
COMMENTARY

The Geeks vs. the Infantrymen

Microsoft employees lament that a military system will 'help people kill.' Damn right it will.

By Robert H. Scales

Microsoft employees last week sent an open letter to CEO Satya Nadella and President Brad Smith demanding that they immediately cancel a Defense Department contract for the Integrated Visual Augmentation System, on grounds that IVAS is “designed to help people kill.”

Damn right it is. Microsoft’s employees should take pride that they have been entrusted with the privilege of providing a game-changing technology that will allow American soldiers and Marines, not the enemy, to do the killing. In wars over the past 70 years, 90% of all uniformed military personnel killed by enemy fire were infantrymen, a cohort of some 50,000 who comprise less than 4% of all who wear the uniform. Outside the infantry, men and women in uniform stand a greater chance of dying from accidents than they do from enemy action.

One reason for this asymmetry of sacrifice is that for decades the U.S. has underfunded its close-combat branches. Jim Mattis, a combat-tested Marine infantryman, was the first defense secretary to attempt to overcome this record of neglect. Shortly after taking office, he inaugurated his Close Combat Lethality Task Force and appointed me a special adviser.

Before the task force began its work, infantrymen received less than 1% of the defense budget for training and equipment. The task force looked at many technologies that promised to make America’s infantry dominant in battle and help prevent combat deaths. So far we’ve found only one technology that promises to be a game changer: IVAS. The innocuous device looks a bit like a pair of sunglasses.

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The 1986 movie “Top Gun” depicts the Navy’s Fighter Weapons School, which teaches pilots how to outfly the enemy by subjecting them to several bloodless air-to-air battles before facing a real enemy. Mr. Mattis challenged the task force to build a Soldier’s Top Gun. We sought a means for every infantryman to “fight 25 battles before the first battle begins.” IVAS will expose infantrymen to close combat virtually using its augmented-reality function.

To understand how IVAS will help infantrymen in combat, recall the October 2017 tragedy at Tongo Tongo, Niger, where four special-forces soldiers were killed in a three-hour firefight against an overwhelming force of heavily armed militants. Had these soldiers been equipped with IVAS, the fight might have turned out differently. The device will have several tiny, built-in sensors that give the wearer an ability to detect an enemy ambush. Its heads-up display will mark the soldier’s surroundings and inform him of potential enemy positions. Later versions of IVAS will connect to a soldier’s weapon, allowing him to see and engage a hidden enemy virtually using a Bluetooth link connecting the device to a weapon’s integrated sight. As I read the Microsoft letter, I juxtaposed the mental image of those four brave soldiers with that of the letter’s geeky authors. “We believe that Microsoft must stop in its activities to empower the U.S. Army’s ability to cause harm and violence,” they complain. IVAS, they write, “works by turning warfare into a simulated ‘video game,’ further distancing soldiers from the grim stakes of war and the reality of bloodshed.”

In reality, the infantryman knows well “the grim stakes of war and the reality of bloodshed.” They call it “intimate killing.” Soldiers may not feel comfortable in the quietude of the Microsoft campus. But those men died in Tongo Tongo defending Microsoft employees’ right to enjoy their lattes. I hope that enough of their colleagues appreciate how vital is the task to put in the hands of our intimate killers a device that will keep them alive in tomorrow’s close fight. Mr. Scales, a retired U.S. Army major general, is a special adviser to the Close Combat Lethality Task Force.