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ADVOCATE: Dr. Bob Meaders testifies during a House subcommittee hearing in June.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

## More

The contracted manufacturer for the pads is National Industries for the Blind, headquartered in Alexandria, Va. The Corps is working with Gentex to have them install velcro tabs/strips in the combat helmet to reduce the logistics burden of retrofitting helmets in the field. (scratch what I told you about Marines doing this in the field; contractors from Gentex will be doing this).

One set of pads (7 pads) costs \$40. The pad system costs the same as the sling suspension system.

The name of the Marine's new issued helmet should be the "Marine Corps combat helmet," vice the "Light Weight Helmet."

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# Marines to get helmet pads

## Pendleton Marine's grandfather tried for years to convince the Corps of benefits.

By VIK JOLLY  
The Orange County Register

Responding to new studies – and a concerted effort by family members – the U.S. Marine Corps has reversed its policy and ordered protective inserts for its standard-issue combat helmets.

By year's end, the Corps will be fielding 139,000 pad kits, which it now believes offer better head protection from bomb blasts, and new helmets will come with the pads built in.

Test results, following a congressional hearing in June, showed that the padded helmets give superior protection from blunt-force trauma, a Marine spokesman said Tuesday. Earlier, the Corps

had argued that there was no scientific evidence.

"The Marine Corps made (the policy) decision based on that," said Capt. Jeff Landis, a public affairs officer at Marine Corps Systems Command in Quantico, Va. "That's what we really needed to make the best decision for the welfare and safety of our troops."

The Corps had previously insisted that the pads actually reduced protection from bullets. A test now showed little difference in protection from bullets, Landis said.

The Iraq war is yielding a higher percentage of brain injuries than any previous U.S. conflict, according to researchers. While some families took comfort in buying pads themselves – and manufacturers pushed the product in publications aimed at military audiences – the Marine Corps never endorsed them for its latest helmets.

Bob Meaders, a retired Navy doctor and grandfather of a Camp Pendleton Marine, launched Operation Helmet in 2004, aiming to get liner kits sent to his grandson, Justin, and other Marines.

To date, the group has shipped more than 27,600 helmet inserts – at \$100 each – to Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"When you are finished, it's a great feeling," said Meaders, 72, in a telephone interview from Glen Rose, Texas, about 70 miles southwest of Dallas. "That was a feeling of relief, knowing that the Marines on the front lines will have the best protection available."

The organization's biggest contributor, with a donation totaling \$300,000, was singer Cher, who sat behind Meaders at the June congressional hearing at which legislators urged the Corps to supply the pads.

Hundreds of troops and Marines families wrote to Operation Helmet seeking the pads, and Meaders persistently wrote the Marine Corps arguing that data was available to show the pads were better.

He was chastised by some in the chain of command and was even told that e-mails would be blocked, he said. On Thursday, the Marine spokesman thanked him for his input.

"What it did was made all of the services take a harder look at protection and our decisions based on testing and results," Landis said. "They in essence allowed us to look a little deeper and order more tests and prove which was the better, more effective protection."

The U.S. Army and the Marines once used similar helmets. Then the Army issued the Army Combat Helmet, costing \$306 each and manufactured with the pads already incorporated for Iraq-bound soldiers.

The Marines also issued new helmets but without pads.

In August, the Marines allowed optional use of pads. Then, last week, the Corps made the pad-suspension system the only one authorized for use with the standard helmet.

The authorization couldn't have come sooner for some Marine families.

"Had they listened in the first place and been more open-minded about it and done their testing a couple of years ago, who's to say how many lives we could have saved and how many could have been less severely injured with added protection," said Shannan Limon, formerly of San Clemente. Operation Helmet helped her husband, Philip, get a pad insert before he was deployed to Iraq in

January from the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms.

Landis said the studies only recently became available.

"Anytime you're going to have a war, you're going to have ... studies to better protect (troops), and the technology and the intelligence is getting that much better," he said.

## Evolution of Marine helmets

Proponents of protective pad kits argued for years that they reduce the impact of bomb blasts, but Marine Corps officials had several concerns over safety issues, including whether they make the helmet less effective against bullets. Now the Marines have endorsed them.

Helmet using web suspension system, once standard issue for the Marine Corps.

Helmet with impact-absorbing pads. Costs about \$40.

