As Army delivers new network, leaders credit Soldier feedback at NIE

U.S. Army

WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE, N.M. (Nov. 11, 2012) -- As Soldiers ready for deployment with the Army's new tactical communications network, the Network Integration Evaluations that shaped that capability are now aiming to take it to the next level.

After less than two years of Soldier-driven evaluation and integration through the Network Integration Evaluations, or NIEs, two brigades of the 10th Mountain Division are now training on Capability Set 13 -- the Army's first fully-integrated package of radios, satellite systems, software applications, smartphone-like devices and other network components that connects Soldiers and leaders at all levels of the brigade combat team, BCT. At the same time, the fourth NIE event is taking place this month, driving technology improvements that can be incorporated with the next capability set.

"We were able to use the NIE to define a greater capability for Soldiers that are going into combat. At the end of the day, that's going to save Soldiers' lives," said Lt. Gen. Bill Phillips, military deputy to the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology, or ASA(ALT), who visited NIE 13.1 operations this week in partnership with Lt. Gen. Patricia McQuistion, deputy commanding general for the Army Materiel Command.

"We've made some incredible progress because of Soldier feedback," Phillips said. "We have to continue to utilize the NIE to enhance our systems, to bring on new systems that improve our capability, and we'll do that with Capability Set 14 to continue fielding the best products we can to units and Soldiers and commanders."

Launched in June 2011, the NIEs are semi-annual field exercises designed to quickly integrate and mature the Army's tactical communications network, the service's top modernization priority. NIE 13.1 runs through Nov. 17 and involves the 3,800 Soldiers of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division, who are conducting rigorous mission scenarios in a realistic environment at Fort Bliss, Texas, and White Sands Missile Range, N.M., in order to evaluate the operational value of various systems developed by the Army and by the private sector.

"What I've seen as a result of coming out here today is how agile and adaptive our Soldiers are," McQuistion said. "They can take these systems, make sense of them and see how to use them for the best capability."

A major focus of this NIE is to assess network capability at the lowest echelons -- how platoons, squads, teams and dismounted Soldiers can pass information to make better decisions, said Col. Thomas Dorame, 2/1 AD commander.

"We're not just taking the network to another command post, but we're also now using that capability to push it into vehicles and to the individual Soldier," he said. "If you're in contact with the enemy and you're trying to figure out how to maneuver, being able to identify where your Soldiers are down to the individual Soldier is incredible."

The NIEs produce Soldier feedback to inform the Army on what systems should be procured, and serve to ensure that the systems work together as an integrated communications package for the BCT. Just as important, NIEs have aided the Army in developing Tactics, Techniques and Procedures, known as TTPs, for how to field, train, operate, maintain and sustain network capabilities. These TTPs and other lessons learned from the NIEs are being applied as the Army rolls out Capability Set 13.

Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division's 3rd BCT at Fort Drum, N.Y., and 4th BCT at Fort Polk, La., were the first to receive Capability Set 13, which began fielding in October 2012. The 4th BCT, 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson, Colo., will be the next to get the new gear starting early in 2013.

The new network will arrive in Afghanistan as U.S. forces continue to retrograde, turning over many of their Forward Operating Bases and other infrastructure to the local forces and thus gradually losing fixed network locations. Capability Set 13 systems provide mobile satellite and robust radio capability for commanders and Soldiers to take the network with them in vehicles and while dismounted as they conduct security assistance and some combat missions.

"The capabilities that this brings will enable them to reach out farther from those base camps that are in a static environment," said Maj. Ernest Tornabell, brigade S6 for 2/1 AD. "As we do the drawdown and we continue to work on our training with the Afghan National Army, the Afghan Border Patrol and other agencies, we will be able to maintain a state of communications with our higher headquarters with data and voice -- which is really what you're looking for to maintain situational awareness."

As the Army continues to re-balance its resources from the Middle East to other areas including the Asia-Pacific region, the NIE can be used to evaluate technologies that meet potential new requirements and capability gaps, McQuistion said. NIEs will also continue to evolve with greater involvement of non-network capabilities, participation by joint and coalition partners, and the integration of communications gear onto Stryker and heavy platforms.

Future NIEs will also offer further opportunities for the Army to leverage industry innovation to meet its network technology needs. The NIE construct has evaluated more than 115 industry solutions to potentially fill capability gaps.

While the NIE continues to evolve with each event, its core premise -- to address capability gaps by obtaining Soldier feedback and rapidly fielding equipment to meet their needs -- is still what makes it so valuable to the Army, the leaders said.

"When you put systems in the hands of Soldiers, incredible things happen," Phillips said.

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