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DEFENSEWATCH

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Army Orders Soldiers to Shed Dragon Skin or Lose SGLI Death Benefits

By Nathaniel R. Helms

Two deploying soldiers and a concerned mother reported Friday afternoon that the U.S. Army appears to be singling out soldiers who have purchased Pinnacle's Dragon Skin Body Armor for special treatment. The soldiers, who are currently staging for combat operations from a secret location, reported that their commander told them if they were wearing Pinnacle Dragon Skin and were killed their beneficiaries might not receive the death benefits from their \$400,000 SGLI life insurance policies. The soldiers were ordered to leave their privately purchased body armor at home or face the possibility of both losing their life insurance benefit and facing disciplinary action.



The soldiers asked for anonymity because they are concerned they will face retaliation for going public with the Army's apparently new directive. At the sources' requests *DefenseWatch* has also agreed not to reveal the unit at which the incident occurred for operational security reasons.

On Saturday morning a soldier affected by the order reported to *DefenseWatch* that the directive specified that "all" commercially available body armor was prohibited. The soldier said the order came down Friday morning from Headquarters, United States Special Operations Command (HQ, USSOCOM), located at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. It arrived unexpectedly while his unit was preparing to deploy on combat operations. The soldier said the order was deeply disturbing to many of the men who had used their own money to purchase Dragon Skin because it will affect both their mobility and ballistic protection.

"We have to be able to move. It (Dragon Skin) is heavy, but it is made so we have mobility and the best ballistic protection out there. This is crazy. And they are threatening us with our benefits if we don't comply." he said.

The soldier reiterated Friday's reports that any soldier who refused to comply with the order and was subsequently killed in action "could" be denied the \$400,000 death benefit provided by their SGLI life insurance policy as well as face disciplinary action.

As of this report Saturday morning the Army has not yet responded to a *DefenseWatch* inquiry.

Recently Dragon Skin became an item of contention between proponents of the Interceptor OTV body armor generally issued to all service members deploying in combat theaters and its growing legion of critics. Critics of the

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Interceptor OTV system say it is ineffective and inferior to Dragon Skin, as well as several other commercially available body armor systems on the market. Last week *DefenseWatch* released a secret Marine Corps report that determined that 80% of the 401 Marines killed in Iraq between April 2004 and June 2005 might have been saved if the Interceptor OTV body armor they were wearing was more effective. The Army has declined to comment on the report because doing so could aid the enemy, an Army spokesman has repeatedly said.

A U.S. Army spokesman was not available for comment at the time DW's original report (Friday - 1700 CST) was published. *DefenseWatch* continues to seek a response from the Army and will post one as soon as it becomes available. Yesterday the DoD released a news story through the Armed Forces News Service that quoted Maj. Gen. Steven Speaks, the Army's director of force development, who countered critical media reports by denying that the U.S. military is behind the curve in providing appropriate force protection gear for troops deployed to Iraq and elsewhere in the global war against terrorism. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* led the bandwagon of mainstream media that capitalized on *DefenseWatch's* release of the Marine Corps study. Both newspapers released the forensic information the Army and Marines are unwilling to discuss.

"Those headlines entirely miss the point," Speaks said.

The effort to improve body armor "has been a programmatic effort in the case of the Army that has gone on with great intensity for the last five months," he noted.

Speaks' assessment contradicts earlier Army, Marine and DoD statements that indicated as late as last week that the Army was certain there was nothing wrong with Interceptor OTV body armor and that it was and remains the "best body armor in the world."

One of the soldiers who lost his coveted Dragon Skin is a veteran operator. He reported that his commander expressed deep regret upon issuing his orders directing him to leave his Dragon Skin body armor behind. The commander reportedly told his subordinates that he "had no choice because the orders came from very high up" and had to be enforced, the soldier said. Another soldier's story was corroborated by his mother, who helped defray the \$6,000 cost of buying the Dragon Skin, she said.

The mother of the soldier, who hails from the Providence, Rhode Island area, said she helped pay for the Dragon Skin as a Christmas present because her son told her it was "so much better" than the Interceptor OTV they expected to be issued when arriving in country for a combat tour.

"He didn't want to use that other stuff," she said. "He told me that if anything happened to him I am supposed to raise hell."

At the time the orders were issued the two soldiers had already loaded their Dragon Skin body armor onto the pallets being used to air freight their gear into the operational theater, the soldiers said. They subsequently removed it pursuant to their orders.

Currently nine U.S. generals stationed in Afghanistan are reportedly wearing Pinnacle Dragon Skin body armor, according to company spokesman Paul Chopra. Chopra, a retired Army chief warrant officer and 20+-year pilot in the famed 160th "Nightstalkers" Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne), said his company was merely told the generals wanted to "evaluate" the body armor in a combat environment. Chopra said he did not know the names of the general officers wearing the Dragon Skin.

Pinnacle claims more than 3,000 soldiers and civilians stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan are wearing Dragon Skin body armor, Chopra said. Several

months ago *DefenseWatch* began receiving anecdotal reports from individual soldiers that they were being forced to remove all non-issue gear while in theater, including Dragon Skin body armor, boots, and various kinds of non-issue ancillary equipment.

Last year the DoD, under severe pressure from Congress, authorized a one-time \$1,000 reimbursement to soldiers who had purchased civilian equipment to supplement either inadequate or unavailable equipment they needed for combat operations. At the time there was no restriction on what the soldiers could buy as long as it was specifically intended to offer personal protection or further their mission capabilities while in theater.

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