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Agent Orange: one veteran's fight

Brandi Smith, KBMT



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In binder after binder, Liberty native Cleveland Walters Jr. documents his battle with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"These are my claim reports from the VA," retired TSgt. Walters says, thumbing through the pages of one. "Denied, denied, denied. This did not happen to you while you were in the service."

This refers to his laundry list of diagnosed conditions: anemia, arthritis, borderline diabetes, acid reflux, Parkinsons and a number of other neurological issues.

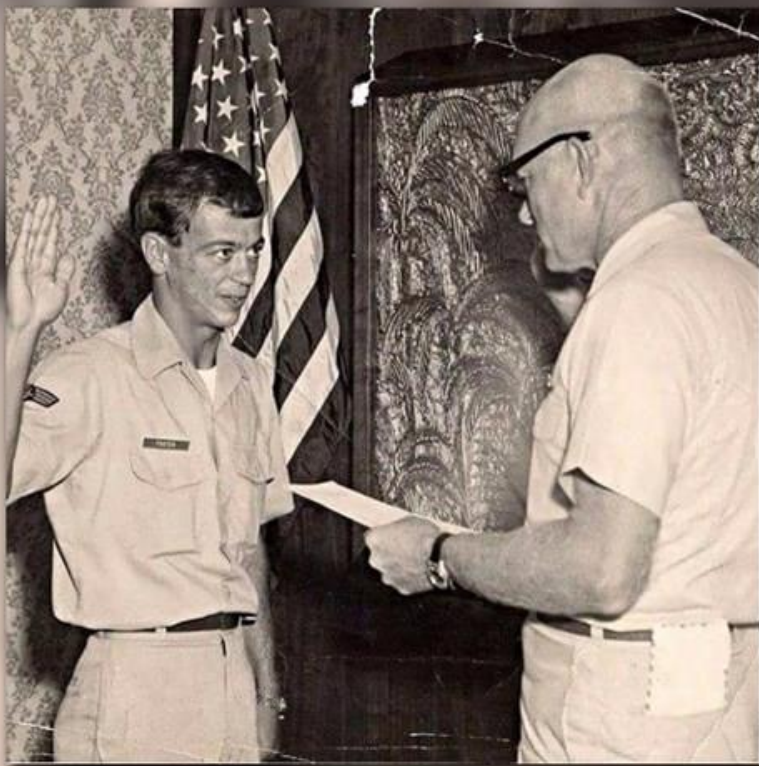
"I'm in pain all the time," Walters says.

The illnesses may not seem related, but the 26-year Air Force veteran says they all stem from the six months he spent at Anderson Air Force Base on Guam. Within weeks of landing on the small Pacific island, he says a rash covered his body.

"All of a sudden, this stuff is all over my head, my neck, my ears, my chest, my back," remembers Walters.

Retired MSgt. Leroy Foster also served at Anderson during the Vietnam War and describes a similar rash.

"I broke out into boils and cysts and open lesions on my body," describes the veteran, who says he's now been diagnosed with more than 30 different conditions, including rectal cancer, colon cancer, thyroid cancer, bladder cancer and prostate cancer.





Retired MSgt. Larry Ledford, who was stationed in Guam for six years, says he's had skin cancer and prostate cancer. He's now undergoing chemo for chronic lymphocytic leukemia.

Agent Orange: meet the Vietnam-era veterans fighting the VA

While Walters helped launch the B-52s bound for Vietnam, Foster's work detail was different.

"They put me on that trailer, spraying Agent Orange," Foster remembers.

Agent Orange is a chemical weapon used during the Vietnam War, but its original purpose was as an herbicide.

"It was very effective in killing plants, exposing enemy troops, killing food crops for the enemy there," says Dr. Arch Carson, program director of the Occupational and Environmental Medicine Training Program at the UTHealth School of Public Health in Houston.

The VA says exposure to the herbicide can cause AL amyloidosis, chronic B-cell leukemias, chloracne (or similar acneform disease), diabetes mellitus type 2, Hodgkin's disease, ischemic heart disease, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Parkinson's disease, peripheral neuropathy, porphyria cutanea tarda, prostate cancer, respiratory cancers (includes lung cancer), cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus and soft tissue sarcomas. Because of all the different ways it can manifest, Dr. Carson says exposure is difficult to diagnose.

"It's a big challenge and it does require a lot of specialists," he says.

Foster didn't know any of that when he says he filled a trailer and sprayed Agent Orange all over the base to beat back the jungle.

"I was just wearing a white t-shirt and my fatigue pants," says Foster, who stayed on the island for several years.

Walters left Guam after six months, but says the pain never left him.

"I was constantly going to doctors and they would evaluate me, but they never could find anything," he says.

However, Walters says things changed when he started going to the VA.

"They started immediately putting me on this and this and this," he says, gesturing to several boxes of prescription drugs and ointments.

His relief, though, comes with a price; Walters says the VA treats him for free, but requires him to pay for his medication.

Foster is in the same boat because the VA won't acknowledge the vets were exposed to agent orange.

"It is very frustrating. My own country betrayed us," says Foster.

Any change would require an act of Congress, something Florida Rep. Dennis Ross is working on in the form of H.R. 809.

[TRACK THE PROGRESS OF H.R. 809](#)

"They call it the FOSTER Act," Foster says proudly.

The proposed legislation extends VA coverage for veterans exposed to Agent Orange during their time in Guam and other territories.

"They raised their right hands and vowed and swore to give the ultimate sacrifice of their lives and we treat them this way?" explains Ross.

If H.R. 809 passes, Walters' fight will be over decades after the war in which he served.

"We owe it to them. Period," Ross says.

12News reached out to Southeast Texas' Congressional delegation.

[Rep. Brian Babin](#) said, "I look forward to the House Veterans Committee reviewing this important legislation. This is an issue that deserves the utmost attention. As a veteran myself, I believe it is absolutely critical that Congress does everything it can to ensure these American heroes are getting the treatment they need and deserve."

In a statement, [Rep. Randy Weber](#)'s staff said, "H.R.809, Fighting for Orange-Stricken Territories in the Eastern Region Act, was referred to the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. Although Congressman Weber does not sit on this committee, please rest assured that Congressman Weber will keep the thoughts of Texas 14 in mind should this legislation come to a vote on the House floor."

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