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Students develop life saving eye in the sky

Spy plane to help armed forces by detecting snipers, bombs and enemy vehicles

Ed Thomas

A TECHNOLOGY whiz kid from Camden Town could change the face of warfare if his ideas are adopted by the armed forces.

Tom Foran is entering the MoD's Grand Challenge to find new ways of detecting threats to its troops.

The 20-year-old and his team of fellow students from Middlesex University are designing a UAV (unmanned autonomous vehicle) that will fly above the ground spotting snipers, bombs and enemy vehicles.

The hi-tech spy plane will be mounted with thermal imaging equipment and robotic cameras and will relay information back to base without the need for a pilot.

The York Way resident said: "Other teams entering the challenge are designing ground-based UAVs. But we are developing a flying vehicle as the air is probably the safest place to be in a battlefield.

"Being airborne will also give the best viewing angles and provide the most detailed information."

The Grand Challenge takes place in a militarised zone on

Salisbury Plain next summer. A mock scenario will present the teams with a range of potential threats, from improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to mounted machine gun placements.

Each of the 14 teams chosen for the challenge will have to use their UAV to map the enemy threats which, in a real-life situation, would help allied forces mount an attack.

"We really can't wait," said the product design engineering student. "This has been a long time coming but finally we are starting work on this project.

"We have been to MoD conferences, carried out research and drawn up plans.

"Now we're saving up money and looking for investors so we can start building our UAV which will be at the cutting edge of technology."

The five-man team, including lecturer Dr Stephen Prior and a PhD student, expect the project to cost more than £30,000.

Dr Prior said: "We are now seeking partners to help fund the dev-

elopment of this exciting work.

"Since the war in Iraq began in March 2003, on average 2.5 soldiers have been killed every day – the majority by improvised explosive devices.

"These two robotic devices could make a real difference in lowering the number of these deaths by detecting, identifying, locating and reporting these threats to the soldiers on the ground."

Winners of the competition will have their machines developed by the MoD for battlefield purposes.

Minister of state for defence equipment and support, Lord Drayson, is backing the teams as they develop their ideas.

He said: "The Grand Challenge is an opportunity for young minds, for growing businesses, for entrepreneurs and for financiers.

"Technology plays a huge role in our forces. It often makes the difference between success and failure, and sometimes life and death."

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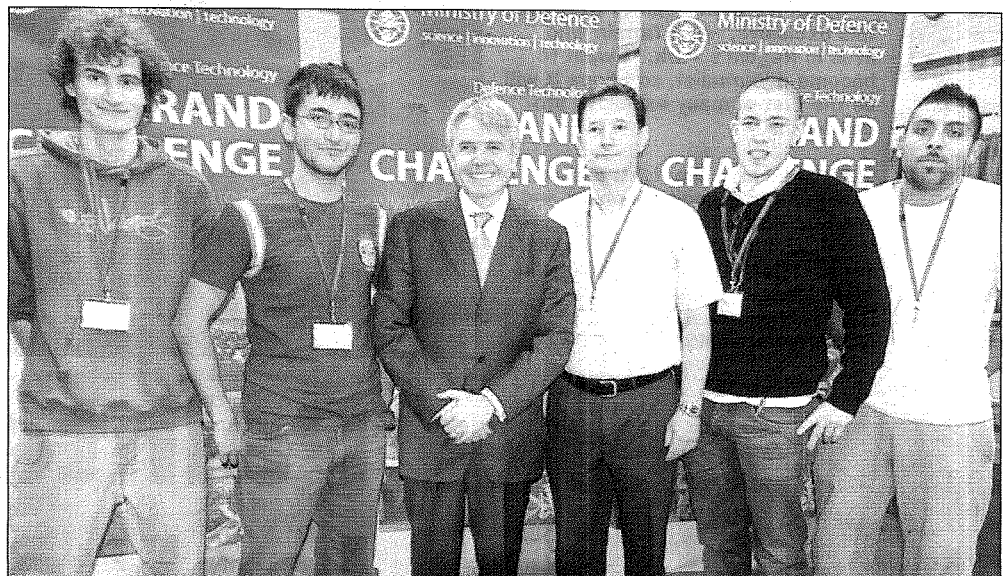
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The team with Lord Drayson (centre) is (from left) Robin G Read, Mehmt Ali Erbil, Dr Stephen Prior, Tom Foran and Sid Odedra.