

VETERANS FOR CHRIST, INC.
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Fellow Veterans Grace and Peace to you and your family

[“Nearly All” VA Claims for Gulf War Illness “Improperly Denied”](#)



Marines headed to support the coalition forces participating in Operation Desert Shield board a commercial aircraft chartered by the Military Airlift Command in September 1991. Photo courtesy of the Defense Department.

When John Saul’s Marine air-ground task force landed in the Persian Gulf in 1991, the oil fields in Kuwait were ablaze. Heavy, dark smoke colored the sky.

“It was black at midday,” he told The War Horse. “Solid black.”

The fumes hung onto every breath the 24-year-old helicopter mechanic took.

“You could smell it and taste it,” Saul said. “There was no way to get away from it.”

He never really did. His symptoms began not long after he left the Marines in 1993: He developed a burning and recurring skin rash. It appeared first on his forearms. Over time, it spread to 50% of his body—his hands, arms, legs, torso, and the tops of his feet.

Saul, now 54, didn’t know he could qualify for VA health care until 2014 when a Navy veteran urged him to do so. Besides his skin condition, he filed claims for fibromyalgia—a chronic disorder that causes pain throughout the body and that can affect sleep, mood, and memory—and irritable bowel syndrome. Veterans Affairs considers both to be [presumptive conditions](#) connected to service in the Gulf.

Which means getting benefits should be easy.

But VA denied all three of Saul’s claimed issues, Saul said. His skin problem was eczema, VA examiners told him, and they used the wrong rules on the other claims, he said. Saul appealed. VA corrected its mistake and approved service-connection for his fibromyalgia and irritable bowel syndrome.

Then VA sent him to the [Georgia Skin and Cancer Clinic](#). After a battery of tests over several months, his skin specialist was unable to reach a diagnosis.

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‘I Have Had All I Can Take’ — the Final Months of Legendary War Reporter Ernie Pyle

Surely, VA would finally agree his rash was service-connected, Saul figured. Medically unexplained chronic symptoms related to certain types of ailments, including “skin problems,” are presumed to be connected to service in the Gulf.

But VA denied his claim again.

The VA nurse practitioner who examined him said his problem was dermatitis. Two dermatologists, one from VA and the other in private practice, did not back up that diagnosis, he said.

“You exceed the requirements with overwhelming evidence by a medical doctor specialist, only to be examined by a nurse practitioner who ignores the specialist’s diagnosis and gives a different diagnosis, and then the VA uses that to deny the claim,” Saul told the authors of a report looking at VA disability claims. “It’s like they go to the lesser of the two. The evidence is

there and the specialist said so, just to have a nurse practitioner in five minutes contradict months of studies, tests, and exams by a medical doctor specialist.

“We Were Fully Willing to Go”

His story is as familiar as it is pervasive: As generations of veterans return home from war, they find themselves in secondary battles with VA over benefits—[Vietnam veterans over Agent Orange](#), post-9/11 veterans over [pits that burned as much as 240 tons of trash a day in Iraq and Afghanistan](#), and World War II veterans who found themselves used as [guinea pigs during the atomic bomb testing](#).

This time, more than 650,000 U.S. service members deployed in the [war against Iraq](#) over its invasion and annexation of Kuwait 30 years ago. The combat was brief—just 42 days—but the fallout has been unending. Nearly 44%—almost half—came home with a variety of serious medical problems, including several mysterious ailments that became collectively known as Gulf War illness, [according to a 2016 VA study](#).

The condition is “a cluster of medically unexplained chronic symptoms that can include fatigue, headaches, joint pain, indigestion, insomnia, dizziness, respiratory disorders, skin problems, and memory impairment,” according to VA.

[Research shows the symptoms came after exposure](#) to a confluence of similar chemicals—acetylcholinesterase inhibitors—that include DEET used to protect against malaria-causing mosquitoes; a pesticide, permethrin, service members used in their laundry; sarin gas released when U.S. troops bombed a munitions factory at Khamisiyah; and pyridostigmine bromide, which the military used as a preventive treatment against nerve agent.

But the research never translated to benefits and care for Desert Storm veterans.

“We were fully willing to go and recognized we might not come home,” said [Anthony Hardie](#), an Army veteran and [Bronze Star](#) recipient who served in the [Gulf War](#) and who has experienced a variety of health problems since then.

“What we didn’t understand was we might come back with injuries and would have never in a million years believed we would not be taken care of after the fact.”