**Old kevlar helmet**  
Used by Army and Marines

**PASGT**  
(PERSONNEL ARMOR SYSTEM GROUND TROOPS)  
Introduced in the early 1980s to replace the M-1, a World War II-era helmet known as the "steel pot." Initially, the military hoped the new kevlar helmet would be lighter than the M-1, but in the end, the PASGT ended up weighing about the same (3.5 lbs.), while providing better protection. Now out of service.

**Current U.S. Marine Corps combat helmet**  
shaped similar to PASGT

**MCCH**  
(MARINE CORPS COMBAT HELMET)  
Now distributed to Marines, it can stop a hit from a 9mm round. It has a six percent improvement in fragment protection over the PASGT and a 40 percent increase in protection from blasts, while cutting a half pound in weight. In response to studies and family pressure, protective pads will be added.

Sources: United States Marine Corps, Globalsecurity.com, Oregon Aero, Operation-helmet.org, Olive-Drab

The Register

### More about the helmet

Recently completed government laboratory testing of six commercially available pad suspension systems for the Marine Corps combat helmet demonstrated their exceptional performance against non-ballistic blunt force impacts. While these tests were underway, the Marine Expeditionary Forces, in coordination with Marine Corps Systems Command, procured 39,000 sets of padded helmet suspension systems to meet immediate operational needs to I and II Marine Expeditionary Force. MARCORSYSCOM has purchased an additional 100,000 sets of pad suspension systems. 50,000 have already been delivered to the Consolidated Issue Facilities (CIFs) and the Critical Asset Rapid Distribution Facility. The remainder will be delivered by December.

The Marine Corps participated in the Congressionally directed, independent, non-ballistic tests through the Department of Defense. Separate Marine Corps tests conducted by the University of Virginia showed no significant difference in ballistic backface trauma between the sling suspension system and the pad suspension system. However, the pad system did demonstrate greater non-ballistic blunt impact protection, according to tests conducted by the U.S. Army Aeromedical

## Research Laboratory.

Tests were completed 31 August by the University of Virginia and 6 September by the U.S. Army Research Laboratory. The UVA "Ballistic Behind Armor Blunt Trauma" study assessed the risk of ballistic induced backface trauma for the Marine Corps helmet sling and pad suspension systems. The study found no significant difference in ballistic backface trauma between the systems. The USAARL study compared the effectiveness of the suspensions systems to non-ballistic blunt trauma. They tested six commercially available pad systems along with the sling system. Data received from early results showed greater non-ballistic blunt impact protection for the pad system. The official USAARL results will be made available later this month.

In light of these positive results, the Marine Corps is changing suspension systems for the combat helmet from the sling suspension system to the pad suspension system. Only pad systems purchased by the CIF or via the official supply system are authorized for use with the lightweight helmet. Unauthorized pad systems are being immediately replaced with approved systems due to lower performance in tests.

The Marine Corps' decision to buy 89,000 sets of combat helmet suspension pads for immediate fielding and an additional 50,000 order is a direct result of previous tests for ballistic and non-ballistic blunt trauma. Testing started with the Univ. of Virginia in March 2006. Marine Corps Systems Command testified to the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces in June 2006 that a decision would be made after the results of this test. Congress asked DoD to conduct additional testing, and it was after the results of both sets of tests that the Marine Corps made the decision.

We appreciate the effort of Operation Helmet and their true concern for Marines in combat. The Marine Corps is committed to providing the best possible protective equipment to the warfighter in combat, and this includes providing the best helmet protection possible. When the Marine Corps became aware of a possible improved suspension system thanks to individual Marines, the House Committee on Armed Services including Chairman Curt Weldon, and Operation-Helmet.org, the Marine Corps Systems Command immediately heightened its investigation of combat helmet suspension systems. As such, the Marine Corps was more than happy to participate in the Congressionally directed, independent, ballistic and non-ballistic tests.

The Corps authorized Marines to use the padded suspension system in MARADMIN 362/06 (Leightweight Helmet Suspension System and Implementation Guidance) on Aug. 1, 2006 and defined the requirement and policy change for Marines to have the padded suspension system in MARADMIN 480/06 (Pad Suspension System in theLightweight Helmet) Oct. 5, 2006.

*Source: Marine Corps spokesman, Capt. Jeffrey A. Landis*

