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Washington

VA denies benefits to veterans who flew in Agent Orange-contaminated planes

By Patricia Kime
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The Veterans Affairs Department has denied benefits and compensation to a group of Air Force Reserve veterans who sought relief for what they believe are service-connected illnesses tied to flying aircraft contaminated with Agent Orange.

During the Vietnam War, UC-123K Provider "spray birds" were used for chemical defoliation missions. VA ruled in November that aircrew members who flew the same planes after the war faced "minimal" long-term adverse health effects.

"Even if crew exposure did occur, it is unlikely that sufficient amounts of dried Agent Orange residue could have entered the body to have caused harm," VA officials said.

For one former crewman who suffers diseases that VA lists as associated with Agent Orange exposure, the decision comes as a blow.

"It's really tough for us to believe many of these grievous illnesses aren't service-related," said retiree Maj. Wesley Carter, 64, diagnosed with diabetes, peripheral neuropathy and prostate cancer. He flew C-123s from 1972 to 1982.

Carter began researching the issue after he was diagnosed with several ailments. After contacting fellow crew members, he found at least five had similar diseases and several had died.

"I started wondering about the common denominator," he said. "It was the aircraft."

Carter located a 1994 Air Force report about his old aircraft, nicknamed "Patches" for the number of hits it took from enemy fire during the war. The historic aircraft was destined for a spot in the National Museum of the Air Force, but officials deemed it too contaminated with a known carcinogen to go on immediate display.

Patches was scrubbed by a hazardous materials crew at Wright-

Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, before being moved indoors.

"We ate in that plane, slept on the floor, lived in it on tactical deployments, and it was too contaminated for public display?" Carter said.

In making its decision, VA said it reviewed Air Force reports of samples from the aircraft to test for dioxin. It concluded that because dioxin is not water soluble and the residue could be dislodged only by using the strong solvent hexane, the residual chemicals were unlikely to cause adverse health effects.

A Vietnam Veterans of America spokesman called the VA's conclusion "bull."

"It's flat outrageous. How many reports and studies will they have to review before they get this right?" said Rick Weidman, executive director for government relations for VVA. "It's another sign [that VA] hasn't changed its corporate culture of denial."



One of the planes used to spread Agent Orange, nicknamed "Patches," had to be scrubbed down by a hazardous materials crew before it could be displayed at the National Museum of the Air Force.

An estimated 1,500 to 2,000 service members flew C-123s in squadrons based at Westover Air Reserve Base, Mass.; Pittsburgh

Air Reserve Base, Pa.; and Rickenbacker Air Force Base, Ohio.

It's not known how many are still alive, Weidman said. □

Law makes vets more competitive for jobs

By Rick Maze
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A new veterans employment law signed Nov. 21 by President Obama creates no new jobs but attempts, instead, to make those who served in the military more competitive for jobs that are available.

The Vow to Hire Heroes Act encourages businesses to hire veterans by offering tax credits, improves transition assistance programs for separating service members to help prepare them to look for jobs, creates a new skill-retraining program for chronically unemployed veterans and attempts to streamline placement of separating troops in federal jobs.

The economy has slowly been growing jobs, but Obama said veterans need more help.

"While we've added more than 350,000 private-sector jobs over the last three months, we've got 850,000 veterans who can't find work," Obama said. "And even though the overall unemployment rate came down just a little bit last month, unemployment for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan continued to rise. That isn't right."

In a message to businesses, he said, "If you are hiring, hire a veteran. It's the right thing to do for you, it's the right thing to do for them and it's the right thing to do for our economy."

First lady Michelle Obama, speaking at the signing ceremony, said the law might not create jobs, but pointed out that businesses have been hiring veterans as part of the Joining Forces campaign led by her and Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden.

"Businesses have already hired more than 18,000 veterans and military families, and they've made commitments to hire at least 135,000 more," she said.

The law is a compromise between the White House and the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees, which melded proposals into a final package.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the House committee chairman, described the new law as putting "veterans of all eras on the path to meaningful employment."

"From the combat medic returning home from Afghanistan to the Vietnam veteran who has lost a job due to the struggling economy, the Vow to Hire Heroes Act tackles the barriers too many of our veterans face in today's job market," Miller said.

Ryan Gallucci, an Iraq War veteran and deputy director of the Veterans of Foreign Wars' national legislative service, said the law will have some impact right away on separating service members and veterans looking for work. But one of the most important things it does is try to measure the success of the myriad programs the government already provides.

"In the long run, the VFW believes the reporting metrics included in the bill will be critical to analyzing what works and what doesn't when helping veterans find quality jobs," Gallucci said. "As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, more and more veterans will be entering the workforce. ... We need to know how to best serve their transitional needs." □



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