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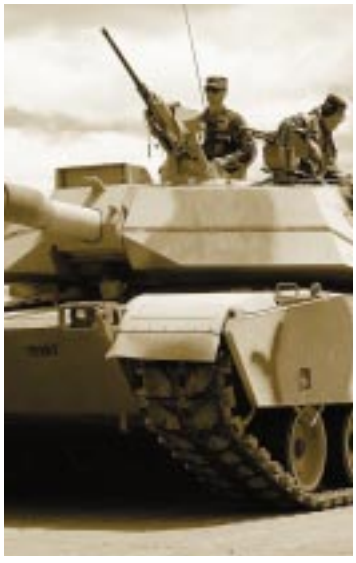
Data Collection

U.S. Army Base Serves Up Faster, More Efficient Mealtimes



Enterprise: Fort Hood Military Cafeteria

Industry: United States Armed Forces

Application: Data collection for streamlining cafeteria operations

Profile: Fort Hood, Texas, near Kileen, is a U.S. Army post large enough to station and train two Armored Divisions. The base covers 217,000 acres and is home to almost 44,000 active troops and their families and military retirees.

Around the world, the U.S. Army feeds its soldiers in 350 dining facilities and field locations. Keeping track of inventories, menu planning and pricing, recipe conversion and accounting for soldiers' meal entitlements are all essential parts of the daily operation. At Fort Hood, twelve dining halls each serve three meals a day to as many as 400 soldiers at a time.

The Army, in conjunction with Columbia, MD-based developer Impact Innovations Government Group, is prototyping a Windows NT-based, client/server application to replace its obsolete and cost-prohibitive legacy minicomputer system.

The new FS2000 is a food management system tailored to meet military requirements. It is improving business processes in food service operations, allowing high-level managers to make better management decisions. One of FS2000's many functions is to capture subsistence entitlements—that is, tracking how much of a soldier's meal is subsidized. Traditionally, soldiers wrote their social security number, rank, service, and entitlement on a clipboard upon entering a dining facility. If a soldier received a cash subsistence entitlement, the cashier also collected for the price of the meal. This tedious method often kept hungry soldiers waiting in line.

In addition, cashiers hand counted cash receipts and a data entry clerk spent approximately two hours entering the information into a proprietary database. The dining facility manager then used this data to produce a monthly report indicating how many meals were served and verifying if the soldiers entered the correct entitlement. To eliminate the cumbersome clipboard process, Impact Innovations and the Army introduced Palm Computing® platform handheld devices as an alternative to expensive point-of-sale systems.

Today, cashiers use Palm Computing devices equipped with bar code scanners to quickly swipe soldiers' ID cards that bear all the necessary information. The Palm device also calculates how much each diner owes for a meal, displays it, and stores the information with the other collected data.

At day's end, the Palm™ devices are synchronized with a Windows NT server, which uploads the data into a Sybase SQL Anywhere database. The server then generates a daily report showing any discrepancies in the amount of cash collected and whether any soldiers used the wrong entitlement code.

"Using the new Palm-driven process, Fort Hood is eliminating hours of data entry and report generation," said Toby Ostrowski, U.S. Army Center of Excellence, Subsistence (ACES). "The solution also allows managers to determine in real-time how many soldiers have been served and whether to prepare more food, thus making it possible to improve meal planning and reduce food waste."

The Army is considering using Palm Computing devices to automate dining halls around the world—from U.S. bases to makeshift mess-halls in the field—enabling soldiers to use ID cards to deduct the cost of meals directly from their paychecks. This fast, portable, inexpensive solution would eliminate the cash transaction process, speed checkout time, and ultimately, increase customer satisfaction.

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