



GulfNEWS

A bi-monthly newsletter serving the interests of Gulf War veterans

Depleted Uranium Report Released

By David Evans
Public Affairs

After an extensive investigation into the use of depleted uranium during the Gulf War, the Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illnesses has released its report. The report finds that there is no evidence to support the claim that depleted uranium caused or is causing the undiagnosed illnesses some veterans are experiencing.

Bernard Rostker, special assistant for Gulf War illnesses, says the report examines a variety of issues regarding DU exposures that took place during and after the Gulf War.

"We start by explaining what DU is and outlining the potential health risks of its chemical and radiological properties," Rostker says.

He says the same depleted uranium used in armor-piercing munitions and armor shielding is also widely used in civilian industry, primarily for stabilizers in airplanes and ships as well as for radiation detection and shielding for medicine and industry.

Defense Department officials say the sabot rounds fired from the main gun of U.S. Abrams series tanks figure prominently in most of the depleted uranium incidents under investigation. They say the round, when fired or burned in fires, exposes the depleted uranium rod. That exposed penetrator rod poses a very low radiological threat and no heavy metal toxicity threat as long as it remains outside the body, say the experts. However, if internalized in sufficient quantity, depleted uranium may pose a health hazard to personnel. Nonetheless, the medical significance of any exposure scenario depends on a number of factors including the amount taken into the body, the particle size distribution and the solubility of the material.

"We've categorized the exposure scenarios into three levels based on the type of exposure," he says.

"Level I is the highest exposure group, it includes about 113 soldiers who were in or near combat vehicles at the time they were struck by depleted uranium rounds, as well as 30 to 60 people who entered these vehicles immediately afterwards. Depleted uranium fragments struck and became embedded in some of these soldiers. Others may have inhaled and ingested



Bernard Rostker, special assistant for Gulf War illnesses, stands near an Iraqi tank stopped by a depleted uranium round during the Gulf War.

depleted uranium particles, or had depleted uranium contaminate their wounds."

Since 1993, the Department of Veterans Affairs has been monitoring 33 vets who were seriously injured in friendly fire incidents involving depleted uranium. These veterans are being monitored at the Baltimore VA Medical Center. Many of these veterans continue to have medical problems, especially problems relating to the physical injuries they received during friendly fire incidents. About half of this group still have depleted uranium metal fragments in their bodies. Those with higher than

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DoD and VA Plan Evals

The Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs are contacting veterans of the Gulf War that may have come in contact with depleted uranium. The program is designed to ensure that veterans with elevated uranium levels in their bodies as a result of DU exposure are identified and offered examinations.

The program is an expansion of the ongoing work of Dr. Melissa McDiarmid of the Baltimore VA Medical Center. Since 1993, she has performed evaluations and follow-up of 33 service members wounded by depleted uranium during friendly fire incidents during the war.

Bernard Rostker, the DoD's special assistant for Gulf War illnesses, says his team will launch the new program by contacting those veterans with the highest exposures to depleted uranium.

"We'll be calling all the vets that were involved in friendly fire incidents, both those on the vehicles when they were struck by depleted uranium and those who entered the vehicles immediately

afterward to rescue their fellow soldiers," he said.

"Those service members," Rostker explained, "are considered to be Level I exposures. Soldiers who worked around the contaminated vehicles have been classified as Level II exposures and they will also be contacted under this program."

He added that Level II would include explosive ordnance disposal personnel who removed unexploded munitions from the stricken vehicles and battle damage assessment teams that evaluated the vehicles after they were transported back to bases in Saudi Arabia.

Also included in the Level II category are the maintenance recovery personnel who salvaged parts and removed the contaminated vehicles from the battlefield, as well as members of the 144th Service and Supply Company who ran the salvage yard at King Khalid Military City, Saudi Arabia, and the radiation

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Since we began our work in November, 1996, my office has focused its attention primarily on events associated with chemical or biological warfare agents. With the release of An Nasiriyah and Czech-French Detections, we have published a total of 16 papers related to chem-bio issues. Although some chem-bio topics remain to be addressed, in the coming months we are expanding our focus to include environmental issues, like depleted uranium, pesticides and oil well fires.

