



Veterans-*For-Change* Special News Release

A Voice of the Veterans

Week Ending Sunday, February 21, 2016
Volume 7, Issue 08

COURTNEY CALLS FOR CONGRESSIONAL ACTION TO SUPPORT “BLUE WATER” VETERANS EXPOSED TO AGENT ORANGE

Dear Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Brown:

The VA's recent decision to continue to deny care and benefits to “Blue Water” Vietnam Veterans makes clear that Congress must take action to finally fix this problem. That is why I urge you to pass the bipartisan Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act (HR 969), of which I am an original cosponsor, to ensure that all those who served on naval ships in the waters surrounding Vietnam – and exposed to Agent Orange – get the care and support they deserve.

The widespread use of nearly 20 million gallons of the herbicide throughout Vietnam and on its inland waters to clear vegetation as part of “Operation Ranch Hand” from 1961 to 1971, led to these chemicals entering the surrounding harbors, bays, and seas. The “Blue Water” Navy ships took in this contaminated water and distilled it for showering, drinking, laundry, and cooking. Thus, some 90,000 Navy sailors were likely exposed to this toxic chemical used during the war even if they did not set foot on land.

Unfortunately, the VA continues to interpret the Agent Orange Act of 1991, which first established a presumption of exposure for those who served in Vietnam, as including only veterans who have actually set foot on land or the inland waterways of Vietnam. In the decision of *Gray v. McDonald*, the U.S Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims required that the VA re-evaluate and clarify Blue Water sailors' eligibility for Agent Orange related benefits under current law. The VA stood by its current position and sailors who served in the seas outside of Vietnam's internal waterways remain ineligible for benefits.

Like many veterans in my district who regularly share their concerns about this issue with me, I am deeply disappointed in the VA's continued refusal to act. It is long past time to right this wrong, and passage of Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act will fix this problem once and for all by specifying in law that those who served in the territorial seas of Vietnam are included in the presumption of exposure to Agent Orange.

Passage of this bill will make a meaningful difference in the lives of Vietnam veterans not just in eastern Connecticut but across the country. It will not only provide the care and compensation that they deserve for their suffering – it would also provide a long-overdue acknowledgment of the risk they took in service to our country. I appreciate the many important issues before your committee in ensuring that the VA is fulfilling its solemn duty to our veterans. However, given the magnitude of this problem, I hope you will make passage of this bill a top priority this year.

Sincerely,
JOE COURTNEY
Member of Congress

***Help Disabled Veterans with their Disability Claim Appeals
Support Bill to Streamline VA Claims Appeals***

Senator Dan Sullivan (AK) has introduced the “Express Appeals Act” (S. 2473) that establishes a new, voluntary five-year pilot program to help reduce the large backlog of disability claims appeals before the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

While the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has made progress on the disability claims backlog, another backlog (over 400,000 pending appeals) on the appeals process has been created. An average veteran waits nearly 1,000 days—or almost three years—for the VA to resolve an appeal. Please use the Action Center to ask your Senators to support this important bill.

[Take Action NOW!](#)

Veterans Bills Pass the House

The House of Representatives recently passed six veterans bills. These included: The Veterans Employment, Education, and Healthcare Improvement Act” (H.R. 3016); the “Construction Reform Act” (H.R. 3106); the “Career-Ready Student Veterans Act” (H.R. 2360); the “American Heroes COLA Act” (H.R. 677); the “Failing VA Medical Center Recovery Act” (H.R. 3234); and the “Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act” (H.R. 2015). Many of these measures had been amended in committee to include provisions from other bills. Important provisions include automatic annual COLA adjustments for VA benefits, expanded canine therapy for veterans suffering with PTSD, extension of the Yellow Ribbon Program to Fry Scholarship beneficiaries, improved postnatal care for female veterans, the removal of the cap on VA home loan guarantees, and the requirement that VA accept private evidence for disability compensation claims. These bills now move to the Senate for consideration.

Give the Vietnam Blue Water Navy Veterans their Presumptive Rights

In 1977, the first claims of Agent Orange exposure came flooding into the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). But it took 14 years for Congress to actually listen, take action and give our Vietnam veterans the benefits they deserved.

The Agent Orange Act of 1991 was implemented to provide much-needed care to veterans who were exposed to the harmful chemical cocktail Agent Orange. Many of us thought the fight to get the medical attention we deserved was over, but that wasn't the case. In 2002, the VA amended its initial plan and excluded thousands of “Blue Water” Navy vets -- who served right off the coast -- from receiving our rightful benefits. Because we hadn't served on land, the VA tried to say we were unlikely to suffer the effects of Agent Orange poisoning. Even though we didn't serve on Vietnamese soil, we were still exposed to Agent Orange. In fact, a 2011 study by the National Institute of Medicine found that Blue Water veterans could have been exposed in multiple ways, including via the ships' water distillation system and through the air. The 2009 IOM update stated “Given the available evidence, the committee recommends that members of the Blue Water Navy should not be excluded from the set of Vietnam-era veterans with presumed herbicide exposure.”

We are asking for your help in urging Congress to pass legislation (House Bill H 969 and Senate Bill S 681) that will reinstate our right as Vietnam Navy veterans to receive the benefits we deserve for being exposed to this terrible chemical.

