



Soldier volunteers provide critical service at Natick

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Cognitive science research team members at the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center guide a human research volunteer through a virtual reality experiment in Natick, Massachusetts. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center / U.S. Army)

They arrive every 90 days at the Natick Soldier Systems Center in Natick, Massachusetts, ready to perform an invaluable mission on behalf of their military brothers and sisters. If a Soldier wears it, eats it or sleeps under it, a human research volunteer has tested it for the Army warfighter.

HRVs arrive at Natick usually following advanced individual training and prior to their first permanent duty station. Many Soldiers often arrive unfamiliar with the small military research complex and installation.

"I had no clue about Natick," said 1st Sgt. Miguel A. Martinez Jr., first sergeant of the Headquarters Research and Development Detachment at the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center, who works with many of the HRVs. "Before I came here, I asked myself, 'What am I getting myself into? I have no idea what this is.' I have been here a year, and I love it. It's great."

Behind every HRV is a small force of noncommissioned officers who are charged with sustaining Natick's mission of maximizing the warfighter's survivability and combat effectiveness.

"We know what the equipment can be used for, instead of what it was designed to do," Martinez said. "Soldiers walk in and say, 'That's awesome. I can do this, this and this.' The scientists then say, 'Wow. We never thought of it that way.'"

It happens often: Soldiers repurpose a piece of military equipment in a way that scientists never thought possible. One example was the Army poncho, said Sarah Ross, human research volunteer test coordinator and a veteran NCO.







A human research volunteer is the first line of research and the backbone for testing everything that is worn, carried or consumed by Soldiers, Natick says. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center / U.S. Army)

"Scientists had no idea that Soldiers were using it as a shelter or a cover," Ross said. "Two years ago, [a review] was done in the Doriot Climatic Chambers because Soldiers were getting heat injuries from being underneath the poncho. They found Soldiers were using the poncho as a shelter, and the temperature underneath the ponchos was reaching 150 degrees. Soldiers thought they were in the shade, but in reality they were hurting themselves by doing it. Scientists and engineers didn't create that item for them to use it in that regard, so they changed it. But they wouldn't have known that if they didn't have a good relationship with Soldiers to be able to get that feedback."

Martinez and Ross work together with HRVs to ensure that being a Soldier doesn't come second at Natick, Ross said.

"Bottom line is we are all just making sure that we do the best we can for the Soldier," she said.

A lot can happen in the 90 days that Soldiers serve as HRVs.

"It's enough time where Soldiers who are not diligent in staying within qualification of their MOS, their job, that they can become complacent quite easily," Ross said. "So that's where HRDD comes in — to make sure that Soldiers keep that good order because that's important."

Soldiers who volunteer for studies at Natick may find themselves with such tasks as trying new uniforms or garments or enduring environmental conditions that Soldiers in the field commonly face.



Soldiers who volunteer to be human research volunteers at the Natick Soldier Systems Center at Natick, Massachusetts, provide an invaluable service and help further studies at the small military installation. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center / U.S. Army)

"A Soldier can be here for 90 days and participate anywhere from doing one study to 10, 12 or 15," Ross said. "I keep records, and I give them all a little memo of things they have done. I did one where a Soldier did 17. That's the most I have seen a Soldier do in 90 days."

As part of the team at the Doriot Climatic Chambers, Ross has seen a lot of HRVs come through Natick.

"Our program is evolving because the Soldiers that we work for are evolving," Ross said. "The Soldiers we are getting in this program are changing because the demographic of the Soldier is changing. We are seeing more females in these groups than I have ever seen. This upcoming group has 11 females. I have never had 11 females in a group of 30 before. That's never happened in my eight years here."

The installation often welcomes West Point cadets as well as squads from larger bases to help with testing.

"We have cadets from West Point who intern here," Martinez said. "We also have a squad from the 82nd Airborne Division that helps as well. There are guys from Fort Stewart, Georgia, here, and we have HRVs as well. It's a very busy installation for a small unit."

HRVs have been prized for their feedback since 1954 at Natick labs, where they take part in studies for NSRDEC and the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine. Ross often hears back from some Soldiers who have volunteered at Natick.

"One of the best things to me is when I open up Facebook, and I get a message from [a former HRV]," she said. "They tell me, 'Hey Sarah, I am an E4 now. My unit was chosen to use this new rucksack. I opened it up and realized that three years ago when I was at Natick as an HRV I helped with this research.' I probably receive about 10 of