

VA RULES AN AFFRONT TO NAVY VETERANS

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This nation has a fundamental responsibility to provide medical care to servicemen and women sent into harm's way — and someone needs to make that clear to the Department of Veterans Affairs. The VA is splitting hairs over which Navy veterans exposed to the herbicide Agent Orange during the Vietnam War qualify for health care coverage. The answer is obvious: all of them.

A bill in Congress would clear the way for Navy veterans to get disability payments and free health care for ailments linked to Agent Orange. The U.S. military sprayed 20 million gallons of the herbicide in Vietnam to remove foliage that provided ground cover to enemy fighters. One of the chemicals in the weedkiller contained dioxin, which the VA recognizes may be related to a number of cancers and other health problems.

Before 2002, sailors awarded the Vietnam Service Medal — given to those who served in the theater of war on land or sea — automatically got benefits. But then the VA changed its policy. It said that because Agent Orange was used on land it could not have harmed Navy personnel. As *St. Petersburg Times* staff writer William R. Levesque reported this week, the VA narrowed its definition of who qualified for benefits by determining that only veterans with "boots on the ground" should be eligible. It also required that Navy veterans prove exposure to Agent Orange, which is not required of ground troops.

The VA policy runs counter to the common sense of equalizing benefits among the armed services. It also ignores the science of Agent Orange and the reality of wartime conditions. A 1990 study by the Centers for Disease Control found Vietnam veterans had a 50 percent higher rate of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma than the general population. The disease is one of many linked to Agent Orange. It also found that among Vietnam veterans, those in the Navy had the highest rate of non-Hodgkin's. Navy veterans said they often went ashore or their ships carried Agent Orange. Even the VA acknowledges that while much of the area sprayed in Vietnam was inland forests, the spraying also occurred in mangroves along the peninsula and along main shipping channels. The herbicide was sprayed from airplanes and helicopters, among other methods. It defies logic that an herbicide used and handled so widely among service members would affect only "boots on the ground."

It also is an insult to ask Navy veterans to prove now, 40 years after the fact, that their health problems are related to Agent Orange. The government should treat Navy veterans of Vietnam like they do those of any other branch. They deserve screening for related health problems and access to a full range of benefits.