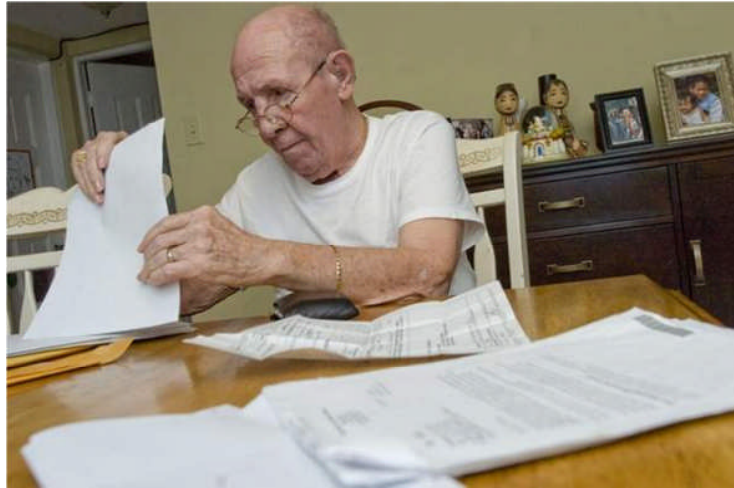


Rule change helps veterans: More diseases included in coverage

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Vietnam War veteran and Parkinson's disease sufferer Marvin Williams pulls out documents regarding retroactive and additional benefits during an interview in Tamuning, Sept. 7. Williams became eligible for the benefits after the Department of Veterans Affairs established that veterans exposed to Agent Orange used by the U.S. during the war, who now suffer diseases such as Parkinson's, are eligible without proof of direct causal links. / Masako Watanabe/Pacific Daily News/mwatanabe@guamp

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Forty-four years ago, Marvin Williams served on an Army cargo tanker, bringing precious fuel to fighting men on the shores of Vietnam. In a notoriously bloody war, Williams had a "cheesecake" gig, and not a single soldier on his boat was ever hit by enemy fire, he said.

Decades later, Williams realized the danger came from above.

From poison in the air. From his own country.

"At the time we didn't know it was bad for us," Williams said, his hand fumbling with his medical documents. "That came much later. ... But I remember one time in Vietnam I got sick, and the doctor didn't know what it was. It was really bad sick."

While Williams and his other crewmembers were delivering supplies and fuel during the Vietnam War, military planes overhead were spraying Agent Orange, a powerful herbicide designed to destroy the dense jungle and clear the waterways.

Today, Williams, now 71, is one of 89,000 Vietnam veterans, including many boat operators, who were paid a total of \$2.2 billion in compensation since August 2010, when the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs added Parkinson's disease and two other conditions to its list of eligible illnesses.

Williams, a former Guam resident who returns every year to visit family members in Tamuning, was diagnosed with Parkinson's 12 years ago. He filed for military compensation right away, but was denied until last year, when Parkinson's became an eligible disease.

In the 12 years since his diagnosis, Parkinson's has taken its toll. Williams can no longer write with a pen. Shaving is difficult and dangerous, he said. His medicine wears on his body, but his tremors could be deadly if he stops taking it.

"I think we had to wait too long," Williams said. "I had to be 71 years old before I got anything. It would have been much nicer if I was 50 years old. But they wouldn't give me nothing back then. ... Better late than never, but still too late."

Williams received a lump sum of about \$23,500 earlier this year, and his retirement and disability benefits have been increased permanently. He also can apply for funding to renovate his house or even go back to college, if he chooses.

According to a press release issued last month, potentially eligible veterans include those who were exposed while:

- Serving in Vietnam or on its inland waterways between Jan. 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975;
- In the demilitarized zone in Korea between April 1, 1968, and Aug. 31, 1971; or
- Due to herbicide tests and storage at military bases within and outside of the United States. Andersen Air Force Base played a crucial role during the Vietnam War, and a soil study released in 2003 found evidence of the toxin remained at the base.

"VA is committed to ensuring veterans and their families receive the care and benefits they have earned," Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki said in the press release. "I encourage all potentially eligible veterans to apply as soon as possible to preserve the most favorable effective date for payments."

Burden of proof

Veterans don't have to prove that Agent Orange caused their disability because that burden of proof would be near impossible, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Instead, if

veterans can simply prove they served in an exposure window, and if they have one of 14 eligible conditions, they qualify for compensation.

Compensation for Agent Orange exposure began some time in the 1980s, said Cindy Gogo, of the Guam Department of Veterans Affairs, but at first the list of eligible disease was small, so only a few men collected.

As the list of diseases has grown over the decades, so has the number of compensated veterans. Dozens of illnesses are under consideration for addition to the eligible list also, Gogo said.

Today, about 900 Guam residents -- including veterans and wives of deceased veterans -- are collecting compensation for Agent Orange exposure, Gogo said.

Diabetes is the most prevalent eligible disease on Guam, she said.

"There are still veterans who served during the Vietnam War who have not been diagnosed with diabetes but still could be," Gogo said. "They may not have gotten (their illness) while they served, but because of presumptive disability, they can still qualify."

Civilian workers

However, not everyone who says Agent Orange poisoned them is a veteran.

Guam has former civilian employees who were exposed while working at Andersen during the Vietnam War, said Manny Cruz, acting president of the local branch of the American Federation of Government Employees.

The civil engineering division at Andersen once had about 800 employees who handled the deadly toxin as much as the airmen did, Cruz said. Unlike veterans, the civilian workers have no avenue to compensation.

"We have a lot of workers who were exposed, they were touching that stuff like it was nobody's business. They were helping load it in the planes," Cruz said. "It was stored in the supply depot at Andersen."

Cruz said a federal law would be needed to compensate civilian workers on Guam for Agent Orange exposure, but so far there has been no such law approved by Congress.