

Operation Helmet

Nonprofit group pays to upgrade gear for troops in combat

By Jan A. Igoe, The Sun News, Thu, Jul. 20, 2006

In fewer than three weeks, local supporters of Operation Helmet have raised almost \$6,000 toward helmet liners to better protect Marines and airmen in combat zones from blast forces.

Operation Helmet is a nonprofit group that supplies U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan with free helmet upgrade kits. The grass-roots movement was born in 2004 when retired Navy captain Dr. Bob Meaders got a request for better helmet protection from his grandson, a Marine combat engineer.

When Chris Panos of Surfside Beach learned of the program, he got the local ball rolling with a fundraiser at Sugami North Japanese Steakhouse in Myrtle Beach July 10, co-chaired by John Easterling and Laura Best. Owner Sam Lauren donated the food, which was served on the restaurant's deck overlooking the Intracoastal Waterway.

Panos, an Air Force veteran, was surprised to see Cher on a news show lending her support to the cause. She told CNN that she'd offered to sign a photo for a soldier recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center who couldn't remember his name without checking his hospital ID. Amazed that young men and women were being sent into conflict with inadequate protection, she personally donated more than \$100,000 to Operation Helmet.

The upgrade kits don't look like much - just a couple of spongy cushions and some strapping. But looks can be deceiving.

"The pad suspension system suspends the helmet on impact-resistant, highly engineered pads to provide standoff, comfort and stability," according to Operation Helmet's Web site. "The helmet does not contact the skull directly, with the pads absorbing and spreading out the blow. This upgrade prevents or cushions the trooper's head from blast/fragment impact, spreads contact over a wider area and can save lives and prevent disability."

Kits install in 15 minutes with a screwdriver and cost around \$100, a cost covered by Operation Helmet.

"When I was in Vietnam, we worried about schrapnel," Easterling said. "Now we worry about concussion."

The wide use of improvised explosive devices in Iraq and Afghanistan has changed the perils soldiers on the ground face. Operation Helmet reports: "The new Marine light weight helmet offers 30 percent more ballistic [bullet] protection, but fails the basic test for impact protection required of motorcycle helmets."

While helmets and body armor made of Kevlar have improved survival rates, traumatic brain injuries have increased, according to the New England Journal of Medicine.

"A blast creates a sudden increase in air pressure by heating and accelerating air molecules and, immediately thereafter, a sudden decrease in pressure that produces intense wind. These rapid pressure shifts can injure the brain directly, producing concussion or contusion," wrote Dr. Susan Okie in the May 19, 2005, issue.

"Blast waves and wind can propel fragments, bodies or even vehicles with considerable force, causing head injuries by any of these mechanisms."

To date, more than 16,250 helmet upgrades have been sent to troops in combat.

The Army and Navy Seabees pay for upgrade kits, but they are not supplied to airmen and Marines, who must pay for the kits themselves or take their chances.

That has prompted local supporters to keep their efforts in high gear.

"This is a way to show support for our troops without showing support for the war," said Best, who has family members in every service branch.

"The next [fundraiser] is in October," Jenny Easterling said, "and we're not going to stop this until all our troops are home."

To Help

Send checks payable to Operation Helmet to John Easterling, 307 Oak St., Myrtle Beach, SC 29577. Contributions are tax-deductible. For information, call 843-458-4110 or see www.operationhelmet.org.

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