

Army Terrain Vehicles, February 2004

By Scott R. Gourley

As emphasized by the stark physical realities of current Army operations, U.S. military forces must be prepared to operate amid the harshest terrain on earth. A recent addition to the Army mobility inventory is designed to facilitate those operations. While manufacturers' designations range from "utility vehicles" (UVs) to "rugged terrain vehicles" (RTVs), civilians generally refer to the platforms under the generic designation of "all terrain vehicles" (ATVs). Given their utility to modern combat operations, a more appropriate moniker for all the new systems might be "Army terrain vehicles."

Prowler. One of the new platforms that appears to be working its way into specialized portions of the Army's ATV arena is the Prowler automatic four-wheel drive rugged terrain vehicle (RTV). The prototype RTVs, which were developed by All Terrain Vehicle Corp. (a subsidiary of Phoenix International Systems, Inc.), were evaluated in early 2003 by members of Company A, 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), operating in Colombia, South America.

In highlighting the differences between Prowler RTV and other ATVs already in special operations and general U.S. Army inventories, Amos Deacon, chief executive officer for All Terrain Vehicle Corp., notes that "Prowler has a smaller dimensional envelope, smaller turning radius, is much more stable (its center of gravity is almost a foot and a half lower), handles more payload, is faster and has more ground clearance. Also, the Prowler is an operator passive vehicle. It drives the way a car drives. Other ATVs are operator active. (The operator has to straddle it, has to use handlebars to steer it while using his hands to operate his accelerator and brakes and has to position his weight to maintain stability.)"

According to the unclassified test report, "The intent of the evaluation was to test the handling characteristics, utility and maintenance issues of this ATV in the South American area of operations."

Vehicle range varied from 50-200 miles per day over terrain described as "flat plains to moderate hills, double-canopy tropical rain forest, soil, fine dirt, terrain with the consistency of talcum powder when dry and thick syrup-like mud when wet."

In describing Prowler's overall utility, the Army report indicated that "it can be used as a very stable and agile weapons platform, reconnaissance vehicle or casualty evacuation vehicle. This vehicle was mainly used as an equipment carrier, which extended the range of ODAs."

According to Deacon, Army special operators in South America recently modified one or more of their Prowler platforms "for alpine-type operations in the Andes. They put tracks, [Mattracks rubber track conversion systems] on the Prowler and were able to drive through the snow at 40 miles an hour. It's pretty amazing."