

A Tougher Tablet PC

[Arik Hesseldahl](#), 02.25.03, 10:00 AM ET

NEW YORK - We're all familiar with the dirty little secret about laptop PCs. They get abused, misused, dropped, spilled on and otherwise handled in ways they weren't designed for--and yet we're shocked and surprised when they suddenly stop working.

Now the latest fad in mobile computing is the tablet PC, and we've been curious about how well these machines could stand up to the typical treatment that a laptop gets. We've handled several and spent a considerable amount of time with one machine from **Hewlett-Packard** (nyse: [HPQ - news - people](#)) some months back--coming away with the general impression that tablet PCs aren't exactly built to withstand repeated drops onto a hard surface. This is odd mainly because the tablet has been positioned mostly as a PC for so-called vertical applications, business markets with specific mobility needs such as factory-floor managers or health care workers--jobs which can be hazardous to a delicate piece of equipment like a computer.

We figured it wouldn't be long before **Panasonic** would add a tablet PC to its line of Toughbook computers. If you're not familiar with the Toughbook line, it is a brand dedicated to, well, toughness. They are the machines that laugh in the face of a full cup of coffee spilled on the keyboard, giggle at a five-foot drop onto a concrete floor and yawn at sudden jarrings, excessive vibration and clouds of dust.

A unit of Japan's **Matsushita Electric** (nyse: [MC - news - people](#)), Panasonic announced this week the Toughbook CF-18, which is both a laptop and a tablet. Like a few other tablet models, the screen flips up and over the keyboard to become the tablet, with which you interact using a pen-shaped stylus. Unlike other tablets which detach from the notebook completely and have a hard drive mounted inside the screen, this tablet is really a notebook adapted to act like a tablet. This doesn't help its weight, however, which is 4.4 pounds. The lightest tablet we've seen yet comes from **NEC** and weighs in at less than two pounds. The question is, though, which one you'd rather drop.



Panasonic's Toughbook CF-18 tablet PC

On its outside is a cast magnesium alloy case. The 10.4-inch screen and the 40-gigabyte hard drive have both been impact-isolated to withstand drops and impacts on all corners. It also meets military specifications for operating in extreme environments. The lithium ion battery can keep the machine running for more than seven hours.

It supports three versions of **Microsoft's** (nasdaq: [MSFT - news - people](#)) Windows: Windows 2000, Windows XP Professional and Windows XP TabletPC Edition. It offers several wireless connection options, including Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, CDMA 2000 and GPRS, and can even support a Global Positioning System module. There's also the standard connection options like a 56k modem, along with Ethernet, two Type II PCMCIA card slots, two USB 2.0 ports as well as audio input and output. Prices on the machines start at \$3,200 and they're available directly from Panasonic via its Toughbook Web site.