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Remote Weapon System Breakthrough

The Netherlands armed forces are equipping 17 of their Thales-supplied Bushmaster mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) infantry mobility vehicles, used in Afghanistan, with Raven R-400 stabilized remote weapon stations.

The order represents the first sale of the Raven R-400 system, known in the U.S. military as the M101 Crows (common remotely operated weapon station), to a NATO country.

Raven/Crows is produced by an industry team comprised of Australian-based **Electro-Optic Systems Holdings Limited (EOS)** and U.S.-based Recon Optical (Barrington, Illinois).



Photo: Royal Netherlands Army

The contract for the Netherlands was announced this week and was preceded by extensive testing in the customer nation.

According to Dr Ben Greene, CEO of the Australian company, the contract -- worth A\$5.8 million (\$5 million) has been awarded to EOS by Thales which is acting as the prime contractor for the Dutch Bushmaster program. EOS will fulfill the contract within 60 days using production facilities in Australia and the U.S., says Greene.

As part of this agreement, EOS has awarded Recon Optical a \$2.2 million production contract to supply 17 stabilized mounts from its Illinois facility, the U.S. company says.

EOS, which has recently built U.S.-based production facilities in Tucson, Arizona, provides the fire control and sensor components that enhance the accuracy and provide remote operation of the weapon system.

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This allows the Raven/Crows system to be operated safely from within the ballistic armor protection offered by the Bushmaster vehicle. The soldier is no longer exposed to hostile fire, inclement weather or other hazardous conditions normally associated with operating a pintle-mounted weapon system on a vehicle, Recon Optical says.

The Raven/Crows system can accommodate a variety of small-caliber (5.56-mm and 7.62-mm) machine guns, the Browning M2 .50-cal heavy machine gun (which will be used on the Netherlands Bushmaster vehicles) and the Mk 19 40-mm automatic grenade launcher.



A Raven/Crows system seen integrated on a Netherlands Bushmaster vehicle during field testing. Starting in August, this configuration will enter service with Dutch forces in Afghanistan. Photo: Royal Netherlands Army

The U.S. Army has contracted over 560 units to EOS and Recon Optical for use in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. company says. For the U.S. program, Recon acts as the prime contractor.

Australia is using the same weapon system in Afghanistan after having ordered it in 2006, adds Greene.

According to Dennis Healy, senior vice president and general manager of Recon Optical's force protection technologies business, reports from the users in Iraq "suggest that the system's thermal capabilities also enhance the soldiers' ability to identify improvised explosive devices."

Greene says that the Netherlands order is of "huge strategic importance" to EOS because it represents a breakthrough in the European NATO market. It follows hard on the heels of another success by EOS, which was a sale (announced May 30) of Raven/Crows systems to an unidentified Asian country, worth up to A\$ 50 million (A\$ 25 million now, A\$ 25 million in 2008), for completion by 2010.

"It is the first open procurement by a NATO country of this technology, and our first sale of any kind to a NATO country. It signals EOS' market entry into the NATO and European markets. The award was made after an international competition, and extensive testing and qualification by the Netherlands and Thales."

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In the Netherlands itself, there may be a follow-on order in the offing as most of the country's 200 Boxer 8x8 armored vehicles (ordered last year from a German-Netherlands industry consortium) will also need to be equipped with a remote weapon system.

But the main prize is the U.S. Army's follow-on multi-year order for remote weapon systems, for which EOS has put in a Crows-based bid through Recon. A decision is expected as early as August.

Greene says that the market for remote weapon systems is "one of the fastest-growing markets for military technology," with orders approaching \$300 million in value that are expected to be placed during this year for programs in Asia, Europe and the U.S.

By 2014, the remote weapon system market will exceed 12,000 units (A\$ 4 billion) in contracts, Greene thinks.

With this order, EOS and Recon are breaking into an international market for remote weapon systems that so far has been dominated by Kongsberg with its Protector-series (of which over 2,000 have been ordered and 100/month are produced to equip the U.S. Army's Stryker Brigades and armored vehicles in eight other nations) as well as a growing number of other companies.

The latter include BAE Systems Bofors, FN-Herstal, Krauss-Maffei Wegmann, Oto Melara, Rafael, Rheinmetall, Thales and others.



In the Netherlands army configuration, the Raven/Crows system will have 500 rounds (12.7-mm) ready to fire. Photo: Royal Netherlands Army

Currently, the Netherlands Bushmaster vehicles (25 of which were ordered and delivered under an urgent operational requirement last year, at a cost of €1 million (\$1.37 million) per vehicle) are equipped with a pintle-mounted 7.62-mm FN-Herstal MAG machine gun.

The weapon mounts now ordered are designated the EOS-SRWS by the Dutch (for EOS-supplied stabilized remote weapon station) and will be configured with a laser rangefinder, day sight and a thermal imaging camera to be able to observe and fire in daylight as well as by night.

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The ammunition box in the Dutch configuration contains 500 rounds.

The first of these systems are expected in the operational theater (Uruzgan province, southern Afghanistan) as early as August, a statement from the Netherlands defense ministry says.