

The American Legion praises VA for “overdue but welcome” help for more Agent Orange victims

WASHINGTON (Oct. 13, 2009) -- The American Legion's national commander says he is pleased by the Department of Veterans Affairs' just announced recognition of the herbicide Agent Orange as a culprit in three more illnesses plaguing Vietnam veterans. The VA's decision was in reaction to the latest in a series of “Veterans and Agent Orange” reports from the Institute of Medicine (IOM).

“The VA's establishment of exposure to Agent Orange as a contributor to hairy cell leukemia (HCL) -- a rare form of cancer -- Parkinson's disease and ischemic heart disease (IHD) is perhaps overdue, but welcome, said Clarence E. Hill. “It means many more Vietnam veterans will be afforded the VA health care and benefits they deserve. I offer sincere thanks to Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki for this action. As a Vietnam veteran himself, I am sure General Shinseki's interest in this matter was intense and personal.”

Agent Orange is a herbicide that was employed during the Vietnam war to defoliate heavily forested areas and thus remove concealment for enemy troops. It is estimated that more than 21-million gallons of the highly toxic chemical were sprayed over rural areas of South Vietnam from 1962 to 1971. Its poisonous effects were not restricted to vegetation, as intended, but sickened and killed humans as well.

American troops exposed to Agent Orange began showing various symptoms of illness early on, but the military service connection to defoliant-caused disease was not readily made. The American Legion played a significant role in making that connection and lobbying for its official recognition by the Department of Veterans Affairs. HCL, IHD and Parkinson's disease will soon join a long list of illnesses thought to plague Vietnam veterans who came in contact with Agent Orange.

“While we are happy with the announcement, we will continue to work with medical experts to explore connections between Agent Orange and respiratory disorders such as asthma, pleurisy, pneumonia and tuberculosis as well as gastrointestinal diseases, liver toxicity, thyroid disease, homeostasis, endometriosis and others,” Hill said. “We will also be anxiously awaiting VA's long overdue official decision on the suspected connection between herbicides and hypertension – the harbinger of so many other serious disorders.

“It should be remembered that Agent Orange exposure was not limited to just ‘boots on the ground’ in country,” Hill continued. “Veterans exposed to Agent Orange included blue water Navy sailors, among others. They, too, deserve the care and benefits to be afforded other victims.

“There are 900-thousand Vietnam-era veterans in Legion ranks alone, so we have a huge stake in this,” Hill said.

With a current membership of 2.5-million wartime veterans, The American Legion was founded in 1919 on the four pillars of a strong national security, veterans affairs, Americanism, and youth programs. Legionnaires work for the betterment of their communities through more than 14,000 posts across the nation.