

# COMBAT BODY ARMOUR FOR THE FLEET PHYSIOLOGICAL AND HUMAN FACTORS ASSESSMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

A new lighter (2.5kg) Combat Body Armour (CBA) has been developed by the Stores and Clothing Research & Development Establishment to replace the existing British Army 'flak-jacket'. It consists of a protective inner of 'Kevlar' inside a sleeveless collarless cotton cover with adjustable straps and a velcro front fastener. Several prototype garments were trialled (1,2) and improvements made to increase its flexibility. To give effective fragmentation protection the CBA should be the correct fit and be compatible with other protective garments: the added weight, bulk and thermal insulation might reduce mobility and increase the thermoregulatory burden on the wearer particularly in hot climates. Furthermore, any tendency to reduce sweat evaporation may prove problematic in extreme cold conditions. To assess these possible penalties and the suitability of the CBA for RN upper deck crew the latest prototype (MKII) was evaluated in a series of physiological and human factors studies.

## METHODS

Three upper deck tasks were repeatedly timed to measure speed of access and egress to and from confined work spaces of 6-8 men wearing, or not wearing, CBA over an Action Coverall and Foul Weather Clothing (AC/FWC). A further three loading/unloading tasks were also timed to assess the limitations to body movement or posture of the CBA. Teams of 3-4 subjects repeated the tasks dressed as above. The experimental design was balanced for order effects in all but 2 of the above trials. Comfort and mobility were accessed by subject questionnaire at the completion of each trial.

Eight volunteers wore AC or AC/NBC (NBC Nuclear, Biological and Chemical suit with respirator) with and without CBA in a temperate climate (wet bulb globe thermometer - WBGT index 27 °C) and whilst in the hot climate (WBGT 30.5 °C), but wearing the CBA over the AC or No8s/NBC (No8s - Standard working dress). Subjects performed light to moderate work (stepping exercise, 310 W approximately) for a maximum work time of 85 minutes. Physiological measurements were made of aural temperature ( $T_{aur}$ ) and mean skin temperature ( $T_{skin}$ ) from thermistors, heart rate (HR) by ECG telemetry, and sweat production/evaporation calculated from differences in body weights and clothing weights. Expired gas was sampled and analyzed to calculate energy expenditure. Subjective measures of thermal comfort were also recorded from a continuous scale.

Similar measurements were made in a physiological assessment of the CBA in a cold environment (- 5 °C). Eight subjects wore 4 different assemblies; AC/FWC, AC/FWC+CBA, NBC and NBC+CBA and each performed 60 minutes of exercise (450 W approximately) before resting for a further 60 minutes. In addition the skin temperatures of the extremities were recorded at the left index finger and both great toes.

## RESULTS

Access and loading task times were assessed by a linear model incorporating constants for subjects, occasions and CBA. Entry and exit times for 2 of the tasks (into the Seacat Director and out of the 40/60 Aimer) were significantly slower ( $P < 0.01$ ) but ease of access was not affected in the other tasks, indeed only one instance of snagging was recorded in some 168 entries and exists. The degree of discomfort reported by subjects when wearing CBA was unaltered with the exception of movement to and from the Helicopter Weapon Mountings. Weapon and ammunition loading tests yielded only one significant result, this being the increased time to load the 40/60 ammunition if wearing CBA. However, CBA wear generally (but not significantly) increased the overall time requirement of the loading tasks.

A linear additive model of main effects for subject, clothing and session was assessed for temperate and hot climates independently by analysis of variance. No significant increase in energy expenditure was found by adding CBA to any clothing assembly.

In the temperate climate all subjects completed the maximum work time (85 mins) in AC irrespective of CBA and there was a small (not significant) reduction in work time in NBA if CBA was worn (71.5 and 62.6 mins respectively).  $T_{air}$  was significantly elevated by the CBA in both assemblies which yielded higher maximum temperatures.

In the hot climate subjects completed the entire work in AC and AC+CBA, but CBA reduced work significantly when worn with No8s/NBC (59.6 to 45.7 mins). In this climate HR and  $T_{air}$  rose significantly faster to a higher maximum value if wearing CBA and yielded significantly higher subjective ratings of tiredness, thermal discomfort and dampness as t h e progressed. Sweat production was elevated ( $P < 0.05$ ) by the CBA, but the garment did not reduce evaporation rates significantly.

In the cold study differences between clothing assemblies were assessed by an analysis of variance. CBA had remarkably little effect on the above measures of thermal strain with the exception of slightly higher chest (not significant) and toe ( $P < 0.1$ ) temperatures when worn over the other assemblies and a higher level of thermal comfort if wearing NBC+CBA compared to NBC alone. However, a number of subjects were withdrawn from the chamber when their peripheral temperatures fell below the prescribed safety limit for this study.

## CONCLUSIONS

The small but significant increases in access times and ammunition loading times reported above need to be considered in relation to the overall time evolution of the task: thus the average increase in time (10-13 %) when wearing CBA had only a minimal effect on the time to complete the total task and should not be given any appreciable weighting. Similarly the reduction in comfort with CBA was minimal and occurred only during extensive body movement. Because of the importance of correct size and fit, data from a recent INM anthropometric data base (age weighted for personnel at sea) were used to estimate the size roll requirements. It was observed that the provision of 8 different sizes according to chest circumference and height would permit a correct fit for 95 % of men.

On comparing CBA and non-CBA conditions in the temperate climate, it was observed that the full permissible work time was achieved by all subjects, but physiological indices indicated a progressive increase in thermal burden and cardiovascular strain with CBA. Increases in thermal strain were more dramatic in a AC/NBC clothing and the addition of CBA made a further small but significant impact. In the hot climate findings for the AC and AC+CBA were similar to those results in the temperate climate, whereas the No8s/NBC assembly caused a significant decrement in work time which was further reduced by 25 % with the addition of CBA. The CBA did not pose any significant physiological penalties if worn with other protective clothing at - 5 °C.

Taken together, the results from the above series of trials have established that this latest design of CBA is much improved and would indicate that the penalties incurred by its use are outweighed by the desire for improved fragmentation protection.

## REFERENCES

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