

Statement for the Record
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
Hearing on Pending Legislation
Thursday, June 15, 2017
Arla Ray Harrell, Son of Mr. Harrell

My father, Arla Wayne Harrell, was drafted into the army in 1944. He had recently turned 18 and never been more than a few miles from his birthplace. His trip to Camp Crowder Missouri for basic training was not only farther than he had ever traveled, but had a larger population than he had ever witnessed. During basic training, he was told if he would volunteer for a special duty (*timed exposure to mustard gas in a locked chamber*), he would receive two extra weeks of leave. He was also told there would be minimal health risk. The potential that he would receive any harmful effects was minimized, and he was promised medical treatment if required.

For an 18 year old, an additional two weeks leave was an enticing and manipulative offer. To someone that age, the benefit of leave far outweighed the risks.

He was mandated to sign a vow of secrecy, which stated that he could not speak about any of these events for fifty years. Even though my Father suffered his entire life with medical conditions associated with exposure to mustard gas, he kept his word and did not speak about the experiment until the fifty year limit was reached. To maintain this vow truly demonstrates his values of loyalty, duty, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage to the United States Armed Forces.

Fifty years later, my Dad applied for disability for his medical issues. Claims demanded that he show proof that he was exposed to mustard gas. This was impossible for him as many of the records had been burned in a fire. The records that were available regarding the mustard gas testing were still classified and not available to him. Any efforts to prove that he had been exposed to mustard gas were blocked at every path. He has received no compensation from any government agency or veterans association.

I am a retired Army Senior NCO and served my country proudly for 26 years. I feel betrayed and saddened by the way my father has been treated. I am saddened by the fact that the military would use American Soldiers as human guinea pigs and also for the fact that they refuse to acknowledge that it was done.

My dad is now 90 years old and his time is short. The Soldier's creed states that I will leave no Soldier behind. Please do not leave my father and his fellow Soldiers behind. My father will never have the same life he could have had without the medical issues he has dealt with, but it would be a great benefit to acknowledge it happened to him before he leaves us.

On my honor,

Arla Ray Harrell

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Betty Harrell Agan, Daughter of Mr. Harrell

Dear Senator McCaskill:

Thank you for the support and hard work you and your staff have done for my dad, Arla Wayne Harrell – World War II veteran.

We, our family, is honored to have Senate Bill 75 named after our dad. When he was told this bill was named after him – a bill for World War II veterans who experienced Mustard Gas experiments, which was not part of regular military training, he had tears running down his face. My dad can no longer talk as a bad stroke took what was left of his voice away. He has had years of chronic hoarseness and laryngitis. My dad has over a quarter century of mustard gas claim denials from the VA.

They always say he is not on the D.O.D exposure data base. We have found out on a statement of case from the VA, this is not true. In 2011 before Senator McCaskill knew my dad's story, the VA knew dad was on the DASD-HRPO (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense – Human Resource Protection Office) list. The VA was given this information by the Department of Defense. The VA never told my dad of this.

Also in the denials, he was never at a known site where mustard gas was found, according to the VA, Camp Crowder, Neosho, Missouri. There are others who have made the same claim as my dad while they were stationed at Camp Crowder.

I've received a disc from the Records Management Center – 3, 183 pages of information on my dad I'm going through.

After dad's latest denial, 2016, we filed a NOD (Notice of Disagreement) with the VA. The VA denied it. Next we asked for an appeal in Washington, DC but as of yet we have not been given a date nor have we heard from anyone.

No one at the VA has ever offered to give us any help.

Senate Bill 75 – the Arla Harrell Act – corrects a problem many of the remaining World War II veterans have faced with their claims. My dad and other veterans who were experimented on have faced an uphill battle. My dad would have had a better life starting in 1991 with his first mustard gas claim, as would have all of the vets. They would have been receiving medical care better suited to their illness caused by the experiments.

My dad and the other veterans whom are mostly dead now, served their country twice – once in the military and foremost in the sacrifice of their health. They insured those that followed got better and safer equipment when war gases were used. They insured mustard gas injuries had better medical care.

Senate Bill 75 removes road blocks for these World War II veterans.

Betty Harrell Agan, daughter of Arla Wayne Harrell

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Trish Harrell Ayers, Daughter of Mr. Harrell

To Whom It May Concern,

I would like to share a bit about my dad, Arla Harrell, for whom the Arla Harrell Act is named. He is an honest and honorable man. Never in my life have I heard him utter a lie or shade the truth. He is loyal to his family and his country.

