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Congressman steps in after VA misdiagnosis and claim denial

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HOLIDAY, Fla. (WFLA) - Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Palm Harbor) is getting involved in a Pasco County veterans struggle with the Veteran's Administration.

The Florida Republican reached out to Target 8 after we reported the agency rejected a claim by Lonnie Kilpatrick, a Navy veteran.

After serving in the Vietnam War, Lonnie developed Ischemic heart disease, a condition tied to Agent Orange. When he received a heart transplant in 2010, his family says doctors found a cyst on his kidney, but told him he was cancer-free.

For years, the VA at Bay Pines said a herniated disc and arthritis were to blame for Lonnie's back pain, but his back pain persisted and earlier this year, the family learned Lonnie has stage 4 renal cancer and his medical treatment had been delayed due to the VA's misdiagnosis.

Lonnie's family believes he was exposed to Agent Orange while he served in Guam during the Vietnam war.

At the time, Lonnie was tasked with removing and decoding classified recorded enemy communications from a C-123 aircraft. Many C-123s were used to spray Agent Orange, a powerful, toxic, cancer-causing defoliant in the war zone.

We did some digging and discovered that Mr. Kilpatrick would regularly board the aircraft, which either flew over or landed in Vietnam and worked around runway perimeters and other locations that were heavily sprayed.

Over a year ago, Air Force veteran Leroy Foster told Target 8 he would spray hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of gallons of Agent Orange around Guam military installations and apartment complexes.

"I was spraying two and three trailer fulls a day," Foster said. "I was spraying the most deadliest substance on earth and I am responsible for it."

The Kilpatricks lived in a complex bordered by jungle. "After they sprayed [the Agent Orange], it just turned a burnt orange made everything dusty," recalled Lonnie Kilpatrick. "Everything died, it was that quick."

But despite their close proximity to the defoileant, the VA denied Lonnie's claim for Agent Orange disability benefits after an eight-year wait, saying the Department of Defense does not recognize that the military sprayed Agent Orange in Guam.

Commander John Wells, Executive Director of the Military Veterans Advocacy has taken up the cause for veterans who served on the island. He believes it is more likely that Lonnie Kilpatrick, as well as many veterans and civilians, were exposed to Agent Orange through island's two aquifers.

"Both of them have been contaminated and have TCDD which is dioxin as well as Silvex which is kind of Agent Orange on steroids," Cdr. Wells explained.

Now Lonnie's wife Sheila is challenging the VA to examine the couple's children.

"All my kids, they all have something, heart problems," explained Sheila Kilpatrick. "We've pulled up all this information to link to Agent Orange."

The Department of Defense claims it has no records showing Agent Orange was shipped to Guam. According to Cdr. Wells, most shipping records were destroyed after two years.

Rep. Bilirakis has asked that a top VA official look through Mr. Kilpatrick's medical files to determine if his records can be declassified. If that happens, we may have evidence the exposure exists and the VA may reconsider its decision to deny Lonnie's benefits.

If you have something that you think should be investigated, call our Target 8 Helpline at 1-800-338-0808 or contact Steve Andrews at sandrews@wfla.com.

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