



TREND SPOTTING

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virtually



Spc. Louis Drexler and other members of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, use the Dismounted Soldier Training System. Top and middle right, Drexler and Staff Sgt. Casey Liffbrig help each other with equipment. Bottom right, Liffbrig battles an enemy he sees on the mounted display.



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Fort Bragg soldiers plug into simulated environments for advanced training without the travel and bugs.



Members of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, suit up with their Virtual Soldier Manned Modules for virtual training.

Fort Bragg soldiers leaving the battlefield in Afghanistan will soon swell the stateside ranges, drop zones and open spaces where they train. This costs millions in manhours, ammunition and fuel.

What if that same training could be accomplished in a single room?

Fort Bragg was the first to field the Dismounted Soldier Training System, the Army's new virtual simulation training system. It cost \$57 million to produce, but developers say it will save in the long run.

On a July afternoon, a squad of 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division soldiers gathered around their leader, Staff Sgt. Casey Liffbrig, in a darkened room emptied of furniture save a bank of computers and the technicians huddled behind them. The soldiers strapped on mock-M4 Carbine rifles, backpack computers, sensors and helmet-mounted displays equipped with stereo speakers and a microphone.

Their objective: Take out Shah Nasim Kahn and disrupt Taliban activity in the region. The soldiers were warned to tread carefully on a route speckled with roadside bombs as they cleared buildings along the way.

"Keep your head on a swivel," Liffbrig said.

But the soldiers never moved from circular mats on the carpeted floor, and Kahn, their enemy target, was an avatar in a game engine.

John Matthews is a project director with the U.S. Army Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation (PEO-STRI) in Orlando, Fla. He said Fort Bragg will keep three of the training systems — worth \$500,000 apiece — and eventually receive three more for a total of six. Alone, one system may be used to train a squad. Link three together, and soldiers can train as a platoon. Three operators and one maintenance technician are permanently assigned to the current systems on Fort Bragg.

"We looked at the units that were deploying the most and need this training faster," Matthews said.

Elite originally reported on the Dismounted Soldier Training System in August 2011. A contract had been awarded earlier that year to Intelligent Decisions, an IT solutions company that partnered with the Army on the project.

The Army will eventually distribute 127 Dismounted Soldier Training Systems to installations in the U.S. and overseas, with 40 of them arriving in January.

The Fort Bragg soldiers were impressed.

Liffbrig's squad immediately came under enemy fire, forcing the soldiers to quickly make life-or-death decisions. "You may not have the heat of the sun or the bugs out there, but you're still getting the training value," he said.

The experience is recorded, so soldiers are able to review their performance after the computers and headsets are put away.

"They (soldiers) actually talk to each other about tactics and techniques," said Clarence Pape, vice president of Intelligent Decisions' Department of Defense Professional Services. "It's not just a video game." ★