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► November 2012 ◄

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Agent Orange's legacy of pain

Dave Canfield
The Record

AVERILL PARK — Like many Vietnam veterans exposed to the now-infamous chemical Agent Orange during their service, Bob Hug will suffer the rest of his life from ailments linked to his exposure to the herbicide.

However, it's only due to a technicality and the work of advocates and his congressman that the Averill Park resident now has the aid of the Department of Veterans Affairs to treat the cancer that has left him without a voice box.

That's because, since 2002, the VA provides Agent Orange-centered treatment only to veterans who served with "boots on the ground" in Vietnam despite a 1991 requirement to cover such illnesses in former service personnel. That would typically exclude so-called "Blue Water Navy" men like Hug, now 60, who spent his time aboard the U.S.S. Hancock on a flight deck with planes that carrying such deforesting agents. The ship's drinking water came from filtering seawater off the coast of land that was drenched with the chemicals.

It's only because Hug set foot on Vietnamese soil for a handful of hours awaiting a plane that he became eligible for benefits — and even that came after getting U.S. Rep. Scott Murphy involved.

"To change it, it's going to take an act of Congress, as they say," said Hug, a Troy native diagnosed with cancer of the larynx in 2000, speaking with the help of a mechanical voice box.

Such Congressional action is under way in the form of the Agent Orange Equity Act of 2009, which is floating in each house of Congress and would make veterans of the Vietnam combat theater eligible regardless of their branch of the military. Among its sponsors include New York Sens. Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, and Murphy has signed on to the House bill.

When Hug's initial request for VA help in 2006 was denied, advocates began to work on his behalf, and Murphy joined in the fight when he came onboard as a Congressman earlier this year. According to his office, the regional VA reversed its decision in September, allotting Hug more than \$80,000 for his treatment retroactive to his original request.

Murphy, a Glens Falls Democrat whose district includes much of Rensselaer County, said he's committed to getting Vietnam veterans the treatment "they need and deserve, and the help that they have earned as a result of their services."

"A lot of people who served there have come down with various diseases and illnesses as a result," he said. "The way the military has dealt with this, they have really segmented off people who were in the Navy when it seems pretty clear they're facing issues as a result of exposure to Agent Orange."

As many as 13,500 veterans in New York ineligible under the "boots on the ground" requirement may have been exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam, according to numbers from Gillibrand's office.

Gillibrand — who held Murphy's 20th Congressional District seat before her appointment to the Senate — noted in a press release issued upon her introduction of the bill in late October that several scientific studies have enforced the premise that Blue Water Navy vets were by no means immune to the dangers of Agent Orange.

Hug has also seen that research, and he noted that Australia has made seafaring vets eligible for such assistance.

"There's many studies," he said. "The VA just won't accept them."

And that, to Murphy and his like-minded colleagues in Washington, is itself unacceptable.

"It's incredibly important that we take care of our veterans who came back and make sure they're getting the benefits that they deserve and they earned," he said. "I think that a lot of people would be upset to hear what's happened to our Blue Water Navy veterans who served in Vietnam. That's why we're working to get it fixed."

He said his staff has been working with several vets in situations similar to the one Hug faced.

Hug said he thinks Americans would support an overhaul of the policy. Those who served the nation about a boat faced the same dangers as all soldiers in the area, whether from attack or from the dioxins used to kill plant life, he said.

"We signed up, saying 'send us where you want us,'" he said. "Our life was on the line. They sent us to Vietnam, we went over there and did our job. We weren't on the ground, but the dioxin was definitely in the water and in the air."

"I definitely think we're getting short-changed," he added.

SOURCE: <http://www.troyrecord.com/articles/2009/11/11/news/doc4afa23bd950c3507636390.txt>