

THE COURIER

OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY



10/10/2006

Local man gets his wish for soldier safety

By: Howard Roden , Courier staff

LAKE CONROE - Dr. Bob Meaders' faith in the American form of government was reaffirmed last week.

The former U.S. Navy flight surgeon's spirits received a gigantic boost after the Marine Corps announced Thursday it had purchased 89,000 sets of combat helmet suspension pads for its combat soldiers. Tests conducted by the U.S. Army Aeromedical Research Lab showed the pads provided more non-ballistic, blunt-impact protection than the nylon "sling" suspension systems that had been used in Marine Corps helmets since World War II.

For Meaders, the Marine Corps' decision represents the culmination of his three-year effort to provide greater safety for those soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. The desire to better protect his grandson, Marine Corps Sgt. Justin Meaders, led Bob Meaders to create Operation Helmet. It is a nonprofit organization that, through its fund-raising efforts, has supplied 26,600 pad kits to combat personnel overseas.

"I'm tickled pink," Bob Meaders said from his Bentwater home Monday.

"In the military, we call this a single-event mission. All the troops that have been exposed to blast forces now will have the best technology available. But it has been an uphill battle."

More than \$1.8 million in donations have been raised through Operation Helmet. The organization gained so much momentum and became so streamlined that Operation Helmet could respond to a soldier's - or a soldier's family - request for an upgrade kit in less than 14 days.

The suspension pads do not prevent shrapnel wounds - the helmet itself is designed to do that. But with old nylon suspension, a soldier's head would rattle around in a helmet "like a clanger in a bell," Bob Meaders said.

"With nothing inside the helmet but air, the helmet slaps up against the skull," he said. Initially, the Marine Corps supported a University of Virginia study that claimed no significant difference between the sling suspension system and the pad system touted by Meaders.

But a preliminary study conducted in 2004 by the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center showed U.S. troops were suffering traumatic brain injuries in greater numbers in Iraq and Afghanistan than in previous wars.

Of the 155 soldiers wounded in combat in the study, 88 showed minor to severe brain injuries as a result of a blast from a landmine, rocket propelled grenade or improvised explosive device.

"They (the Marine Corps) hadn't upgraded the interior of their helmets for decades," Meaders said. "They opted for a helmet more bulletproof. But with the old suspension system, the helmet was more vulnerable to blast forces."

His unflagging efforts were rewarded this summer when he and celebrity Cher spoke before the House subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces in support of the pad systems. As a result of their testimony, the subcommittee pressed the Marine Corps to switch to the pad system, of which some types were already in use by the U.S. Army.

"I applaud the Marines for ensuring this upgrade, and I take comfort in the thought of the great number of lives it may save," U.S. Rep. Curt Weldon, R-Pa., chairman of the subcommittee, said in a statement released by his office Friday.

U.S. Rep. Kevin Brady, R-The Woodlands, hailed the Marine Corps' decision "as a great victory for one man who was determined to show the Marines that they could do better."

Bob Meaders' efforts are "going to save the lives of our troops," Brady said. "Government moves slowly sometimes. I'm so relieved it moved forward and made this decision."

Meaders, meanwhile, said the final outcome is a "good reflection" of the American scheme of government.

"When an old country doctor from Montgomery can speak his mind, and our government listens, it shows the quality of the country we live in," he said. "And the American people have been great in stepping up to the plate on this project."

In its press release, the Marine Corps Systems Command acknowledged and appreciated the efforts of Operation Helmet "for their support in bringing these issues to the forefront."

Even though the Marine Corps will begin supplying shock-absorbing helmet kits for its soldiers immediately, Bob Meaders said Operation Helmet has received 814 requests for kits from Air Force personnel who currently use the old sling system in their helmets.

"We'll continue to purchase kits for those soldiers who need them," he said. "But if the day comes when we shut it (Operation Helmet) down, we'll take the money that's left and provide it to

groups that help injured soldiers, such as the Brain Injury Association of America."

Happy as is Bob Meaders is about the Marine Corps' announcement, it's hard to surpass the joy he and his wife LaVera are feeling now that their grandson Justin has returned from his second combat tour in Iraq. Justin Meaders returned to Camp Pendleton, outside of San Diego, two weeks ago.

"We hope this is the last time he'll be over there," Bob Meaders said. "We're proud of him and the job he did over there."

Howard Roden can be reached at hroden@hcnonline.com.