



Heckler and Koch's HK417 7.62mm rifle system as issued to Australian marksmen in Afghanistan.

SOLDIERS' SHOPPING TROLLEY

What are our soldiers issued with when they go to Afghanistan?

Before taking up his appointment as Minister for Defence Materiel, Jason Clare had no idea.

But that's no surprise. A lot goes into equipping a soldier with the right tools to face a determined enemy in a far-off land. Things to attack an enemy with – stuff to protect the soldier against the enemy's assaults – and just the pure creature-comfort stuff required for survival against the elements.

During his time in the role, Mr Clare said he learned that our soldiers were issued with 105 different items, worth about \$9,650. And that's just their personal kit. Then come weapons, ammunition, radios, vehicles, helicopters and so on.

Before being replaced by Senator Kim Carr late last year, Mr Clare published an opinion piece describing how soldiers push a shopping trolley through the Defence kitting store in the Middle East to collect all their gear – and how it was ultimately the job of the Minister for Defence Materiel to make sure those soldiers had what they needed in those shopping trolleys.

The equipment our soldiers have in Afghanistan is very different to the equipment they would have been issued 10 years ago. In fact, in many cases, it's quite different to the equipment issued to our soldiers just one year ago.

Mr Clare said 2011 saw new body armour rolled out, new combat uniforms and longer-range machine guns issued.

"We also upgraded our Bushmaster vehicles in Afghanistan to make them even safer, and installed a counter rocket system at Tarin Kot and a number of forward operating bases, to warn troops of impending rocket attacks," he said.

"All up we are spending more than \$1.6 billion on new equipment to better protect our troops in Afghanistan.

"It's a lot of money, but I think it's money well spent – and it is saving Australian lives."

But, no one knows what a soldier needs in Afghanistan better than someone who has been there. With this in mind, Defence set up Diggerworks – a group of scientists and engineers teamed with soldiers who have recently returned from Afghanistan – tasked to fix problems identified by Australian troops in the field.

In fact, Diggerworks – a 'virtual organisation' – is headed by Colonel Jason Blain, who commanded our soldiers in Afghanistan in 2010.

The biggest concern our soldiers had with equipment 12 months ago, Mr Clare said, was body armour. It was heavy and designed for patrolling in vehicles in Iraq, not for patrolling on foot in Afghanistan. It was also very bulky, making it difficult for soldiers to use their rifles optimally.

"The team at Diggerworks worked with Australian industry and fixed this problem, developing new, lighter body armour called TBAS – and our soldiers are now wearing it in Afghanistan.

"When I spoke to our soldiers about TBAS in Tarin Kot a few months ago they were very happy – they said it made it easier for them to do their jobs.

"Soldiers have also asked me for changes to their combat helmets to make them more comfortable and easier to wear. Diggerworks responded by putting more padding and a better chinstrap on all the helmets in Afghanistan.



One of the three newly built, concrete-reinforced accommodation buildings for Australian personnel at Multi-National Base Tarin Kot.

Upgrades to 2000 combat helmets worn by soldiers in Afghanistan were completed in October last year, in a program worth \$1 million – or \$500 each!

The upgrade included fitting new padding and harnesses inside the helmet to increase comfort and functionality.

Another 1500 helmets will be fitted with the new padding and harnesses in the first quarter of next year for soldiers deploying to Afghanistan in the future.

Further upgrades to better integrate night-vision equipment and to enhance blunt-impact protection will also be undertaken by Diggerworks this year.

But, are the soldiers happy with the upgrade?

The following was submitted to CONTACT in direct response to Mr Clare's announcements, suggesting there's a way to go yet.

"Can't complain about the body armour – finally got something right.

Can't say the same about the helmets though. The inserts we all bought pre-deployment were so much better, but we are forbidden to wear them!

If the government wants to cut back on defence spending they should give us an allowance to buy gear we all know and trust instead of paying some peanut in an office – who probably hasn't even seen the gear they are peddling – to design it for us."

UK Talisman theatre-entry standard (TES) High Mobility Engineer Excavator (HMEE) with upgraded armour kit, to include underbelly blast plate, armour cab protection, rocket screen bar armour, blast attenuating seat, roof escape hatch and improved situational awareness thermal imagery camera suite. The pictured HMEE is conducting a route-proofing and clearance mission with UK forces in Afghanistan and will soon be doing the same for Australian forces.



A new, lighter M3 model Carl Gustav recoilless rifle with AN/PAS 13C(V)3 heavy-weapon thermal sight fitted, and in expert hands. More than 400 of the weapon/sight combos were delivered to the ADF in 2011. Australia is the first country to use both as an integrated weapon system.

