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# Veterans deserve Gagetown registry

It's a story told too often, the story of veterans who learn they have a catastrophic illness and then, in the search for answers, have to fight the government they proudly served.

It's a story similar to the one about contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, N.C., and male Marines diagnosed with breast cancer.

It's a story similar to the one about Agent Orange in Vietnam and the array of cancers soldiers exposed to the herbicide endured.

This story also involves Agent Orange, but, "Agent Orange is the least" problematic of the chemicals those who trained at Canadian Forces Base Gagetown may have been exposed to, said Robert Pelletier Jr., a former Framingham resident who's been fighting on behalf of his fellow National Guardsmen for seven years.

This story involves Reservists from New England and New Jersey, as well as Canadian troops, likely more than 15,000 British troops, and many other American servicemen and women, though it's hard to be sure of exactly who.

That's one of the more important things Pelletier and others hope to learn through the creation of a Veterans Administration registry to track Americans who trained at Gagetown. They want to be able to document any medical issues that could be connected to the testing of toxic herbicides at the New Brunswick base as well.

Last month, a bill sponsored by U.S. Rep. Michael Michaud of Maine, and co-sponsored by several other members of Congress from New England, including U.S. Rep. Stephen Lynch, D-8th, was filed seeking to establish "a registry of certain veterans who were stationed at or underwent training at Canadian Forces Base Gagetown" at any point between Jan. 1, 1956, and Dec. 31, 2005.

"National Guard members who trained at Gagetown have legitimate concerns about potential exposure to Agent Orange and other toxic defoliants," said Lynch. "This legislation would require Veterans Affairs to establish a registry that would record and track these claims, an important part of ensuring our veterans receive the care they have earned."

"It's extremely frustrating that the VA doesn't track these concerns," said Michaud. "I'm hopeful this registry will help these veterans finally get the attention and care they deserve."

"I think it's fantastic," Milford native Ralph Berardi said of the push to create a registry. "I think there are dots to be connected."

Dots that may connect to cancers he's had.

Berardi, who now lives in Rutland, is "a proud veteran. I spent 27 years in uniform." Among his assignments was a 1987 trip to Gagetown for a pre-camp conference with the 505th ASA Company, a unit that supported the 26th Yankee Division of the National Guard.

Like others sent to Gagetown, he had no way to know the extent of testing that had been done there with Agent Orange, Agent White, Agent Purple and other toxic defoliants.

"You follow orders. You don't question."

He also has no way to know if the bladder tumor he developed in 2001, a cancerous tumor in a sweat gland found in 2004, the diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes, or the benign brain tumor removed earlier this year are connected to his short stay at Gagetown. All he knows for sure is "when I look back at my family history, nobody has had the types of cancer I have.

"Am I bitter? No. I'm thankful for every day I'm alive," he said. "I don't think they really understood the effects of the chemicals they were using.

"I think the VA is beginning to understand you don't have to have set foot in the Republic of Vietnam to have been exposed to Agent Orange," said Berardi, but "they wait until people start dying off" before connections are made.

"You need to probe. You need to keep asking the questions. ... I just hope that some day they'll admit what was going on."

Among the things the Canadian and U.S. governments acknowledge is the U.S. military tested herbicides including Agent Orange in the forests near the base in 1966 and 1967. Canadian Department of National Defence documents obtained in 2005 also show 3.3 million liters of various unregistered herbicides were sprayed over 181,000 acres of the base between 1956 and 1984.

In 2005, a law group filed a class action suit on behalf of more than 1,000 veterans and civilians living in and around the Gagetown base, but the case was rejected by the Federal Court of Canada due to lack of evidence. In 2007, the Canadian government offered a one-time payment of \$20,000 to its citizens affected by Agent Orange exposure at Gagetown.

"The Canadians blame the Americans and the Americans blame the Canadians," said Pelletier, a former Marine who was sent for training at Gagetown with the Maine National Guard in 1980.

Maine sent thousands of its Guard members to Gagetown from 1971 to 2006, and has seen more than 100 former service members file claims with the Veterans Administration for health issues they believe are connected to their time there. "They're being denied," said Pelletier, but there is hope the claims will be reviewed when all the dots are connected.

As a service officer for the American Legion in District 17, Northern Aroostock County, Pelletier's "job is to help veterans," and when he married and moved to Framingham about five years ago, he brought his concerns about Gagetown with him. A 2010 interview with the Daily News helped him raise awareness for local veterans such as Berardi.

Now that he's returned to his native state, he continues the fight to help fellow veterans by pushing for legislative and government support.

In July, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agreed to conduct an investigation into whether American soldiers were exposed to toxins at Gagetown. The bill to create a registry is another vital step toward getting answers.

"As a country, we owe it to our veterans to address these concerns," said Lynch.

"It's been seven years we've been fighting this," said Pelletier. "Finally, they're listening."

It remains to be seen whether the 112th Congress will listen enough to pass this bill.

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