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U.S. Army Engineers Hear Voice of 82nd Airborne Battle-Seasoned Soldiers

DETROIT ARSENAL, WARREN, MI. – The Soldier’s point of view is the most important feedback Ground Systems Enterprise members receive at the Detroit Arsenal. Being able to hear the battle-seasoned Soldier’s perspective of operating the Army’s manned and unmanned ground vehicles – first hand – provides engineers and technicians crucial user and experiential data with which to enhance system capabilities or correct potential shortfalls.

Understanding this, the U.S. Army Tank Automotive Research, Development and Engineering Center (TARDEC) hosted 11 82nd Airborne Division Soldiers July 21 and 22 at the Warren Campus.

The Soldiers received a “paper-to-steel” look at ground vehicle development and reciprocated by sharing their daily challenges with TARDEC associates. “It helps our mission to receive this feedback,” stated TARDEC Military Deputy LTC Andres Contreras. “We’re here for the customers themselves and we need to hear from them.”

Soldiers toured the facilities where the tools they use daily are developed, enhanced and integrated into ground vehicle systems by TARDEC researchers, developers and engineers.. This included visits with TARDEC’s robotics, survivability, and modeling and simulation (M&S) teams. The Soldiers also toured TARDEC’s Prototype Integration Facility (PIF) and the Cave Automatic Virtual Environment (CAVE), which uses state-of-the-art audio and visual technology to provide engineers with a better understanding of Soldiers needs and equipment capabilities.

“I’m so glad we visited the CAVE because once I saw what you can actually do in there, it was amazing,” remarked CPT Michael Hamilton. “I’m going to spread the word about it as much as I can. If you can make sure people know about things like that, it’s just amazing. It’s a great tool.”

The Soldiers stressed the importance of gaining warfighter insight early in the development process to avoid potential complications in the field. They fully endorsed bringing in Soldiers to provide engineers with an accurate assessment of ground vehicle and equipment-related challenges the faced in the field, and away from controlled laboratory environments that can’t adequately replicate the unpredictable operational conditions and physical environments in which Soldiers serve.



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“We’re here for a day and we can give you as much feedback as we can, but if you can pull someone in here for a week at a time and pick their brains, they’ll really get specific,” Hamilton explained. “If you take a job-specific guy and pull him in here for a long time, I think you’d gain tons more information.”

MAJ Larry Ross, a TARDEC tactical vehicle survivability team leader, agreed the Army could benefit from receiving user feedback at an earlier stage. “That is part of the design process but right now it’s more toward the end of that process, and I think what we might need to put it in first,” Ross stated. “We’re trying to get that input earlier in the concept and construction phase, rather than go ‘here’s a finished product, what do you think?’”

During a roundtable discussion panel on the second day of the visit, the Soldiers openly dialogued with TARDEC associates, explaining field needs for batteries, electrical components, armor and other necessities. In many areas, like batteries for powering silent watch electrical components, Soldiers were assured TARDEC’s associates are hard at work developing systems to enhance those capabilities. In several other areas, the Soldiers remarked the work already done by TARDEC has provided them with several benefits that allow them to complete missions safely and effectively. The Soldiers insisted this continued collaboration will only help field quality products faster.

“All of the RDECs [Research, Development and Engineering Centers] are doing an outstanding job in evolving technologies,” remarked SFC Derek Burpee. “I think Soldier involvement is important. Bring in some field units that are coming back [from overseas] to provide on-the-spot feedback and do some quick testing instead of developing, testing, fielding and waiting for feedback. I think everyone is really doing a great job; there’s a lot of brilliance out there.”

It was suggested TARDEC build the program with similar forums, inviting other battalions and units. The Soldiers also hinted TARDEC would benefit by sending associates into the field to meet with Soldiers and understand vehicle issues firsthand in the operational environments the vehicles are currently deployed.

“Imagine when you come out to the field,” Freeman told panel attendees. “Some one’s going to get you into an MRAP [Mine Resisted Ambush Protected vehicle] and go out up a hill and see where it stalls out. Then you can understand that it weighs too much and doesn’t have enough power. You can see first-hand what issues may exist.”

The TARDEC visit was one stop on a nation-wide RDEC tour for the Airborne Soldiers from Fort Bragg, NC. They remarked that the work being done throughout the RDECOM community is one of the Army’s best kept secrets. “We had no idea about any of this,” remarked SFC Michael Billman. “I’ve been in the service for 11 years now and didn’t know anything about RDECs. I guess maybe the best thing for you guys to do is to push it out there



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more so that the units and divisions know that they can call and say they have these problems.”

Burpee remarked he would appreciate seeing similar forums continue in the coming years, possibly allowing visitors to spend a week at each RDEC to spend more time exchanging ideas and receiving a closer look at the work being done to support Soldiers. “This type of forum is really a winner all across the RDECs for us,” he stated. “I think everybody’s doing the right thing at all these RDECs. They’re developing really great stuff. It’s just about getting the right Soldier at the right time to give this feedback; it will sharpen the edge.”

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TARDEC Mechanical Engineer Allen Rubel explains a Stryker Vehicle virtual environment to 82nd Airborne Division Soldiers during a TARDEC visit July 21 and 22. The special glasses make images inside the CAVE appear to float in space with users able to “walk” around them, yet maintain a proper perspective. (U.S. Army TARDEC Photo by Ted Beaupre)

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82nd Airborne Division Soldiers view a virtual Stryker Vehicle as part of a “paper-to-steel” look at ground vehicle development during a TARDEC visit July 21 and 22. Using special glasses, the CAVE creates a 3-D virtual environment in a room measuring 10 feet long, 10 feet wide and 10 feet high. (U.S. Army TARDEC Photo by Ted Beaupre)

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The robotics lab displayed several robots currently being developed at TARDEC during a visit by 82nd Airborne Division Soldiers July 21 and 22. The TARDEC visit was one stop on a nation-wide RDEC tour for these Soldiers who have recently returned from an overseas deployment. (U.S. Army TARDEC Photo by Ted Beaupre)

090721-A-1234T-0036

Project Manager Shana Render explains the new Gladiator robot’s operational capabilities to CPT Jonathan Godwin, 82nd Airborne Division, during a TARDEC visit July 21 and 22. (U.S. Army TARDEC Photo by Ted Beaupre)

TARDEC is the Nation’s laboratory for Ground Systems Integration to ensure U.S. Soldiers continue to be the best-equipped and most lethal, survivable and sustainable fighting force on Earth. For additional information or to schedule an interview with a TARDEC leader or subject-matter expert, please contact Bill Dowell at (586) 574-6683, william.dowell2@us.army.mil.

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