Army to deploy “revolutionary” smart weapon

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The U.S. Army is set to deploy [1] a “revolutionary” airburst grenade launcher, said to be the first small arms “smart” weapon. Described as a “game changer,” the XM25 Counter Defilade Target Engagement System (CDTE) could fundamentally transform squad and platoon tactics.

Most firefights in Afghanistan take place beyond 300 meters [2] (often up to 500 meters). This reduces the lethality of small arms staples like the M4 carbine. When the enemy is “in defilade” (i.e. under cover and/or concealment), it compounds the situation.

The XM25 literally gets around this problem. The weapon fires a 25 mm microchip-embedded high explosive round [3] that detonates above or beside the target, showering the enemy with lethal metal fragments. As Brig. Gen. Peter Fuller mentions, “You no longer can shoot at American forces and hide behind something. We're going to reach out and touch you.”

The Heckler & Koch weapon is reportedly a cinch to learn. A laser rangefinder calculates the distance to the target, and displays that information on an optical lens. The soldier can add a meter or two (to defeat an enemy in defilade), and this information is fed to the 25 mm round. The Target Acquisition/Fire Control (TA/FC [4]) programs the round via a wiring harness in the weapon and airbursts at the predetermined range.

A Soldier aims an XM25 weapon system at Aberdeen Test Center, Md.

Lt. Col. Christopher Lehner, program manager for individual Soldier weapons at PEO-Soldier, extols the XM25’s lethality. “With XM-25, in under five seconds I could lase, put the reticule on target, and pull the trigger,” Lehner explained. “At 400 meters, it takes another two seconds to get there and explode.”

Price is a factor—XM25’s will reportedly cost $25,000 apiece. But full-scale deployment of the XM25 could alleviate a far costlier alternative—airstrikes. Hellfire missiles, launched from drones or Apache helicopters, run approximately $68,000 each. And since close air support is banned in Afghanistan [5] except under “very limited and prescribed conditions,” the XM25 is a huge boon for small units.

Weight is another issue—at almost 13 pounds, the XM25 is twice the weight of an M4. But soldiers say the weapon’s extraordinary capabilities justify the extra pounds.

In 2011, the Army plans to purchase [6] up to 12,500 XM25’s—one for each infantry squad and Special Forces team. Full-scale deployment could happen in 2012 or 2013.

“This is a game-changer," Lehner said. “The enemy has learned to get cover, for

hundreds if not thousands of years.”

"Well, they can't do that anymore. We're taking that cover from them and there's only two outcomes: We're going to get you behind that cover or force you to flee. So no matter what, we gotcha.”

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