

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

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

Sam Schultz, E5 Squad Leader

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee.

My name is Sam Schultz. I am from Southern Indiana.

As a nine-year veteran of the Indiana Army National Guard I have been on deployments to peacekeeping and combat zones in Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, serving with the 1-151 and 1-152 Infantry Battalions. I was a team leader in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, from February 2003 to February 2004, and a heavy weapons squad leader in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

I joined the Indiana Army National Guard in April 1997, and was discharged in April, 2005.

I was in Qarmat Ali for six to twelve hours daily from the end of May to the beginning of September, while performing my duties as contractor security in support of Task Force RIO, during my time in Iraq.

My job there was to ensure the health, safety, and well being of the team and lead the team during combat and security exercises.

I did not find out about the exposure at Qarmat Ali until I was tested in October 2003, which was the end of my time there. The military told us to not visit the site after we learned of the exposure, but we still had to on several occasions. I did not find out about the extent of the issues we faced as a result of the exposure until five years later, when the Indiana Army National Guard sent certified letters stating we had been exposed to sodium dichromate.

At the Qarmat Ali Water Treatment Plant, I remember the air was full of dust, and the wind was constantly blowing. There were piles of orange dust, but they didn't particularly stand out because the entire site was covered with the orange and yellow dust. At times the dust was so thick in the air it was impossible to breathe or see so we wore traditional Iraqi head scarves wrapped around our face and the Army issued safety glasses as our only protection. We were never issued the proper protective equipment to effectively mitigate the risks.

The entire site was contaminated, although we had no idea that it was at the time. The locals were not comfortable working at the site. They were skeptical of the site.

The storage shed had broken bags of sodium dichromate piled up with lots of loose powder exposed to the wind. The pile was several feet deep, covering an area about fifteen to twenty feet outside of the three-sided storage building. The shed was big enough to drive a large tractor in to scoop up the material.

Now, I understand what the exposure did to me, and to others.

I have recurring debilitating headaches, burning lungs, memory loss, heartburn and lethargy on a daily basis, diarrhea weekly, monthly sinus infections, and skin lesions that cleared up, but left scarring.

These symptoms began in Iraq, but the doctors in Iraq reassured us that we were sick just because we were in Iraq and in contact with contaminants. They said as soon as we left Iraq, the symptoms would go away. In short, the doctors treated it like a mild reaction.

That was not the truth. Other members of my group have experienced the same symptoms, or worse. Two soldiers had to be medivaced out. One American soldier's nose was literally deteriorating, and he was sent to Germany for treatment. Another, a British Soldier, had the same problem, but his nose was almost non-existent by the time he left. He also had developed boils on his skin that resembled golf balls. The soldiers in my unit developed severe pulmonary and gastrointestinal problems and had to be treated by the British military hospital in Basra and the U.S. army hospital in Kuwait. We also suffered from skin lesions that we treated ourselves.

As a soldier, I know I'm tough. I rarely complained during my time in the service and readily accepted the challenges we faced as part of our job. But the response to this contamination was horrific.

KBR's answer was to spray the site with water, which didn't work because it dried up very quickly, and the contaminants blew in the wind again covering everything with a thick coating of the orange dust. They then sprayed the site with raw oil which also dissipated quickly.

Finally, we were pulled from the site in October, and given a new mission.

The testing for exposure to sodium dichromate began after we left the site. We were sent to Kuwait for a day and were told it was just for a physical. The visit lasted about 1.5 hours, and many tests were done. I am not a doctor and I have no idea what those tests were, but I do remember a lung function test, a blood test, and urinalysis.

While in the doctor's office, my nose started to bleed profusely for 10 minutes. The doctor told me it was simply because of the dry air, though I never had a nosebleed from dry air like that in my life.

I never got the results of any of those tests from the Army. We were simply told that we flunked the physical, and would need to get re-tested in 2-4 weeks. We received no answers and any questions were downplayed by the medical team.

When I was retested, the doctors told me my elevated chromium levels were the result of "Hydroxycut." But I wasn't taking hydroxycut and I do not know anyone who was.

I signed a piece of paper acknowledging that I had been retested, and that I swore I didn't take Hydroxycut.

I still have no answers about my poor health, and I feel like the government and nation I served is letting me fall through the cracks.

I want to make it clear that I don't blame the doctors and nurses at the VA, who do all they can do, given the resources they have. Unfortunately, the medical staff are so overloaded that it means less time focusing on me and my issues, and therefore, fewer answers about my exposure.

The leaders in Washington, DC need to focus on helping those of us that are sick from chemical exposure.

Most of all, there needs to be an open and honest line of communication for all those who have been poisoned, and who may be in the future. I feel that this entire time, the burden of proof to prove exposure symptoms should not be placed on the backs of our veterans.

It is obvious that these symptoms are caused by our exposure. But for a long time, all I got, and my men got, was a run around. We need honest answers and straight talk from the military and the VA.

I sincerely hope these hearings help prevent hazardous exposures in the future and encourage better care for our veterans.