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Tennessee National Guard uses virtual technology to enhance training missions "CAV-T" combines traditional military muscle with state-of-the-art technology

CATOOSA, Ga. – The Tennessee National Guard's 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment took to the field last month for a landmark training exercise combining traditional military muscle with cutting-edge virtual technology.

Each frigid weekend this January, soldiers from the 278th's 3rd Squadron surged onto the maneuver area at Volunteer Training Site-Catoosa in northwest Georgia, equipped with Bradley Fighting Vehicles and heavily-armored Humvees. As one platoon of scouts positioned their tanks along the hillside watching over the terrain below, another occupied a state-of-the-art virtual battle space meticulously designed to simulate a maneuver area 300 times its size.

The Guard debuted the Combined Arms Virtual Training concept Jan. 11, during its inaugural virtual-meets-live-fire training exercise. The CAV-T concept leverages multiple virtual simulators to replicate heavy equipment and remote training sites that are often difficult to reach and expensive to maintain.

While the physical maneuver area at VTS-Catoosa offers only 10 square kilometers of actual terrain, the CAV-T interface occupies 3,000 square virtual kilometers of the Mojave Desert, all tucked inside what appears to be a simple semi-trailer parked on an unassuming lot.

Despite its modest appearance, one look inside reveals a video-gamer's dream – an intricate fusion of digital technology and advanced military communication networks fit for a futuristic Sci-Fi thriller. The resulting visual impact is meant to immerse the cavalry scouts into a 360-degree combat environment capable of producing realistic war-fighting scenarios limited only by their commander's imagination.

Meanwhile, armed with machine guns and long-range surveillance systems, their sister platoon conducts comparable maneuvers as they fight through the inclement Georgia weather.

The ability to marry virtual training with actual live-fire exercises has a number of advantages.

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“Nothing will ever replace putting boots on ground,” Staff Sgt. Michael Metcalf, the squadron’s master gunner emphasizes, “but the great thing the simulators bring is the ability to practice gunnery skills when we can’t fire live rounds.”

Metcalf explained that the expansive safety radius needed to fire their actual weapons just isn’t available locally. “A scout troop would take ten to fifteen kilometers,” he noted. “There’s nowhere in Tennessee we can find that. Even on the top gunnery ranges in the world, there are still limitations,” he said. “With the simulators, there are none.”

In addition to the virtual training they receive on their real-world weapon systems, Capt. Stephen Allred, 3rd Squadron’s L Troop commander, said the increased maneuver space CAV-T affords his soldiers is just as important.

“Being able to complete our training on the simulators has been extremely beneficial to us as far as being able to maneuver our elements,” he said.

Allred stated the ability to familiarize his new soldiers on virtual vehicles before they step into their physical ones, also helps lessen their learning curve and makes their precious time in the field all the more valuable. “The time spent in the Bradley is priceless,” he said emphatically.

1st Lt. Bradley McMahan, the Tennessee Army National Guard’s training specialist and a cavalry scout himself, echoed Allred’s sentiment. “Doing this on the ground we have available is a little like playing football on a pool table,” he said.

McMahan, who facilitated the training, also explained that increased maneuver space and freedom to fire weren’t the only factors at play when he coordinated this exercise.

“I can move three Bradleys, five Humvees, two support vehicles and necessary personnel down the highway for a little under nineteen thousand dollars,” he said. “In comparison, after about eighteen gallons of diesel fuel, I can run the trailer-based training over the course of the entire weekend for around one hundred ninety eight dollars.” That’s a significant savings for the Tennessee National Guard and ultimately the tax payer.

“There is no substitute for live training,” McMahan added, “so each platoon is given the opportunity to operate their own equipment as well as the simulated equipment. Simulators help us make the most of that most important resource.”

Overall, Allred said he was impressed with the value virtual training added to his soldiers’ time in the field, which is vital to the operation of their highly technical equipment.

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“This is the best gunnery I’ve ever had in my seventeen years of doing this,” he said. “The things our soldiers have now are all the things us old scouts wish we'd had. It was excellent.”

STORY BY:

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PHOTOS/CAPTIONS:

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Cavalry scouts from the Tennessee National Guard’s L Troop, 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment provide route reconnaissance at Volunteer Training Site–Catoosa, Jan. 25, during a landmark training exercise combining traditional military muscle with cutting-edge virtual technology. The Combined Arms Virtual Training concept leverages multiple virtual simulators to replicate heavy equipment and remote training sites that are often difficult to reach and expensive to maintain. (U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. Melissa Wood/RELEASED)

<http://www.dvidshub.net/image/1162644/tennessee-national-guard-uses-virtual-technology-enhance-training-missions-cav-t-combines-traditional-military-muscle-with-state>

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Sgt. Alex Smith, a cavalry scout with the Tennessee National Guard’s L Troop, 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment, scans the training area as he provides security from his Bradley Fighting Vehicle at Volunteer Training Site–Catoosa, Jan. 25. The landmark training exercise combined traditional military muscle with cutting-edge virtual technology to replicate heavy equipment and remote training sites that are often difficult to reach and expensive to maintain.. (U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. Melissa Wood/RELEASED)

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Cavalry scouts from the Tennessee National Guard's L Troop, 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment conduct a large-scale virtual reconnaissance mission within the confines of an unassuming semi-trailer at Volunteer Training Site–Catoosa, Jan. 25. The Combined Arms Virtual Training concept leverages multiple virtual simulators to replicate heavy equipment and remote training sites that are often difficult to reach and expensive to maintain. (U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. Melissa Wood/RELEASED)

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1st Lt. Bradley McMahan, the Tennessee Army National Guard's training specialist and a cavalry scout himself, observes scouts from L Troop, 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment as they conduct a large-scale virtual reconnaissance mission within the confines of an unassuming semi-trailer at Volunteer Training Site–Catoosa, Jan. 25. The Combined Arms Virtual Training concept leverages multiple virtual simulators to replicate heavy equipment and remote training sites that are often difficult to reach and expensive to maintain. (U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. Melissa Wood/RELEASED)

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