Nearly 90,000 Blue Water vets are depending on you. We are dealing with serious health issues that range from cancer to diabetes, and from Parkinson's to heart disease. Many of these diseases have made it nearly impossible for some of us to get steady work.

Last year, the VA finally extended benefits to Air Force crew members who flew in C-123s after they had been used in Vietnam to spray the toxic cocktail. The VA came to the realization that even the slightest exposure to this chemical had serious effects on a soldier's health. So why are the Navy vets' pleas being ignored? We breathed the Agent Orange-polluted air that drifted from the coast and drank water sprinkled with the herbicide, and now our bodies are paying the cost.

We ask you to stand with us, (and with Representative Chris Gibson, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, and others to demand that the VA assume responsibility for the effects of Agent Orange on Blue Water vets. Please sign our petition asking Congress to pass House Bill H 969 and Senate Bill S 681 and give us our benefits.

IG Finds that some Suicide Hotline Calls Handled Improperly by VA

According to a recent report from the Office of Inspector General (OIG), more than 20 veterans, service members or family members who called the Veterans Crisis Line in FY 2014 were transferred to a voicemail system and their calls were never returned. The Veterans Crisis Line was established in 2007 to address the growing problem of suicide among veterans and service members. It has fielded more than 2 million calls and is credited with saving more than 50,000 lives. FRA's own 2014 testimony divulged a Facebook post from a veteran on January 14, 2014 that claimed that they had called the hotline been put on hold for four minutes and 15 seconds and then the call was dropped. FRA passed on this information to VA staff, but never heard anything further. On average, 22 veterans commit suicide every day, making suicide prevention a priority issue for FRA.

The number for the Veterans Crisis Line is 800-273-8255. Online chat is also available at <http://www.veteranscrisisline.net> or by texting 838255.

71st Anniversary of Marine Landings on Iwo Jima

On 19 February 1945, Marines landed on Iwo Jima to begin the largest all-Marine battle in history. It was also the bloodiest in Marine Corps history. The Marine Corps suffered over 23,300 casualties. The capture of Iwo Jima greatly increased allied air support and bombing operations against the Japanese home islands. Of the savage battle, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz said, "Among the Americans who served on Iwo Island, uncommon valor was a common virtue."

Women Marines 73rd Birthday

Last Saturday, February 13, marked the 73rd birthday of the Marine Corps Women's Reserve. It was started in 1943 when the country was embroiled in World War II and women answered the call to serve, allowing more male Marines to go to the front lines.

Extend Assistance for Military Widows

Rep. Alan Grayson (Fla.) has introduced legislation (H.R. 4519) to provide a five-year extension of the Special Survivor Indemnity Allowance (SSIA) provided to military widows and widowers. This legislation is needed because the SSIA is due to expire on October 1, 2017.

SSIA provides partial financial relief to widows and widowers of deceased military members in receipt of Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuities that are impacted by the required annuity offset for the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) paid by the VA. FRA has been actively pursuing repeal of this insidious "offset" for several years (HR 1594/S. 979), and SSIA has provided limited financial relief for those affected.

In related news, members of the FRA Legislative Team recently met with the Senate Armed Service, Personnel Subcommittee to discuss FRA's 2016 Legislative Agenda, the Subcommittee's plan for restructuring TRICARE, and to provide survey results from FRA's online survey. These off-the-record meetings allow FRA staff to provide the enlisted sea service perspective to key staff members on Capitol Hill. Members are urged to use the FRA Action Center (action.fra.org/action-center) to ask their legislators to support the SSIA extension (H.R. 4519) and repeal the unjust SBP/DIC offset (S. 979/H.R. 1594).

Legislation to Streamline VA Claims Appeals Introduced

Senator Dan Sullivan (Alaska) has introduced the “Express Appeals Act” (S. 2473) that would establish a new, voluntary five-year pilot program to help reduce the large backlog of disability claims appeals before the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). The Senator said, “It is astonishing to me that an average veteran waits nearly 1,000 days—or almost three years—for the VA to resolve an appeal of one of their benefit decisions. Proud veterans across the U.S. ... should not have to endure these absurd, multi-year wait times just to see their cases resolved.” The bill will create a pilot program to provide timely and accurate decisions on veterans’ appeals before the VBA.

Many disabled veterans who filed a claim and gone on to have the result adjudicated feel the VA has made a mistake; they should not be penalized by having to wait two or more years for an appeal to be complete. While the VA is making progress on reducing the overall disability claims backlog, veterans who file an appeal are too often waiting years to get a final determination. The legislation (S. 2473) intends to cut bureaucratic red tape, allowing disputes with the VA to be resolved in a much timelier manner. Additionally, entrance into this program would be completely voluntary, and a veteran would be able to exit the express appeals process at any time and re-enter the traditional pipeline at the end of the line with no adverse consequences.

With over 400,000 appeals clogged up in a growing backlog, it is imperative to move forward with commonsense reform proposals like this legislation FRA is grateful to Senator Sullivan for sponsoring this bill and Senators Bob Casey (Penn.), Dean Heller (Nev.) and Jon Tester (Mont.) for co-sponsoring the bill at introduction. Members are urged to use the FRA Action Center (action.fra.org/action-center) to ask their senators to support this important legislation to help disabled veterans.



Veterans-For-Change, Inc.

Riverside County, CA

Visit our website today
www.veterans-for-change.org

Serving those who served!

Please pass to all your Veteran friends and family!