June 2000

Comparative Study of Different Lightweight Head Protection Systems with Full-Face Visors for Humanitarian Deminers

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Recommended Citation

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Introduction

A key component of any Personal Protective Ensemble (PPE) for demining is the helmet and/or face shield. For obvious reasons, protecting the face of a deminer is of utmost importance in case of an accidental detonation of a mine. Currently, a wide range of head and face protective devices are available for the deminer, and this study attempts to evaluate these devices from several perspectives.

Like any other explosive, when an AP landmine detonates, a blast wave is generated along with an impulsive burst of fragments and an intense fire flash spreading in all directions. The impact and ensuing effects can lead to shearing of body parts. These injuries occur in the form of traumatic amputations, such as those observed in victims who have stepped on landmines. Under extreme conditions, intense blast loading can lead to shearing of body parts. These injuries are particularly vulnerable to fragmentation injury with blindness being the obvious consequence.

In order to examine these effects and to evaluate the ability different technology in head protection has in preventing or reducing these effects, simulated mines, containing C4, were chosen to represent a wide range of blast types and severities. As a point retention system, which secures the helmet snugly to the head through the use of a chin-cup

The Sport Helmet

The Sport-1 Helmet developed by Med-Eng because it is lightweight and fits the head snugly, providing enhanced stability and comfort over other common types of helmets. The Sport-1 Helmet is mounted by means of aluminum blocks, which are bolted to the helmet and the visor. Standard locking pins allow the visor to be held securely over the face or above the forehead. The visor extends from beneath the chin to the top of the forehead, thereby covering the entire face. The helmet uses a customized three-point retention system, which secures the helmet snugly to the head through the use of a chin-cup.

The Sport-1 Helmets, as constructed by Med-Eng, are normally made with visors of a standard thickness of 5.7mm. In order to observe the effect of thickness on the blast integrity, fragment resistance and other performance measures for this study, the Sport-1 Helmets were made with visors of two other thicknesses: 5.7mm and 3.5mm.

Experimental Details

Positioning of Mannequins and Instrumentation

Full-scale tests involving instrumented anthropomorphic Hybrid II mannequins (representing the 50th percentile North American male [height: 1.75 m, weight: 77 kg]) were carried out where the mannequins were placed in deminers' positions. In order to place the mannequins in the correct position, an advanced blast resistant positioning apparatus was utilized (Figure 1). For the purposes of this study, two mannequins were used, one on either side of the mannequin. One mannequin in a kneeling on one knee position with its sternum 0.65m to 0.68m from the simulated mine (corresponding to a 0.80m distance between the mine and the mannequin's nose) represented the typical distance a deminer's sternum would be from a mine while using a prodder of about 10cm (±1cm). In order to examine the effect of distance, the other mannequin was positioned such that its head was 0.7m from the mine (Figure 1).

Simulated mines, consisting of C4 plastic explosive packed snugly into injection molded puck-shaped plastic containers, were buried with one end of overburden in front of the mannequin. Three sizes of simulated mines, containing 50, 100 and 200g of C4, were chosen to represent a wide range of blast type AP landmines.

In order to quantify the performance of the helmets and visors, each mannequin was instrumented with a cluster of tri-axial accelerometers (PCB) in the head along with a pressure transducer (PCE) for measuring overpressure at the ear. All instrumentation lines were connected via appropriate power supplies and signal conditioning equipment to a computerized data acquisition system. For further detail concerning this experimental procedure, please refer to [Appendix A.1]. This method of testing is currently under consideration for use by the Canadian Center for Mine Action Technology (CCMAT).

Helmets and Visors Tested

There are several different types of lightweight head and face protection systems available to the deminer, designed and manufactured by several organizations. In this study, three types of lightweight protective helmets were evaluated. The first was the Sport-1 Helmet developed by Med-Eng Systems, which is composed of a lightweight sporting helmet (used for such activities as climbing or kayaking) with a full-face visor mounted onto it (Figure 2a). The SPORT-1 Helmet was chosen by Med-Eng because it provides head and face, providing enhanced stability and comfort over other common types of helmets. The Sport-1 Helmet is mounted by means of aluminum blocks, which are bolted to the helmet and the visor. Standard locking pins allow the visor to be held securely over the face or above the forehead. The visor extends from beneath the chin to the top of the forehead, thereby covering the entire face. The helmet uses a customized three-point retention system, which secures the helmet snugly to the head through the use of a chin-cup.
nominal thickness values, 4.5mm and 5mm.

