



**HOUSE ARMED SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE ON TACTICAL AIR AND LAND FORCES
CURT WELDON, PENNSYLVANIA
CHAIRMAN**

PRESS RELEASE

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Opening Statement of Chairman Curt Weldon

*Hearing on Combat Helmets, Body and Vehicle Armor in Operation Iraqi
Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – This afternoon the Tactical Air and Land Forces Subcommittee meets in open session to continue our ongoing review of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom force protection issues. We will receive testimony from two distinguished panels of witnesses.

This marks the third hearing this subcommittee has held in the past five months regarding force protection initiatives. The testimony we receive today will provide the status of combat helmets, and body and vehicle armor in Iraq and Afghanistan. Force protection has always been a top priority to this committee and will continue to be a top priority as long as our military is deployed in harm's way. Chairman Hunter and Ranking Member Skelton have provided outstanding leadership and support on this issue and we thank them for that leadership and support.

We are finally turning the corner with respect to meeting the body and vehicle armor requirements in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has been a hard fought effort and there are still many areas for improvements in terms of reforming the acquisition system and maintaining a sense of urgency, but overall we have come a long way. As long as our personnel are threatened we must do everything we can to provide them with the best protection that is available.

Regarding body armor, all military personnel serving in Iraq have been issued, at a minimum, the body armor with enhanced armor plates to meet the threat. The Army and Marine Corps continue to direct their efforts toward supplementing body armor with side torso armor. These side torso armor requirements must be fulfilled as expeditiously as possible. The committee understands that the Army is in the process of qualifying additional sources for side torso armor in order to meet the requirements sooner. We expect to hear more about this strategy today. We understand the services face a difficult task in balancing the need to protect soldiers and Marines while at the same time not adding so much weight as to inhibit their mobility and effectiveness. Just as adding armor to vehicles has a down-side by creating roll-over potential, adding body armor can reduce personal mobility and increase the danger to the individual.

Regarding vehicle armor, almost 100 percent of the vehicles in theater have factory produced armor and no vehicle leaves a secure area without armor. The industrial base for vehicle armor continues to expand. We expect to hear from our service witnesses regarding the status of transitioning from existing armored vehicles to those with even higher levels of protection.

Despite recent press reports regarding the danger caused by roll-over potential, I am confident that the additional vehicle armor has saved many lives and continues to help protect military personnel from deadly IED attacks. Driver training and roll over mitigation procedures need to be a priority. We cannot neglect safety. But I am confident that personnel would choose armor over reducing roll-over potential by reducing vehicle armor. We expect to learn more about what's being done to address these concerns.

A new issue before the subcommittee, but one we have been investigating for several months has to do with combat helmets. We understand that there are primarily three helmets in use by the services, with either padded or sling suspension systems. We also understand that the helmet shells used by different services, while of slightly different sizes and weights, provide similar ballistic protection. However, while available test data is limited, results indicate significant differences in protecting against non-ballistic impact or blast protection, depending on whether the helmets use padded or sling suspension systems, with the padded suspension system providing approximately twice the protection against blasts.

Apparently we have thousands of our military personnel who believe the helmet they are being issued does not provide them satisfactory protection. Are they misinformed or is there substance to their concerns? The Medical Officer of the Marine Corps in a memo in April of last year concurred in the official position of the Marine Corps not authorizing the padded suspension system for the Marine Corps helmet -- He noted that, "comfort, fit, and performance when exposed to cold temperatures and moisture make the (padded) system unsuitable for operational use."

This is why after examining this we have brought the helmet issue before a formal session of the subcommittee -- because of unresolved differences on the issue. When we asked the Marine Corps why some Marines were expressing dissatisfaction with their helmets, the official position was that the Marine Corps helmet provided the required protection. They also expressed their concerns that there was an inappropriate relationship between Operation Helmet and the primary provider of the padded system for combat helmets. In fact a senior Marine Corps official accused Operation Helmet of "abetting war profiteering." This same official indicates that the padded system, being requested by Marines in Iraq for their helmet, "does not work. It reduces ballistic protection of the system and does not address the injuries that are occurring most frequently in theater. The Light Weight Helmet (the Marine Corps helmet) is superior to any other system available." In addition, with all of the trips that our Members have made to Iraq, we have had no negative feedback regarding helmets from our military personnel. However, with a reported 8,000 warfighters, currently 40-50 per day, now having expressed a need for a different helmet suspension kit than they have been issued, it is time to get definitive answers.

How can so many warfighters be wrong? The padded system being requested is used by the Army and Special Operations Command, or SOCOM. The Marine Corps' own testing indicates that their helmet provides about half the blast impact protection of the Army-SOCOM helmet. The Marine Corps says its helmet meets the Marine Corps requirement, but if it only provides half the blast impact protection of the Army-SOCOM helmet, we need to understand why this is acceptable to Marine Corps leadership. And why it insists on using the sling suspension system.

It is also interesting to note that while the Marine Corps insists on using the sling suspension solution, the Navy Seabees, also a part of the Department of the Navy, after examining the options available, also selected the Army-SOCOM padded suspension kit for their helmet.

There are also issues regarding Army management of its helmet program. We understand that the Army used the same padded suspension system for roughly the first 500,000 production versions of its new helmet and then changed its testing criteria and now uses three different manufacturers. We want to know whether these differing padded suspension systems differ in quality.

We expect the service witnesses to help us understand the rationale for using different helmets and different suspension systems and the procedures used to properly test these systems against ballistic and non-ballistic impacts such as blunt trauma. We also need to know what the medical data shows regarding the kinds of head injuries being experienced in theater.

The final issue we want to address relates to recent media reports quoting service personnel saying that they do not have adequate medical supplies, specifically specialized bandages that are used as blood clotting accelerants. The services claim that they have adequate supplies and that no unit has indicated an inability to get the required bandages. We have asked our witnesses to be prepared to answer questions on this subject. My only comment for now on this is that, here again, upon examination we find individual service solutions to problems, with the Army selecting its solution and the Marine Corps using a different blood clotting accelerant solution. Where is the jointness and coordination we hear so much about?

As the threat to our military personnel continues to evolve, force protection requirements must continue to change accordingly. We as a committee need to be reassured that all force protection programs are being accomplished expeditiously, the Services are communicating with one another, and that every effort is being considered to meet new force protection requirements. Every day, we must be able to confidently say that we are doing everything possible to provide our warfighters the protection they need and deserve.

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