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-- PAE

SECTIONS
Front Page
News
• Anniston
• Oxford
• Jacksonville
• Calhoun County
• Clay County
• Cleburne County
• Randolph County
• Talladega County
• Legislature
• State
• Nation
• World
Sports
Lifestyle
Entertainment
Business
Religion
Technology
Community
Classroom
Opinion
Columns
Obituaries
Almanac
Classifieds
ISSUES
Iraq
9/11 Memorial
PCBs
Incineration
McClellan
Message Board
SEARCH
Search Archives:
<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Go"/>
Browse Articles
Web Directory
DIRECTORIES
Star Homes
Local Churches
Local Businesses
SERVICES
Get The Star
Advertise

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'Another life saved'

By Matthew Korade
Star Senior Writer
01-15-2004

The effort to install armor plating on the Army's canvas-door humvees is a giant-size project, larger than anything that most Anniston Army Depot workers have seen.

The journey from steel sheets to fitted armor encompasses six buildings and 70 employees at a cost of \$20 million to the Department of Defense.

It is the urgency of the mission that keeps the workers duty-bound. They have been taking 12-hour shifts, seven days a week, since mid-December to finish an order for the first 500 vehicles.

"The faster we can push these doors out, that's another life saved," said Ken Jeffrey, the production controller.



Depot employee Jim Hale spot-welds some hinges that will be used to install the new heavy armor doors on the Army's fleet of Humvees. Photo: Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

They will build the armor here and bolt it onto the vehicles in Iraq, adding 1,200 pounds to the four-door vehicles and about half that to the two-door models. Nearly 160 sets have been completed so far.

To push the pieces out, the depot is using a robotic machine called a plasma cutter, which burns through steel at 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The device, which uses a pure nitrogen fuel, cuts the steel in a tank of water, which prevents the metal from warping in the extreme heat. Officials hope the technology and



- Clebur
 - The D
 - Jackso
- News

-- AFF

Search



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Hourly
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the armor contract itself will help the depot survive the upcoming round of base closings in 2005.

In the cutting room, the plasma torch lowers, the tank fills, and a pristine plate of steel disappears beneath the surface. Suddenly, the grimy water is a colored fountain, bubbling orange, shooting out flames and steam. Soon, sharp-angled cutouts in the shape of doors appear.

The machine is fast. Production manager Marshall Crow said using the plasma torch to cut three-eighth-inch steel is like using a band saw to cut Reynold's wrap. The torch can slice the plating at a rate of 12 feet a minute. But it's made to handle eight-inch steel.

Aubrey Shears, right, and Butch Hathorne drill holes in the metal plates of armor.



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SPECIAL REPORT

In an adjacent room, a pair of workers clamp the freshly cut door panels to a brace that moves them into position for more work. The 80-pound pieces are pushed into a machine that looks like a large oven with windows, where holes for door hardware are bored.

Next door, workers punch holes into the front and rear quarter-panels, which will allow them to be bolted on later. The armor will protect the humvees from small-arms fire and shrapnel, they said.

Nearby, Michael Epps, 27, is cutting door latches. His father-in-law, Rohn Bedford, will install the armor at a service station 50 miles north of Baghdad, along with 10 other depot employees who have been there since November.

"I'm just worried about him being over there, and suicide bombers taking them, actually bombing the humvees they're riding back and forth in," Epps says.

But the armor is a big benefit, he says.

"He's actually told me that what they got on them is already saving lives," Epps says.

The depot is making the armor kits along with Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois. Officials here expect additional work, up to 3,500 kits total.

There have been other parts orders in recent years, "but it's not as hot as this one," says Marvin Keitt, supervisor of the Army's distribution center.



There, workers pack the steel armor into wooden crates bound for Iraq. They are placing a little American flag in each one.

SLIDE SHOW

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