

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

**“The Exposure at Qarmat Ali: Did the Army Fail to
Protect U.S. Soldiers Serving in Iraq?”**

**Russell Powell
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Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you for inviting me to testify this afternoon.

My name is Russell Powell and I live in Moundsville, West Virginia. I started my military career in January 1994 with the 82nd Airborne Division as a paratrooper infantry medic. In April 2001, I joined the 1092nd West Virginia Army National Guard as a medic. The 1092nd was deployed to Iraq in March 2003.

While serving in Iraq, I was the battalion medic and Staff Sergeant. In this role, I provided advanced medical care for soldiers on the ground and looked after the welfare of the troops. From April 2003 to June 2003, I was assigned to the Qarmat Ali water treatment plant in Basra, Iraq. In addition to the medical care I provided to my fellow soldiers, I also served on a team that provided security for KBR employees working at the plant by supplying defensive positions and cover fire, if needed.

When my platoon arrived at the plant it was in total disarray and had been vandalized and nearly destroyed. The metal buildings were stripped of everything valuable. The roofs were missing. A building that contained thousands of 100-pound bags of what I know now to be sodium dichromate had its roof stripped off and the top layers of the bags were ripped open, exposing the orange powder to the wind. These bags were spread throughout the facility, both inside and outside the buildings. The bags were often placed at the doorways of the buildings so we had to walk through piles of the

orange powder when we entered and exited the buildings. The soldiers at Qarmat Ali would even use the bags as protection during storms and sit on the bags to eat lunch.

There was a coating of orange-colored powder throughout the facility. At times, it was so thick there were at least two inches of powder on my boots. At that time, neither KBR nor the Army voiced any concerns about what the powder might be. Although we did not know what the powder was, we always noticed a metallic taste in the air, especially after a dust storm. We would also notice the metallic taste if we were walking and kicked up the powder. We all talked about how disgusting the taste was and how it burned our throats.

While I was at Qarmat Ali, I began suffering from severe nosebleeds. My nose would often bleed for 5 to 10 minutes and I had to provide cotton balls to other soldiers suffering from nosebleeds. I began having difficulty breathing and I felt nauseous. Within three days of arriving at the plant in April 2003, I developed rashes on my knuckles, hands, and forearms. I never had any of these problems before working at Qarmat Ali and had been very healthy.

Wind storms were a regular occurrence in Iraq. During my work at Qarmat Ali there were at least ten wind storms. They were like tornadoes blowing through the facility, picking up the orange powder and other debris, and turning day into night. I would see other soldiers coughing up blood into their shirts while trying to protect their faces. After these storms, everyone was coated in orange powder – we looked like orange powdered doughnuts. We would have to dust each other off to get the powder off our clothes. At no time were we offered any kind of protective clothing, masks or respirators by KBR or the Army.

During and after these wind storms, I and many other soldiers and KBR workers had severe nosebleeds, coughed up blood, had difficulty breathing and nausea, and/or experienced a burning sensation in our lungs and throats. After a few weeks of being at the facility, many of the soldiers around me began getting lesions on their hands, arms, faces and in the nostril area.

As a medic, I felt very concerned about the safety and health of the people I was serving with at Qarmat Ali. I questioned one of the KBR workers about the powder and all the related medical problems. He told me that his supervisors at KBR told him not to worry about the powder or our health problems because we must be allergic to sand and dust. I laughed at his explanation because it seemed bogus. After fifteen years working as a medic, I knew there was no way that every one of us could be allergic to sand and dust at the same time -- for the first time -- with such similar symptoms.

Shortly thereafter, there was another severe dust storm. I ate an MRE (meals ready to eat) and my throat and stomach began to burn like nothing I had felt before. My nose began to bleed and I felt nauseous. After this particular storm, I became severely sick and was told that I was too ill to go out on the mission the following day.

I went to the Infirmary the following day. After a brief examination, the doctor indicated that I just had "flu-like" symptoms and I should be fine. He did not explain why my face had turned cherry red or why I had been experiencing these symptoms since my arrival at Qarmat Ali.

Approximately thirty minutes later, my condition became much worse and I passed out. A couple of soldiers found me in a covered bunker and said I was delirious and had coughed up blood. I do not remember anything until waking up the following

day in the Kuwait Soldiers Hospital. My face and lips were burning, blistered and oozing pus, and it looked as though I had been burned by a hot iron. My throat was sore to the point that I could not swallow anything. I was in the hospital for almost a week getting antibiotics intravenously. The doctors had no explanation for why I was sick or why my face and lips were burnt so badly.

The day I was released from the hospital I returned to Qarmat Ali with my platoon. Upon my return to Qarmat Ali, numerous soldiers came to me complaining of the same symptoms I was experiencing, including intense stomach and gastrointestinal problems. I prescribed antibiotics for those soldiers, but the symptoms persisted. Many people were sick at Qarmat Ali: the National Guard soldiers, the KBR workers, and the local Iraqi nationals. I remember one particularly bad case: Sergeant Michael Helmick had developed a perforation in his septum, which means he had a hole through from one nostril to the other.

I have never, in all my years with the military and serving abroad, seen this many soldiers experiencing symptoms with no explanation. I felt very frustrated that I could not help them or myself.

At the end of June 2003, the Indiana National Guard relieved us of our duties and our unit moved into northern Iraq. The nosebleeds subsided, but I was still nauseous every day.

During the time I was serving in Iraq, I was never informed that our West Virginia platoon had been exposed to sodium dichromate while serving at Qarmat Ali. The Army never told us before the mission that there might be any risk from chemical exposure. As a medic, had I known the true nature of the risk, I would have made sure

that everyone had appropriate personal protective equipment. Unfortunately, many of the soldiers who served at Qarmat Ali are paying the consequences for the Army's failure to warn and protect the troops.

After leaving Iraq in April 2004, I went to the VA Clinic in Clarksburg, West Virginia to talk to the doctors about my skin rashes and lesions, stomach problems, and nose bleeds. The doctors were unable to determine what the cause of these problems might be. Five years passed before I received a letter from the West Virginia National Guard stating we were exposed to sodium dichromate while serving at Qarmat Ali.

When I received the letter in 2009, I took it to the VA to show my doctor. He told me that he was not familiar with sodium dichromate and its health consequences. Since that time, my doctors have performed some research about this exposure to determine the effects on the human body. The VA doctors believe that this exposure could be causing my health problems. The Army held a town hall meeting in West Virginia for the soldiers in March 2009, but I do not know why they even bothered. The representatives from the Army just told us to go to the VA and did not answer our questions.

My symptoms have not changed since my service in Iraq. As I sit here today, a 34-year old veteran of the 82nd Airborne and the West Virginia National Guard, I cannot take a full breath. I can no longer coach my sons in Little League. I can no longer serve on the SWAT team at our local correctional facility. I go to almost weekly doctor's appointments for my various medical conditions and I must deal with the conflicts that occur when I have to miss work and ask for additional sick time to address my health problems.

I am testifying today because it is disheartening to know that I may not be able to see my sons graduate from high school and college, get married, or hold my grandchildren because of this completely avoidable exposure.

I would like to thank you for your consideration of this tragic exposure at Qarmat Ali and the impact it has had on the lives of many West Virginia veterans. I urge my fellow veterans to get registered, go to the VA to document their exposure, and demand appropriate and effective health care.