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New Stryker boasts plenty of firepower

MICHAEL GILBERT; The News Tribune

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The 10th and final version of the Stryker armored vehicle to be delivered to Fort Lewis looks a lot like its predecessors, with one exception.

One big exception.

The Mobile Gun System features a 105 mm cannon. Five years in the making, it brings much more to the fight than other versions armed with a heavy machine gun, a grenade launcher or anti-tank missiles.

"This will bring a lot more firepower, a lot more versatility to what the infantry can do," said Sgt. 1st Class David Cooper, a tanker who leads a platoon of three of the new vehicles in the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment.

The new variant – they call it the MGS – is designed to back up the infantry with a gun that can blast through walls, knock out a fortified sniper nest, stop another armored vehicle and clear a street of enemy fighters.

General Dynamics Land Systems began delivering the new vehicles a couple of months ago, and now company teams are training crews. For now, Fort Lewis will be home to one brigade worth of MGS vehicles, 27 in all.

Local Stryker troops now fighting in Mosul and Baghdad, Iraq, won't get the big guns before coming home next year. But the brigade breaking them in at Fort Lewis expects to take them to Iraq when it likely goes next summer.

The Army eventually plans to buy a set of 27 for each of its seven Stryker brigades, at a cost of about \$3.7 million per vehicle.

The MGS is the most expensive of the 10 Stryker variants – the most common, the infantry carrier, costs about \$1.6 million – and has proved to be the most difficult to develop.

Still working out some kinks

The main challenges: a reliable mechanism to automatically load rounds into the MGS, firing it accurately off a bouncy wheeled platform instead of a more stable tracked base, and keeping the vehicle light enough to meet the Army's weight requirements, officials said.

General Dynamics officials said they think they've worked through those issues with the vehicle that's being delivered now. Others are being tested at Army ranges in Arizona,



Enlarge image

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Instructor Joe Hutchison, left, talks with Spc. Joel Wright as instructor Larry Kirkegaard trains Spc. John Leek on how to repair the newest Stryker.



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The rifling inside the 18-foot barrel of the 105 mm cannon atop the newest version of the Stryker helps ensure accuracy. "If you can see a target and lock on to it, you can engage it with accuracy out to 2,000 meters," said Tom Crooks, at left, of General Dynamics.

New Mexico and Maryland.

The Fort Lewis Stryker troops will conduct similar tests and take the vehicles to the Yakima Training Center late this month to put the gun through its paces. It's too big to shoot at Fort Lewis.

As with past Stryker versions, testing will continue even as the vehicle is delivered to soldiers preparing to take it into combat, said Peter Keating, a General Dynamics spokesman in Warren, Mich.

Thomas Crooks, the company's service lead at Fort Lewis, said the 49,000-pound vehicle is operated by a three-man crew: a driver, a gunner and a vehicle commander.

The gun is loaded by an automated hydraulic handler. The vehicle can carry up to 18 rounds.

The computerized fire-control system is virtually the same as the one used in the Army's main battle tank, the M1 Abrams. The gunner and the vehicle commander track targets on computer screens inside their hatches in the turret, Crooks said.

The MGS is also armed with a coaxial M240B machine gun that's operated via the fire control system, and a .50-caliber machine gun at the vehicle commander's hatch.

"You can literally shoot smiley faces at 800 meters," said Cooper, the platoon sergeant. "And that's not an infantryman exposed with a machine gun, but a gunner buttoned up in a turret."

Versatile fighting machine

The MGS will carry four types of ammunition: a depleted-uranium armor-piercing round, a high-explosive anti-tank round, a high-explosive plastic round for blowing through walls and barricades, and a canister round filled with 2,300 tungsten ball bearings for firing on enemy fighters.

At Yakima, operators will work through a series of gunnery scenarios to validate their skills, all of them drawn from the experiences of soldiers working now in Iraq, Cooper said.

In the meantime, MGS crewmen are undergoing new equipment training at Fort Lewis and operating the vehicles in the post's ranges and at the Leschi Town urban training complex.

Cooper said the MGS packs "exactly the same, if not a little more enhanced" firepower as an Abrams tank, especially with the four types of rounds.

Defensively, though, it's not as stout as the 70-ton tank.

"I can't disregard some of the threats out there, like (rocket propelled grenades) that I can in a tank," Cooper said. "I have to be prudent. ... It can dish out the punishment, but it can't take it to the same degree that an Abrams can."

The MGS also doesn't require as extensive logistical support as the Abrams. It gets far better gas mileage, and it's built on the same basic chassis as the other Strykers.

"The same mechanics can work on this that work on all the other variants," said Bob Montoya, the General Dynamics lead instructor at Fort Lewis

He said his trainees include infantry platoon leaders who need to know how to employ the new vehicles to support their ground troops.

Ready to show their stuff

"We want to make the entire chain of command aware of the capabilities of the system," Montoya said.

At least one lieutenant colonel already gets it, the General Dynamics guys said: When his battalion's nine MGS Strykers arrived at the motor pool he walked up to each, spat in his hands and then rubbed it onto the vehicles – just like in a recent car commercial.

"He said, 'They're mine now!' and I said, 'Yes sir, they are,'" said Crooks. "There's a lot of smiling 19 Kilos around here lately."

That's the number and letter of the Army's military occupational specialty code for tank crewmen. And in a brigade that is dominated by infantrymen – 11 Bravos – tankers see the MGS' arrival as a chance finally to show what they can do.

"A lot of guys, you know, the airborne Rangers, they kind of look at it and don't know what to think of it, basically," Cooper said. "I think it's going to go a long way to bring armor and infantry together, make everybody a big happy family."

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The 10 versions of the Stryker

The Army now has 10 variants of the Stryker vehicle, which was born at Fort Lewis. They are:

- Infantry carrier
- Reconnaissance
- Fire support
- Command
- Engineer support
- Medical evacuation
- Mortar carrier
- Anti-tank guided missile
- Nuclear, biological and chemical
- Mobile gun system

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