A [2017 GAO report](#) found that VA had denied more than 80% of Gulf War illness claims. Denial rates were three times higher than for all other medical issues related to the war, and the claims process took longer. And more recent research from veterans service organizations shows the problem hasn’t improved: Two veterans’ advocacy groups, Veterans for Common Sense and

Vietnam Veterans of America, analyzed VA's claim decisions between 2002 and the first quarter of 2018 and found that VA [rejected 90% of undiagnosed disability claims](#) from Gulf War veterans, denying them Congress-approved eligibility for free VA medical care.

“The claims process for Gulf War illness veterans remains so badly broken that nearly all veterans who apply are improperly denied,” Hardie said.

VA spokesman Randal Noller told The War Horse the agency “remains fully committed and attentive to the concerns of our Gulf War veterans and the issues many have raised. The department is working diligently to gather more information to address these concerns.”

“They Should Get Our Support”

Former VA Secretary David Shulkin told The War Horse the process that veterans go through to receive care and benefits is “backwards.”

“Rather than forcing veterans to fight to prove their case and have to wait and wait until absolutely the most comprehensive data is available to show there is an association (to their military service),” he said, “if somebody served their country, they should get our support.”

Shulkin, a physician, has had his own issues: He was fired by President Trump in 2018 over a [travel scandal](#), and [VA's inspector general](#) criticized his department's failure to address poor conditions at its flagship hospital in Washington.

But veterans' advocates met with Shulkin in 2017, and he agreed to set up a task force that would include them to resolve the perpetual claim denials.

He was fired before it could get underway. The advocates have been unable to get VA officials to pick up the phone ever since.

“The VA has not been responsive,” said Brown, the Vietnam Veterans of America consultant. “I don't really know the reasons why. I just think they really don't care that much.”

VA to start processing Vietnam vets' claims for conditions newly linked to Agent Orange poisoning

Veterans Affairs officials on Thursday announced they will immediately begin processing disability claims for [three new illnesses](#) linked to Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam, even though final rules on the cases are still a few weeks away.

“Many of our nation’s veterans have waited a long time for these benefits,” said [VA Secretary Denis McDonough](#) in a statement. “VA will not make them wait any longer. This is absolutely the right thing to do for veterans and their families.”



A United States advisor and a Vietnam company commander lead troops through an open area of swamp in jungles about 25 miles east of Saigon on Oct. 25, 1962. (Horst Faas/AP)

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Presumptive benefits for the three conditions — bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, and Parkinsonism — were [mandated by Congress](#) in the annual defense authorization bill passed in December.

For the last five months, VA officials have been working on how to implement that order, to ensure the extra workload doesn’t overload the claims processing system. The previous

presidential administration had said the work could take up to 24 months, but McDonough in February publicly vowed to speed up that process.

Adding the three illnesses to the list of presumptive conditions related to service in Vietnam is key, because it removes the need for documentation conclusively linking veterans' illnesses to their time in the ranks.

The government already recognizes 14 other conditions connected to widespread chemical defoliant use during the Vietnam War, which sickened hundreds of thousands American veterans.

VA staff noted that the rulemaking work still continues for the change, but they are looking at ways to speed the lengthy review process by getting cases filed as soon as possible. Payouts could be sent out in coming months.

Department officials will also review existing cases which were denied in the past to see if they qualify for benefits now. They could not say how many individuals may be affected by that move.

[Leo Shane III](#)

Why Veterans Are Targeted by Radicals Online

28 May 2021

Military.com | By [Steve Beynon](#)

Among the the Jan. 6 pro-Trump assault on the U.S. Capitol were veterans and active service members, highlighting a potential issue with extremism within the ranks.

This included Ashli Babbitt, a 35-year-old [Air Force](#) veteran, who was shot and killed by law enforcement at the Capitol during the insurrection. Following the attack, at least 12 [National Guard](#) members were booted off of the Capitol Hill security mission after investigators found them to have extremist ties. Jacob Fracker, an infantryman in the Virginia National Guard, was arrested after allegedly breaching the building with the mob; he was not on duty at the time.



Virginia National Guard Cpl. Jacob Fracker, left, and Army veteran Thomas Robertson, right, were arrested in Virginia in connection with the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol. Fracker, who previously served in the Marine Corps, and Robertson are members of the Rocky Mount Police Department. Photo via the Justice Department.

At least 43 of the 357 individuals charged in relation to the insurrection as of March 31 had a military background, according to [a review from the Combating Terrorism Center](#).

Kristofer Goldsmith, an Iraq War veteran who has been studying the issue for years, said there's no evidence that veterans are more or less susceptible to conspiracy theories or to delving into extremism. But they are uniquely targeted by disinformation campaigns because of their social influence and military training, he added.