We recently released our first environmental exposure report, which focused on depleted uranium. This report examines the potential environmental and medical health risks associated with DU. The Department of Defense and Department of Veterans' Affairs have expanded a medical follow-up program to evaluate veterans with the highest known exposures to DU during the Gulf War. My office is contacting these approximately 300 individuals.

*From the desk of
Bernard D. Rostker
Special Assistant for
Gulf War Illnesses*



Finally, I am announcing a program that will facilitate the process for our Gulf War veterans to obtain copies of their in-patient hospital records from hospitals established during the Persian Gulf War. Although these records were located in the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Mo., they were stored only by the name of the hospital and date of treatment. Working with the Offices of

the Surgeons General, the VA, and the record center, we are completing an electronic data base to cross-reference patient names and social security numbers with the theater hospitals and admission dates. When this data base of over 17,500 Gulf War inpatient records is completed, we will be able to assist veterans in requesting copies of their hospitalization records. Veterans may call 1-800-497-6261 to find out if their inpatient record has been added to the data base and to obtain the paperwork necessary to request a copy.

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control workers who processed the vehicles for return to the United States.

Officials say the program will start with a telephone call, confirming with the veteran the exposure that occurred. If it's determined that an exposure did occur, the contact manager will describe the depleted uranium medical evaluation and encourage the member to participate.

"We will follow the telephone conversation with a letter describing the DU medical evaluation program and the DoD or the VA will then call the individual to schedule the examination," Rostker says.

"The evaluation will also include a 24 hour collection of urine for measurement of uranium."

He says Dr. McDiarmid's work has shown that the 24-hour urine collection for urine uranium level is more sensitive than the total body scanning because of the lowest measurable threshold of each system.

Officials anticipate that it will take approximately one year to locate and notify people, complete the physical examinations and get the laboratory results back for the program analysis.

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normal levels of uranium in their urine since monitoring began in 1993 have embedded DU fragments. These veterans are being followed very carefully and a number of different medical tests are being done to determine if the depleted uranium fragments are causing any health problems.

The veterans being followed who were in friendly fire incidents but who do not have retained depleted uranium fragments, generally speaking, have not shown higher than normal levels of uranium in their urine.

For the 33 veterans in this program, tests for kidney function have all been normal. In addition, the reproductive health of this group appears to be normal in that all babies fathered by these veterans between 1991 and 1997 had no birth defects.

Rostker explains the second category of exposure, Level II, includes around 200 soldiers who worked in and around vehicles struck by depleted uranium. Rostker says the vehicles were mostly wrecks of American vehicles struck during friendly fire incidents. He says it also includes as many as 600 personnel who took part in the clean up after the fire involving DU munitions and DU armored tanks at Camp Doha, Kuwait.

Level III, Rostker says, includes all others who had fleeting contacts with DU. This group includes individuals who may have entered Iraqi equipment, or who were down wind from vehicles that burned after being struck by a depleted uranium round or down wind from the Doha fire.

"Based on existing research, we believe this group received minimal, medically insignificant exposures and we have no plans to provide special screening beyond that already available to all Gulf War veterans at their request," he says.

Rostker says the report also highlights some lessons learned from the Gulf War and makes recommendations for future force protection.

"The Department of Defense is fully aware of its responsibility for the use of depleted uranium, and has stepped up its emphasis on soldier and leader awareness of the hazards associated with battlefield depleted uranium use and contamination," he says.

"The Deputy Secretary of Defense has ordered the service chiefs to ensure that the hazards associated with depleted uranium are incorporated into the general military training program. We will continue to monitor the status of the services' DU training efforts," Rostker adds.

As the latest in the series of informational publications published by the Gulf War illnesses investigators, Dr. Rostker says this particular investigation has been underway for more than 18 months.

Rostker says this report, while comprehensive, does not close the book on depleted uranium.

"This is an interim report published to inform the public of the current status of our ongoing investigation," he says.

"Our investigators continue to compile data, pursue DU testing to fill data gaps, and interview Gulf War veterans in an effort to more accurately report on DU exposures in the future. Specific information on the new medical follow-up will be passed to the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine which is assessing the dose and health risks for each of the exposure scenarios. This work is expected to take at least another year to complete," says Rostker.

