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The Blue Water Navy Needs Your Help

Veterans gathering support for bill that would reinstate medical benefits associated with their exposure to Agent Orange during Vietnam

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The Denver Post

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Veterans of the Navy, Coast Guard and Fleet Marines (often referred to as the Blue Water Navy) who served in Vietnam in the offshore waters need your help. Veterans from this group who are currently disabled by diseases the VA links to the dioxin contained in Agent Orange are denied any health care and lost wage compensation. Ironically, any service member who can prove their boots touched the soil of mainland Vietnam automatically receives those benefits under a “presumption of exposure” rule. This rule allows those boots-on-ground veterans to claim their benefits without the need to prove any exposure to Agent Orange, the worst of the dioxin-based herbicides.

So, where's the problem?

Between 1962 and 1971, the United States military sprayed 21,000,000 gallons of chemical herbicides and defoliants in Vietnam, eastern Laos and parts of Cambodia, as part of Operation Ranch Hand. The program's goal was to defoliate forested and rural land, depriving the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army of places to hide. Another goal was to destroy the food crops, which affected both the Viet Cong enemy and the South Vietnamese “friendlylies.” But no distinction was made between them. And, as the world now knows, the use of dioxin-based herbicide contaminated our own troops stationed in Southeast Asia.

Much of the massive application of the herbicides on the foliage eventually washed down streams and rivers, to the bays, harbors and offshore waters where the Blue Water Navy lived and worked, providing direct combat and combat support to the war effort. Their fresh water for eating, drinking and bathing was made from that water by techniques completely unable to eliminate any dioxin from the water. Several research studies show that the process of making fresh water aboard ships actually enhanced the toxicity of any dioxin trapped in the on-board water system by a factor up to 10 times its initial strength.

These offshore veterans are currently dying in poverty because of medical bills that should have been covered by their VA benefits. They are dying without the dignity and respect they deserve as disabled veterans and casualties of war. Colorado has about 140,000 Vietnam veterans and about 32,000 of them are Navy Vietnam veterans.

All veterans of the Vietnam War were originally included in the veteran's benefits by the Agent Orange Act of 1991. However, in 2002, the VA, at its own discretion and without the knowledge of Congress, stopped all benefits for Agent Orange-related diseases and disabilities for the Blue Water Navy personnel. They have publically stated that there was no particular reason for this, and that it was not grounded in any scientific or medical research or report. Since then, they have been unable to find any scientific or medical reason to continue this exclusion, as validated by a study they commissioned the Institute of Medicine to carry out. In fact, the Institute of Medicine has recommended, in three official reports, that these veterans not be excluded from the same benefits awarded to personnel suffering from Agent Orange disabilities but having served with boots-on-ground. To date, the VA has not complied.

This is an issue the American public needs to know about so they can demand their Congressional representatives to support legislation to resolve this travesty. All Americans should be ashamed by how this government is treating veterans from Vietnam to our current conflicts.

There is currently a Bill in the Senate that would re-instate the health care and compensation to the disabled Blue Water Navy personnel, returning them to equal status with other Vietnam War veterans disabled by dioxin. That Bill was introduced on September 23 as S-1629, "The Agent Orange Equity Act of 2011." But in order to get through the legislative process and be signed into law, the voters of America need to contact their Senators and Representatives to let them know there is strong support for this Bill. Methods for contacting Legislators by phone, fax and email are easily found on <http://www.contactingthecongress.org> and <http://capwiz.com/military/dbq/officials/?lvl=C>

Agent Orange was a 50:50 mixture of 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D, and because of this combination, it was unlike anything that had ever been used in domestic agriculture. And it was often used at 20 times its recommended strength. Agent Orange was manufactured for the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) primarily by Monsanto Corporation and Dow Chemical. They were instructed by the DoD not to label or put warnings on the barrels. The herbicides used to produce Agent Orange were contaminated with 2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzodioxin (TCDD), the most highly toxic form of dioxin. It was simply a natural by-product of the manufacturing process, but controllable by certain known techniques.

Because of the large military demand for Agent Orange, the manufacturing processes were accelerated to maximize corporate profits, resulting in higher levels of dioxin contamination than in 2,4,5-T produced for civilian applications. This super herbicide was given its name from the color of the orange-stripe around the 55 gallon barrels in which it was shipped. And although there were Chemical Warfare agents known as agents White, Purple, Blue and a few others, Agent Orange was by far the most widely used of these so-called "Rainbow Herbicides".

Prior to spraying the herbicides from specially altered C-123 transport planes, the contents of the 55 gallon drums were mixed in a 50:50 ratio with fuel oil to help the Agent Orange stick to the leaves of plants. Because of the fuel oil additive, the Agent Orange and accompanying dioxin molecules were able to float much longer than otherwise. This accounts for much of the reason why the runoff carried such large quantities of Agent Orange into the sea and increased the contaminate rate of the offshore Blue Water Navy.

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