycle to execute this sort of exercise. Brigade Modernization Command, Army Test and Evaluation Command and PEO Integration form what is called the Triad that will oversee it.

The eyes of the Army are squarely on the NIE exercise. Fifty-nine general officers will visit White Sands in the fourth week alone to see how the network and overall test model have fared.

Wendel said he could see the NIE model expanding across the Army depending on its success.

"I'd say we're pleasantly surprised at how well the first weeks have gone so far," Wendel said.

Army leaders remain bullish on fielding smartphones to combat soldiers.

The Army issued Motorola phones to soldiers in Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 35th Armored Regiment uploaded with programs such as Soldier Eyes, which allows the user to mark areas of interest, such as the site of an improvised explosive device. When the phone is held up, a mark shows up on the screen over the imagery where the phone's camera is pointing. Soldiers also found the mapping software that walks the user onto a target useful.

"The soldiers really like the mapping aspect. The one thing they have found, though, is you don't assault an objective head on, so they need to work on that," said Capt. Scott DeWitt, company commander of Alpha 1-35.

The captain issued phones to each of his squad and platoon leaders. He said his infantry soldiers need a case that can stand up to the elements, including the dust storms they've endured at White Sands.

Most, if not all, of the soldiers in DeWitt's company have cellphones so the train-up was easy, he said. Many of the soldiers quickly navigated the phone's features and have given the engineers feedback on what applications the Army should add.

"They've grown up with this technology, so they know what they're talking about when it comes to these phones," DeWitt said.

Army officials know they need to develop new networks and find new ways to power them.

"You can't just come up with all these new systems that demand power and not provide answers to how all of this will run," said Terry Garrison, the team lead for Command Post Systems & Integration.

The Army is testing an intelligent generator built by DRASH. Each digital generator has a smart chip installed that can turn generators on and off depending on the unit's power needs.

Garrison said early estimates suggest intelligent generators could provide 13 to 20 percent fuel savings.

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