DoD Locates Missing Gulf War Records

By Diana Berardocco
Public Affairs

The Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illnesses is offering assistance to those Gulf War veterans who have had difficulty in obtaining copies of their inpatient hospital records from the Gulf War. Collaborating with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Personnel Record Center and the Department of the Army, the office is creating a consolidated database to retrieve hospital records for all patients treated in Army, Navy and Air Force Gulf War hospitals. Veterans interested in securing information from these records are encouraged to contact the office to request a data search.

"Our goal is to inventory any known surviving hospital record from the Gulf War and create a database with names of all U.S. military and coalition forces and civilians," said Bernard Rostker, the special assistant for Gulf War illnesses.

In the military, the disposition and storage of records is governed by each service, DoD regulations and statute. Medical records fall into two categories: individual health records and inpatient hospital treatment records.

Individual health records include clinic visits, diagnostic tests, immunizations, dental care and, in some cases, discharge summaries of inpatient care. These records represent a history of a service member's medical care and accompany them throughout their military career. Upon a member's separation or retirement, the individual health record is retired to the Department of Veteran's Affairs Record Management Center in St. Louis, Mo., Rostker said.

In-patient hospital treatment records are created each time a service member is admitted to a military medical treatment facility for care. These records document all treatment and procedures performed while the member is hospitalized. If the patient is evacuated to another facility, a copy of the treatment record accompanies the patient and the original record is retained with the hospital's files. Defense Department guidelines call for hospital in-patient treatment records to be retired within a span of four to 10 years, depending upon the facility's record disposition policy, to the National Personnel Records Center where they are archived under the name of the hospital transferring the records.

War often skews even the best policy, explained Rostker. In a fast-paced, chaotic battle environment, a service member's individual health record may be maintained by the unit and never reach the hospital administering care or the individual

may receive treatment in a number of facilities. The in-theater hospitals did not have transcriptionists, so discharge summaries were not done in most cases. Also, the in-theater hospital generally did not have copy machines, so when a patient was transferred to a hospital, the original record was sent with the patient.

After the war, veterans seeking their medical records had to know the name of the facility that treated them during the war in order to obtain the record from the hospital or the records center.

The need for a database grew out of the concerns veterans expressed to Rostker's team about locating their records. Many veterans thought that their records were lost or destroyed.

"The records were never lost or destroyed," explained Mike Boyle, an investigator on Rostker's medical issues team. "If veterans didn't know the name of the hospital that treated them, there was no way of finding their records."

To come up with a solution for veterans, Rostker's staff built on the work accomplished by the Department of the Army. The Army created an electronic database which cross referenced the patient's name and social security number with the name of the admitting hospital and dates of care for 10,500 in-patient treatment records before sending the records to the records center in St. Louis. This accounted for approximately 70 percent of the Army Gulf War in-patient records.

At the records center, staff members examined more than 2,000 boxes identified as Air Force and Navy hospital records from the Gulf War. The hands-on effort, augmented by Army Reservists, resulted in the identification of 7,000 additional Air Force and Navy in-patient hospital records. Rostker's team added this list of individuals by name, social security number and hospital facility name to the Army's electronic database.

"We literally examined and reviewed every record," said Boyle, explaining how the team provided the bridge to unlock the information.

Rostker and his staff hope that this effort will assist veterans who require records to establish a claim with the VA due to service-related illness, as well as those who wish to keep track of their medical conditions.

To **obtain copies** of in-patient hospital records from hospitals deployed to the Gulf, the veteran should call the Special Assistant's office at 1-800-497-6261 to request a database search. The office will complete a request form and forward it to the veteran for signature and mailing to the record center.

Individual health records of former service members are archived in two locations, Boyle said. The VA maintains records for Army veterans discharged after 1992; and Air Force, Marine and Navy veterans discharged after 1994. To obtain copies, veterans may call the VA at 1-800-827-1000. For all other records, veterans should write to the National Personnel Records Center, 9700 Page Ave., St. Louis, Mo. 63132.



Some Gulf War era hospital records were located in St. Louis, Mo. at the National Personnel Records Center, a facility with more than 3.6 million cubic feet of storage space.

