

Exhibitors on virtual cutting edge

By Christopher Boyd | Sentinel Staff Writer
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The cavernous exhibition hall that houses this week's Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation and Education Conference resembles a giant gaming parlor replete with 3-D simulators and virtual battlefields.

But this is no funhouse. The guns pointing at the video displays are real, and the mockups of urban battlefields and military rescue helicopters are deadly serious.

The four-day event at the Orange County Convention Center, which attracted about 350 exhibitors and an expected 14,000 visitors, is at the very core of a transformation that is remaking the U.S. military into a technologically unrivaled fighting force.

"The processing power that is available today allows us to build image generators that closely approximate real life," said retired Navy Adm. Frederick Lewis, executive director of the National Training Systems Association, the conference's sponsor. "The message here is that technology is spreading."

The Defense Department is far and away the biggest buyer of what the exhibitors are offering. As the military prepares for a possible mission in Iraq, its troops are honing skills on simulators that closely resemble the ones on display at the convention.

"These machines allow us to save money, giving our people very realistic training before they go out and use real weapons," said Marine Corps Capt. Billy Mills, pointing with his thumb at what



Bill White of NAV Air operates a Seahawk helicopter simulator at the Orange County Convention Center on Monday.

looks very much like a battlefield bunker armed with two high-caliber machine guns.

The simulator at the Marines' booth was developed in Orlando, Mills said. It is one of 603 simulators that the Marines are using to train troops, and many are capable of running programs that simulate a wide array of battlefields.

"You could run a program that simulates a farmhouse," Mills said. "You can alter the program and scenarios and turn what was a farmhouse into an urban combat zone."

Central Florida is one of the nation's key simulation centers. The Naval Air Warfare Center has more than 1,100 employees in Orlando. The Army's Program Executive Office Simulation, Training and Instrumentation division, which was called Stricom until a recent Defense Department reorganization, is also located here.

Those and other military operations have spawned a network of simulation businesses. RealSims, LLC of Orlando is one of those, and it used the conference to launch its new re-configurable simulator called FasTrac. FasTrac was configured as a US Navy Seahawk helicopter and used by NAV Air to demonstrate an interactive Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) mission where helicopter pilots and ships crews train in a virtual environment which simulates real world battle conditions.