The second type of helmet tested was a construction hardhat mounted with a full-face visor (Figure 2b). This system, designed and constructed by another organization, has a 4.3mm thick ballistic visor mounted by means of plastic mounting blocks on both sides of a construction hardhat. The visor covers the area from beneath the chin to the top of the forehead. Retention to the user’s head is achieved by the use of an under-the-chin strap. The visor is mounted on the back of the helmet such that the brim of the helmet does not interfere with the visor (the helmet is worn backwards so that the visor covers the face). The visor cannot be locked open or closed, rather it is held by friction. The nominal thickness of the visor is 4.8mm.

Use of a Chest Plate

The HDE Demining Ensemble, developed by Med-Eng Systems to provide protection to the deminer’s body, uses a chest plate designed to integrate with the visor of a demining helmet. The bottom of the visor tucks in behind the chest plate, thus providing continuous protection from the chest to the top of the head (Figure 2a). The role of the overlapping chest plate and visor is to prevent the mine blast from reaching inside the visor and to aid in keeping the visor over the deminer’s face during such a blast. During most tests with the Med-Eng Sport-1 helmets, the full HDE Demining Ensemble with its chest plate, recommended by Med-Eng Systems, covered the body of the mannequins. In some tests, in order to evaluate its effect, the chest plate of the HDE was removed.

Full-face visor mounted on adjustable headband Figure 2c

Photos by Med-Eng Systems Inc.

The Hardhat head protection system has not been developed by MES, differing significantly in design from the Hardhat helmets (Hardhat-1 and Hardhat-2) evaluated in [Appendix A, 1]. The third type of system tested, also built by another institution, is a full-face visor mounted on an adjustable Headband (Figure 2c). No chinstrap is provided on this Headband system, but it is expected to remain snug on the head by adjusting its circumference. The visor is of sufficient size to provide continuous protection from the neck up to and including the forehead. Similar to the Hardhat system, this visor cannot be locked open or closed, but it is held by friction. The nominal thickness of the visor is 4.8mm.

Results and Discussion

Visor Penetration

One of the main objectives of a visor is to protect the face from fragments emanating from the detonation of the mine. Whether a visor will be penetrated is dependent on several factors, such as visor thickness, mass of the explosive charge, distance between the mine and the visor, depth of burial and the size and density of fragments in the soil. From this study, it has been ascertained that even a slight increase in visor thickness can have a dramatic effect on the levels of fragmentation protection to the face and head. Figure 3a illustrates the effect of the different visor thickness mounted on the Sport-1 helmet; the thinner gauge visors performed poorly when compared to the thickest visors. On average, over all charge sizes and distances from the charge— the 4.4mm and 5mm visors were penetrated 1.8 and 1.75 times per blast, respectively, while the 5.7mm visor was penetrated only 0.20 times per blast. These results indicate that for the thinner visors between one and two fragment penetrations were likely to occur in each test, but for the thicker visors, a penetration would occur on average only every fifth test. These results are averaged over all three sizes of simulated mines used at each standoff distances.

The effect of charge mass on visor penetration is illustrated in Figure 3b, which shows that the number of penetration through the Sport-1 Helmets visors (all thicknesses) per blast increases with charge mass from 0.3 per test for 50g C4 to 1.4 for 200g C4. When a mine detonates, the fragment density (the number of fragments in a given area) decreases dramatically with distance from the mine. Therefore, as a deminer increases his distance from a mine, or any other detonation, one can expect to interact with, on average, fewer fragmentation particles emanate. Furthermore, as the distance increases, the energy of the fragmentation particles decreases. Due to these factors, one would expect fewer fragmentation penetrations as the distance increases from the mine. This supposition is confirmed in Figure 3c where the number of penetrations per test at a distance of 0.8m, on average, was approximately half of that when the visors were 0.7m from the mine.

Visor Shattering and Cracking

The penetration resistance of the Hardhat and Headband systems has not been directly compared to the performance of the Sport-1 helmets because a different phenomenon occurred with these systems.

