

## Toxic Exposures

### VFW's Concerns:

Service members are exposed to toxins when they are in war zones. In Vietnam, veterans were exposed to Agent Orange; in the First Gulf War it was burning oil wells; and in Iraq and Afghanistan burn pits present health care hazards. When serving stateside, service members have been exposed to contaminated drinking water in places like Camp Lejeune and airborne polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) at Fort McClellan, as well as many others.

The Department of Defense and Congress waited decades before recognizing the health risks to these exposures and because proper data has not been collected on the health effects for these exposed populations, treatment and compensation are hard to receive. When exposures to toxic substances are not fully researched, veterans and their families face significant out-of-pocket expenses for the care they need as a result of the exposure they experienced.

Expansion of presumptive exposure to Agent Orange for Blue Water Navy veterans has been held hostage by restrictions on the budget which have allowed one group of veterans to be treated in a lesser fashion compared to other veterans of the same war. Inclusion of those impacted by radiation testing is limited by language in the law which only covers certain types of nuclear weapons testing although other types of tests were conducted, thus ignoring the exposures that those other veterans faced. A lack of medical research acceptable by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is preventing a list of presumptive conditions related to burn pits from being fully developed and implemented. Registries for those who were exposed and may be impacted later are not being passed into law, which inhibits VA from tracking those who faced dangerous exposures.

### VFW's Solutions:

- Congress must pass H.R.299, or S.422, the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2017*, which would expand benefits and services to Blue Water Navy veterans.
- Congress must pass H.R.632, or S.283, the *Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act*, which would expand benefits to veterans who were exposed to radiation from atomic testing and cleanup.
- Congress must expand benefits to veterans who served on bases in Thailand during the Vietnam era who suffer from conditions associated with Agent Orange.
- VA must provide effective treatments and consistent benefits to Persian Gulf War veterans who suffer from an array of conditions and diseases, collectively known as Gulf War Illness. Congress must continue to properly fund independent research on the causes and effective treatments for Gulf War Illness.
- Congress and VA must continue to fund independent research on the impact of exposure to hazards, including open air burn pits and the antimalarial drug mefloquine, on the health of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.
- Congress and VA must research the impact of exposure to soil, air and drinking water contaminated by PCBs on the health of veterans who were stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama.