

Well-suited for battle?

January 5th , 2003

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San Diego Union Tribune

Military says it's ready in the event of biochemical war, but critics disagree

CAMP PENDLETON - The 1st Marine Division recently began "Gas Mask Wednesdays," requiring 20,000 troops to wear or at least carry their protective masks all day.

Anthrax vaccinations have resumed, and smallpox inoculations will start this month for many service members.

The Marine Corps and other branches of the military have stepped up their preparations for biological or chemical weapons in the event of a conflict with Iraq. But there is skepticism about the adequacy of the U.S. military's equipment and training.

Marine officials and some defense analysts say biochemical equipment and training have vastly improved since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when they were found to be largely deficient.

But federal agencies, analysts and two members of Congress - one Republican and one

Democrat - are worried about the military's supplies of protective equipment and whether training reflects actual battlefield conditions.

A General Accounting Office report in October said 250,000 biochemical suits are defective and unaccounted for in the Army's huge inventory system.

The agency also said the Pentagon doesn't have enough protective suits for all contingencies and that the supply problem will only get worse.

Meanwhile, the Defense Logistics Agency confirmed last month that 80,000 gas masks with the wrong gaskets were issued to the armed services - including some to the Navy and Marines - and that 19,000 are still in circulation.

A Marine Corps spokesman said the service is searching its inventory for them.

Also, the Pentagon's inspector general testified to a congressional subcommittee in October that some Army units get little or no biochemical training after initial schooling.

A congresswoman has asked Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to "certify" that the Pentagon has enough protective equipment before a war with Iraq.

"I am concerned that Pentagon officials may be downplaying the actual risks to our servicemen and women, particularly with respect to the preparedness of our forces for chemical and biological attacks," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., a member of the national security subcommittee of the Committee on Government Reform.

Subcommittee Chairman Christopher Shays, R-Conn., also has expressed alarm.

"When we go into Iraq, the Pentagon needs to be absolutely certain no one will be told their mask can't be fixed because the (Defense Department) bought the wrong-size gasket," Shays said.

"This breakdown of the procurement system also speaks to the larger issue of chem-bio defense readiness," he added. "Chemical officers continue to tell the subcommittee (that) commanders do not give CB (chemical and biological) defense a high priority."

'In good shape'

The military says it is ready.

Lt. Gen. Michael Hagee, the incoming Marine Corps commandant, recently told the *Union-Tribune's* editorial board that the Corps is satisfied with its supply of protective suits.

"Over the past year or so we've looked very carefully at our individual protective equipment to ensure that we have sufficient quantities, which we do, and that it's in good shape, which it is," Hagee said.

He also expressed confidence in the Marines' biochemical defense training, saying, "We are ready to fight whenever the president decides that it's time to fight."

If Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein unleashes sarin or mustard gases, or some other version of chemical weaponry, those suits would be the foundation of each Marine or soldier's protection.

The Marine Corps uses a layered system called the Mission Oriented Protective Posture suit.

The jacket and pants are made of chemical-resistant synthetic fibers. The gas mask and shoulder-length hood allow each Marine to breathe safely in a contaminated area. Rubber galoshes go on over combat boots, and rubber gloves cover the hands.

With every layer on, Marines are supposed to be protected for up to 24 hours.

Infantry Marines from Camp Pendleton's 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, practice about 12 hours every three months in the full suit, said Chief Warrant Officer Philip Ross, the battalion's specialist in nuclear, biological and chemical defense.

He said the minimum requirement for infantrymen is four hours per quarter.

Training allows them to get used to the stifling heat - up to 110 degrees - inside the cumbersome gear, which also constricts vision and makes movement slower and harder.

Ross compares learning to fight in the suit to a football player learning to play in pads and gear. "The more you're in it, the easier it comes," he said.

Still, discomfort is a significant factor. An Army specialist fainted while wearing a similar suit during a demonstration for journalists.

In recent years, the Marines have trained in the protective suits during exercises in Kuwait to get troops accustomed to desert warfare. Hagee said he has personally led troops on exercises during Kuwait's blistering summer.

"It's hot, but we operated. . . . We put on our gas masks. We put on our suits. You can operate," he said.

"Is it pleasant? No. (But) the other guy has to operate there, too."

Too few suits

Still, the GAO has found deficiencies in the Pentagon's stockrooms.

In its report, the federal accounting agency said the Marines have less than 50 percent of the required stock of protective boots ready to go, about half the needed gloves and about 75 percent of the jackets and pants.

The yardstick is how much protective gear the military would need to fight in two theaters at once, though the military is considering lowering that standard.

A Defense Department spokeswoman said the military believes its suit supply is enough.

