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News Story

Gunning for prime market share

By Jim Donnelly, Ottawa Business Journal Staff
 Wed, Aug 6, 2008 4:00 PM EST

As CEO Ken Kirkpatrick will tell you, OSI Geospatial was founded in 1977 as Offshore Survey & Positioning Services Ltd., to provide electronic positioning systems to oil companies.



(Photo courtesy of Selex Galileo)

But the software and systems company has come a long way since those early days, and now is one of many lining up to bid on 'future soldier system' projects in Canada, the U.S. and around the world. Dozens of countries are ramping up their own versions of the future soldier project – including Canada's \$310-million Integrated Soldier System Project, or ISSP – said Mr. Kirkpatrick, and by this fall, when procurement begins, OSI will campaign for many of them.

OBJ: What's been the evolution of the concept of the future soldier program, as it pertains to OSI Geospatial?

KIRKPATRICK: Canada isn't the only country that's moving forward with buying command-and-control systems for soldiers – there are many, many programs ramping up around the world.

Where this all started for OSI is in the U.S., working with the U.S. Army for a number of years in advanced research and development projects, and the development of our technology. So what's happened over the last couple of years is that we've been funded by the U.S. Army to develop leading-edge technology in this area, in giving command-and-control capabilities to the soldier.

And as a result of that, our company acquired that technology through an acquisition we made in late 2005 (of U.S.-based CHI Systems). So we entered this market through an acquisition, and we've . . . concluded there are a number of programs around the world willing to buy that technology.

The U.S. Army has spent millions of dollars with our company in the development of this technology, and we acquired the above company with the objective to commercialize that technology and move it into a product form. And as part of that, we hired sales and marketing experts within the land-based command-and-control area, to help us . . . pursue that market, which includes the ISSP.

OBJ: You mentioned a number of countries are ramping up advanced soldier programs. Where are you seeing the greatest opportunities for OSI right now?

KIRKPATRICK: It's interesting, because there are several programs ramping up. Our focus market is the United States (Future Force Warrior program), Canada (ISSP program), and the U.K. (Future Integrated Soldier Technology [FIST] program), and all three countries are looking to buy this technology. But we also do business in Australia, Denmark, and the Netherlands, and those countries are also ramping up.

OBJ: So most of the world's modern armies are going this route

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Special Projects



buying a new vehicle in 2008?

- No, the uncertain economic climate is making me hold off.
- Yes, dealers and manufacturers are offering great financial incentives.
- I wasn't, but gas prices are making me think about downsizing.
- I was thinking of leasing, but that is increasingly not an option.
- No, I am waiting for the electric car.
- Other.

Results

– seems to be a great market opportunity.

KIRKPATRICK: I think with the type of conflicts that are being fought today, in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, using urban warfare and fighting in caves where it's very close combat, technologies such as ours provide real value in saving lives and improving the operational efficiency of missions. It's a high priority for many governments. And that's moved into the procurement process, where budgets have been established and real programs have begun to address this problem.

OBJ: How does this fit into guerilla-style warfare? What are the explicit advantages?

KIRKPATRICK: What happens is, if you send a (fire) team of 10 into an urban centre, those 10 people have a mission to execute and they're going into that close-quartered, dense-building environment. And in a conflict situation, where there's a lot of heavy fire, people running to find cover and safe places, there's a huge risk of shooting your blue force (the friendly force). Because people break up, they look for shelter, and keeping track of exactly where your team is is a real challenge. And one of the main thrusts of these systems is to be able to identify and track the blue force in those dense, chaotic environments, so it reduces casualties significantly.

OBJ: Can you get into any specifics of the technical advantages your technology offers?

KIRKPATRICK: It's one of those things where I have to be little careful, because it's a competitive environment. But if you go back to the last scenario, if you're in a building and you have a computer system tracking where you are, and also providing a perspective of where the blue force is . . . in many of these environments, Global Positioning Systems (GPS) signals simply aren't available. One of the advanced capabilities that we have, and that we know that very few others have, is the ability to track positions within a GPS-denied environment.

And that's what I believe to be one of our most advanced technologies, that very few other companies have at this point, and that's been developed over a number of years with U.S. Special Operations forces.

OBJ: It's been reported that a number of firms (such as General Dynamics Canada, EADS Defence and Security, Thales Canada, and Rheinmetall Canada) are all planning to bid on Canada's ISSP. Is it an advantage being a smaller company in this regard?

KIRKPATRICK: I think where we sit is that we have technologies that's advanced compared to those bigger companies. Because of how our technology has evolved, it's been developed to handle much more sophisticated challenges in support of what I'd call special operations requirements. But being a small company comes with challenges, and there are some big companies who are stepping into this space. But if we deem it necessary to establish partnerships with companies that are larger . . . our technology gives us the ability to attract those types of partners.

OBJ: Is a partnership something that's on your radar for the near future?

KIRKPATRICK: We look at every program as a stand-alone. So we look at it and say "What's the highest chance of success to win at least a piece of the program, or all of the program?"

OBJ: Do different countries have different procurement specifications?

KIRKPATRICK: I'd say they all have a certain level of requirement that would be consistent. But as we know, each

country has their own requirements, and there will always be a difference between what Canada buys and what Australia buys.

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