

A bright idea: ECVC's Jones helps develop new flashlight

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What Bob Jones considered a bright idea nearly had the switch turned off. Now that the new prototype flashlight has been developed, he hopes it soon will be a standard-issue item in the military.

"Now the difficult part comes," said Jones, executive vice president at Eastern Carolina Vocational Center in Greenville. "We've already tested it and done the packaging for 5,000 of these in the last couple of weeks. Now comes the hard part of getting the military to use them."

Jones came up with the idea for the Hard Case Tactical flashlight, engineered and developed by Energizer. Its primary purpose is to provide a lighter flashlight for military or police use, replacing D-Cell batteries with AA or AAA lithium batteries. But its added features and durability also make it more user-friendly in the field than the type that has been used for more than five decades, Jones said.

"The only change that was ever made to this flashlight throughout its entire 50-plus years was a raised part was added on 20 years ago, I think, to keep from accidentally turning the flashlight on," Jones said.

"The military doesn't like to switch," Daneel le Roux, president of ECVC, added.

The idea of altering the military flashlights began with discussions about reducing battery weight during a visit to Fort Monmouth, which handles much of the Army's research and development of the hi-tech systems in communications, computers, intelligence, sensors and reconnaissance. Jones approached Energizer with his ideas for other improvements, and the engineering department at Fort Monmouth worked on a design, incorporating 47 of 60 suggestions from a focus group of soldiers.

"Out of it came all these other features on it," Jones said.

Among the biggest change is the capability of four different kinds of light - white, red, blue and infrared - with the push of a button. The old version required changing filters that are stored in the bottom of the flashlight - a time-consuming task, especially at night if one is dropped. The bulb is also more durable than the easily breakable filament bulb.

"Some of these are being tested and being used in Iraq, and one thing they have found out was that the blue light, they can check for cornea injuries," Jones said. "There's a lot of eye injuries, so they can check. ... The blue light also can be used to check for blood in the dark."

The flashlight's infrared can be used with night-vision goggles. Red and blue lights can be used for signaling and at traffic checkpoints.

Other features include:

- Extra wide clip to hold the light steady while running.
- Large bottom footprint that allows steady upright use on table or flat surface.
- An impact-resistant ABS plastic, rubber overmold and stainless steel sideguards to make it virtually indestructible.
- Weight of only 8 ounces with two AA lithium batteries (lighter with AAA batteries).
- Swivel with stops at 90 degrees, 180 degrees and 210 degrees.
- Hooded head protects lens, ensures light projects straight ahead and cannot be seen from periphery.

- Anti-roll square body.
- Weatherproof and floats.
- Durability to survive a 30-foot drop onto concrete.

ECVC received its first prototypes this past summer but was bound by a nondisclosure agreement until last month. The fact that a prototype had been developed came as a surprise to Jones after a visit to Fort Bragg with two Energizer executives to gauge the market for flashlights.

"They had decided they weren't going to do it because they didn't see a big opportunity for sales," Jones said. "We looked at doing it and decided it costs so much to do the research and development that we're not going to do it. That's a lot of money to risk."

Mike Sanders with Energizer decided to move ahead with the project.

"He just called up one day and said, 'Hey, we've got a prototype of a flashlight ready,' " Jones said. "They were trying to keep it secret, didn't want any competitors to find out about it."

Some of the testing was handled by ECVC, which provides employment opportunities for disabled persons.

"The people that tested this thing, that soldiers' lives will depend upon, they have disabilities," le Roux said. "They use night vision equipment to test the infrared capability to make sure everything is working right. ... We're very careful to have people with disabilities involved and not just have it in name but in actual practice."

The commercial packaging for flashlights to sell outside military bases and at base stores was developed by Craig Roberts at Package Craft in Bethel.

"Craig Roberts really spent a lot of time with the Energizer people coming up with this," Jones said. "The original packaging (Energizer) came up with, their engineer couldn't even put the thing together."

The first 5,000 flashlights were sent to Energizer's Atlanta distribution center, where most will be used for sales team samples. Jones hopes ECVC will land a military contract and serve as a distribution point. ECVC already handles military orders for batteries.

"Now the hard part begins," Jones said. "I'm glad I'm not in sales."

