

A major theme of DVD 2010 will be Lightening the load the 21st century soldier has to carry. Colonel Peter Rafferty outlines a coherent approach to providing the range of a soldier's capabilities.

A newly-formed group has pledged to continue "pushing the boundaries of technology" in its quest to develop new kit for soldiers. The Personal Combat Equipment team, set up in April having formerly been an element of the Defence Clothing team, is responsible for delivering equipment perfectly tailored to the rigours of current operations. It now sits in the Individual Capability Group in Land Equipment. Col Peter Rafferty, the team's leader and an infantry officer recently returned from a long tour in Afghanistan, said he and his colleagues are constantly striving to reduce the burden on dismounted troops by coming up with lighter, better integrated gear.

"The aim is to deliver "Robocop"," said Col- Rafferty. "That's science fiction today but it is the long-term vision, that of a fully integrated lightweight state-of-the-art system with the soldier at its heart.

"The demands of modern operations mean that more equipment is being placed on the bodies of our soldiers. You can't wave a magic wand because if you add equipment, you add weight, therefore other things have to be improved to make that burden neutral.

"It's a massive challenge but we now have one single group responsible for all the bits and bobs that go on a soldier."

The team makes its debut at DVD. Also present will be stands from the Light Weapons, Photographic and Batteries and Dismounted Soldier Systems teams and Col Rafferty is keen for as many soldiers as possible to go to DVD to learn more about how the kit they use on the front line comes into being and give their views on kit they have used.

"The value of attending DVD for younger soldiers is the chance to see the evolution of the equipment, some of which they may not be familiar with," he said.

"They can talk with a number of procurement teams and get a better idea of how the equipment is developed and, crucially, how they can influence that with a view to further developments in the future.

"Not every good idea can be implemented but we listen carefully to the thoughts of our users. They are the ones who use the equipment and it is important for them to know that they have a voice."

Operation Herrick has posed some particularly tricky questions to the people tasked with developing battle-winning kit, but the experts continue to come up with the goods. Col Rafferty

pointed to the Army's current line up of ballistic protection, including Osprey body armour, as an example of where the British military is at the "forefront of the world". But he is justifiably proud of procurements to date; the importance of the work will ensure that he and his team never rest on their laurels.

"We invest a lot of time, energy and taxpayers' money in taking lessons learned from clothing and equipment we have fielded and I send a team to theatre every deployment to get feedback directly from the soldiers," he added.

"Where it's sensible and affordable to do so, we build any capabilities they suggest into the equipment.

"Our staff understands that whatever the operation or the environment there is a job to be done to make sure that soldiers have the best solutions available. Everybody who deploys benefits from the work of this team.

"It's daunting in the realisation of the volume of the work involved, but it's not a challenge which we feel is beyond us."

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