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MEDIA RELEASE - 17 December 2002

NAVY VIETNAM VETERANS DRANK DEADLY COCKTAIL

The National President of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, Brian McKenzie, said today that Vietnam Veterans who served in the Australian Navy in Vietnam waters were more likely than not, ingesting a lethal cocktail comprising dioxins, Agents Orange and Blue, via drinking water.

Mr McKenzie was commenting on a recently released study report by The National Research Centre for Environmental Toxicology, Queensland Health Scientific Services which conducted research on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The aim of the study was to investigate the potential for exposure of sailors to contaminants via drinking water

Overall the findings of the study demonstrates that evaporation distillation equipment used onboard our Navy and Army small ships does not remove, but in fact enriches certain contaminants such as dioxins in drinking water.

'In 1997 a study report of Australian Vietnam Veterans revealed a greater than expected mortality level, with the highest overall levels of mortality among Royal Australian Navy personnel – and we now know why', Mr McKenzie said

Mr McKenzie said; Many of our ships, while anchored in Vietnam waters, took on water for distillation, which was contaminated by the spaying of mangroves with deadly dioxins, which due to an ineffective distillation process poisoned veterans with cancer causing dioxins.

Those soldiers and airmen who travelled to and from on ships such as HMAS Sydney, Escort ships and other sea transport would also have been exposed to this deadly cocktail.

The majority of our sailors could not have been exposed to overhead spaying or other direct contacts with dioxins.

The findings of this study, I am sure will cause the Department of Veterans Affairs to carry out modifications to some administrative processes, to ensure that Veterans and their widows affected have a clear passage to their rightful compensation, Mr McKenzie said.

Mr McKenzie said; the findings of this study may also have implications for current serving members of Royal Australian Navy and the wider community.

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The Hon. De-Anne Kelly MP

Minister for Veterans' Affairs
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Former Minister for Veterans' Affairs

Media Release

Wednesday 18 December 2002

VA169

VIETNAM WATER CONTAMINATION STUDY RELEASED

The Federal Government will ask the Repatriation Medical Authority to review its principles for veteran compensation claims for exposure to dioxins, after a study found that Royal Australian Navy and some Australian Army personnel serving in Vietnam may have been exposed to dioxins through contaminated drinking water.

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, Danna Vale, said she had also asked the Department of Veterans' Affairs to undertake further research into the study findings, using the results in the current Vietnam Veterans Mortality and Cancer Incidence Study.

"The Government commissioned the study in response to concerns from Navy veterans following the 1997 Vietnam Veterans Mortality Study, which showed an elevated mortality rate among RAN personnel, particularly RAN Logistic Support personnel," the Minister said.

"Herbicide exposure through the evaporative water distillation processes used on ships while in Vietnamese waters was identified as one potential cause. Tests by the National Research Centre on Environmental Toxicology have now shown that dioxins can pass through the evaporative distillation process.

"If contaminated water were used in this process, the study indicates it is likely that the consumption of drinking water exposed personnel to dioxin levels that exceeded safe levels proposed by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

"This is a matter of concern to the Government in fulfilling our commitment to care for those who served during the Vietnam War. It potentially affects not only Navy veterans but those who served on Army small ships or travelled as passengers from Vietnam on HMAS Sydney."

Minister Vale said she had received the assurance of the Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Chris Ritchie, that it was unlikely that the problems that may have been experienced in Vietnam would occur now.

"The majority of RAN ships are now fitted with alternative desalination units and, in any case, current operating procedures require that, under ordinary circumstances, production of water for domestic use is not to be undertaken in estuaries, or in seawater which is likely to be contaminated."

Navy continues to refine its potable water standards and to assess the effectiveness of its desalination equipment.

Minister Vale said all Australians who served in Vietnam were already entitled to treatment and compensation for war-caused conditions related to exposure to dioxins. She encouraged veterans who believed they might need assistance for such conditions to contact the Department of Veterans' Affairs on 133 254.

"These results may have implications for the Statements of Principles that govern determination of the links between wartime service and these conditions," Minister Vale said.

"I have asked that the study findings be referred to the independent Repatriation Medical Authority to consider whether any changes are necessary to these Principles," Minister Vale said.

"The findings will be taken into account in the latest mortality study of Vietnam veterans, which is also investigating rates of cancer among Australians who served in Vietnam.

"Health research is a vital part of meeting the health care needs of our veterans. Considerable effort has gone into researching the health of Vietnam veterans in particular and these findings add

significantly to the scientific knowledge available to help provide the support they need.

"This research has always been conducted with strong support from the veteran community and I would like to express my appreciation to the many Vietnam veterans who assisted this study," the Minister said.

"The findings of the study are available on the Department of Veterans' Affairs website at www.dva.gov.au."

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