

Synthetic clothes off limits to Marines outside bases in Iraq

LANCE CPL. STEPHEN HOLT

Special to American Forces Press Service

CAMP TAQADDUM, Iraq – Marines conducting operations outside forward operating bases and camps in Iraq can no longer wear synthetic athletic clothing containing polyester and nylon, Marine Corps commanders have ordered.

The ban on popular clothing from companies like Under Armour, CoolMax and Nike comes in the wake of concerns that a substantial burn risk is associated with wearing clothing made with these synthetic materials, officials said.

When exposed to extreme heat and flames, clothing containing some synthetic materials like polyester will melt and can fuse to the skin. This essentially creates a second skin and can lead to horrific, disfiguring burns, said Navy Capt. Lynn E. Welling, the 1st Marine Logistics Group head surgeon.

Whether on foot patrol or conducting a supply convoy while riding in an armored truck, everyone is at risk to such injuries while outside the wire.

“Burns can kill you and they’re horribly disfiguring. If you’re throwing (a melted synthetic material) on top of a burn, basically you have a bad burn with a bunch of plastic melting into your skin, and that’s not how you want to go home to your family,” said Welling.

According to Tension Technology International, a company that specializes in synthetic fibers, most man-made fabrics such as nylon, acrylic or polyester will melt when ignited and produce a hot, sticky, melted substance. This can cause extremely severe burns.

For these reasons, Marines have been limited to wearing clothing made with these materials only while on the relatively safe forward operating bases and camps where encounters with fires and explosions are rela-

tively low, officials said.

These products have risen in popularity in the past few years and are now sold at military clothing stores. Some companies have come out with product lines specifically catering to military needs. This makes polyester clothing readily available to servicemembers, said Welling.

The Under Armour company, a favorite among many servicemembers here, advertises that the fabric used to make their garments will pull perspiration from the skin to the outer layer of the clothing. This, the ads say, allows the person wearing it to remain cool and dry in any condition or climate.

While these qualities have been a main reason for Marines to stock up on these items, the melting side effect can be a fatal drawback, said Welling.

This point was driven home recently at a military medical facility at Camp Ramadi, a U.S. military base on the outskirts of the city of Ramadi, arguably one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq. “We had a Marine with significant burn injuries covering around 70 percent of his body,” said Navy Cmdr. Joseph F. Rappold, the officer in charge of the medical unit at the base.

The Marine was injured when the armored vehicle he was riding in struck an improvised explosive device, causing his polyester shirt to melt to his skin. Even though he was wearing his protective vest, Navy doctors still had to cut the melted undergarment from his torso. His injuries would not have been as severe had he not been wearing a polyester shirt, said Rappold.

Burns have become a common injury in Iraq as the enemy continues to employ IEDs and roadside bombs. Currently, these hidden explosives are the No. 1 killer of servicemembers in Iraq, said Welling.

For years, servicemembers with jobs that put them at a high risk of flame exposure, such as pilots and

explosive ordnance disposal personnel, were kept from wearing polyester materials because of the extra burn threat. Now, with so many encounters with IED explosions, the Marines are extending this ban to everyone going outside the wire, officials said.

With the approach of summer, temperatures during some days are expected to hover around 130 degrees Fahrenheit. These blistering temperatures spur many to wear the moisture-wicking, quick-drying clothing in an attempt to beat the heat and stay cool.

“I understand it gets to be 150 degrees in a turret during the summer time,” said Welling. “My goal is not to make it more uncomfortable or harder on the servicemembers. My job is to make sure that when they hit an IED and are engulfed in flames, they have the best protection possible and the least risk of something [going wrong] that could have been prevented.”

The directive is straightforward and simple, Welling said. “The goal is not to bubble wrap the warrior going outside the gate. The idea is to minimize the [hazards] we have control over,” said Welling.

Commanders have expressed concern that troops will downplay the problem of wearing wicking materials in combat settings because they think their body armor or uniforms will protect them.

The camouflage utility uniforms are designed to turn to ash and blow away after the material is burned, but the burn hazard remains, said Welling. She recommends wearing 100 percent cotton clothing while on missions.

So far, Marines have been responding well to the new regulations.

“The policy is good because it’s designed for safety and is about keeping Marines in the fight,” said Cpl. Jason Lichtefeld, a military policeman with the 1st Marine Logistics Group, who plans to ensure his Marines comply with the new rules.



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Marine Staff Sgt. Jonathan B. McClary, a combat engineer, wears a polyester T-shirt with moisture-wicking technology in an attempt to stay cool during hot days in Iraq. But wearing these polyester materials off forward operating bases in Iraq is now prohibited because of the burn hazard.

Even Marines who never venture off base should be aware of the risks associated with wearing the wicking fabrics, officials said.

For example, a Marine’s high-performance undershirt recently started smoking when an electrical current shocked him. Fortunately, it didn’t catch on fire or melt, but the potential was there, said Welling.

Officials acknowledged that high-performance apparel may be the best way to stay cool when working in a low-risk environment with a minimal chance of exposure to flames or intense heat. “We’ve got a great piece of gear, but when you put it in the wrong environment, it could cause more problems than it’s worth,” said Welling.

(Lance Cpl. Stephen Holt serves with the 1st Marine Logistics Group.)



MINNIE CHEATUM

Fallen Soldier honored

Brig. Gen. Robert P. Lennox presents a Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart and a certificate of U.S. citizenship for her son to Frances Sandoval, mother of Sgt. Israel Devora Garcia, April 12 at the Clint cemetery. Devora Garcia died April 1 in Baghdad, Iraq when an improvised explosive device detonated while he was conducting a dismounted patrol. The Soldier was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Baumholder, Germany.

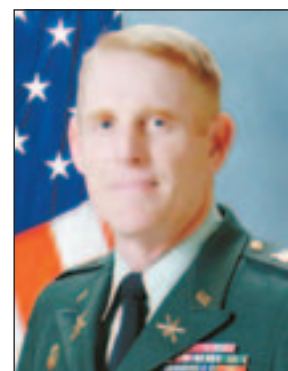
Mathews nominated for brigadier general

DIETER JESTER

Special to The Monitor

The former deputy commandant of the U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery Center and Fort Bliss has been nominated for promotion to brigadier general.

Col. Roger Mathews departed Fort Bliss in January to become the deputy commander of operations at the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command/U.S. Army Forces Strategic Command at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo. His nomination for promotion is awaiting confirmation



Col. Roger Mathews

by the U.S. Senate.

Mathews also served here from 1993 through 1996 with the organization then known as Joint Task Force-6. He served JTF-6 as its current operations officer for the state of Texas, as chief of the operations division, and as deputy director of operations and civil affairs. He became deputy commandant of

the ADA Center in June 2005 after having served as chief of staff for the 32nd Army Air and Missile Defense Command since August 2003.

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