Average number of complete penetrations through visors mounted on Sport-1 Helmets’ effects of charge mass Figure 3b

EFFECT OF CHARGE MASS ON SPORT-1 VISOR PENETRATION

Mannequins in Kneeling Position

Distance between Mine and Mannequin’s Nose: 30 cm and 80 cm

Average number of complete penetrations through visors mounted on Sport-1 Helmets’ effects of distance Figure 3c

EFFECT OF DISTANCE ON SPORT-1 VISOR PENETRATION

Mannequins in Kneeling Position

Charge Size: 50 g, 100 g and 200 g

Distance between Mine and Mannequin’s Nose: 30 cm and 80 cm
Visor from Hard Hat ejected from face and found in front of mannequin after blast  Figure 5a

Visor from Headband system ejected from face  Figure 5b

Failure than the visors manufactured by Med-Eng Systems. Figure 4 shows the percentage of helmet visors which cracked or shattered for all five helmet types when facing the 100 and 200g C4 mines (the 50g C4 mine results are not included, as this threat level never caused any visors to shatter). It can be seen that the Hardhat visors, which was the thinnest of all those tested, cracked and shattered most readily followed by the Headband system.

Effect of Chest Plate on Visor Removal

In order to provide effective and continuous protection to the face of a deminer during an accidental detonation, the combination of a full-face visor mounted on a stable helmet platform and integrated with an overlapping chest plate is imperative. A visor that is not securely mounted has a high probability of being removed during the blast event, creating the possibility of secondary fragmentation, overpressure and heat reaching the exposed face. Figures 5a and 5b illustrate examples in which the visors of the Headband and Hardhat systems were removed from the mannequin's face during the blast event. Figure 6 illustrates that when a visor is not properly held in place on a stable helmet platform combined with an overlapping chest plate, it is much more likely to be removed from the face during the blast. The Hardhat and Headband systems had their visors removed from the face in 100 percent of the 18 tests, independent of chance size and distance from the mine. However, when the Sport-1 helmet was used with an integrated chest plate, the visor was removed in just over 25 percent of the 19 tests (usually when a larger charge size was used or when the visor was at the closer distance to the charge). The benefit of a stable helmet platform alone was illustrated when the interfering chest plate was removed from the HDE, as the visor was removed in 60 percent of the 14 experiments. That is, more often than when the Sport-1 helmet was used with a chest plate but much less than when an unstable mounting platform was used without an integrated chest plate. It should be noted that the Sport-1 helmet, as part of this study, was in its prototypic stage. Due to the occasional failure when the visor was removed during the mine blast, the Sport-1 helmet is being extensively revamped and improved in order to prevent similar occurrences in future tests.

Consideration of Heat Effects

Figure 7 provides evidence that protection from the thermal effects of a detonating mine is required. In both pictures, the detonation of the mine created a fireball that easily reached the heads and torsos of the mannequins. In order to protect the deminer from receiving burns as a result of this fireball, protective clothing is required. The ability of a visor to remain in place during the blast event will prevent burns.

Effects of Helmets and Visors on Ear Overpressure

As part of this study, pressure measurements were made at the ear of the mannequin in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the different head protection systems in reducing the overpressure levels that reach the ear of the deminer in the case of an accidental detonation. Figure 8a shows typical traces of overpressure measurements obtained at the mannequin's ear when they faced a blast from the 100g C4 simulated mine at a distance of 0.70m. Figure 8b illustrates traces when facing the 200g C4 simulated mine at a distance of 0.80m. From both figures, it can be observed that the peak overpressure for the Sport-1 helmets is essentially independent of visor thickness but that the peak pressure increases significantly for both the Headband and Hardhat systems. This result is not surprising, as one would expect the peak pressure reaching the ear to be a function of geometry: The Sport-1 helmets have the advantage because their visors are tucked in behind a chest plate to limit the blast overpressure's ability to reach the ear. The Hardhat and Headband systems do not operate in this fashion, so the blast wave can easily get behind the visor and readily reach the ear, which most likely contributes to the higher overpressure (this factor also causes the visor and headgear to be easily removed from the head during the blast event).

