

**IS MILITARY RESEARCH HAZARDOUS TO VETERANS' HEALTH?
LESSONS FROM THE COLD WAR, THE PERSIAN GULF, AND TODAY**

STATEMENT

by

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before

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE**

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Mr. Chairman and Senators:

My name is Rudolph Mills and I live in Fredericksburg, Virginia. I am here today to relate to you my problems with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Fifty years ago, in December 1944, my twin brother and I quit high school to join the U.S. Navy. World War II was still going on and we wanted to serve our country. Once we were inducted we went our separate ways. I was at Recruit Training in Bainbridge, Maryland, when a call came for volunteers to participate in gas mask experiments. I stepped forward. I was seventeen years old, just out of boot camp and willing to do anything to help my country. And it wasn't just me, there were thousands of patriotic young Americans who felt the same.

In April of 1945 I participated in gas chamber experiments with the same gas mask approximately a dozen time for an hour each time. I had on an experimental mask and the Navy was trying to determine if people wearing these masks could communicate with each other.

I was enticed to sing over the intercom. At the time I could sing quite well. I remember the corpsman conducting the tests seemed serious about "taking me uptown" for tryouts. When I sang, the air pressure of my voice caused the sides of the mask to open up and I suffered burns on my cheeks and chin. No one ever told me that the mask became less effective against the gas with each use.

We were sworn to secrecy and it wasn't until 45 years later that I learned I had been part of around 4,000 or more servicemen who were human guinea pigs in gas experiments conducted from 1942 through 1945 by the Chemical Warfare Service. I was among those

who received high doses of mustard gas.

Even before my discharge in July, 1946, my health started to deteriorate. I started to lose my teeth and I had a chronic sore throat. Within three years of my discharge my tonsils and all teeth had to be removed. I developed a hacking cough when I was in my twenties which culminated in a diagnosis of cancer of the larynx in 1970. At the age of 43 I underwent a long series of radiation treatments and later surgery to remove part of my voice box and larynx. This left me with difficulty breathing, and the voice you hear today.

It didn't occur to me that my exposure to mustard gas was responsible for my physical problems until June, 1991, when I read an article in my hometown newspaper. This article said the Department of Veterans Affairs was urging veterans exposed to mustard gas in chemical warfare experiments during World War II to come forward for compensation. Given that my cancer had affected not only my health, but my career and family, with its associated financial burdens, I came forward. Just as I believed in my country when it asked me to volunteer for those experiments, I took the VA at their word when they said they would compensate suffering veterans. In that regard I was very naive because my experience with this agency has been a bureaucratic nightmare.

I cannot take the time today to tell you the details of my story which have left me depressed and disheartened, but I can tell you that for the past three years I have gotten a royal runaround from the Department of Veterans Affairs. I filed a claim which was eventually denied because the particular type of cancer (laryngeal) I had was not recognized as being related to mustard gas exposure. After a study, conducted by the National Academy of Sciences, found a causal relationship between exposure to mustard gas and the subsequent development of laryngeal and other cancers, I was notified these additional diseases would be recognized by the VA. My spirits were lifted when I read another article which quoted Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Anthony J. Principi, as saying, and I quote, "The years of silent suffering have ended for these World War II veterans who participated in secret testing during their military service. I am pleased that we are able to continue the process toward compensating those veterans who have healthy problems that may be related to significant mustard gas exposure." I was told that once the VA promulgated a new regulation my case would be reevaluated. It has now been a year and a half and this regulation has still not gone into effect. My Congressman, Herbert Bateman, makes inquiries on my behalf and each time his representative is told the new regulation should be finalized in the near future.

At the time the new regulation was first proposed, VA officials were quoted as saying those veterans who received significant exposure to mustard gas would be given the benefit of

the doubt as to other causative conditions. The NAS report found that delayed effects of mustard gas exposure may appear even though no acute effects were noted at the time of the exposure. I feel very strongly that my laryngeal cancer fits within the guidelines of the NAS's 1993 report. Yet the VA's proposed ruling states, and I quote, "we have determined it is reasonable to consider evidence of intervening cause which may exist...". This loophole could conceivably deny benefits to those whose problems the VA decides could have been caused by another source. As it is, I have a twin brother who has lived a very similar lifestyle as myself (with the exception of mustard gas exposure) and has, throughout the years, enjoyed much better health than I do.

Finally, let me say that I almost wish I had never read the article asking those who participated in these experiments to step forward. It has resulted in my disillusionment with the way the government of my country treats its own citizens and the veterans who wanted nothing more than to serve their country. I have absolutely no regrets in joining the Navy as a very young man and doing what was asked of me, for I loved my country and I love it just as much or more today. And in spite of all the agony the VA has put me through, I would step into a gas chamber again today if it would help preserve this great country for my grandchildren. I'd step forward and do it again. Even so, I can't help but feel that my government hasn't played fair with me. I was asked to come forward and file a claim - I did so. I was told the silent suffering was over - It is not. I was told I would given the benefit of the doubt - that has not happened. The VA has sat back and engaged in their endless bureaucratic games while many of us died off before our cases could be considered. In my opinion, they have acted callously and have not been truthful. If I never get a penny's compensation for the fact that I repeatedly breathed poisonous gas into my lungs that will be all right. But I will never be able to forget that my government has given such shabby treatment to me and so many others like me. That hurts more than my exposure to mustard gas.