

Utah defense contractor raising profile with pitch for spy gear

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A division of New York-based defense contractor L-3 Communications is looking to make its first nonmilitary sales of technology that gives U.S. field commanders a bird's-eye view of the battlefield.

Communications Systems-West is pitching the \$50,000 Rover III Manpack for mountain rescues, law enforcement and U.S. border patrols, said Susan Opp, vice president of strategic development.

The Rover, a high-speed wireless data transmission system that can fit in a suitcase, works off aircraft-mounted cameras, projecting detailed images to a rugged laptop on the ground. It also can work with infrared cameras, which detect a person's body heat and are often used by aircraft in Utah to find lost hikers and skiers.

Some lost hikers are never found in Utah's rugged mountains, and the Rover could turn the odds in their favor by transmitting images from aircraft to ground, where they could be studied in greater detail, said Salt Lake County Sheriff Aaron Kennard, who was given a recent demonstration.

The operations of L-3's Salt Lake City division have been kept under wraps for 50 years, since its inception and through several ownership changes.

Now with the push for nonmilitary sales, Communications Systems-West is raising its public profile. It made a recent call on Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman, trying to sell the Rover to the Utah



Curtis Brunson, president of Communication Systems-West, poses outside the company Wednesday, April 12, 2006, in Salt Lake City. "Our job is to move data from point A to point B hundreds of times faster than the best Internet connection", said Brunson.

(AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac)

Department of Public Safety, which owns several helicopters and small planes.

The company invited The Associated Press for a tour this week and said it was the first time any news organization was allowed to glimpse its operations.

In a shop where about 20 people assemble and test Rover Manpacks, a wall-mounted counter tallied the number of units shipped out — 785 since 2004, many to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The company's biggest customers are the U.S. Air Force and Army, which are expected to buy hundreds more Rovers. The company also is designing a smaller, iPod-sized variation.

Another L-3 division makes a Dick Tracy-style watch with a screen that can show moving images from aircraft, satellites or spy drones. The WAVE — for Wrist Attached Video Equipment — is useful for special operations, company officials said.

Communications Systems-West occupies buildings next to Salt Lake's airport, where it ships out enough communications parts and gear

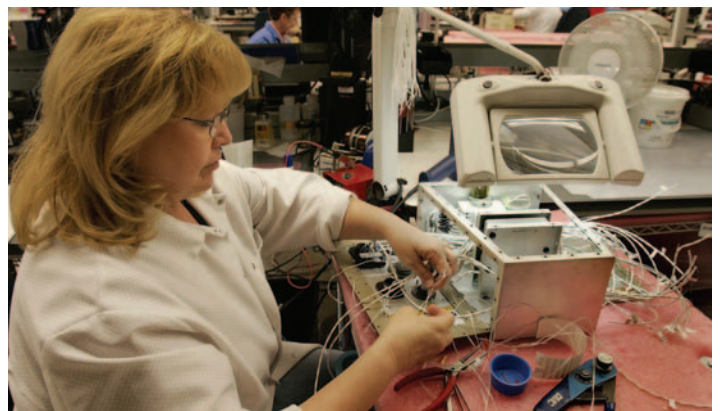


The inner workings of the ROVER, a high-speed, wireless data transmission system that can fit in a suitcase, is assembled in the L3 Communications plant. The unit receives images transmitted to the ground from an aircraft mounted camera and displays them on a laptop.

(AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac)



Ralph Werner rewires one of the original Phoenix systems that were sent to Iraq at the L-3 Communications plant. The system is part of a ground satellite dish system that communicates in the field with satellites. (AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac)



Mary Forman assembles part of a Phoenix data communication systems in the L-3 Communications plant. Much of the equipment is hand-made to military specifications. (AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac)

to fill a Home Depot catalog. It also retrofits military Humvees with transmitting gear and foldable satellite disks, some carried by trailer.

“Our job is to move data from point A to point B” hundreds of times faster than the best Internet connection, said Curtis Brunson, an engineer and president of Communications Systems-West. “We build broadband communications systems mainly in support of intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance for manned and unmanned systems.”

One of 65 business units of L-3 Communications, the Salt Lake company employs 3,050 people, a figure that’s up by 353 in the past 16 months.

“We’ve been hiring like mad,” tapping Utah’s engineering schools for talent, Brunson said. “We are one of the fastest growing companies in Utah.”

Comm West, as it’s known, hopes to boost profits even further with nonmilitary sales of an array of encrypted communications and navigation products. Much of the expensive stuff is handmade to military specifications. The electronics must withstand the rigors of desert fighting and pressures at 60,000 feet aloft.

L-3 was spun off in 1997 by Lockheed Martin Corp., although the Utah division has been around since 1956, first as Sperry Utah Engineering Laboratories.

L-3, the No. 6 U.S. defense contractor, has grown rapidly since 1997 through acquisitions, reporting \$9.4 billion in revenue last year, up from \$2.3 billion in 2001.

In a conference room, Brunson projected a slide of Comm West’s payroll, which has grown to \$173.5 million from \$92.4 million in 2001. “I like to use this chart when I meet with the governor — especially when I’m asking for something,” he said.



A new Global Hawk 6.25-meter ground satellite dish is wired by Jacob Lopez at the L-3 Communications plant. (AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac)



Outfitted communication Humvees are ready for shipment as an 11.3-meter dish looks to space where it communicates with a satellite at the L3 Communications plant. Where a normal high-speed Internet line could transmit a photograph in 10 seconds, some of L-3’s products have the ability to move hundreds of photos in the same time.

(AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac)



Detail showing rewiring one of the original Phoenix systems that were sent to Iraq at the L-3 Communications plant Thursday, April 13, 2006, in Salt Lake City. The system is part of a ground satellite dish system that communicates in the field with satellites. (AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac)



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