

Truth behind the mask; Are U.S. troops in danger with defective gear?

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By Doug Rokke

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"Gas, gas, gas." Those three words elicit immediate fear and action.

If these words or any other alarm from a "siren" to "banging on metal" are heard, military personnel must stop breathing while putting on their gas mask and securing it within nine seconds. Then they must put on their chemical protective clothing "MOPP suit" within five to seven minutes. The purpose of this equipment is to prevent breathing in and prevent skin contact with chemical, biological or radiological poisons that may be used during Gulf War II or future battles by Iraq, the United States or other nations.

You must use both pieces of equipment to survive and they must not be defective!

The essential lifesaving assumption is that the gas mask and MOPP suit will work when you wear it. However, the Army's M40 series and the Navy's gas mask both leak when you move your jaw or head and when you sweat. Most of the masks also have numerous tears and holes in them.

United States General Accounting Office investigators, U.S. Army reports, congressional testimony and soldiers' complaints have verified that the gas masks are defective and leak. These same reports have verified that over a quarter-million MOPP suits that are defective have been issued to our troops, but they can't be located.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., sent a letter to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld dated Nov. 27 asking him "to certify that military personnel who may be deployed in Iraq are adequately equipped against biological and chemical attacks." As of Jan 2, Representative Schakowsky's staff said that Secretary Rumsfeld had not provided that certification.

Today, Pentagon officials have deployed and are deploying our nation's and Illinois' finest sons and daughters for war with defective gas masks and MOPP suits.

As reported in The Pantagraph editorial "Bad time to have doubts on Army protective gear" (OurViews, Jan. 1), Army spokesman Capt. Benjamin Kuykendall said the shortcomings are being addressed and many are minor ones that could be fixed in the field with "duct tape."

As an Army officer and expert in nuclear, biological and chemical warfare, I must emphasize that defective gas masks and MOPP suits cannot be fixed with duck tape! Duct tape is not impervious to the chemical, biological and radiological agents and duct tape will come off the mask once it gets wet.

The current gas masks leak because the mask does not have enough silicon rubber under the chin to keep the mask from coming off the head during movement.

Another deliberately ignored problem is that the gas mask filters will not remove the very small (less than 0.3 micron) and very dangerous particles that are released during chemical, biological and radiological incidents, especially use of depleted uranium. This is a hazard if Iraqis use such agents, if the U.S. again explodes any stockpiles they find in place, and from exposures to radioactive components of our own weapons.

In rebuttal to Captain Kuykendall's solution for repairing defects with "duct tape," masks with tears and holes must be replaced - not fixed with duct tape. I must ask, and hope my neighbors care enough to ask: Why didn't the military unit commanders report these defects and obtain equipment that is not defective?

These defects have been known for years and have been willfully ignored. Now, widespread dereliction of duty threatens the lives of seasoned soldiers and young recruits alike, as we prepare to go to war.

Defective gas masks are not limited to the military. Some of our community police, fire and medical personnel have also been issued defective gas masks and do not even possess necessary MOPP or equivalent protective suits.

Exposures during Gulf War I (August 1990 to November 1991) caused in part by use of these same defective gas masks have resulted in over 159,238 Gulf War veterans on permanent disability, and over 8,013 dead as of May 2002. This casualty count is still increasing. according to the Veterans' Benefit Administration Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity Data and Information System in May 2002 Gulf War veterans' information.

Today, the entire Persian Gulf region still is a toxic and environmental wasteland because the chemical, biological and radiological contamination dispersed during Gulf War I was never cleaned up.

As a combat veteran of Gulf War I and the Vietnam War and as an Army officer, I must urge that every mother, father, son and daughter demand that President Bush and Secretary

Rumsfeld replace all defective gas masks and MOPP suits.

The president and Secretary Rumsfeld also must be required to finally provide medical care for thousands of us who are Gulf War I combat veterans and who are already sick because we were given and wore defective equipment while on duty in the toxic wasteland that is the Persian Gulf.

Remember, the president and his staff work for each of us! That is how our government was created and must continue to function. We cannot send the pride of our nation and our community to Gulf War II with defective equipment. If we do, and thousands of our sons and daughters come back disabled as has happened since Gulf War I, the future of our community and nation is dismal.

The media may not show you a single dead body or injured warrior during the next war. That was the strategy of Gulf War I, but that's not the reality of war. Death and injury are the reality of war. That includes children.

Citizens who can see through the smoke-screen of political rhetoric and the sanitized image of war must speak up and demand replacement of defective equipment.

That is our obligation as Americans based on a heritage of freedom. A freedom won by the legendary "Minutemen," the pride of Concord and Lexington.

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