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CATHY GRAY
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These boots are made for marching

Exoskeleton equips wearers with strength of a machine



BERKELEY (AP) — Move over Bionic Man and make room for BLEEX — the Berkeley Lower Extremities Exoskeleton, with strap-on robotic legs designed to turn an ordinary human into a super strider.

These boots are ultimately intended to help people like soldiers or firefighters carry heavy loads for long distances.

"The design of this exoskeleton really benefits from human intellect and the strength of the machine," says Ho-mayoon Kazerooni, who directs the Robotics and Human Engineering Laboratory at the University of California at Berkeley.

The exoskeleton consists of a pair of mechanical metal leg braces that include a power unit and a backpacklike frame. The braces are attached to a modified pair of Army boots and are also connected, although less rigidly, to the user's legs.

More than 40 sensors and hydraulic mechanisms function like a human nervous system, constantly calculating how to distribute the weight being borne and create a minimal load for the wearer.

"There is no joystick, no keyboard, no push button to drive the device," says Kazerooni, a professor of mechanical engineering. "The pilot becomes an integral part of the exoskeleton."

In lab experiments, says Kazerooni, testers have walked around in the 100-pound exoskeleton plus a 70-pound backpack and felt as if they were carrying just five pounds.

Eventually, the device could help rescuers haul heavy

equipment up high-rise buildings or turn tired troops into striding super soldiers.

What it won't do is turn you into a Borg, the gadget-happy gladiators of "Star Trek" fame.

"The exoskeleton is not going to magically transform people into killing machines," says Kazerooni, known to his students as Professor Kaz. "They're really good, it turns out, at enabling firefighters, soldiers, post-disaster rescue crews to carry heavy loads over great distances for hours."

So, no cyborg cops. But at least you get Terminator tops.

Video of the BLEEX in action, which can be viewed online at me.berkeley.edu/hel/bleex.htm, shows a steel-spiked symbiosis of man and machine, marching about to the techno-industrial drone of grinding motors. The next step for the BLEEX team is making the power source quieter and stronger and miniaturizing components.

BLEEX is funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the Pentagon research and development arm, and was among the projects being showcased at a DARPA tech symposium this week in Anaheim.

The project is one of scores in the field of robotics, which ranges from industrial machines that assemble cars to orthotics, surgical devices that activate or supplement weakened limbs or functions.

Excitement about robotics was fanned by last week's DARPA-sponsored Mojave Desert race for fully autonomous vehicles, and the field is making strides worldwide.

In Japan, a leader in robot research, Sony Corp. has developed a child-shaped walking robot, known as Qrio, and Honda Motor Co. has also developed a walking, talking humanoid robot. This spring, some Japanese companies plan to start marketing a "robot suit," a motorized, battery-operated device intended to help old and infirm people move around.

The current favorite in the DARPA race came out of Carnegie Mellon University, where professor Matthew Mason is working on intelligent robots including the Mobilizer, which uses its wheels to move things.

"There's just too much to do," says Mason. "Every time that there is an advance in computing, there are just so many more things that it becomes possible to do."

SUPER TROOPER: A man wears the BLEEX (Berkeley Lower Extremity Exoskeleton). The strap-on robotic legs, developed by university researchers, aim to help people like soldiers or firefighters carry heavy loads for long distances.

Associated Press