

BURN PITS

Toxic exposures impact Iraq, Afghanistan veterans, families and survivors

(Click on the images below to find out how the Burn Pits affected the lives of these veterans, families and survivors)



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In a 2006 memorandum to the Pentagon, Air Force Lt. Col. Darrin Curtis, who was in charge of assessing environmental health hazards at Balad Air Base in Iraq, raised serious concerns about toxic exposures from burn pits.



The letter, which was signed by Lt. Col. James R. Elliott, the Air Force's chief medical officer at Balad, confirmed the environmental dangers that open air burn pits posed to the soldiers and airmen who lived on one of the largest U.S. installations in Iraq.

Smoke from burning plastics, Styrofoam, paper, wood, rubber, waste, metals, chemicals and oils were contaminating the air. Based on studies he conducted on the ground, Curtis cited an

“acute health hazard” to troops from the black plumes of smoke the burn pit generated around the clock.

Like many military facilities, the air base at Balad had been captured after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and was used to advance the war effort. At the time military commanders had few options for ridding themselves of the waste their forces generated.

But as the war effort intensified, Balad Air Base and its adjacent Army Logistics Support Area Anaconda, became a hub for personnel, equipment and operations. By 2006, the base had ballooned into a city with 25,000 men and women. Hundreds of thousands of tons of trash were burned daily. Without enough incinerators, smoke from the open air pits smoldered and lingered low to the ground, often cascading over housing areas and giving the base a signature stench.



As the city grew, so did the type of trash it was generating. While considered an “interim solution,” use of the pits at Balad went on for years. “It’s amazing that the burn pit has been able to operate without restrictions over the past few years,” Curtis wrote.

Defense Department documents dated for 2007 indicated that dioxin levels at Balad were 51 times what the military considered acceptable. Similarly, particulate exposure was 50 times higher than was considered acceptable. For people deployed at the base for more than a year, volatile compounds and cancer risks from dioxin exposures were twice as high as acceptable.

“I am a Vietnam War veteran, and when I hear about dioxins, it raises an immediate red flag – especially when we look at the

long-term impact that Agent Orange exposure has had on our community,” said National Service Director Garry Augustine. “It makes you wonder if we’re not looking at something much, much bigger.”

Then a member of the DAV’s legislative staff in Washington, D.C., sent a copy of Curtis’ report to Army Times reporter Kelly Kennedy, who writes about health issues.



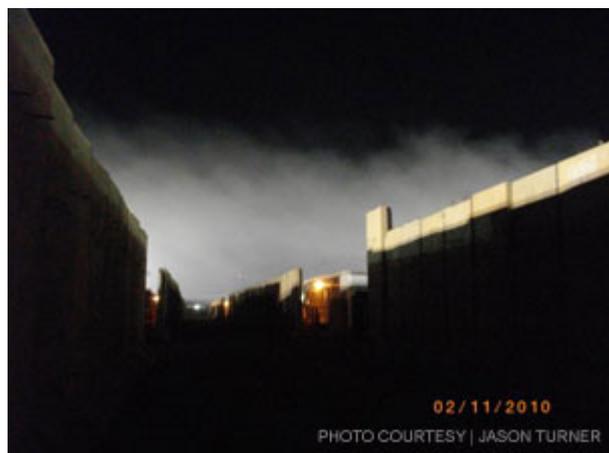
Kennedy’s story, “Burn Pit at Balad Raises Health Concerns,” was the first major news report about an issue she has followed ever since.

For the past few years, Kennedy has chronicled the government’s response to exposure concerns. The Defense Department first denied any long-term health consequences related to exposures, but information and data have since pointed to long-term health problems from exposures.

Kennedy’s reporting, along with the DAV’s advocacy and legislative initiatives, have brought the issue to national prominence. As a result thousands of veterans and active military members have come forward with their exposure concerns.

“The VA also has issued a 30-page letter training its staff on the environmental hazards veterans may have faced through burn pits and other exposures,” said National Commander Wallace E. Tyson. “We’re horrified to hear about how some veterans who have stepped forward have been treated, but we’re hopeful that we’re not going to repeat the mistakes we made with Agent Orange.”

The training letter marks the first time that the VA has addressed an environmental hazard while troops were still being exposed.



“This issue speaks to the very reason why we are united as a community of veterans,” said National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson. “The veterans who are suffering right now deserve the benefit of the doubt. They need someone to stand up for them and for our government to own up to

its responsibilities to them.”

“We’re going to go to bat for these veterans in Washington, and our National Service Officers are going to help them with free representation in their communities,” said Washington Headquarters Executive Director David W. Gorman. “We don’t know what impact this is going to have in the long term, but we’re going to be there to fight for them as long as we’re needed.”

A number of lawsuits have been filed against Defense Department contractors from burn pit victims and their survivors since Army Times first reported the story. In that time, legislative efforts have largely curbed the use of burn pits – though not completely.

“I think the burn pits have already left a legacy. I was in Afghanistan, and they’re still burning, and everyone here seems very aware about the potential health hazards,” Kennedy said. “I’d rather see those fires extinguished, but I’m glad that people know enough that they can talk to their doctors about them if medical problems, such as respiratory problems or cancers, develop.”