

GUEST COLUMN

Operation Helmet fits soldiers for war dangers

By CAROL MEGATHLIN

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I never thought Cher could induce me to part with any of my money, but doggone if she didn't.

When I first heard on CNN that she had embraced Operation Helmet, I thought she was just another celebrity bidding for attention by attaching her name to a worthy cause. Then on July Fourth, a CNN morning news story noted a \$10,000 donation to the effort by Tony Freeman, the owner of an RV dealership in California. I went to my computer to investigate.



DENNIS COOK/AP
Operation Helmet founder Dr. **Robert Meaders** testifies June 15 before a House Armed Services Committee on the use of combat helmets, vehicle armor and body armor by ground forces in Iraq. He and others argue that helmet kits increase safety for troops.

Operation Helmet is legit, all right. I found it on a reliable Web site www.americasupportsyou.mil, as well as on the Internal Revenue Service Web site, confirming that donations are tax-deductible. So what's it all about?

According to a defenselink.mil news article, Operation Helmet was organized by Dr. Robert Meaders, a retired Navy flight surgeon. His grandson is a Marine combat engineer. During training for convoy duty, the grandson's gunnery sergeant told the troops to get Kevlar helmet-upgrade kits if they could. The Marine called his grandfather and asked for help.

Meaders did some research on the kits. Studies at Walter Reed indicate that improvised-explosive-device blast waves, not just shrapnel and bullets, are causing brain injuries among troops. Service members returning from Iraq are presenting severe head injuries in percentages larger than in previous wars. According to Meaders, the standard-issue helmet "rocks on the head, making violent contact with the skull in an area about the size of a ball-peen hammer." The impact can cause skull fractures, intracranial bleeding, and concussions that are either fatal or disabling.

Meaders outfitted his grandson's rifle team with the kits that fit inside helmets. Soon, the entire company requested them. "The rest is history," Meaders is quoted as saying.

To date, the program has supplied more than 13,000 kits to troops in the field. Deployed soldiers may request a kit at the organization's Web site, and dependent upon available funding, he or she is sent one free of charge. As for the donations, 100 percent of each is said to go toward purchasing and shipping the kits.



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When I visited the Web site, www.operation-helmet.org, I discovered that donors can choose the service branch, the unit, even a specific soldier for their contributions. I decided to direct my donation to the 3rd Infantry Division in order to support Savannah's home team. But the Army deserves a salute — it has already begun providing all deploying troops with the upgraded helmets.

As for the Marines? They're forming "study groups" to determine the efficacy of the kits. If there is even a hint of evidence that the upgrade will save lives, what's the question?

When the insurgents started planting roadside bombs in Iraq, I was furious at the delay in equipping our soldiers with more heavily armored Humvees. The troops were scavenging scrap metal to do the job themselves. I asked my friend, Brig. Gen.

Jim Huggins, how they could possibly maintain their morale in such circumstances. His response? The military's job is to accomplish the mission with the resources they were allotted. This attitude of humility and solidarity surfaced again after Dr. Meaders sent his grandson enough kits for his rifle team. The soldiers wouldn't use them until the whole company was outfitted.

In the July 4th CNN story, Shannon Limon, the wife of a Marine, said, "This is something the guys are asking for. They either have to purchase it themselves if they want it, or they have to depend on Operation Helmet to send it to them." The kits cost \$75-\$100, but any donation is welcome. Can we, in good conscience, allow even one soldier to go without the best available protection, simply because he can't afford it?

Freeman not only gave a \$10,000 check to the effort, he also promised to match all donations, up to \$10,000, made during the month of July.

If you say that you oppose the war but support the troops, prove it.

The process is easy. The time is now.

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