

STATEMENT OF JEFFREY L. O'MALLEY,  
VETERAN, UNITED STATES ARMY,  
FOR PRESENTATION BEFORE  
THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,

March 10, 2021

3:00PM.

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Jeff O'Malley, and I am honored to be asked to participate in today's hearing of the Committee. I would like to note the date as having special significance for me, as it is exactly fifty years from the date that I boarded the plane for Vietnam...March 10, 1971. The experiences I had during my tour, and those of all my comrades, have stayed with me for all these years.

I signed a four-year enlistment in June of 1969, committing to assignment with the Army Security Agency, and with the expectation that I would probably be sent to language school. I completed basic at Ft. Leonard Wood, and was sent to the Defense Language Institute, Southwest at Biggs Field, Ft. Bliss for the 47 week Vietnamese language course. After graduation, we were sent to an electronics course at Goodfellow Air Force Base, in San Angelo, then, Vietnam. During language school and the electronics course, our top secret security clearances were completed.

From March of 1971 to late February of 1972, I served as a voice intercept linguist for the Army Security Agency in the Republic of Vietnam. Except for a few day trips, I worked at the 8<sup>th</sup> Radio Research Field Station near Phu Bai. The base was south of Hue, and adjacent to the main bases of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, Camp Eagle. The work was important, and, at times, stressful, but the unit was well run and efficient, earning two unit citations during my tour.

I returned to the United States in late 1972, was assigned to an ASA unit at Fort Hood, pending my discharge in late May. After receiving my discharge, I returned to Houston, and re-entered civilian life.

Over the years, off and on while working, I used the GI Bill to attend college, but family obligations often took precedence. I finally received my BS degree in English and History from a branch of the University of Houston system in May of 2001. I had a long stint as a loss prevention executive for retail outlets in Texas and Louisiana, worked as a fraud investigator for the State of Texas, did some teaching and was working in an alternative school run by a local school district by 2001. The job was a contract position, which usually began after enrollment reached a certain level, and it was a job with no health care provided. Several times throughout my years of work, I had jobs that did not provide adequate healthcare, but I had been blessed with good health.

In the summer of 2008, I was offered a permanent position with the alternative school, with a raise and full benefits. It was due to begin on September 1<sup>st</sup>, and I accepted. As is fairly common in southeast Texas in late summer, a hurricane arose in the Gulf, Hurricane Ike, which came ashore and took out power and caused damage, delaying the start of school. Sitting at home with no power, I decided I would try to decide on a Blue Cross provider. I took the handbook, found the doctors in my area, and started calling. After getting no answers at five or six, I realized that their power was out as well. I finally got a response from a small office that had just gotten their power back, and they invited me over to meet the doctor.

The doctor, Mary Knaus, met me at reception, and took me back. The preliminaries of height and weight and temperature she handled herself, as her nurse was not scheduled to be there yet. As she took a medical history, she said she would take my blood pressure, using the old analog method. I paid NO attention, until she said, "I think I'll take it again..." I noticed that she was very concerned, and then she told me, "Jeff, I'm going to have you sit in the lobby. I'm going to give you a pill, then check it again. I've never seen a pressure that high, except in the ER when a patient presented for stroke." She gave me a pill, and I waited. After an hour, she took the BP again and gave me another pill. She then took an in-depth history, scheduled me for blood work and a chest X-ray. She

had no clear idea of why my blood pressure was so high. She wrote me a prescription and asked me to check my blood pressure several times a day. She indicated that my pressure had been 210/120+.

I did the blood work, and the mystery continued. The chest X-ray gave us no clues either. I began work thereafter, and would, daily, have the school nurse take my blood pressure. There were a few days where I was sent home. Since my prescription was not helping much, Dr. Knaus sent me to a cardiologist, Scott Harris, who was very sure he could fix the prescription. He prescribed the four medicines I take to this day. He still could not explain why my hypertension was so severe, so he scheduled an MRI, which found a growth on my kidney, which was diagnosed as Renal Cell Carcinoma. This led to a radical right nephrectomy, and a two month recovery. When I returned to work, I found that the side effects of my medications caused me to have very little stamina, and I eventually had to resign my position. Because I lost my insurance, I applied for eligibility for VA health care, and have been very happy with the care I have received. (During my last office visit with Dr. Harris, the cardiologist, I asked why I was still on the BP medications, and he explained that, as far as he could tell, the two very serious conditions that I had discovered in the fall were unrelated, and that he had no good explanation for my hypertension.

A fellow veteran, who trained and served with me, sharing a billet for our year in Vietnam, Dan Ferguson, invited me to visit his family in Toledo, Ohio in 2015. Dan, who is an Agent Orange prostate cancer survivor, asked me if kidney cancer was one of the presumptive conditions. I had no idea what a presumptive condition was, so he and I visited his VSO, who explained that, while kidney cancer was not, that there was recent research that was looking to add four new conditions, including HYPERTENSION. After I returned to Texas, I started researching the presumptive process, and the current state of the science.

After the 2016 NAM update listed all four of the suggested presumptive conditions at the second highest level of confidence, I tried to determine what the next steps in the process would be. The election of 2016 meant there would be a new secretary at the VA, and the announcement of Dr. Shulkin seemed encouraging. Shulkin decided he would need to consider the issue and set November 1, 2017 as the date for his decision. On November 1, I checked the VA

website for an announcement, and waited until quite late, when a rather vague statement appeared. I could not tell what the decision was, nor whether it was good news.

I did ALL the things the VA asks veterans to do. Local sources could not explain what was decided. I contacted the White House Veterans' Hotline four times, and each time was told someone would contact me. No one ever did. The fourth time I called, I was told that no information would be forthcoming. I became aware that there were members of the Senate committee who were also interested in the issue, so I watched for questions during hearings. When all else failed, I filed a FOIA request to try and find out what the VA was planning to do about the four conditions, which was originally denied. I appealed and won, and began receiving documents. Those documents have been made public. They were provided to members of the committee and the press.

The opportunity to testify before this committee, to support the effort to understand the ongoing problems resulting from the use of Agent Orange is greatly appreciated, and I look forward to taking your questions.