

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

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

**Rocky Bixby
Former Staff Sergeant
Oregon Army National Guard**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify today to share with you my story and the story of others from the Oregon Army National Guard.

My name is Rocky Bixby, and I live in Hillsboro, Oregon. I served as a Staff Sergeant in the Oregon Army National Guard commanding a squad of eight fellow soldiers. Before my service with the Oregon Guard, I served in the U.S. Marine Corps for four years. Currently, I am a public safety officer at the Oregon Health & Science University. I have worked in law enforcement as a federal police officer, a state police officer, and a county deputy.

My Oregon Army National Guard unit was deployed to Iraq in February 2003, and my squad was one of four squads that provided guard duty for KBR contractors during the spring and summer of 2003. We rotated through the Qarmat Ali water treatment facility from April to June 2003. I helped to coordinate the transfer of security responsibilities at Qarmat Ali from the Oregon Guard to the Indiana Army National Guard in June 2003. Our security work involved guarding KBR workers, following them in and out of buildings, which required moving throughout the site. Sometimes I was there for several hours a day and sometimes I was there all day.

Each morning we received regular briefings from KBR about our security work. The only hazards identified at the Qarmat Ali facility were related to developments in the

war. No one from KBR or the Army ever told us about hazardous materials at the Qarmat Ali facility. We spent a great deal of time with KBR employees traveling to and from the site. There were countless opportunities to communicate with us about environmental hazards.

The water treatment plant was in ruins when we arrived in April 2003. I had never seen a plant in such disarray. The buildings were a mess. They were stripped down, wires were pulled out, and equipment was missing. Enormous water pipes were lying all over the ground.

The orangish-red color of the sand at Qarmat Ali was especially memorable. There was orange powder all over the plant -- it was caked thick and was crusted over the sand. The wind constantly blew at the site. Sand, dust and the orange powder constantly got on our skin, in our eyes, and in our mouths and noses.

While I was working at Qarmat Ali, I developed a cough and shortness of breath. I was told by a medic that my respiratory problems were caused by the desert conditions; no one ever said anything about an exposure to sodium dichromate. I did not learn about our exposure to this horrible chemical until almost six years later when I received a letter from the Oregon National Guard in early 2009.

Unfortunately, I continue to experience health problems today. The persistent cough that developed continues to bother me, and I often feel like I need to cough. I am often out of breath, and my breathing is labored; it feels like someone is standing on my chest.

Before my service in Iraq, I was physically fit. I used to run several miles without much effort. During high school, I ran track, cross country, wrestled, and played football.

I am a lifetime non-smoker. But now I have trouble walking from my house to my car. I simply run out of breath.

I am aware of the health problems that some of the other soldiers who served at Qarmat Ali are suffering. Sadly, we have already lost one Oregon Guard soldier to leukemia, who was only 21 years old. I'm concerned about the risk of cancer from my exposure to sodium dichromate. I have a family and want to protect and support my wife and children. Others report breathing problems, rashes, and problems with digestion and acid reflux. Larry Roberta, another soldier in the Oregon Guard, remembers that the air tasted like metal whenever we visited the plant. Unfortunately, Larry ingested some of the orange dust while eating after a wind storm. Some of the orange powder had fallen onto his chicken sandwich. In July 2003, shortly after his exposure, Larry went to the doctor because of a sharp pain in his chest and again in October and November 2003 because of continued pain and severe coughing fits. I have spoken with Larry and he describes that his breathing problems are so severe that he feels like he is drowning. Larry also had to have surgery to repair his esophagus and stomach.

In Oregon, our state legislature has started a process to set up a fund for sick soldiers who served at Qarmat Ali and are now struggling with health problems. But, as you know, we are living through tough economic times in Oregon, and the proposed funds will not be enough to cover the costs of our medical treatment. We need more support from the government to help face our current and future medical needs.

One thing that really bothers me is that this exposure was preventable. I understand that KBR was responsible for the environmental assessment of the site and for clean up. They were paid for that work, and we were dispatched to guard and protect the

KBR employees so that they could do their job at the site. We could have used protective gear, which is supposed to be used in a toxic environment. When the war began, we were issued protective suits in case we encountered chemical weapons. If KBR had told us about the toxic nature of the chemical laying all around the plant at Qarmat Ali, we would have used this protective gear and we would not have been exposed to sodium dichromate.

While we were deployed in Iraq, no one in the Army told us about the exposure at Qarmat Ali or the toxic nature of the chemical. No one tested Oregon Guard soldiers during or after the exposure. Even though some of the Oregon Guard soldiers were having health problems when we returned to the U.S., many of us did not take the time to write anything on our release papers because we did not want to prolong our service by triggering a medical hold.

After receiving the letter from the Oregon National Guard informing me that I had been exposed to sodium dichromate, I finally had a chest x-ray at the VA a few weeks ago. The doctors discovered that I have a node on my lung. Chairman Dorgan, if it were not for your hearing last summer, I would never have learned that I was exposed to sodium dichromate, and I would not be receiving this follow-up care.

I came here today to share my story to protect my family and to do my part to take care of my squad and the other soldiers exposed to sodium dichromate at Qarmat Ali. I thank you all for inviting me here to testify. I appreciate that you are trying to help us right this wrong. My hope is that your actions will help the soldiers who have been exposed – and prevent future exposures.