

June 19, 2006

Helmet safety draws scrutiny on Hill

By [Matthew Cox](#)

Times staff writer

Lawmakers recently grilled a Marine leader over why the Corps' combat helmet isn't more like the Army's.

Responding to testimony that a private organization had provided 6,000 deployed Marines with special helmet inserts to reduce head injuries, the lawmakers wanted to know why the Corps itself was not providing the added protection as the Army does for soldiers.

"Apparently we have thousands of military personnel who believe the helmet they are being issued does not provide them satisfactory protection," said Rep. Curt Weldon, R-Pa., during a Thursday hearing held by the Tactical and Land Forces subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee.

"The Marine Corps' own testing indicates that their helmet provides about half the blast impact protection of the [Army] helmet, said Weldon, subcommittee vice chairman. "We need to understand why this is acceptable."

Maj. Gen. William Catto, commander of Marine Corps Systems Command, said he hasn't seen proof that the Army's helmet, or its padded suspension system, provides better protection than the Marine helmet.

The issue was driven in large part by Dr. Robert Meaders, a former Navy flight surgeon who started "Operation Helmet" more than two years ago to help his grandson's Marine unit upgrade their helmets before going to Iraq. The effort has garnered support from across the country including donations from Hollywood stars such as Cher, who attended the hearing.

The special shock-absorbing pad system provided through the organization attaches to the inside of the helmet. It is the same one the Army uses in the Advanced Combat Helmet.

The Marine Corps' Lightweight Helmet, issued to more than 130,000 troops, uses a sling suspension system that Meaders and other experts say does not provide the same impact protection.

The Army adopted the ACH in 2002 and has fielded about 660,000 of these helmets.

The helmet is more comfortable to wear than the Army's previous headgear, Sgt. 1st Class Jerry Lutz of the Army's Project Manager Clothing and Individual Equipment told lawmakers.

Catto said the Marines issue the ACH to special units such as Marine Recon teams but he is not convinced it's the answer for the entire force.

"All I've heard about the ACH is it provides better crash protection, and it's more comfortable," Catto said.

