

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 unanimously passing H.R. 299, the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019*. The VFW-supported bill, which must still be approved by the full House and Senate before going to the president, would restore VA 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 Mark Takano and Ranking Member Phil Roe for leading this bill through committee,” said VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence, “and for following through on their commitment to get this bill passed in the new 116th Congress.”

Once passed into law, H.R. 299 will restore VA benefits to tens of thousands of so-called 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 will mark 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 timeframe 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 expand 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,

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

which is important for future legislative efforts to 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 Lawrence. “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 since there are no statutes of limitation when it comes to making things right for veterans, I’m urging every veteran, family member and advocate to contact their respective members of Congress to get this bill passed and signed into law now!”

[Contact your members of Congress here.](#)