"The (department) is making all efforts to ensure sufficient stocks on hand to provide service members deploying to all high-threat areas with the (newest-version) JSLIST suit," Lt. Col. Cynthia Colin said. "Sufficient stocks of both JSLIST and the BDO (the battle dress overgarment, an older version) already exist within the inventory to address any contingency."

The GAO contends that today's protective suits are wearing out faster than they are being replaced with a new, higher-tech version.

The new suits - known as the JSLIST, for Joint Service Lightweight Integrated Suit Technology - aren't replacing the older ones as quickly as planned. That means the suit inventory may drop below minimal needs in five years, the report said.

The Marine Corps' storerooms contain both the older and newer suits.

One more critic of the military's preparedness is Eric Taylor, a former Army chemical officer who now teaches biochemistry at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Taylor visited a six-day Marine field exercise at Camp Lejeune, N.C., last summer and is writing a paper on the military's biochemical defenses for the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

He gives the Marines a C or a D grade for preparing troops for actual chemical warfare.

According to Taylor, there wasn't enough realistic practice of decontaminating troops and equipment; not enough time was spent on chemical defenses; and unit commanders knew a mock attack was coming, so there was no element of surprise.

Taylor also blamed senior officers from the Pentagon on down for not putting enough time into biological and chemical defense exercises.

"The seniors say: 'We're ready. Training is up.' But if you ask the enlisted people and junior people under them, they say, 'No, we're not,' " Taylor said in an interview.

Some experts believe U.S. forces have made strides.

A retired Navy rear admiral said the military's training and biochemical defense equipment are a "quantum leap" ahead of what they were in the Gulf War.

"I've got a fair, good amount of confidence that every fighter wing, every Navy ship and every Army battalion is fully equipped to fight in a chemical environment," said Stephen Baker, who was operations officer of the Theodore Roosevelt battle group in the Gulf War.

The Marines' Ross, a biochemical warfare specialist for 14 years, agrees that the Corps learned from the first war with Iraq.

"Back when we went to Saudi Arabia the first time, everybody was trying to play catch-up because nobody really paid attention," he said. "We always thought everyone was going to be too scared to use" chemical or biological warfare against the United States.

"But we got smart this time. We've been training to the level we need to."

Internal defense

Besides suits and masks, which largely protect against chemical weapons, the troops will also be armed with internal protections against germ warfare - vaccinations.

Experts say that though gas masks can guard against inhaling toxins, the best defenses are good general health and advance inoculation.

In September, Marines at Camp Pendleton and Miramar Marine Corps Air Station began getting vaccinations against anthrax, a deadly bacterium.

The fear of anthrax as a terrorist weapon took hold when five Americans died in the fall of 2001 from anthrax-bearing letters sent by an unknown source.

Hundreds of thousands of U.S. service members were inoculated against anthrax in the late 1990s in a controversial program that was shelved because supplies of the vaccine ran low.

A debate over the health risks of anthrax vaccinations led to at least 37 courts-martial after military personnel refused to be inoculated. A new anthrax vaccine is now being produced.

Hagee said in November that no one in the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force has balked at the vaccination this time around.

A more controversial vaccination program is to begin this month.

President Bush has ordered mandatory smallpox inoculations for 500,000 military members and 500,000 civilian emergency workers.

The White House said it believes Hussein holds the smallpox virus and may try to use it if attacked, although some analysts say it's unlikely the virus could be made into a weapon.

The United States stopped vaccinating Americans in 1972 after determining that the disease had been eradicated from the planet.

The new vaccination program has many advocates, but it also carries risks.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 14 to 52 people out of every 1 million vaccinated will develop serious complications, and one or two will die.

Some experts say the threat would be lower because modern medicine allows better screening for people with diseases, such as leukemia, who would probably be in danger if inoculated.

However, there are also more people with immune deficiencies, such as HIV and AIDS, who might be endangered by the smallpox vaccine.

Also, today there's an available treatment, vaccinia immune globulin, that combats most complications from the smallpox vaccine, said Dr. William Bicknell of Boston University's School of Public Health.

An advocate for reopening inoculations to the public, Bicknell believes no one would die and that would be only a few minor complications from vaccinations of healthy people.

He called inoculating military personnel "prudent, thoughtful and reasonable," because members of the military probably are in good health.

"The vaccine works. It's worked from a hundred or more years," Bicknell said. "For smallpox, we can take it off the table as a terrorist weapon."

Back on base, Ross is confident that his Marines can perform under fire from chemical and biological agents.

"The Marines in this battalion, I can tell you, are ready to go," he said. "They've trained it. They've lived it. They've been put through it over and over. They are almost sick of seeing me."