Driverless VW wins $2 million robot race

PRIMM, Nevada (AP) -- An unmanned vehicle has successfully navigated a forbidding 132-mile section of the Mojave Desert. The next stop for the technology may be Afghanistan or Iraq.

A souped-up VW Touareg, designed by Stanford University, zipped through the course in six hours and 53 minutes Sunday, using only its computer brain and sensors to navigate rough and twisting desert and mountain trails.

The robotic vehicles had to navigate a course designed to mimic driving conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, including winding dirt trails and dry lake beds filled with overhanging brush. Parts of the route forced the robots to zip through three tunnels designed to knock out their GPS signals.

The race is part of the military's effort to fulfill a congressional mandate to cut casualties by having a third of the military's ground vehicles unmanned in 20 years.

The Stanford team -- which spent $500,000 on the race, some of which was provided by sponsors -- celebrated by popping champagne and pouring it over their mud-covered car called Stanley.

"This car, to me, is really a piece of history," Stanford computer scientist Sebastian Thrun said Sunday after receiving an oversized check for the $2 million prize, funded by taxpayers. He said he did not know how he would spend the money, but jokingly said he needed to buy cat food.

The race, called the Grand Challenge, displayed major technological leaps since last year's inaugural race, when none of the self-driving vehicles crossed the finish line.

In second place was a red Humvee from Carnegie Mellon University called Sandstorm, followed by a customized Hummer called H1ghlander. Coming in fourth was a Ford Escape Hybrid named Kat-5, designed by students in Metairie, Louisiana, who lost about a week of practice and some lost their homes when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast.

The race began Saturday with a field of 23 autonomous vehicles. Eighteen failed to complete the course because of mechanical failures or sensor problems.

It's unclear how the Pentagon plans to harness the technology used in the race for military applications. But Thrun said he wanted to design automated systems to make next-generation cars safer for everyone, not just the military.

"If it was only for the military, I wouldn't be
here today," Thrun said.

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