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America Supports You: Group Helps to Protect Servicemembers

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American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, May 9, 2006 – A nonprofit group founded and organized by a U.S. Navy veteran is protecting troops on the front lines against severe head trauma by mobilizing citizens to support deployed servicemembers.

Operation Helmet, led by Dr. Robert Meaders, a former naval flight surgeon, ophthalmologist and dive master, has been providing Kevlar helmet upgrade kits to troops since February 2004, and today the America Supports You member has provided nearly 4,800 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines with the kits.

"My grandson, a Marine combat engineer at the time, was told by a gunnery sergeant during training for convoy duty to get the upgrade if they could - just might save their lives," Meaders said.

Meaders' grandson called him, and Meaders researched the kits. He provided his grandson's rifle team with the kits, but soon his grandson's entire company requested the kits. In fact, grandson and team refused to wear the kits unless the whole company had them. "The rest is history," Meaders said.

Meaders then created a Web site where deployed military personnel can request a free helmet upgrade kit. The site also has a way for citizens to donate and help the nonprofit group provide kits to the troops. Funding for the kits comes from the donations.

Daily, Meaders said, he gets e-mails from U.S. forces requesting the added measure of protection. Meaders said that in addition to providing enhanced blast protection, the helmet upgrades are more comfortable and stable than the strap suspensions issued to personnel.

Meaders, whose support to the U.S. military was recognized in a letter from Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, said that Kevlar helmets offer the best protection known from bullets and small shrapnel, the main danger in previous combat engagements. But now that enemy forces are using improvised explosive devices, rocket-propelled grenades and other types of explosives extensively, the helmet kits provide additional protection.

According to Meaders and military medical research conducted at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, IED blast waves are causing severe head trauma to their victims. But in addition to being injured by the blast wave, many personnel are also injured by shrapnel and because they are thrown from their vehicles or from where they were standing at the time of the explosion.

In 2003, doctors with the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center at Walter Reed said casualty assessments suggested servicemembers in Iraq were returning with brain injuries in larger percentages than previous wars.

In prior conflicts, traumatic brain injury was present in at least 14 to 20 percent of surviving combat casualties; information from Iraq suggests that this number is now much higher, according to officials at Walter Reed. In 2003, the Walter Reed center screened 155 patients who had returned from Iraq and were deemed as being at risk for brain injury. Sixty-two percent were identified as having suffered a brain injury.

The strap suspension system issued to most deployed personnel allows the helmet to rock on the head, making violent contact with the skull in an area about the size of a ball-peen hammer, Meaders said. The impact, if severe enough, causes skull fractures, intracranial bleeding, and concussions resulting in death or disabling injuries.

The helmet kits provided by Meaders' organization provide a shock-absorbing pad suspension system that costs about \$100 from commercial providers and can be installed in 15 minutes.

Many troops have told Meaders that lining the helmet with shock-absorbing pads and a better suspension system also keeps the helmet stable when wearing night-vision goggles, when soldiers run, bend over or perform normal rigorous physical actions during their missions.

Meaders, a Vietnam War veteran, likened his support of the global war on terror to earlier days in U.S. history when citizens rallied around the soldiers of World War II. All monies donated to Operation Helmet go to the shipment and purchase of helmet kits, Meaders said.

"My wife and I have donated between \$500 and \$1,000 per month," Meaders said. "We can't ask others to help if we don't set an example. ... People are doing what Americans have done since the Revolutionary War -- that is, pitch in and help the government both supply the troops and make their lives a bit easier."

Meaders said the Army is now providing padded helmets to its deploying personnel, and the Air Force and Marine Corps are forming study groups to examine the value of the kits. But for now, visitors to Meaders' site keep contributing and helping.

Jerry Thoma of Columbus, Ohio, supports Operation Helmet. He sent a helmet kit to his son in Ramadi, Iraq, via Operation Helmet. Thoma contributed \$200 to Operation Helmet to purchase his son's helmet kit. His son, Jeremy, is an infantryman in the Marines.

"I sent over one for him and one for a friend," Thoma said. "He wrote back and said he loves it and everyone wants one. He did give the other to a guy in his fire team." Thoma said his son appreciates the helmet kit, especially because he is inspecting and clearing buildings for illicit weapons and insurgents, and he may likely serve as a Humvee gunner in the coming weeks.

"I think Operation Helmet is one of the best things I've ever seen done for our troops," Thoma said.

"Anything the American public can do to help these kids would be greatly appreciated by me, for one, and any parent who has a child over there," he added.

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