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SHOOTERS' BUILDING BLOCKS: CUMBERLAND TACTICAL HANDGUN
ROBOT WARRIOR: NORTHERN LIGHTS TACTICAL TRACS

NORTHERN LIGHTS TACTICAL TRACS

◀◀ TRACS with full-size humanoid target. Any more real and you will need an attorney.

TRACS ready to engage all comers. Gun fires three-round bursts via signals from remote controller. ▶▶

ROBOT

» BY MIKE JONES

As you hastily turn the corner, a nasty three-round burst misses your ankles and thighs by only inches, and you are reminded that this is no ordinary range session.



WARRIOR

Back to cover, you properly “pie” the corner and deliver half a dozen rounds center mass back into your aggressor. The exercise controller signals, “Terminate exercise.”

Although that three-round burst was only composed of .68-caliber paintballs, it probably didn't feel like it. Nothing completely imitates the stress of real bullets coming at you, but I guarantee that the Tactical Robotic All-Purpose Chassis System (TRACS) threat from Northern

Lights Tactical will amp you up and get your adrenaline flowing.

Ever since trench warfare ended in 1918, cover and movement have been the essence of staying alive in combat. TRACS will reinforce that. Simply put, when was the last time you had a range day where your target moved in every direction and inevitably tried to out-flank your position of cover? That is but one of several missions that TRACS can complete.



▲ TRACS' wireless camera system comes securely packaged in a Pelican case that houses monitor during operation.
Photo: Northern Lights Tactical

During any form of close combat, people move, usually very quickly and unpredictably. This is exactly what TRACS replicates as a target. Try a Tuel-ler knife drill: TRACS will move nearly as fast as a human, normally 0-7 mph in about two seconds with even a novice operator.

About a year ago I ordered a TRACS, sight unseen and without a T&E, for my agency. It was a leap of faith, as they are not inexpensive and I know about as much about robotics as I do about brain surgery.

THE SPECS

At its heart, TRACS is a 26" x 26" robotic four-wheel-drive platform with zero turning radius (it can spin in circles, exposing the target briefly) encased in MIL-DTL-46177 steel armor. Just about everything but centerfire rifle bullets bounce off of it (you have to use frangible ammunition to be able to use a rifle unless you are willing to risk zing-



➤ Shooter rolls a corner to engage TRACS.

➤ TRACS inserted into building via loading dock during exercise. Search of several rooms took only a few minutes, as opposed to 45 minutes it might take a bunkered-up human team.



ing one into the chassis and voiding the warranty). With skilled shooters, however, you can get away with it.

The mounted target sits several feet above the TRACS platform, so unless you are having a real problem, the rounds don't even come close to the expensive part. Even the tires are foam filled. Under optimum conditions, TRACS can be controlled to over one mile. It will carry a load of up to 250 pounds over most any terrain. Various target-mounting systems are available for traditional and humanoid 3D targets. For those wanting the paintball system, TRACS comes with a Tippman A5 paintball gun fitted with an electronic trigger.

Upon opening the TRACS manual, my eyes glazed over as I read what may or may not have been a wiring diagram for the space shuttle. In all seriousness, the manual was intimidating. In speaking to the manufacturer, I was informed that the manual was being re-worked. Please keep in mind that this is my experience, and I have a VCR that has been blinking 12:00 since 1990. Luck-

ily I have not really needed to modify anything from TRACS' factory settings: it worked perfectly right out of the box.

As for customer service, Northern Lights Tactical is right up there with Aimpoint, Insight Technology and Bravo Company USA—in other words, superb. When I called about a problem (in actuality, it turned out to be a problem on my end, which is not surprising) I didn't get a well-meaning-but-in-the-dark receptionist—one of the engineers answered the phone! If you have a problem, they solve it, immediately. There is virtually no maintenance associated with TRACS, which makes it perfect for most cops, given our cultural and possibly genetic tendency to break things. All of the fittings and ports for accessories are intuitive. Stuff fits where it looks like it should.

You are able to tune TRACS for turning speed, general responsiveness, etc., but as stated earlier, I haven't had to modify anything in a year of use. The robot is controlled by a wireless handheld transmitter very similar to one you would encounter with a high-end

radio-controlled aircraft. Do yourself a favor and get two 24-volt batteries for the TRACS, with one always on charge, and never have down time.

MISSION CONFIGURABLE

As it is adaptable from training target to operational tool, the TRACS makes good practical and financial sense all around, and my agency has not been disappointed.

TRACS' operational debut was during an exercise that involved the threat of domestic terrorism. With camera mounted, TRACS allowed us to visually clear areas via remote wireless monitor from complete safety 25 yards away. We were able to get relatively deep into a structure before there was any interference in the wireless signal, and we could have easily gained a foothold had it been required. Within the structure, the camera system was detailed enough to allow us to complete facial and weapon recognition. The camera is built unbelievably tough, and I do believe that the camera could take abuse up to and including non-

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AS A WEAPONS SYSTEM

Northern Lights Tactical does not advertise it as such, or even recommend it, but TRACS could be utilized as a less-lethal weapons system. With a skilled operator, the little armored beast could roll up to an individual or a group and engage them with traditional paintballs or PepperBall projectiles. Even the most aggressive sword-wielding tweaker would be hard pressed to do much more than scratch the paint. That should bring a smile to your face.

The majority of TRACS use will be as a target, with or without the shoot-back feature. In this it excels like no other moving target I have ever used. The TRACS controller should be well versed in the machine before using it in con-

junction with shooters. As TRACS can move quickly, the controller must constantly ensure a safe field of fire for the shooter(s). TRACS weighs enough that if you run it into an ankle at full speed, you may be visiting an ER. Protective equipment for the shooter is simply a facemask rated to stop paintballs and a highly recommended groin protector.

CONTINUING INNOVATION

Northern Lights takes feedback seriously and is continually working on new accessories. In addition to the already mentioned features, there is a trigger system to initiate smoke and chemical grenades, as well as distraction devices. A trailer system allows you to utilize multiple towed moving targets, and a payload delivery arm can handle a throw phone.

The last EOD/bomb squad robot I used cost over \$100,000. With articulating tracks, it could climb stairs, its arms could extend overhead to render an object safe, and it could perform any num-

ber of other amazing feats, including placing and detonating a "hockey puck" charge on a metal door.

TRACS does not even try to perform those functions, and at a cost of less than 10% of that big number, we can't really expect it to. It is simply a very robust training and operational tool that in both arenas will likely save good-guy lives. And I'm not the only one who thinks so, as TRACS units are in use by U.S. Naval Special Warfare, USMC, US Army, GUNSITE and various police agencies in the U.S. and U.K.

Start by checking out the video on the Northern Lights Tactical website: you'll be impressed. After that, your next new recruit may be a robot! ●

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