



Electronic Spectrum

Personal Digital Assistants

A Major Step in the Transformation of the US Military

The US military is quickly transforming itself to meet the demands of a digital world. In order to complete this transformation, the military will have to discover a way for individuals to gain immediate access to voluminous amounts of information. Regardless of military specialty, space and time requirements demand that all information be digitised and immediately shareable, available and transportable. Laptop computers used today are too bulky, heavy and cumbersome to use in the field.

Hand-held personal computers, a.k.a. personal digital assistants (PDAs), offer a solution that can be implemented now. PDAs are widely available, easy to use, relatively durable, reasonably priced and powerful enough to run modified versions of today's most widely used programs - Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc. The latest generation of PDAs running Palm OS 5 and Pocket PC 2002 are as powerful as desktop computers were only a few years ago. Additionally, information can be wirelessly shared between PDAs.

The US military's desire to purchase off-the-shelf software capitalises on the software industry's creative talents, and acknowledges that individuals have been purchasing and effectively using commercial software in their military duties for many years. Programs purchased are typically low-to-moderately priced and easy to run. Some reside only on the PDA while others utilise the capabilities of both PCs and PDAs.

The more advanced programs permit sharing of information either through the PDA's beaming function or other wireless ability, in addition to sharing data by copying PC files.

One such program is the Leader's eBook by Warrior Solutions. This program has taken the required leader's notebook and digitised it so it can reside on a PDA and a PC. Syncing the two on a reg-

ular basis ensures the user always has the latest data. Information can be shared with other Leader's eBook users by beaming or through a shared PC. The program effectively eliminates three to five pounds that the leader would have to carry if he were using a hardcopy version of the same information.

GPS systems are quickly becoming universal throughout the military and are required for the most junior leader. PDAs now boast the ability to have a GPS system on board through the hardware's expansion ports, and future PDAs will have GPS systems imbedded in the hardware itself.

With the ability to carry large amounts of data, security may be a concern. Few commercial programs have built-in encryption, relying instead on the password protection available with the PDA's resident software. Additional protection is available through commercial programs that offer the same level of encryption as used by the various governmental agencies.

The US military has recognised the capabilities of PDAs. Newly commissioned ensigns have received PDAs since 1999 and sailors can use their ship's IR ports to download or send emails through the ship's servers. Newly commissioned 2nd Lieutenants from West Point receive PDAs, and many individual SNCOs and officers are purchasing them and software for use in their daily activities. Many commercial PDAs with off-the-shelf software have been taken to combat in Afghanistan and Iraq.

If the US military is looking to adopt a cost-effective, self-contained, feature-rich information system that is highly mobile, affordable and easy for its leaders to use, PDAs coupled with off-the-shelf software offer a logical and cost effective solution.

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