

Gulf and Middle East war burn pits could be this generation's Agent Orange

By Ted Puntillo, Director of Veterans Services for Solano County, CA

The Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) estimates that hundreds of thousands of veterans who served in the Gulf War in the 1990s and most recently in the conflicts in the Middle East may have been exposed to a myriad of airborne chemicals and toxic substances because of burn pits.

Burn pits were used to destroy and eliminate everything that was not needed during missions – including, but not limited to chemicals, toxic materials and unexploded enemy ordinance. Instead of eliminating these substances in a safe and proper way, they were burned in pits, turning debris into a hazardous gas for everyone to breathe. Shockingly, by the army's own account, the pits were built and used to get rid of things, regardless of how the process affected human health.

The US Department of Veteran Services has 110,989 service men and women listed in its burn pit registry. According to the registry, tens of thousands of veterans suffer from lung, digestive and other neurological issues, all linked to the exposure of these burn pits. Just like the VA took years to acknowledge the lethal effects of Agent Orange, they are once again slow to assess and recognize the long-term impacts of burn pits.

According to a 2011 study by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, because of the carcinogenic nature of many of the chemicals potentially associated with burn pits, it is prudent for the United States military to continue to investigate and document the instances of cancer and other long-term health outcomes in exposed military populations.

A study by the VA Public Health Department acknowledges that some service men and women are experiencing many of the short-term burn pit health effects, including burning, dry or tearing eyes, nasal congestion, sneezing, sore throat and cough. Veterans with pre-existing conditions, such as asthma (or a natural tendency of asthma) may experience chronic lung problems, allergies, or may have respiratory symptoms that last for a longer period because of the potential exposure.

It took the military many years to codify the harmful and deadly effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam veterans. Because of this, the VA suggests that every Gulf War, Iraqi and Afghanistan veteran exposed to burn pits – especially those who experience lung, digestive and neurological issues – get an official diagnosis from their health care provider. If you need help filing a claim regarding exposure to burn pits or any other issue, please visit the Solano County Veteran Services office, as we are here to help.

As always, thank you for your time and attention to this matter and for your service to our country.

Ted Puntillo is Director of Veteran's Services for Solano County. Reach him at (707) 784-6590 or TEPuntillo@SolanoCounty.com. The Solano County Veteran's Services Office, 675 Texas St. in Fairfield, is open from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.