

House VA Committee Passes Blue Water Navy Act

Restoring eligibility, expanding benefits long overdue

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WASHINGTON — The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States is saluting the House Veterans Affairs Committee for passing H.R. 299, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2017. The VFW-supported bill, which must still be approved by the full House and Senate before going to the president, would restore benefits to thousands of Vietnam veterans, expand inclusive dates to those who served along the Korean DMZ, and benefit children born with spina bifida due to a parent’s exposure to Agent Orange-related herbicides in Thailand.

“The VFW salutes the bipartisan leadership of House VA Committee Chairman Phil Roe and Ranking Member Tim Walz for getting this bill through committee,” said VFW National Commander Keith Harman, who served in Vietnam as an Army helicopter crew chief and door gunner with the 101st Airborne Division

Once passed into law, H.R. 299 will restore VA benefits to some 100,000 Blue Water Navy veterans who had their disability eligibility taken away in 2002 after regulatory changes. It will also require the VA to contact those veterans who had filed claims that were later denied. Those veterans could be eligible for retroactive benefits.

The legislation marks a victory for other veterans and their families who suffer from conditions related to toxic exposures. Veterans exposed to Agent Orange while serving along the Korean DMZ will have an earlier start date to encompass the time period when various defoliants were tested. The current start date of April 1, 1968, will be backed up seven months to Sept. 1, 1967. In addition, benefits will be expanded to include children born with spina bifida due to a parent’s exposure in Thailand. Coverage for this condition already exists for the children of Vietnam and Korean DMZ veterans. The new law will also require the VA to report on research being conducted on a broad range of conditions possibly related to service in Southwest Asia, which is important for future legislative efforts to

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create a list of presumptive conditions for veterans seeking VA health care and benefits.

“Toxic exposure is toxic exposure, and denying benefits to any veteran just because of time or location denigrates their service and marginalizes their suffering,” said Harman. “Agent Orange made Vietnam veterans sick. It made those stationed along the Korean DMZ and in Thailand sick — and many of their children, too. Toxic substances are also making many Southwest Asia veterans sick. This legislation is long overdue, but there are no statutes of limitation when it comes to making things right for veterans. Let’s get this bill passed and signed into law!”