

Chaplain's Notes¹ Here's the latest Agent Orange, news, to July 2019;

The decades-long fight for Blue Water Navy veterans to receive VA disability benefits for illnesses linked to exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War is over.

On Tuesday June 25, 2019 President Trump signed into law H.R. 299, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019, The legislation will extend disability benefits covering medical conditions associated with Agent Orange exposure to those who served on ships off the coast of Vietnam, known as "Blue Water" Navy veterans.

Veterans who served in Vietnam between 1962 and 1975 are presumed to have been exposed to Agent Orange if diagnosed with a medical condition associated with the herbicide, according to the Agent Orange Act of 1991. Presumptive diseases of exposure to the herbicide include certain cancers, Parkinson's disease and diabetes. However, this act applied only to veterans who served on land and in Vietnam's inland waterways.

H.R. 299 extends these benefits to any military personnel who served on any vessel during the Vietnam War that came within 12 nautical miles of the coastlines of Vietnam.

H.R. 299 further expands coverage and includes the provision that every veteran exposed to herbicides like Agent Orange should receive the same presumptive benefits, A provision in H.R. 299 states, 'A veteran who, during active military, naval, or air service, served offshore of the Republic of Vietnam during the period beginning on January 9, 1962, and ending on May 7, 1975,' will be eligible for disability compensation for presumptive conditions of herbicide exposure.

This will allow veterans who fall into that category and whose claims have been denied or held in pending status to gain access to VA medical care for conditions on the presumptive list.

Subsequent to the passing of the Bill, the VA Secretary Robert Wilke issued an immediate stay, blocking the processing of claims, stating that there are upwards of 560,000 potential claims. This number is disputed by John Wells; the Executive Director of the Military-Veterans Advocacy and others - who state the figure is closer to 90,000. Wilke has instituted a suit to reverse this decision.

VA staff has indicated that priority will be given claims by Veterans with life-threatening illnesses or over age 85.

Here are my usual reminders:

You all should locate and tell your family where they can find your DD 214 "Record of Service". Further, if you have a Navy Retirement, there are significant other things you should know about and do before you pass -check with DFAS to identify those that apply to you.

John Orr

¹ (Sources: American Legion, the Association of the United States Navy, **and** militarytimes.com of July 2019)