Soldiers take digital assistants to war

By Vandana Sinha
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As the Army prepares to move its main battlefield digitization system to handheld computers, some soldiers in Iraq and Kuwait have been testing portable devices for another project, the Commanders Digital Assistant.

About 200 soldiers have been testing 100 rugged handhelds and 40 tablet PCs armed with Global Positioning System and communications software. The CDA systems let them pinpoint their locations and send text messages.

Meanwhile, the Army's central digitization initiative—the Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below tactical communications system—has proved successful in averting friendly fire accidents in Iraq. At the war's peak, the Army had more than 3,000 FBCB2 units running in Iraq and Kuwait. In Iraq FBCB2 runs on notebook PCs mounted in trucks and other vehicles and on desktop systems at command centers, but the service will soon test its suitability for use on handhelds, too.

The Army launched the CDA program for its airborne units, which do not yet have access to FBCB2 systems.

In Kuwait and Iraq, CDA serves obvious needs, said Maj. Brian Cummings, an assistant product manager at the Army's Program Executive Office-Soldier at Fort Belvoir, Va. "Eight percent of questions on the battlefield are: 'Where are you, where are my leaders, and what do my leaders want me to do?' " he said. "This tool answers those three questions."

The fast deployment for the Commanders Digital Assistant wireless project had soldiers wondering whether it would expand servicewide. This summer, Army leaders have moved the trial from the war zone to Fort Bragg, N.C.

In August, the 1st Brigade of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment will experiment with 40 handhelds and 10 notebooks in battle scenarios.

The CDA devices went to Kuwait in December under a $39.1 million task order of General Dynamics Corp.'s multiyear, $867 million Common Hardware-Software II contract with the Army.

Soldiers trained with the hardware and software for six weeks before using CDA in combat in Iraq.

"They were not originally going to take the tool, but they felt it could help their mission," said Chris Marzilli, vice president and general manager of commercial hardware for General Dynamics C4 Systems Inc., the Taunton, Mass., business unit of General Dynamics that designed the CDA system. "They used it in operational scenarios."

Each soldier's computer is preprogrammed before missions to appear as an IP node on the network and an icon on the screen. With maps and real-time GPS coordinates, soldiers can

With a stylus, each soldier can mark location changes and send reports of ground observational messages such as "Call for Fire" or "MedEvac."

The messages travel across an 802.11b wireless LAN. Military radios can extend its 300-m
Military leaders in the field are using rugged Panasonic Toughbook CF-34 subnotebooks with 256M Secure Digital Cards. The iPaqs are connected by cable to separate tactical modems and GPS devices provided in batteries.

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The total weight sparked some complaints from the equipment-laden soldiers, and General Cummings proposed using a disposable, high-energy battery sleeve of the type used in car pounds, while doubling useful life up to 12 hours, Marzilli said.

If the Fort Bragg tests support pushing the CDA network Armywide, Cummings said it would be indispensable.

On a battlefield, “if you have devices that take away a lot of the confusion,” he said, “they could help your business.”

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