Soldiers work with high-tech gear at WSMR

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Sgt. Scott Golding operates an SUGV (Small Unmanned Ground Vehicle) on Friday at White Sands Missile Range. He was helping evaluate different high-tech equipment in conditions similar to those found in Afghanistan and other war zones. (Norm Dettlaff/Sun-News)

WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE - Small arms fire between Army soldiers and mock Afghan insurgents punctuated this remote and desolate area of southern New Mexico early Friday.

The soldiers moved quickly to capture the high-profile opposition leader. There were no American casualties, but several of the insurgents were "killed."

About six miles away, coalition forces were keeping guard over a mountain village where as many as 50 "Afghans" were living. A forward operating base for the coalition forces had been established about two kilometers away. The village and camp were roughly about two miles north of U.S. Highway 70 on restricted military land belonging to White Sands Missile Range.

It was as real as could be as two companies of the Army's 5th Brigade, 1st Armored Division continued with the two-week test exercise of equipment and new technologies the U.S. Army could very well begin using in battle in as soon as two years. An unarmed aerial system, perhaps more commonly known as an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV); a small robot, called a small unmanned ground vehicle; and unattended ground sensors were used to capture the high-profile insurgent; and a UAV was used to monitor activities in the mock Afghan village.

Data from the equipment was fed to a "NIK," or network integration kit, inside a specialized new fighting vehicle the Army has begun using in combat. Humvees have proven to be vulnerable on the battlefields, and the new NIK is equipped with computers and multiple communications devices that can be used to detect some of the hardest people on earth to find.

"We're covering approximately 920 square kilometers," said Col. Dan Pinnell, commander of the American forces participating in the exercise. "Storylines have been created and it's constant action, reaction and counter reaction of everyone involved. This is the type of exercise where soldiers in the field are forced by necessity how not to make the same mistakes again."

Spc. Conrad Slater was impressed with the unattended ground sensors that were used to capture the high-profile insurgent leader during Friday's simulated raid at WSMR's C Station, a former site of WSMR's range control center in the 1950s. Two different sensors, one slightly bigger than a mouse pad and the other small enough to fit into the palm of a soldier's hand, were able to record video that tracked the movement of insurgent vehicles. The small, remote-controlled robots were able to alert soldiers of the number of insurgents inside the building where the high-profile leader was, and where those people were.

A scout platoon of soldiers was able to quickly find the high-profile insurgent and "kill" others who were with him.

"These sensors work very well in heat and elements," said Slater, shortly after the simulated raid was staged. "This exercise was kind of slowed down a little to show off the equipment. Normally, it goes a little faster. You would've seen quite a few doors blown off."

Spc. Jesse Finley, a member of the scout platoon, said he was able to get a better understanding of the new equipment and technology, and said there's still some bugs that need to be worked out.

"Compared to last year, the unmanned aerial systems bugs have been worked out, but it could still be better," he said. "The other equipment is still too heavy for soldiers to transport and use in the field. We need something lightweight and reliable. If a piece of equipment weighs 60 to 65 pounds soldiers aren't going to be able to carry it up a mountain."

Paul Meheny, chief of public communications for the Army's Integration Program Executive Office, said that's the kind of feedback Army officials need to hear from soldiers regarding the new systems and technologies.

"Improvements are constantly ongoing," Meheny said. "This feedback is important in that it helps decide how much equipment the Army should buy, or should the Army buy it at all."

Meheny added substantial improvements have been made to equipment and technologies since the testing began two years ago. Feedback from soldiers and their superior officers is used to make modifications that can sometimes be made in as little as six months.

Jay Hayden, bureau chief of WSMR's Materiel Test Directorate, said the first two years of tests were conducted at Fort Bliss, and tests this year and next will be at WSMR.

"Next year, the 3rd Brigade, 1st Armored Division will be here to test the equipment," Hayden said. "That's important because that will be Army's first brigade to take this new equipment and technology into battle.

"...The intention of moving the exercise (to WSMR) was to have a larger area where multiple sources could be attacked."

Col. Steve Duke, of the Army Test and Evaluation Command's Operational Test Command, said an important consideration is to make this year's testing "as accurate and realistic as possible."

That includes dressing opposition forces to look like insurgents. The desert terrain at and near WSMR is also similar in numerous ways to conditions in Afghanistan.

"Last year's exercise was much more scripted," Duke said. "This year has been more creative, ... a real cat-and-mouse game. I want (opposition forces) to try and beat our butts every time."

Portraying the leader of "Mountain Village," one of the two Afghan villages being simulated, 1st Lt. Eric Muirhead said the village is a "very, very good portrayal of what we've seen," in Afghanistan.

"A lot of these characteristics are eerily realistic," Muirhead said.

After sending in an SUGV to see what and/or who was inside, Sgt. Michael Gimble, left, captures a "High Value Target," in this case Spc. Rodrigo Garcia, who was playing a high-ranking enemy in Friday's training exercises. (Norm Dettlaff/Sun-News)