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Pitt Program Scores Big Security Win for NFL

FirstLink Introduces Under-Vehicle Inspection Technology to Super Bowl XL

Pittsburgh, PA - January 27, 2006 – The Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence FirstLink program is playing a key role in enhancing security at Super Bowl XL in Detroit. FirstLink is responsible for introducing the NFL’s Security Office to an advanced robotics technology manufactured in Western Pennsylvania, and successfully deployed by the U.S. Army, that performs under-vehicle inspections for contraband or explosives.

At only four inches high, and weighing about 30 pounds, the remote-controlled omnidirectional inspection system (ODIS) can travel under virtually every type of vehicle while its multiple onboard computers and video camera capture detailed images and relay them to an operator safely removed at distances up to 100 meters. More than 20 units are currently deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and already have a proven record of saving U.S. forces from injury and death.

“ODIS is an example of an advanced technology developed for use by the military that, with some retooling, can have enormous benefits for first responders,” said Jim Rooney, Director of FirstLink, the Department of Defense’s National Center of Excellence for First Responder Technology Transfer, located within the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence.

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FirstLink was established in 2004 to identify military technologies available for license, and to facilitate the commercialization of those that lend themselves to civilian use by first responders, including police, firefighters, paramedics, and the National Guard. It is the latter that will deploy the six ODIS systems ordered by the NFL for use at Super Bowl XL.

Developed by the U.S. Army Tank and Automotive Research Development and Engineering Command (TARDEC) to address the shortcomings of manual inspection (necessary physical proximity to the vehicle and limited visual range), ODIS technology was refined for first-responder use by Kuchera Defense Systems of Windber, Somerset County, Pennsylvania. TARDEC and Kuchera had an established relationship when they were approached by FirstLink to consider how ODIS might be adapted for the changing needs of public and private safety and security organizations.

“Our role at FirstLink is to seek out promising military technologies, evaluate their merit for use by first-responders, and then bring the best of these to people in the field – the firemen, police and paramedics who might actually use them,” Rooney said. “We introduce the concept to the first responders and make sure that their feedback goes to the manufacturer. Based on their input, a market analysis is performed to determine if it’s economically feasible to create the new technology.”

Although ODIS has been used in other prominent civilian settings – at the U.S. Capitol, for example, and at the high-profile trial of convicted sniper John Lee Malvo – Super Bowl XL will be the largest civilian event at which it has been deployed.

Meanwhile, FirstLink continues to explore with Kuchera and TARDEC new adaptations of ODIS technology, such as survivor search missions and detection of chemical or biological hazards in contaminated areas. Given the increased importance of unmanned robotic vehicles for both military and civilian operations that present high risk to personnel, the future of ODIS is a bright one.

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“ODIS represents the best of first responder technology transfer,” Rooney said. “If we can use existing technology and make adjustments so that it may improve the capabilities of first responders and perhaps save lives in the civilian setting, that’s a double return on the tax money that funded the initial technology development. That’s what we strive for at FirstLink every day.”

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Founded in 1996, the Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence (IEE) at the University of Pittsburgh’s Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business offers a variety of programs to help businesses grow and prosper in all stages of their lifecycle. From conceiving an idea to creating a legacy for future generations, the IEE provides knowledge, advice, and innovative services to entrepreneurs through FirstLink, PantherlabWorks, Entrepreneurial Fellows Center, and Family Enterprise Center.

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