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Operation Helmet aims to supply troops with kits

Founder works with community to send protective liners overseas

By **JACKIE BARKER**
Chronicle Correspondent

An ongoing project had a modest beginning in the life of Bentwater resident Bob Meaders, but it soon became a consuming job.

His grandson, Lance Cpl. Justin Meaders, was in combat training when a Marine gunnery sergeant showed him a helmet liner and suggested he try it out before going into combat. In talking to his grandfather, Justin said, "This is one of the best things I have ever seen. It takes any hit to the head and you can hardly feel it."

Justin told his grandfather he wanted one, but didn't want it unless everyone in his company of 100 could have the same liner.

"I went to the computer and started researching the liner and what it would do to protect a soldier from the impact of a blast and realized its value. I sent 10 for his company and started Operation Helmet to secure others so all 100 would be equipped," Bob Meaders said. The liners cost \$100 each.

That was just the beginning.

Supply and demand

When Capt. Brett Smith of the U.S. Army returned home to Bentwater, the community had a parade and patriotic celebration. Smith commented to Bob Meaders about the helmet liner. "This is the best thing we have for our unit in Iraq."

Meaders set up a booth during the festivities and showed the protection the liners added to the Kevlar helmets issued to Marines in combat. A number of his friends and neighbors contributed so additional liners could be sent to units requesting them.

Mayde Creek Junior High pupils in Katy brought in coins and provided funding for one liner from each class. "They sent a long note with each student signing his name that went along with the liners," Meaders said. "The Marines were really pleased."

Churches and other organizations soon joined in the campaign and more liners were sent to war zones. The Lake Conroe Area Republican Women took on Operation Helmet as one of their projects, and worked with a media class at Montgomery High School to produce a three-minute DVD explaining the need for the liners. It will be distributed to interested schools and groups.

The Texas chapter of the Marine Motorcycle Club had a poker run in support of Operation Helmet and added an auction to raise \$13,000 to send 130 liners. Meaders set up a booth at the motorcycle event and received another \$3,000 in donations to pay for an additional 30.

"So far, we have been able to send 800 liners, but there are 30,000 Marines in Iraq, so we are just scratching the surface," Meaders said. Marine officers act as distribution points for Operation Helmet.

RESOURCES

DR. BOB MEADERS

- **Occupation:** Retired doctor
- **Fast fact:** Started Operation Helmet when his grandson requested a liner to make his helmet safer in combat

For more information, visit www.operationhelmet.org or call Meaders at 936-449-9706.

Helmet safety features

The Ballistic Liner and Suspension System kit makes helmets safer because it increases the protection from shock transmission, which is the major cause of head injuries. The standard helmet has a web system that allows it to impact directly on the head whenever there is external pressure. In addition, the helmet is subject to sinking if immersed in water.

The BLSS kit provides an engineered pad system with seven pressure-sensitive pads, which removes all pressure points. The four-point chin strap/harness system has a pad at the nape of the neck and a chin strap, which provides stability. The helmet becomes buoyant and will float if the wearer is submerged.

"One thing I want to stress to the Marines and their families is they should not think they are not protected by their current helmet. In fact, they are protected by their helmets in most situations. Operation Helmet's work simply makes a pretty good helmet significantly better in protection from blast forces," Meaders said.

Requests for the liners are coming from throughout the country. Cheryl Pool contacted Meaders from South Carolina and asked him to send her son a kit in Fallujah, Iraq. Two days after he installed the liner, his truck was in an explosion and he was thrown out and rolled several times.

"He told his mother his head was so well protected he was able to jump up and run back to help some of the others from the burning truck. Its stories like this that encourages us to keep going with Operation Helmet," Meaders said. One family in North Carolina sends contributions every month or so because they have a family member in Iraq who received a liner.

Travels and medical work

Meaders, 70, is a retired Navy captain who served 20 years as an eye specialist. Upon his retirement, he had a second career working for the World Health Organization and International Eye Foundation. He spent a number of years in Africa studying blinding eye diseases and causes of blindness.

He worked with others in WHO starting schools to teach the Africans how to do cataract surgery and prevent blinding eye diseases caused by malnutrition and infections.

"I had malaria five times and got tired of being in bed shaking, so I left WHO to start a private practice in Phoenix for 10 years," Meaders said.

Born and raised in Glenrose, Texas, Meaders took his medical training at Southwestern Medical School in Dallas, which is now part of the University of Texas system. After retirement, he and his wife LaVera bought a travel trailer and spent five years seeing America. During his work career he lived in Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Lesotho, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Honduras, Grenada, Barbados and St. Lucia, among others. His wife joined him whenever possible. He has been a Bentwater resident for five years.

Giving thanks

Meaders would spend part of his retirement playing golf if he had time, but Operation Helmet has become a full-time job, although an unpaid one. He receives 10-12 e-mails a day from Marines or their families, and he answers them all.

"I also take the time to write a thank-you to everyone who contributes to Operation Helmet, no matter what the size of the donation. I want them to know it is appreciated."

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