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LAW ENFORCEMENT TECHNOLOGY

June 1, 2008

Smile, you're on VIDMIC

By Ronnie Garrett

In the television series, *Candid Camera*, producers concealed cameras to film ordinary people confronted with unusual situations, sometimes involving trick props, such as a desk with drawers that popped open when another one was closed or a car with a hidden extra gas tank. Later when the joke was revealed, the victims were told, "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*."

Today, officers wearing the new VIDMIC, a fully operational shoulder mic equipped with a video and audio recorder and a still camera, might say something similar to the suspects they encounter in the field.

This revolutionary data acquisition system from Ear Hugger Safety Equipment (EHS) Inc. fits within an officer's shoulder mic and goes everywhere the officer goes to record important information in the field, the value of which cannot be underestimated, says Mike Marshall, vice president of sales and part owner of EHS Inc.

"Everything is being documented," he says of the system being used by more than 100 departments across the country. "This cuts down on lawsuits and false accusations against officers, increases successful court prosecutions, and when people know they are being recorded, they become less likely to be aggressive toward officers."

Building video evidence

EHS got its start in 2004 selling earpieces for two-way radios. Shortly after that, its customers began requesting audio recorders to document officer interactions with the public, and developers quickly moved from the idea of adding audio to including both audio and video on an officer's shoulder mic.

The company launched research and development efforts and within short order got the technology to the point it is today, which is an extremely lightweight and small unit (no larger than the officer's existing shoulder mic piece) that can record 3.5 hours of video with its lithium battery. The device utilizes separate batteries for the shoulder mic, and the camera and audio functions, to prevent a loss of power to the mic. "Officers never need to worry about losing access to their lifeline," Marshall explains.

After deciding to add both audio and video, the company realized there were inherent benefits to adding a still camera as well. Officers often must photograph evidence at the scene. The VIDMIC's 5.36-megapixel camera produces high-quality images to document evidence and its 1.5-inch LCD on the back enables officers to place everything squarely in the frame before photographing it.

Operating the VIDMIC

The VIDMIC's full-color LCD screen provides many important pieces of information. When turned on it displays: the remaining memory, the number of files stored in memory, battery status, and the time and date of the recording. While capturing video, the LCD screen shows that video recording is in progress and indicates the battery status and time elapsed. It also stamps every second of video with the time and date.

The LCD can be manually turned on and off, depending on an officer's particular need. When patrolling at night, safety and stealth dictate that the LCD be shut off. When the LCD is on, the system features an automatic shut off to place the unit in sleep mode when not recording in order to preserve battery power.

The American Fork (Utah) Police Department has employed VIDMICs since the product was in beta testing. After using the devices for several months, the agency purchased a VIDMIC for each of its 33 officers. Though the LCD presents what may appear to be a daunting amount of information, Sgt. Sam Liddiard of the American Fork PD says officers have found the device inherently simple to use. In fact, he says it literally took less than 5 minutes to train Grand Forks officers in its use. The system, which he says is built upon the KISS principal, has an on/off and a record button. Officers simply point the unit in the direction they want to record and push the record button. When they are finished recording, they shut it off.

"When they wear it right in front of them in the V of their shirt and center mass, they don't need to view the LCD screen at all because after a little bit of training they will know exactly what they are picking up on video," Marshall adds. "It really does become second nature."

Managing image files

Recorded video is stored in the system's 1 gig of memory, which can later be downloaded like a digital camera via USB cable into an agency's computer system, where files can be burned onto a CD for storage. The Spanish Fork-based company provides software to enhance and expedite this process.

The software reads a serial number off the VIDMIC while it's connected to the computer, and automatically associates it with a specific officer. It then allows administrators to assign the footage to different fields or punch in a case number. Later when it's necessary to retrieve video or audio recordings, or still images, users can simply type in the case number to access every single file captured at the scene. This way if four officers arrive on a scene and record video footage, a supervisor can later view all of these recordings by keying in a single case number.

This software simplifies chain of custody issues by preventing officers from modifying the evidence after it is captured. While officers can view the recordings, only supervisors have the authority to approve the files as evidence. The Grand Forks PD provides an investigations commander, a patrol commander and Liddiard with access to EHS' administrative software. These individuals download video off the VIDMICs at the end of each shift and store it. The software prevents any of these officials from modifying the captured footage or images, says Liddiard.

Later, users can employ this software to cut the video into segments to produce evidence for court; particularly useful in incidents where video might have been recorded for several hours. "You don't want the jury sitting there for that long," Marshall explains. "But let's say there are 20 pertinent segments, which are 30 seconds to a minute long, that you want the jury to watch. The software allows the user to drag and drop those onto a list pane and burn them in sequence for court."

The VIDMIC: Priceless

The VIDMIC can cost up to twice as much as a conventional shoulder mic, but in Liddiard's words a department cannot put a price on the benefits this little device brings. While *Candid Camera* captured video footage for laughs, officers using the VIDMIC are capturing it for some serious reasons.

Video is becoming increasingly important to court cases, especially those alleging officer misconduct. When there is video evidence and someone accuses an officer, Marshall points out that 96.2 percent of the time the officer is exonerated. "Without video, how easy is it for a suspect to say that an officer mistreated them and ruin his entire career?" he asks. "Video evidence is extremely important and it's becoming more important all the time."

Imaging technology also enables officers to document the facts of the case, which is priceless, Liddiard says. Grand Forks officers use the VIDMIC's still camera to photograph evidence found at crime or accident scenes. And at a domestic call, for example, its officers simply use the device to videotape the entire incident as well as the condition of the home, the victim's emotions and the children present for use in court.

"Now our officers have video from the moment they show up at a home to when they leave," he says. "It eliminates the he said/she said problem that is common in domestic violence cases. This evidence is very valuable."

The Grand Forks PD recently developed a VIDMIC policy that is currently being reviewed by its police chief. But until the policy is enacted, which should be soon, Liddiard says the department has a procedural rule that states officers should turn on their VIDMICs during any contact with the public. "It provides great documentation of what they did at a call and what was happening at that call," he says. "With this evidence, juries, judges and defense attorneys can see for themselves what happened. Everything the officer or suspect did during that incident is on videotape, and it's indisputable."



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