

How I'm spending my summer vacation

by Dr. Hilary Stallings

Since my brother Chris was deployed last semester, I've learned much about being part of a military family. Most significantly, I've grown to understand that the war is *always* with you; you're *always* aware, as the military says, that *you have skin in the game*.

Simply put: it's consuming. I find myself watching the news with such urgency or repeatedly looking over Chris's consistently benign e-mails. There's just this hope that by being diligent, you'll hit upon

some small reassurance that he'll be OK and come home whole. But, sadly, this search only yields an overwhelming sense of helplessness, a loss of agency that I suspect many of us share. Regardless of political ideologies, feelings about the war or direct links to deployed military members, it seems people would like, in a real, tangible way, to "support the troops." The problem is *how*?

For me, this answer came in an unexpected fashion. I kept hearing about fatal or life-altering head wounds: something like 59 percent of troops who survive an improvised explosive device, or IED, attack suffer traumatic brain injury, most commonly from the enormous concussive effects of the blast. Fortunately, before Chris left, I also heard Capt. Bob Meaders, M.D. (U.S. Navy, Ret.), speak about a retrofit for helmets that can *drastically, drastically* reduce these numbers.

This is a battle of bombs, not bullets; so, for me, there was no way my brother was deploying without one. Immediately, I e-mailed Dr. Meaders, and a helmet insert was shipped that day. Chris confirmed he received it, thanked me (commenting on the increased comfort level of the helmet), and that was it.

I didn't think much about it until a few months later when talking with my father; he asked me in an unusually quiet, still voice whether I thought Chris was using the insert. His angst in anticipating my answer had actually robbed him of normal inflection. Certainly, this \$70 helmet retrofit was helping more than Chris get through the deployment.

In retrospect, that discovery seems so odd. Of course I realized my parents appreciated and were thankful for the upgrade. I knew that. But I had not

internalized the depth of their feelings, nor did I understand that in their minds, knowing Chris had this piece of equipment somehow tipped the scale in favor of his safe return—that now, along with his good judgment and strong training, he had one more thing going for him. At that point, I decided to find a way to help give this same much-needed hope to the parents of Chris's 35 men. Their children, too, needed this safeguard.

So the fund-raising began, starting with a series of mass e-mails that explained how

Capt. Meaders is working to provide ALL military deployed (Iraq and Afghanistan) the inserts for free, but that takes fund-raising, and consequently there's a backlog (more requests than money).... The inserts cost \$70, not an insurmountable sum.... What I'm asking you to do is visit www.operationhelmet.org. Capt. Meaders has material about the actual product, the military's approved use, tax information, etc. You will find him compelling.

I solicited everyone I knew, everyone my parents knew, even my friends' parents and their friends, moving then to letters to editors and calls to representatives.

Casual remarks of interest were always followed with a presumptive, "Make the check out to Operation Helmet" or "I'll be glad to come back after payday." *And it worked.* People were generous, both in their personal contributions and in passing along the word. When we got close to the target amount, Dr. Meaders mailed Chris 35 inserts, which were delivered to him far away, in the desert.

Later, sitting in an Internet café in a land where the native Texan has said that the 90-degree night-lows now make him cold, Chris wrote the following, which unintentionally inspired a campaign to retrofit the *entire* company:

we just got the inserts late last night in the mail....but when i got my platoon together and i explained the whole thing to them from dr. meador (that was his name right) being a passionate advocate of these things, and then how you heard about them and wanted to make sure

every marine in my platoon had them and then all the benefits they provide (from concussions to stopping bullets from bouncing around inside the helmet) the marines were in a kind of shock that someone they didn't know would go so far out of their way to provide something for them.

they knew they weren't cheap and they started doing the math in their heads and figuring the numbers out. they were totally amazed. they were so thankful. marines are wonderful, in that they will always do what they are told, and they will do it, tired, hungry, sleepy, moody, wet, miserable, in pain, and everything else. and they will usually get it done with far less than any other military branch out there. marines are born to fight and get the mission done with less and do whatever it takes to make sure it happens with the proper outcome. so when they found out you were out there running around raising money for them to get inserts they could have gone without, but having just helps them and provides them with that much more comfort, ree, you should have seen how thankful they were. it was truly awesome, and in a way that cookies and magazines and candy (though appreciated) will never be because those things will not actually go out and help them accomplish their mission. and you and your efforts made it that much easier for 35 marines....

ree, you are truly awesome, and should be proud of this. you made 35 (36 including me) grunt marines extremely happy and we each owe it to you and those who helped you and those who do similar kind things to keep going...

As you can see, with the help of many giving friends and strangers, this is how I have been spending my summer: raising funds and awareness—basically, trying to put the war at the forefront in our minds again. This is a difficult challenge as the time frame seems to stretch. But the people over there, on the ground, in the heat, away from their loved ones, are *all* our brothers, sisters and children. We *all* have skin in the game.

If you too would like to order a helmet retrofit for a family member or friend, visit Meaders's Web site, www.operationhelmet.org. Donations to the troops in general are welcome, and remember your gift doesn't have to be grand. Every single dollar helps. At the site, you can view Meaders's recent interview on "Lou Dobbs Tonight," which provides a succinct description of the program.

You can also talk to me. I know this may seem a bit strange, privately having to equip the military, but that's the reality of this war. Again, I am asking that we put politics aside in this case and *simply* support the troops.

Dr. Hilary Stallings is assistant to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Her brother, 2nd Lt. Chris Frey, is serving with the U.S. Marines in the Middle East.



TWO REAL TROOPERS—Marine 2nd Lt. Chris Frey and his German Shorthaired Pointer, Trooper, take a break at the Marine Corps Base at Quantico, Va.

photo submitted



Stallings

Operation Helmet: How it started, how you can help

Operation Helmet is a nonpartisan, charitable grass-roots effort that provides helmet upgrade kits free of charge to U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. These helmet upgrade kits consist of shock-absorbing pads and a new strap system.

Operation Helmet depends on tax-deductible donations. For \$75 to \$100, depending on the manufacturer, added safety and comfort can be provided for a soldier, but donations of any amount are welcome. The donation can be designated for a specific branch of the military, a particular unit or an individual trooper.

Dr. Bob Meaders, a Vietnam veteran, began the Houston, Texas-based Operation Helmet in 2003 when his Marine Corps grandson requested upgrade kits to make his unit's helmets safer in combat. To date, Operation Helmet has sent upgrade kits to more than 10,200 troops.

One hundred percent of all donations go toward helmet kits. There are no administrative costs deducted. For more information, visit www.operationhelmet.org.