When he was eighteen years old, he joined the service and was sent to Camp Crowder for basic training. While there, he was part of the secret Mustard Gas program and was informed that he could never speak of the test or he would be imprisoned. He kept his promise until, in his later years, when he learned he was no longer held to that promise. He kept the secret from his family and his medical providers.

I was present the day, at the V.A. Hospital in Columbia, MO, when he was first asked about exposure to Mustard Gas. A medical provider, while looking at dad's x-ray, questioned him about being exposed to Mustard Gas. I will never forget the look of terror on Dad's face. I suspect the medical provider also noticed Dad's fear. Once Dad was assured he could now speak of the tests, he quietly answered, "yes."

Our family quickly researched and found out that the veil of secrecy had been lifted and veterans were able to speak of the tests. Then it was like the flood gates opened. Dad told us the horrors that he held inside for over fifty years. He told me that he and a group of men were locked inside a room and were forced to breathe in Mustard Gas. He told me his lungs and skin burned during the tests. He had trouble breathing as did the other soldiers. He was hospitalized shortly after the exposure and, at least one other time.

Once Dad learned he could speak of the tests, he made the decision to submit a claim for the exposure. He thought it would be a simple thing. When he received his first denial, it hit him hard. He felt that he had done what was asked of him and now they were implying that it didn't happen and, ultimately, that he was not telling the truth. This was hard for my father to swallow, being a man of his word. He wanted to continue to pursue the claim so he, with my Mom's help, filed the appeal. Letters were written to his members of Congress requesting assistance. He was denied again. For years, he and my mom did everything in their power to get a claim approved, but to no avail. With each denial, Dad became depressed and discouraged. The process was time consuming, but he continued on.

When Dad's health declined, my sisters and brother and I joined forces with Mom to continue the process. We searched the internet, read books about the subject and tried everything in our power to locate records that would prove Dad's claim.

Locating records became our biggest challenge. Many of his records were housed in the facility that burned. He, then, was being asked to submit records that no longer existed. Even with this, we still searched for records and often felt like we were being given the run-around.

In the past several years, while reading the report on a hearing on the Mustard Gas experiments, I read that it was noted that the Army did not keep good records of these experiments and who was exposed. So, in essence, we have been asked to supply records that may never have been created.

He was told that Mustard Gas testing did not happen at Camp Crowder. Later we found that the Army Corps of Engineers had located Mustard Gas buried at Camp Crowder. Dad was not informed of this change. Also, we learned that a number of veterans had filed claims that they, too, underwent testing at Camp Crowder. Their stories aligned perfectly. Dad did not know any of them but they all had the same memories.

At 90 years old, Dad's health continues to decline, to the point where he can only speak a few words. Dad is forced to communicate with his eyes. Whenever we spoke about the work we were doing on his Mustard Gas claim, he would smile. When he was told of the Arla Harrell Act, he teared up, and then smiled broadly.

Last week, when I told him that The Arla Harrell Act was going to be presented in The United States Committee on Veterans Affairs, his eyes filled with tears. We told him a number of times to make sure he understood it was the United States Senate. He continued to tear up. He wants to be acknowledged. Later, when I was telling a member of the nursing home staff about the upcoming hearing, he smiled the biggest smile, the same smile I see when he sees Mom the first time every day.

I grew up with a man who worked full-time in spite of physical challenges with his breathing. He could not be around perfumes, chemicals, and nail polish. His stamina was impacted but he still kept his secret and never told his doctor. I often wonder if he had been allowed to speak of this, at least to his doctor, that maybe there could have been something medically they could have done to ease his suffering. We will never know. I remember, when I was in college, he went with mom and me to a theme park where I worked. In a short time, the walking and heat impacted him so much that he sat down and told us to go ahead. He would wait on a bench until we were done. I knew he wanted to join us through the park and I knew he couldn't physically. Mom and I quickly went to a few places in the park and then returned to Dad. He told us he was okay, to stay longer, but we didn't want him to suffer. This was not a one-time situation. It was only after he was allowed to tell us about the Mustard Gas testing which was done on him that we finally understood what Dad had been dealing with most of his adult life.

My Dad, Arla Harrell, and other living soldiers who endured the tests, suffer with life-long side effects and have kept the secrets that were required of them. They have all done their duty to the service and their country. It is now time they are recognized and there is a more realistic path to securing approval of their claims. It is time our country does their duty to these Veterans.

