NIE evolution has come of age

Signaleers,

The first time I heard about the idea of a Network Integration Event/ Evaluation was at an Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association LandWarNet conference in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., several years ago.

The Army's vice chief of staff, GEN Peter Chiarelli, spoke to us via video teleconference. LTG Jeffery A. Sorenson was the DA CIO/G6 at that time and was our spokesperson.

I remember how GEN Chiarelli held up his iPhone and asked us why we couldn't give the same capability to our Soldiers. He stressed that his Smartphone could do more than military radios for a lot less. You can get video, internet, text, photos and best of all the folks you wanted to communicate with didn't need the exact same equipment to talk.

His speech was a challenge to servicemembers, Department of Defense civilians and suppliers:

'Give our military personnel the same capability that the telecommunications industry sells to everyone right here at home.' When a four-star general talks, people listen.

There were obstacles. Going from a good idea to putting a battle-ready system into formations takes seven to 10 years. At the pace of technological advances, that's like giving our Soldiers dial-up when everyone else has broadband.

Another obstacle: the communications backbone. Cell phone providers have years to build a robust cell phone network. Soldiers going into war or a disaster-relief mission have to build a network in hours.

One of the drivers of the NIE is to provide an opportunity to integrate all our warfighters' systems in an operational environment and to find the equivalent of a Soldier Smartphone with a deployable network. It's exciting to see how far we've come. This upcoming exercise, 14.1, will focus on integrating the aerial network to support the network connection across a Brigade-size battle space.

Already, our Soldiers in the 2-1 Brigade have tested the capabilities of a Smartphone network, called Nett Warrior that gives our combat Soldiers multiple capabilities, including Blue Force Tracker-like situational awareness for dismounted Soldiers. The 2-1 Brigade Combat Team also tested secure satellite and broadband line-of-sight networks using WIN-T and HNR equipment. The success of those NIE tests led to satellite on-the-move equipment being fielded to 10th Mountain.

NIE also has revealed that to build a truly robust network over a vast battle space requires three layers: (1) ground-hugging line-of-sight equipment; (2) satellites in space; and, (3) a layer in between provided by drones and blimps. That third layer will get a close look during 14.1.

GEN Chiarelli gave us a challenge and I believe the NIE has provided the environment to find a solution. Testimony to that fact: in these times of constrained resources, the NIE has thrived.