

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

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Mr. Chairman, I am honored to be testifying before the Democratic Policy Committee today. My name is Glen Bootay, and I live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I signed up to enlist in the Army on September 12, 2001, the day after 9/11. I felt compelled to join the military to defend my country. I was in perfect health when I deployed to Kuwait in November 2002 with the 3rd Infantry Division of the U.S. Army. As a Combat Engineer, in addition to combat operations, my duties included visiting various power and water plants to evaluate structural problems. I served at Qarmat Ali in early April 2003 after my unit had secured the Baghdad Airport.

My mission, along with seven other members of the unit, was to perform an infrastructure assessment of the Qarmat Ali water treatment plant. As soon as we arrived, we saw orange powder on the ground throughout the plant. My engineering squad didn't note the powder on our assessment of the plant because we didn't know what it was. I didn't know about my exposure to sodium dichromate until this July when a friend read about the exposure at Qarmat Ali in a newspaper article.

While in Iraq, I visited a lot of sites, but I remember the Qarmat Ali plant specifically because when my unit arrived, the site was in complete disarray. Our job was to assess what repairs should be made, but we ended up recommending that the Army build a new plant because it would have taken too much time and money to clean up the mess and fix the machinery. We spent approximately three days and two nights at the plant, sleeping outside on the ground.

I remember seeing the orange powder all around us at Qarmat Ali. Even my mother remembers that I called her and told her about the orange powder because I had never seen anything like it before. But I had no reason to think it was toxic and our orders were to perform an assessment of the infrastructure of the plant, not the health risks.

While at Qarmat Ali, I started to suffer from nasal congestion and headaches. I remember that the air tasted like metal, like I had a mouth full of pennies. After I returned from Iraq, I was never contacted by the Army about the potential exposure at Qarmat Ali. I was unaware that I had been exposed to a toxic chemical, but my health problems continued to get worse. I began vomiting up to 20 times a day and I couldn't keep any solid food down. My headaches continued. The point of origin of my illness was while I was in Iraq.

I sought treatment several times at the VA in Georgia and complained of vomiting and severe headaches. The VA's response to me was "just deal with it." I felt abandoned and did not know what to do, but I did know I was in real trouble. By this point, I had lost 25 pounds and I was furious at the VA's failure to take my illness seriously. I decided to see a doctor outside the VA system, so I visited the Mayo Clinic in Florida.

At the Mayo Clinic, doctors told me that if had I stayed at the VA for care, I likely would have died. My body was not getting enough nutrients and I was very weak. A feeding tube was inserted and numerous tests were performed.

I returned home to Pennsylvania to be near my family and was hospitalized multiple times. After extensive research and multiple tests including spinal taps, doctors discovered and began treating an antibody that is attacking my autonomic and central nervous systems. My doctors have always questioned whether I was exposed to something toxic in Iraq, but until now

we haven't had the answer. I am alive today because the doctors at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and Mayo Clinic did not give up.

I have constant headaches, constant chest pain with skipped heart beats, shortness of breath due to the lower edge of my lungs being collapsed, extreme fatigue, periodic skin rashes, inability to sweat, periodic vomiting without nausea, loss of feeling on left side and torso, high blood sugar, episodes of kidney stones, episodes of blacking out and short term memory loss. I have been on two forms of chemotherapy for over two years and take up to 35 medications a day. I have to walk with a cane or a walker and I am unable to work. All of this and I'm only 30 years old.

The VA has refused to cover the costs of my health treatments at the Mayo Clinic and other non-VA hospitals. I have also been denied benefits. I am still waiting for a decision from an appeal hearing from December 2008. I am fighting for my life and desperately need these benefits. But even if I am awarded the benefits at this point, I wonder if I will live long enough to receive them.

I believe my battle with illness would have been very different if I had been told by the Army that I was exposed to sodium dichromate at Qarmat Ali. My doctor now believes my medical problems are a direct result of my exposure to sodium dichromate at Qarmat Ali.

I am testifying today because I believe every soldier exposed at Qarmat Ali, whether in the National Guard or on active duty, should be told about the health risks of sodium dichromate. There could be others out there struggling just like me to figure out the source of their symptoms but have no idea that they were exposed. The VA should pay serious attention to sodium dichromate exposure and give soldiers the care they deserve. The VA must be alert and responsive to soldiers with symptoms that may not be characteristic of a known disease.