

Kevin Horrigan, "Body Armor (The Rocket from Nat Helms' Basement)," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (15 Jan 2006), p. B3

Two weeks ago, from the basement office in his suburban home on a quiet street in St. Charles, Nat Helms launched a rocket. Wonderful thing, this Internet.

Sitting in his basement, surrounded by photos and mementos of his military service in Vietnam and his 15 years as a freelance military correspondent, Nat Helms, 55, sat at his computer and wrote:

"A recent United States Marine Corps forensic study obtained by *DefenseWatch* slams the Interceptor OTV body armor system, claiming 'as many as 42 percent of the Marine casualties who died from isolated torso injuries could have been prevented with improved protection in the areas surrounding the plated areas of the vest. Nearly 23 percent might have benefited from protection along the mid-axillary line of the lateral chest. Another 15 percent died from impacts through the unprotected shoulder and upper arm,' the report says."

Helms' story went on to report that the Armed Forces Radio Network in Iraq had broadcast warnings to U.S. troops that Iraqi insurgents were being trained to aim for the gaps in the Interceptor armor. He reported that despite Defense Department claims that the Interceptor armor was "the best that money can buy," the system "leaves the wearer vulnerable to side and shoulder wounds that could prove fatal."

Troops had begun complaining about it almost as soon as it was issued, Helms wrote. Despite those complaints and despite the existence of superior systems, the Pentagon continued to defend its nearly \$1 billion Interceptor program, the story said.

Helms spent eight years in the Army, including three tours in Vietnam. On his second tour, manning a door gun on a Huey helicopter, he took two rounds on a "chicken plate," a primitive chest protection system. The impact knocked him to the deck of the chopper and left a massive bruise, but the same burst killed his platoon commander. Since then, the integrity of body armor has been more than a hypothetical issue to him.

He came home from the war, worked as a cop in Galveston, Texas, and attended the University of Houston, the cradle of stars. He found work as a reporter and editor for the legendary Bill Feustel at the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, the Associated Press and for KTVI-TV, Channel 2. Fifteen years ago, he went freelance, and when the Internet came along, he volunteered his time with *DefenseWatch*, an online magazine produced by the Soldiers For The Truth Foundation. The Web site address is sftt.org.

SFTT was founded by the late Col. David Hackworth, a longtime hero to the troops he called "muddy boots soldiers" and a vociferous critic of the "perfumed princes in the Pentagon." Helms worked closely with Hackworth before his death last spring and succeeded him as *DefenseWatch*'s procurement critic. SFTT is a favorite sounding board for veterans and active duty troops who wonder if they're fighting on the same side as the people at the Pentagon.

SFTT sometimes collaborates with more established media outlets. On the Interceptor vest story, it was working with reporter Michael Moss and *The New York Times*. Five days after Helms filed his story on Jan. 2, Moss filed his, adding the extrapolated detail that if the Marine Corps' forensic findings were applied to Army casualties as well, as many as 300 U.S. troops may have died in Iraq because of flaws in the Interceptor armor.

The *New York Times*' profile is somewhat higher than that of a guy in a basement in St. Charles. As a result of Moss' story, Senate Armed Forces Committee Chairman John Warner, R-Va., Wednesday held closed hearings into the armor issue. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., got headlines by blaming the problem on the "incompetence" of the Bush administration.

The Marines and Army pushed back, saying that additional armor might be too heavy for troops, although the Marines already had extra armor on order. On Thursday, the Army announced that it, too, would send additional armor to all its troops in Iraq, including shoulder and side plates for the Interceptor vests.

Nat Helms smiled about all of that. "We're darlings of the politicians right now. It's trendy to love a vet."

Like Hackworth, Helms' focus is grunt-centric: He wants whatever works best for the guy out at the tip of the spear, not what works best for the retired admirals, military contractors and Pentagon procurement officers. "They all work in a zero-defect environment," he said of the people in the procurement system. "To admit a mistake is to end your career."

The most basic problem with the Interceptor armor, Helms said, is not that there are gaps in its coverage, but that even when the protective ceramic plates are inserted in the Kevlar vest, it is not certified to stop a 7.62 mm rifle round. That's the size of the ammunition fired by the ubiquitous AK-47, the weapon of choice almost anywhere in the world a guy would need to wear body armor.

Thus, America has sent its sons and daughters to war for uncertain purposes wearing armor that won't protect them from the bullets most likely to kill them. Better body armor is available, but it wasn't developed by the Pentagon, and after all, what's 300 dead soldiers compared to that?