Resources for Veterans

Your ticket to the information highway — visit our GulfLINK web site at:
<http://www.gulfink.osd.mil>

Gulf War veterans seeking information on VA benefits of all types should call the Persian Gulf Helpline at:
1-800-749-8387

Anyone with information on Gulf War incidents should call the DoD Incident Reporting Line at:
1-800-472-6719

Are you a Gulf War veteran (or know of one) with health problems? Call the DoD Gulf War Veterans Hotline at:
1-800-796-9699



Veteran Spotlight

When retired Army 1st Sgt. Donald Cowart considers his Gulf War service, he's able to sum it up in four words.

"It was a blast."

Assigned to the 299th Engineer Battalion, then Sgt. 1st Class Cowart headed a platoon tasked with destroying anything of military value left behind by the retreating Iraqi soldiers during the ground war phase of the Gulf War. His unit, attached to the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized), passed through many locations that have come under close scrutiny by the Gulf War illnesses investigators. He says his group passed near Khamisiyah, Tallil Air Base, An Nasiriyah and Jalibah before stopping within sight of Basra.

"We spent four days actually doing what we had trained for years to do," says Cowart. "It was the most fun I ever had as an engineer."

He says, despite being at the front of the action during the Gulf War, he has

shown no symptoms that would make him think he's one of the victims of Gulf War illnesses.

In fact, he didn't register with the Defense Department's medical evaluation program until just before his scheduled retirement from active duty at Fort Bliss, Texas.

"I didn't know much about the program," he says. "But the people there [at Fort Bliss] said 'You don't have to be sick to be examined. If you served in the Gulf War, let us do the examination.'"



"My approach was positive," says Cowart. "I went into the process feeling fine and hoping nothing was wrong. But I could also see why we should get the exams just to be safe."

These days Cowart says he applies the lessons he learned in the Army to his new position as the general manager of a new restaurant in Statesboro, Ga.

"I'm still identifying a goal, picking the best people to do the job and helping them complete the job," he says.

He adds that today's service members should continue their education, even while on active duty, and keep learning new things.

"The Japanese have a word for my outlook on life," Cowart says, "It's 'kaizen' and it means continuous improvement. And even after 20 plus years of service, I still work on improving myself each day."



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GulfNEWS is produced by the Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illnesses, 5113 Leesburg Pike, Suite 901, Falls Church, VA 22041. Send your comments on this newsletter to David Evans at the above mailing address, or by email to:
brostker@gwillness.osd.mil

Agencies assisting Gulf War veterans:

<http://www.afa.org/>
Air Force Association
1501 Lee Highway
Arlington, VA 22209-1198

<http://www.legion.org/building.htm>
American Legion
1608 K St., NW
Washington, DC 20006

<http://www.amvets.org/>
AMVETS
4647 Forbes Blvd.
Lanham, MD 20706

<http://www.ausa.org/>
Association of the U.S. Army
2425 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22201

<http://www.dav.org/index.html>
Disabled American Veterans
807 Maine St., SW
Washington, DC

<http://www.eangus.org/>
Enlisted Association of the National Guard
1219 Prince St.
Alexandria, VA 22314

<http://www.fra.org/>
Fleet Reserve Association
125 N. West St.
Alexandria, VA 22314-2754

<http://www.mcleague.org/>
Marine Corps League
8626 Lee Highway, #201
Merrifield, VA 22031

<http://www.ngaus.org/>
National Guard Assn of the US
1 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20001

<http://www.navy-reserve.org/index.html>
Naval Reserve Association
1619 King St.
Alexandria, VA 22314-2793

<http://www.navyleague.org/>
Navy League
2300 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22201

<http://www.ncoausa.org/>
Non Commissioned Officers Association
225 N. Washington St.
Alexandria, VA 22314

<http://www.roa.org/>
Reserve Officers Association
1 Constitution Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002

<http://www.troa.org/>
Retired Officers Association
201 N. Washington St.
Alexandria, VA 22314

<http://www.vfw.org/>
Veterans of Foreign Wars
200 Maryland Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002

<http://www.vva.org/>
Vietnam Veterans of America
1224 M St., NW
Washington, DC 20005