Figure 9 shows average peak overpressures mea-
Average peak overpressure measured at the mannequin's ear for different head and face protection systems with mines at distances of 76cm and 80cm from the mannequin's nose. Figure 9

Effects of Visor Position on Head Acceleration
A visor is an essential part of the overall head and face protection system and should be kept in a closed position during demining. In many demining theaters, miners tend to keep their visors open to gain comfort in a hot climate or due to limited visibility because of scraching and fog. This practice may have severe consequences in the event of a detonation. There is the obvious effect of leaving the face exposed to the blast wave and fragmentation, thereby drastically increasing the chance for severe injury to the face, such as blindness. However, the other effects are not often thought of as the accelerating or concussive effects on the head. With the visor open, a large concave surface area is created for the helmet and visor to catch and trap the blast wave. This effect can cause the head to be accelerated backwards at a rate much higher than when the visor is in the closed position (the blast can pass over the relatively streamlined, convex surface of the visor in its closed position). Figure 10 shows the effect of open and closed visors on the head acceleration for the Sport-1 helmet and for different charge masses. The effect of a visor position is obvious, as the peak acceleration can be an order of magnitude greater with an open visor compared with a visor in the closed position.

Conclusion
An initial evaluation of a range of lightweight demining helmets has been performed from several perspectives. It has been shown through tests designed to accurately represent an actual demining accident scenario that, with respect to lightweight helmets, several factors must be considered in order to provide the wearer with adequate protection.

By performing tests with visors that range in thickness, it has been demonstrated that even a small increase in visor thickness can tremendously affect the ability of a visor to prevent high velocity fragmentations from reaching the face of a miner. In the tests performed for this study, it was demonstrated that by increasing visor thickness from five to 5.7mm, one could decrease the chance of a fragment penetration by over eight times. Furthermore, the effect of decreasing one's distance from a mine was shown to have a marked effect on whether a fragment would penetrate a protective visor—thus indicating the importance of increasing stand-off distance whenever possible.

Visor manufacturers were also illustrated to be of paramount importance. The visors not manufactured by MES were more likely to catastrophically crack or shatter into several pieces, whereas the visors on the Sport-1 helmets did not show this tendency. In fact, it was demonstrated that visor thickness is not indicative of potential for failure compared to how well the visor was manufactured.

In order to ensure that the deminer is protected from a detonating mine, it is required that a protective system remain over the head and face throughout the blast event. It has been demonstrated that in order to ensure this scenario, both a stable helmet platform and an integrated chest plate are essential. The Hardhat and Headband systems, which have neither feature, had their visors removed from the faces of the mannequins in every test—even against the smallest of the charge sizes. On the other hand, the form-fitting Sport-1 helmet (unlike the Hardhat, which, like any other construction hardhat, sits high on the head) and visor that can be integrated with a chest plate were removed in far fewer tests and, usually, only when facing a large charge size.

One rarely considered benefit of having a visor remain in place over the face throughout a mine detonation was demonstrated by observing the intense short-lived fireball, which can easily engulf the deminer's upper body, including his face. The presence of a visor will ensure that burn injuries are kept to a minimum. The overpressure at the ear was also shown to be positively affected by a proper head protection system, as the Sport-1 helmets consistently permitted lower peak overpressure levels to reach the ear, as compared to the Hardhat and Headband systems.

All of this evidence provides a clear picture of the equipment required by deminers to effectively perform their duties. If one chooses a lightweight head/face protective system, it should have several key characteristics. It should have a visor that is manufactured properly in order to prevent catastrophic failure, and one of sufficient gauge to minimize the possibility for fragmentation penetration. It should be mounted onto a stable platform—most likely a snug fitting and strong helmet with a comfortable and effective retention system. How the helmet interacts with the other protective equipment should also be taken into account. The bottom of the visor should integrate with an overlapping chest piece, as this structure greatly enhances the ability of the helmet to function properly. Finally, the helmet's use and care is of great importance. If the visor is treated properly in order to prevent scratches and maintain clarity, it is more likely to be used in the down, or closed, position. A visor used in the open position not only opens the face to the threat of fragmentation and heat but also increases the possibility of concussive injury in the event of a detonation.

Appendix A


Acknowledgments
The authors would like to acknowledge the extensive contributions provided by the design, testing and development teams: S. Kalaam, M. Smith, P. Voisine, J. Myles, R. Lauville, R. James, M. Schiller and R. L. "Abbé.

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