

The vulnerable Humvee

The Humvee was already obsolete by the time the Iraq war started. A 1994 report about the U.S. mission to Somalia found the iconic vehicle was a “death trap” when hit by an anti-tank mine. Its vulnerability to explosions from underneath eventually forced the Defense Department to put most troops in heavier, blast-resistant vehicles.

In 2003, troops crossed the berm from Kuwait to Iraq in lightly armored Humvees. Troops welded scrap metal to the vehicles –



known as “hillbilly armor” – to give them more protection. After a soldier asked then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld about that in 2004, the department started fielding more up-armored Humvees.

But the extra armor added more stress on the suspension and chassis. Later, when insurgents moved to using bombs that exploded beneath Humvees, the vehicle’s flat, low bottom proved to be a fatal flaw.

The Army and Marine Corps initially

planned to replace the Humvee with the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle, which was more reinforced, but those vehicles were years away from production when Defense Secretary Robert Gates took office in December 2006.

Gates pushed hard to get Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles to troops in Iraq. The vehicles have a V-shaped bottom designed to deflect blasts.

– Jeff Schogol



March 2003

Iraq war begins.

The Army has 400 armored Humvees, the Marine Corps none. Troops improvise by adding scrap metal, sandbags and plywood for more protection.



October 2004

Decision made that all soldiers and Marines going outside the wire will be in up-armored Humvees.

February 2005

A Marine brigadier general in Iraq submits an urgent request for Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles. Corps officials later abandon the request after Marine Commandant Michael Hagee decides in June that up-armored Humvees are the most immediate solution to roadside bombs.

April 2006

Frag Kit 5 goes into production to give extra protection against deadly new bombs termed “explosively formed penetrators.”

December 2006

Defense Secretary Robert Gates takes office. He later reads a USA Today article about MRAPs’ superior protection against roadside bombs, prompting him to act.

May 2007

The Defense Department forms a task force to get as many MRAPs to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan as quickly as possible. The Army initially orders only 2,500, but after Gates writes a letter to Army Secretary Peter Geren, the service orders thousands more.



2003

2004

2005

2006

2007

2008

2009

2010

October 2003

First add-on armor kits sent to theater.



December 2004

A soldier asks Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at a town hall meeting with troops why they have to “dig through local landfills” to find scrap metal to put on Humvees.

July 2005

Production of up-armored Humvees reaches its peak of 550 per month.

Summer 2006

Insurgents in Iraq start detonating more bombs under Humvees. By late 2006, the Army has about 18,000 up-armored Humvees in theater.

March 2007

Marine Commandant James Conway says sending MRAPs to Iraq is a “moral imperative.”



February 2010

Defense officials announce that the Army will stop buying Humvees at the end of the fiscal year.