



Letterkenny Army Depot rolls out heavily armored vehicle

By JIM HOOK Senior writer

The lights dimmed suddenly in the shop after the top brass spoke.

The black drapes suddenly opened, and the first Panther crept toward the fog machine. The sound system growled Janet Jackson's "Black Cat" and boomed "Let it Rock" by Kevin Rudolf.

A team of artisans from Letterkenny Army Depot and BAE Systems finished the prototype vehicle after nine months of painstaking attention to detail.

The Panther is the latest version of a mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle. Army combat engineers and bomb disposal crews will ride in the Panthers. Its V-shaped, armored hull is designed to divert explosions.

Combat engineers clear the way for other troops and ride point in the war against roadside bombs.

Engineers have been taking a huge hit from improvised explosive devices in Iraq, according to Col. Robert Tipton of the U.S. Army Engineers Regiment. Engineers comprise less than 4 percent of troops, but account for 6.5 percent of all casualties. Of the 283 engineer casualties,

240 were from IEDs or similar explosive devices.

The Panther leaped from concept to finished product "at light speed" in just six years, he said.

"Wow. What a great day," Tipton said.

The BAE-Letterkenny partnership of 150 workers can produce about 30 to 40 of the Panther series each month, according to Dave Loudermilk, BAE manager at Letterkenny.

Crews assemble Panthers "from the lug nuts up" in Building 52 at Letterkenny.

"We're getting fast," Loudermilk said. "Their learning curve is coming down rapidly. The work force, being an experienced work force, learns fast."

The first Panther is to see action in a few weeks.

York-based BAE has a \$1.2 billion contract to supply an undefined number of Panthers to the military in the next five years. So far, the Army has funded \$141 million of the contract and has an option to extend the contract to eight years.

The Panther is named in honor of the "Jungle Cats," the 11th Engineer Battalion, whose symbol is a black panther.

The honor is especially fitting, Tipton said, because Paul R. Smith, a combat engineer with the Jungle Cats battalion, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for his actions on April 3, 2003, at the Baghdad airport. He is

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credited with saving the lives of three soldiers whose M-113 armored engineering vehicle was hit with a mortar round. His courageous action saved the lives of at least 100 soldiers and resulted in the deaths of as many as 50 enemy, according to the citation for the nation's highest military honor.

Jeff Carr, BAE assistant program manager for Panther, said it is satisfying to be building a vehicle like the Panther in his hometown.

"To be at Letterkenny to work on this program is very rewarding," said Carr, a Chambersburg native living in Lancaster.

Jim Hook can be reached at 262-4759 and jhook@publicopinionnews.com.

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