



T H E M I L I T A R Y C O A L I T I O N

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September 19, 2018

The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans'
Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester,

The Military Coalition, representing over 5.5 million current and former service members, veterans and their families and survivors, is writing in response to Secretary Wilkie's September 6, 2018, letter regarding H.R. 299, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2017. The letter is inaccurate and misstates key facts. You deserve to be fully informed and the Veterans deserve to be heard on this important matter.

Secretary Wilkie alleges there is no scientific evidence to prove exposures and finds fault in the Australian study on the same topic. This argument, however, ignores the fact that the issue at hand is not a science problem, but rather a record keeping problem. In 2011, the Institute of Medicine report cited by Secretary Wilkie stated: "Indeed, the committee believes that given the lack of measurements taken during the war and the almost 40 years since the war, this will never be a matter of science but instead a matter of policy." This is precisely why Congress must act on the policy.

Secretary Wilkie asks for a delay in the legislation until the Vietnam Era Health Retrospective Observational Study is completed by NIH. Please note the original estimated completion date of this study was September 2018, and it has since been delayed until "late 2019." There is no guarantee it will not be delayed again. Moreover, that study is not specific to Blue Water Navy Veterans. Instead, it is a survey of the general health of all veterans of the Vietnam Era and includes Blue Water Navy Veterans as "Other Outcome Measures" with an emphasis on the health of their offspring. The collected data will be compared to U.S. residents who never served in the military. As the study is presented, there is no designed attempt to statistically confirm exposure below, at, or above those who served on the ground or on Brown Water vessels. As such, the study has no value in determining whether a presumption of exposure for Blue Water Navy Veterans is justified.

Secretary Wilkie claims that "disabled veterans would be negatively and disproportionately impacted by modified funding fees for VA-guaranteed home loans." This is partly false and totally misleading because it fails to make clear that all disabled veterans (not only those who are rated "permanent and total") are exempt from fees for loans below the "jumbo loan" limit, currently ranging between \$453,100 and \$679,650 depending upon the geographic area. VA failed to clarify the types of VA Home Loans provided which would more accurately inform the impact. On the VA website we found that in 2017 the grand total of loans guaranteed by the VA was 740,339 with an average loan amount of \$254,870 – well below the jumbo loan range noted above, leaving us to believe the jumbo loans would be by far the exception relative to the population. Congress should not accept VA's speculative and unsupported assertion.

Secretary Wilkie asserts that the cost of the bill will be \$5.5 billion, which is dramatically higher than the May 15, 2018, CBO estimate of \$894 million. Secretary Wilkie takes issue with the number of veterans and survivors the CBO estimated would be eligible for benefits. We respectfully assert that VA has had decades to provide accurate information to CBO regarding this issue. VA's post hoc rationalization that the entire bill should be abandoned and Vietnam veterans should suffer further on this basis is placing the burden on the veteran for VA's failure to communicate with CBO. We urge Congress to rely on the CBO estimate as we have negotiated with Congress in good faith based on that estimate to find a solution for these ailing veterans.

Finally, Secretary Wilkie makes the argument that the presumption of exposure should not be extended to these veterans because it would cause a backlog in claims processing and would jeopardize the progress the agency has made in getting its workload under control. This argument is akin to the Secretary positing that taking care of elderly, disabled veterans would be too much work, so it would be helpful to VA if Congress would instead continue to deny these veterans the benefits. This rationale is an illegitimate basis upon which to oppose this, or any, veteran benefit legislation.

It is undisputed that these veterans are suffering and have suffered for decades, with significant strain and sacrifice by their caregivers. There is no more time to waste. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your staff to further discuss these issues in depth. Thank you for all that you do for our nation's veterans.

Respectfully,

The Military Coalition
(Signatures enclosed)


Air Force Association

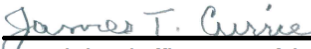

Air Force Sergeants Association


AMVETS


Army Aviation Association of America

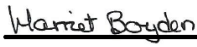

AMSUS, the Society of Federal Health Professionals


Association of the United States Navy



Commissioned Officers Assn. of the US Public Health Service, Inc


CWOA, US Coast Guard


Fleet Reserve Association

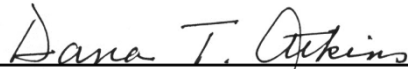

Gold Star Wives of America

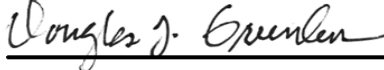

Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America


Jewish War Veterans of the USA


Marine Corps League


Marine Corps Reserve Association


Military Officers Association of America

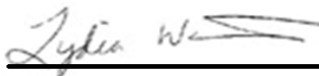

Military Order of the Purple Heart

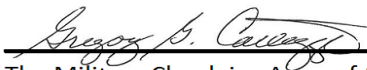

National Guard Assn. of the US


National Military Family Association

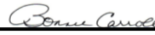

Naval Enlisted Reserve Assn.


Non Commissioned Officers Assn. of the United States of America



Service Women's Action Network


The Military Chaplains Assn. of the USA


The Retired Enlisted Association


Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors


USCG Chief Petty Officers Assn.


US Army Warrant Officers Assn.


Veterans of Foreign Wars of the US