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'Anti-mine' boots for sale

Singapore - A Singapore factory has begun producing a locally invented combat boot designed to protect against foot injuries from anti-personnel landmines.



A worker inspects the stitches of the "blast and fragment resistant" boot at the factory. (Simon Thong, AP Photo)

Samples of the boot had been sold for "evaluations and trials" to defence agencies in about a dozen countries including the United States, Spain, Turkey, Sri Lanka and Saudi Arabia, said Ashley Vaz, business development manager for manufacturer BFR Singapore.

Unlike other anti-mine boots, the "blast and fragment resistant" or BFR boot, was light enough for combat, Vaz said.

Other boots used for de-mining work, "are like a boot plus an overboot," Vaz said. "They're huge and heavy. You can't run in them."

The Singapore boots weighed about 900g each and were light enough for running, he said.

Mitigate, not eliminate

The boots were reinforced with woven synthetic material similar to that used in bulletproof vests, Vaz said. The soles had a sandwich of corrugated stainless steel and alloy plates which collapsed on impact, partially absorbing the force of the explosion and protecting the foot.

"What the boot will do is mitigate, not eliminate, damage," said F K Lee, chairperson and chief executive officer of the manufacturer's Hong Kong-based parent company, BFR Holdings Ltd.

Lee said he hoped the boot would make landmine injuries "reparable as opposed to irreparable. If the sole of the boot is completely smashed, chances are your foot is going to be smashed as well."

Inventor: former military psychologist

Current events in Afghanistan heightened people's awareness of the landmine problem, Lee said. There are an estimated 10 million landmines in that country.

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The Singapore boots would initially be priced at about US\$168 per pair, Vaz said.

BFR Singapore expected to manufacture about 15 000 pairs of boots by the end of this year, and could produce about 120 000 pairs a year, Vaz added.

Vaz's brother Andrew, now a shareholder in the company, invented the boot in Singapore in 1994 after he saw victims of landmine victims in Cambodia.

"It was on my mind for a long time," said Andrew Vaz, a former commando and military psychologist who served in Singapore's military for 10 years. "I just tried out several ideas, and one of them worked." - Sapa/AP



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