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Army Bans Use of Privately Bought Armor

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By LOLITA C. BALDOR

WASHINGTON (AP) - Soldiers will no longer be allowed to wear body armor other than the protective gear issued by the military, Army officials said Thursday, the latest twist in a running battle over the equipment the Pentagon gives its troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Army officials told The Associated Press that the order was prompted by concerns that soldiers or their families were buying inadequate or untested commercial armor from private companies - including the popular Dragon Skin gear made by California-based Pinnacle Armor.

"We're very concerned that people are spending their hard-earned money on something that doesn't provide the level of protection that the Army requires people to wear. So they're, frankly, wasting their money on substandard stuff," said Col. Thomas Spoehr, director of materiel for the Army.

Murray Neal, chief executive officer of Pinnacle, said he hadn't seen the directive and wants to review it.

"We know of no reason the Army may have to justify this action," Neal said. "On the surface this looks to be another of many attempts by the Army to cover up the billions of dollars spent on ineffective body armor systems which they continue to try quick fixes on to no avail."

The move was a rare one by the Army. Spoehr said he doesn't recall any similar bans on personal armor or devices. The directives are most often issued when there are problems with aircraft or other large equipment.

Veterans groups immediately denounced the decision.

Nathaniel R. Helms, editor of the Soldiers for the Truth online magazine Defense Watch, said he has already received a number of e-mails from soldiers complaining about the policy.

"Outrageously we've seen that (soldiers) haven't been getting what they need in terms of equipment and body armor," said Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., who wrote legislation to have troops reimbursed for equipment purchases. "That's totally unacceptable, and why this directive by the Pentagon needs to be scrutinized in much greater detail."

But another veterans group backed the move.

"I don't think the Army is wrong by doing this, because the Army has to ensure some level of quality," said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "They don't want soldiers relying on equipment that is weak or substandard."

But, Rieckhoff said, the military is partially to blame for the problem because it took too long to get soldiers the armor they needed. "This is the monster they made," he said.

Early in the Iraq war, soldiers and their families were spending hundreds or even thousands of dollars on protective gear that they said the military was not providing.

Then, last October, after months of pressure from families and members of Congress, the military began a reimbursement program for soldiers who purchased their own protective equipment.

In January, an unreleased Pentagon study found that side armor could have saved dozens of U.S. lives



(AP) A U.S. Marine patrols while wearing body armor in Husaybah, a Syrian border near Qaim town about...

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in Iraq, prompting the Army and Marine Corps to order thousands of ceramic body armor plates to be shipped to troops there this year.

The Army ban covers all commercial armor. It refers specifically to Pinnacle's armor, saying that while the company advertising implies that Dragon Skin "is superior in performance" to the Interceptor Body Armor the military issues to soldiers, "the Army has been unable to determine the veracity of these claims."

"In its current state of development, Dragon Skin's capabilities do not meet Army requirements," the Army order says, and it "has not been certified to protect against several small arms threats that the military is encountering in Iraq and Afghanistan."

The Marine Corps has not issued a similar directive, but Marines are "encouraged to wear Marine Corps-issued body armor since this armor has been tested to meet fleet standards," spokesman Bruce Scott said.

Military officials have acknowledged that some troops - often National Guard or Reservists - went to war with lesser-quality protective gear than other soldiers were issued.

"We'll be upfront and recognize that at the start of the conflict there were some soldiers that didn't have the levels of protection that we wanted," Spoehr said. Now, he added, "we can categorically say that whatever you're going to buy isn't as good as what you're going to get" from the military.

In interviews Thursday, Army officials said aggressive marketing by body armor manufacturers was fueling public concerns that troops are not getting the protection they need.

Army Lt. Col. Scott Campbell said the Army has asked Pinnacle to provide 30 sets of the full Dragon Skin armor so it can be independently tested. He said Pinnacle has indicated it won't be able to provide that armor until May, and the company said that is still the plan.

Campbell said initial military tests on small sections of the Dragon Skin armor had disappointing results. He said Pinnacle has received \$840,000 in research funding to develop improved armor.

Spoehr said he believes the directive will have little impact on soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan because it's likely that nearly all are wearing the military-issued body armor.

There have been repeated reports of soldiers or families of soldiers buying commercial equipment or trying to raise thousands of dollars to buy it for troops who are preparing to deploy overseas.

On the Net:

Defense Department: <http://www.defenselink.mil>

Pinnacle Armor: <http://www.pinnaclearmor.com>

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