

Iraq and Afghanistan: The Hidden Costs of Forever War

Cancer Resulting from Radioactive Waste and Chemical Weapons

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Kelley Vlahos has done excellent [reporting](#) on the terrible effects of toxic burn pits on Americans serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The illnesses and deaths caused by this toxic exposure are among the ongoing, mostly ignored costs of decades of endless war. A new McClatchy [report](#) reminds us about other U.S. military personnel that have been exposed to hazardous materials that have caused dozens of them to get cancer. In this case, U.S. forces were based in Uzbekistan in the earliest days of the war in Afghanistan at a site contaminated by radioactive waste and the remains of chemical weapons:

U.S. special operations forces who deployed to a military site in Uzbekistan shortly after the 9/11 attacks found pond water that glowed green, black goo oozing from the ground and signs warning “radiation hazard.”

Karshi-Khanabad, known as K2, was an old Soviet base leased by the United States from the Uzbek government just weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks because it was a few hundred miles from al Qaeda and Taliban targets in northern Afghanistan.

The government has a responsibility to the people that it exposes to such deadly materials. The conditions at this base were clearly not safe for the troops that were sent there, and by exposing its personnel to such terrible conditions the military needlessly endangered them. There is no doubt that the military understood that there were hazardous materials on the site, but that didn’t stop them from continuing to send people there:

The Defense Department knew that K2 was toxic from the start, based on documents obtained by McClatchy that are being reported publicly for the first time.

After Uzbek workers who were preparing the grounds for arriving U.S. forces in October 2001 fell ill, U.S. Central Command directed an intelligence review of the hazards at the base.

“Ground contamination at Karshi-Khanabad Airfield poses health risks to U.S. forces deployed there,” said the classified report, dated Nov. 6, 2001, that was obtained by McClatchy.

That report found the “tent city” the military was building at K2 — including tents for sleeping, eating, showering and working — were “in some cases

directly on top of soil that probably was contaminated” by four hazards.

One of those hazards was depleted uranium:

That angers K2 veterans who remember how the Defense Department moved the soil to create the berm, which exposed layers of contaminated soil that was then further dispersed by floods and wind, and during the winter months just became a muddy muck that stuck to everything.

“I never would have had depleted uranium in my system if I hadn’t gone to K2,” Bellard said.

She had chronic fatigue, headaches, respiratory issues and muscle twitches after her deployment and began looking for a cause. A VA-conducted urine test detected depleted uranium, but the amounts were too low to “have any health consequences related to it,” the agency notified her in June 2018.

Massey, who dug up the 250-pound explosive, had to leave the military just before he would have qualified for retirement benefits because of debilitating chronic migraines and other illnesses. He is now seeking additional medical care from the VA because he keeps collapsing without warning.

The Americans who served at this base are still paying a horrific price almost twenty years after they were there, and they are not receiving the assistance they deserve and need. As so often happens in these cases, U.S. forces are exposed to toxic materials while they are deployed as part of a military campaign, and then when they seek help from the government to treat the condition caused by that exposure they are denied:

At least 61 of the men and women who served at K2 had been diagnosed with cancer or died from the disease, according to a 2015 Army study on the base. But that number may not include the special operations forces deployed to K2, who were likely not counted due to the secrecy of their missions, the study reported.

As part of McClatchy’s continued investigation into the rising rates of cancers among veterans, members of those special operations forces units who were based at K2 are speaking out for the first time because of the difficulty they have faced in getting the Department of Veterans Affairs to cover their medical costs.

“After returning from combat years later, we are all coming down with various forms of cancer that the [Department of Veterans Affairs] is refusing to acknowledge,” said retired Army Chief Warrant Officer Scott Welsch, a special operations military intelligence officer who deployed to K2 in October 2001 [bold mine-DL]. He was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in 2014.

Members of Congress should demand a more extensive investigation into the harm that has been done to these veterans, and they should insist on securing these veterans funding for the proper care that they ought to have been receiving all along. The destroyed health and ruined lives of these veterans are part of the cost of the forever war that continues to be paid long after they return home. It is imperative that our government stop neglecting and forgetting these veterans, and it is vitally important to remember the terrible, long-term effects that war can have on them.

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