Respectfully,

Trish (Harrell) Ayers

Berea, KY

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Beverly Howe, Daughter of Mr. Harrell

To whom it may concern.

I see my father as an American hero, that America has forgotten. The promises made to him as an 18 year old, have not been honored. He kept his promise to keep the mustard gas testing secret. Once released from his promise some 50 years later.....America has not honored its promises to him.

My father has felt that with each denial for benefits from the VA, he is being called a liar. His disappointment is visible in his being, with each denial. My parents quit applying for benefits because of the depression that followed each denial. My Dad and Mom never expected that after 50 years that the VA would for another 22+ years, deny his claims, even with medical evidence to support his claim.

I want my father to be recognized for the sacrifice he made so long ago. He had no way of knowing at the time, how volunteering for the secret mustard gas testing would affect him every day of his life after the exposures. He has suffered from lung problems, shortness of breath, atypical pneumonias, emphysema, asthma, hoarseness, permanent scarring on multiple areas of his body, and squamous cell cancer, to name a few.

At the beginning of this process we were told there was no evidence of any mustard gas at Camp Crowder by many VA representatives, including Steve Westerfield. He was the Communications Director for the VA in the beginning of 2016. There was evidence from the Army Corp of Engineers in July 2012 that proved the existence of mustard gas at Camp Crowder, as well as memos from the Department of Defense and the Department of the Army from October 29th, 1996 that listed Missouri, Camp Crowder as a location for known or possible buried chemical warfare material-chemical agents.

My Dad as well as other, now deceased veterans, claimed exposure to mustard gas at Camp Crowder. One veteran described nearly identical exposures as my father at Camp Crowder at approximately the same time. All of his claims and appeals were denied. Common threads are..... no documents available, possibly due to the fact that a fire occurred at the repository for veteran records in St Louis, not on DOD list or no evidence that they were exposed, no credible evidence that mustard gas testing occurred or that secret information about the testing was removed from their records to be stored elsewhere.

My father was hospitalized for 6 days right after his exposure to mustard gas in the gas chamber. His symptoms were consistent with mustard gas exposure.

These men have been caught in a catch 22.

Held to 50 year vow of secrecy.

Secret records stored elsewhere.

Records destroyed.

No one knows where or if these records still exist due to the time that has passed.

Preponderance of evidence supports veterans statements.

VA puts all of the burden of proof on age 90 and up veterans.

No one can say why mustard gas was even at Camp Crowder, Even after proof of its existence.

No one can explain notations on my fathers records that are not on other veterans records of that era.

VA states they must be on DOD list to approve claim

DOD says it is up to VA to approve claim

I love my father and have watched his suffering for all of my 61 years. My wish is that he will rightfully receive the recognition and honor he deserves while he is alive.

He is in failing health. His wheelchair recently broke and it took several weeks to get the part. My mother paid for it. The VA has refused to help with the cost of his wheelchair. He is a tall man and requires a special chair. So his wheelchair had to have the back propped up with a chair until it could be repaired.

The costs of such repairs comes out of my mothers funds. My father is on Medicaid. He never wanted to be on Medicaid. He worked and saved so that my mother and him could take care of themselves. My mother sold their home so there would be money to take care of him and herself. if the VA had approved my fathers claim, this would not have had to happen.

So many promises made and broken to my father by the Army have led to him living daily with the sadness of so many losses, loss of his health, loss of the support of the VA, loss of respect for his word, the loss of his home for his wife, the loss of being able to say he served this nation as a proud veteran....proud of his country.

The bureaucracy of the VA has made it easy to deny claims from this era, for these men. We received the aid of Senator Claire McCaskill and her staff. Even with their assistance we have been met with nothing but denials. The VA demands absolute proof to approve a claim. We have consistently been told my Dad is not on the DOD list, but as of his last NOD denial it noted he was added to a list. I've requested detailed explanations of each point in the claims. We received very standard forms and no detailed explanations as requested. When I question VA staff about things in the case, I often get pat answers or silence. When I requested identification of terms, or forms, or acronyms, no response is provided except we don't know what it means. If the VA cannot assist the veteran when they have access to information how is the average person supposed to respond. No one at the VA is able to tell me what the full vials of mustard gas was used for at Camp Crowder. I was told it could have been used in training. My question was you mean they purposely exposed all soldiers in training. The response I received was "I hope not"

I hope that the VA is not waiting for all of these brave men to die so their horrific story dies with them.

Please provide my father with the honor he so deserves, by acknowledging the sacrifice he made in 1945.

Respectfully,

Beverly Howe