Veterans are a force multiplier," Goldsmith said in an interview with Military.com. "There's no evidence to point to veterans being psychologically more vulnerable to being attracted to these groups. But veterans are economically efficient targets. If you convert them to believe what you want them to believe, [or] vote the way you want them to vote, [or convince them to] have a desire to commit violence against a population ... you're also much more likely to take that person's family and immediate social network."

Goldsmith on Thursday launched Sparverius, a firm that analyzes domestic extremism. He said that extremists are growing more sophisticated, adding that modern leaders of far-right groups probably aren't what people imagine. They're often physically fit and financially successful, practice martial arts, and can be relatively well-read, he said.

He spends much of his time on radical message boards consuming extremist content in hopes of educating Congress, the media and potential clients about the dark corners of the internet.

Falling into extremism can be a slow and unassuming process, Goldsmith explained. Algorithms on websites like Facebook and Youtube can expose people to radical content, slowly converting them.

Even social media pages, TV shows and podcasts that are mainstream and generally inoffensive can have algorithms that create a breadcrumb trail to radical content, Goldsmith said. He likened such algorithms to drug dealers constantly recommending a stronger dose.

"You go to one place that's probably fine, that's like the drug dealer offering you a joint. You like it, and now that dealer, or algorithm, is offering more and more," he explained.

Veterans [generally skew conservative](#) and are more likely than the general population to be gun owners. Federal data shows that [nearly half of all veterans own at least one firearm](#). That combination makes them prime targets for extremism, Goldsmith said, adding that mainstream right-wing media can slowly lead someone to more extreme media over time. He noted that there's nothing wrong with gun content or conservative media, but said extreme content and online conspiracy theories are often tied to otherwise unassuming material.

"I was clicking on ads for stuff like pistol grips," he said. "For the next few weeks I'm getting nothing but ... not just ads for weaponry, but ads saying the world is ending and I need to prepare."

Goldsmith has spent years sniffing out extremism, online scams and disinformation. He has testified before Congress and published [a 200-page report](#) after a two-year investigation finding that foreign actors, most notably Russia, targeted veterans in 2016 election ads.

One example he found was a Facebook page called "Vets for Trump," which was run by foreigners and had 131,000 followers. It posted pro-Russian propaganda and anti-FBI content and frequently attacked top Democratic figures, he said.

The Defense Department [published broad guidance for commanders](#) to address extremism in their formations as they see fit. But the campaign to root out extremists has turned into a political minefield.

Republicans [have all but dismissed concerns of white supremacy and other radical ideology concerns](#) within the ranks, saying the Pentagon is pushing political correctness and policing thought.

-- Steve Beynon can be reached at Steve.Beynon@military.com. Follow him on Twitter [@StevenBeynon](https://twitter.com/StevenBeynon).



Verse of the Day

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5 KJV

YOU TOO CAN BE A MEMBER OF THE VETERANS FOR CHRIST, INC.

Sign up online to become an associate member. The annual associate membership of \$120.00 which can be used as a tax deduction for supporters. Registration fees can be paid online through our PayPal account. You will get a free VFC T-shirt with your associate membership. Your tax deductible membership fee will support the VFC mission.

All Honorably Discharged Veterans are welcome to come and observe the VFC; feel free to ask questions and learn more. If we don't know the answer we know someone who does. Please browse our web site www.veteransforchristinc.org. There you'll find information on many subjects of interest to veterans. You'll also find a Newsletter for your branch of service and links to Social Security and many other links with an abundance of information.

Our monthly meetings are on hold until the pandemic is cleared and a vaccine is developed. No meetings are being held at the Wesley Chapel Library at 2861 Wesley Chapel Rd., Decatur, Ga. Our meetings are the fourth Thursday of every month and start at 6:30 (PM) for approximately one hour and a half, unless otherwise advertised. We will be respectful of your time.

Thank you for your interest in the VFC. We look forward to communicating and fellowshiping with you soon. We are looking for a corporate sponsor for our VFC Gerald Prince College Scholarship which is donated each September at our Anniversary Luncheon

"Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, being men of courage, be strong." 1Cor 16:13

Sincerely,

William A. Harris, Jr.

William A. Harris, Jr., USAF Retired
President, Veterans for Christ, Inc.

www.veteransforchristinc.org

Need to contact VA?

Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255 and press 1, Chat, or Text 838255
Homeless Veteran Resources: 1-877-424-3838 or Chat
White House VA Hotline: 1-855-948-2311

Don't know what number to call?

1-800-MyVA411 (800-698-2411) is never the wrong number