

From: [March, Joseph H.](#)
To: [Public Relations Division](#)
Subject: Release: American Legion stands firm in support of Blue Water Navy veterans' claims of Agent Orange exposure
Date: Tuesday, May 24, 2011 4:31:27 PM
Importance: High

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

American Legion stands firm in support of Blue Water Navy veterans' claims of Agent Orange exposure

WASHINGTON (May 24, 2011) -- The American Legion is standing by its call for benefits to be awarded to Blue Water Navy veterans of the Vietnam War who are suffering health problems associated with exposure to the toxic herbicide Agent Orange. The Legion's reaffirmation of its position comes in the wake of a new report on the issue from the private, nonprofit Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academy of Sciences.

As it stands, health-care benefit and compensation claims against Agent Orange exposure are recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) from certain Vietnam War veterans who served "in the Republic of Vietnam" on the ground or in boats cruising interior waterways, but not from those stationed on board ships offshore or who flew aircraft over Vietnam.

In its 99-page report, members of the *Committee on Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans and Agent Orange Exposure* concluded that, while ground troops and so-called Brown Water Navy veterans had "more plausible pathways of exposure" to Agent Orange, some Blue Water Navy veterans also could have been exposed.

"If not the smoking gun, this report reinforces the need for benefits to be paid to our Vietnam War Blue Water sailors," said Jimmie L. Foster, National Commander of The American Legion. "Reasonable doubt should be given to the veteran who shows symptoms of having been exposed to Agent Orange, especially if he or she served in a theater where we know the herbicide may have been used directly or carried to by other means."

One possible route of crewmembers' contamination, said the committee, was through their drinking of potable water distilled from offshore waters that contained Agent Orange runoff from rivers and streams into which the toxin had been dumped or sprayed. Wind drift, said the committee, also could have caused offshore water to be tainted by the dioxin.

In 2002, the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs commissioned studies of offshore Agent Orange contamination and found that the distilling of seawater to produce drinking water not only failed to remove the toxic chemical, but actually enhanced its effects. As a result, Australia has been granting benefits to its eligible Blue Water Navy veterans for several years.

The IOM committee study found a ten-fold enrichment in the toxicity of Agent Orange

during the distillation process, even higher than the Australian findings. Swimming in the ocean close to shore also could have exposed some personnel to Agent Orange, said the committee.

Despite this, the ultimate conclusion of the Institute of Medicine report was ambiguous. Committee members said that "...there was no consistent evidence to suggest that Blue Water Navy veterans were at higher or lower risk for cancer or other long-term health outcomes resulting from TCDD [2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin] associated with Agent Orange than Brown Water Navy veterans or ground troops. Finally, the committee said, "(we are) unable to state with certainty that Blue Water Navy personnel were or were *not* exposed to TCDD."

Given that this new study fails to disprove assertions of Agent Orange-related health problems in Blue Water Navy veterans, The American Legion continues to oppose VA's denial of health-care benefits and compensation claims.

The American Legion's fight for the honoring of Agent Orange exposure claims is longstanding. In 1988, John Sommer, former combat medic and then-director of the Legion's Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission, publicly took issue with a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study that found no correlation between Agent Orange exposure and subsequent health problems. The study was later found to be flawed.

-30-

Contact: Craig Roberts, 202.263.2982; cell, 202.406.0887 cell; email, croberts@legion.org