Futuristic Training Comes to Camp Swift

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The convoy moved steadily on as its alert Soldiers continued to scan their sectors. Anxious and attentive, they react immediately to an ambush and work to neutralize the threat. With each member performing their respective role, this efficient, complex machine moves, shoots and communicates as a single entity to complete its mission. Between the radio communications, the suppressive fire and the quick-response movements of the drivers, the full convoy operates in perfect sync. Once clear of the danger zone, a voice from another world echoes in their ears. "Endex, endex. This simulation is complete."

As the U.S. Army continues to confront an ever-evolving world of conflict and technology, it must challenge its own standards of training to best meet the needs of the mission. Capitalizing on the latest advancements in computer simulations, the Army has implemented two new standards in pre-deployment training: The Virtual Convoy Operations Trainer (VCOT) and the Engagement Skills Trainer (EST 2000).

From the operator's manual, the VCOT "is a family of modular training devices that enable Service Members to train for convoy operations in virtual combat environments."

Army Sgt. Phillip P. Dodson, Range Operations Specialist, performs a function check on EST equipment used to train National Guard Soldiers at Camp Swift.

Spc. Christopher Lopez of B Co, CSTEBn, serves as gunner during a VCOT simulation. The VCOT allows realistic convoy training for Soldiers without needing real vehicles and routes. (Photos by Staff Sgt Daniel A. Griego.)

Simulating humvees and other tactical vehicles, troops sit with devices meant to replicate convoy seating while wearing virtual reality headsets for a full spectrum of vision. The system provides users unparalleled feedback by recording the complete exercise and playing it back for the troops during their after action review.

The virtual simulation offers a real-world picture to each individual, said Staff Sgt. Herbert W. Cox, VCOT Instructor at Camp Swift. "It teaches React to Combat, React to Ambushes, Roadblocks, Identifying Targets and other skills."

Fully encompassing an Army mission, the VCOT simulations walk the Soldiers step by step through every aspect of an assignment, from the operational order (OPORD) and pre-combat inspections (PCI) to staging and fragmentary orders (FRAGO).

"This gives you the kind of engagement scenarios you're going to possibly see in theater," said Capt. James W. Jones, executive officer for B Co, Combat Skills Training & Evaluation Battalion.

Distinguished as one of the few states with two VCOT systems, Texas got the most recent model just four months ago, augmenting the existing system, the Virtual Combat Convoy Trainer (VCCT). After training the currently deployed 56th Infantry Brigade Combat Team and the mobilizing 72nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, the system has been in almost constant use for the last six months, training thousands of Texas Soldiers.

"We need to get some more VCOTS in the state of Texas," said Sergeant Cox. "It's a great training asset."

Camp Swift, as a vanguard for Army National Guard training, also boasts having the standard in Army marksmanship simulation, the EST 2000.

The system, which replaced the Weaponeer in 2003, is a Windows-based program that can immediately identify a shooter's problems by showing the instructor the aim of the barrel before and after impact. This allows for facilitated diagnosis of trouble with breathing, trigger squeeze or aim.

"It is realistic training," said Spc. William R. Fortune, Facilities NCO for S-3 Operations at Camp Swift. "[The EST] can critique your shooting and your marksmanship by telling you what you're doing wrong. If you're pulling a round, you can actually see what you're doing."

The system uses an air compressor within the equipment to simulate the recoil of the respective weapons while, at the same time, a studio sound system plays coordinating firing sounds to further round out the experience.

Versatile and accommodating, the EST 2000 has a light side for training on the 9mm pistols, M4 and M16 rifles, as well as a heavy side for the M248, M240B and the .50 Cal. machine guns.

"We try to train them on the weapon systems that they'll be using when they deploy," said Charlie D. Macalik, Training Aids, Devices and Simulations Systems manager for the state.

As the standard Army simulation system, the EST 2000 prepares the troops in every way for basic rifle marksmanship qualification, down to the uniform requirement of helmet with full vest and plates.

"This is designed to have them practice their skills and fundamentals before they get out on the live range," said Mr. Macalik. "Soldiers that go through the EST prior to live-fire qualification do better than those not using EST."

As we refine and advance our technologies, we also advance our training equipment. The EST and VCOT present only a brief glimpse into what's to come for safe and effective training. The better our simulations become, the more effective we will be on the battlefield.