

17 February 1995
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Hello, Veterans of the 816th Chemical Company: *James Jones*

Enclosed are some recent articles that describe claim settlements by the VA for exposure to mustard gas. The VA is now recognizing that exposure to mustard gas and other poison gasses caused damage to human tissue and the VA is giving compensation. They also say that the veteran gets "the benefit of the doubt." That is a new and generous provision of the law.

What are your thoughts on the article about veteran James Hammond, who had one large drop of mustard gas put on his arm in basic training? He also says that all the recruits had to walk into a tent and get the feel of the gas before they put their masks on.

I had basic in the Army Air Force at Shepherd Field, Wichita Falls, Texas. We went into a tent full of tear gas without masks and it was very unpleasant.

If James Hammond got 10% disability for one drop of mustard on his arm each of the 816th Veterans should receive more than 10%. I know that the Veterans of the 816th Chemical Co. will not have to prove that they were exposed to mustard gas. See the enclosed article about me. 10% Compensation is about \$89.00 per month. Go for it; you certainly deserve it!

The DAV (Disabled American Veterans) is familiar with claims for exposure to mustard gas. Probably other veteran groups are as well.

Here are my thoughts on all of this:

1. Take the article in this letter about James Hammond and the one about me (I was in the 816th Chem Co in 1945 in India), and go to the closest DAV National Service Officer. File a claim for lung damage, such as COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease).
2. Take your Army Discharge and any thing else you have, such as pictures of mustard gas bombs or phosgene or CC bombs.
3. Remember you can get back-up letters from all of us that you were exposed to mustard gas.
4. The present situation is very favorable for any Toxic Gas Handler of WWII to get the "benefit of the doubt" from the VA. They are accepting the fact that poison gas was produced and sent to War Theaters around the world and that GI's were working in gas dumps.
5. Get the word out to everyone in the 816th to file a claim and we should get the word out to the personnel in the 771st Chemical Co. and any other that you can think of. This letter has gone only to the current list of the 816th.

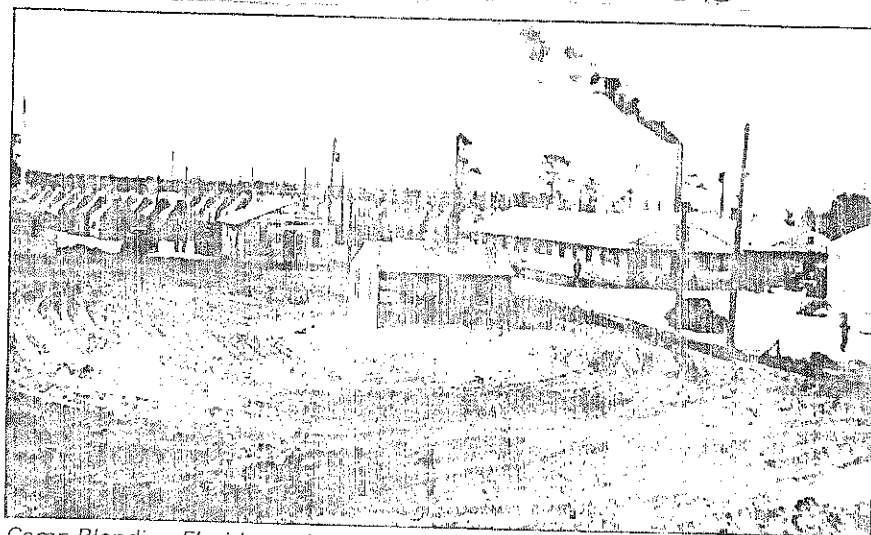
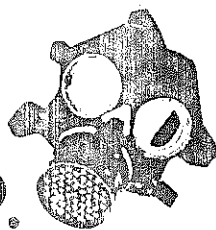
We have the VA on our side, and who handled more poison gas bombs than the vets of the 816th?

10% Disability is \$89.00 per month. I believe that each of you will get 30% to 50% rating. You get the "benefit of the doubt" and you deserve it!

If I can help any of you in any way with your claim, please call or write me.

Sincerely Clyde Priddy

VA Extends Mustard Gas Benefits to Veteran's Buddies



Camp Blanding Florida, at the beginning of World War II. (National Archives)

As is often the case, when DAV National Service Officers (NSOs) help one veteran win a disability claim, many others share in the victory.

For Army veteran James F. Hammond, winning a three-year battle to get compensation for injuries caused by mustard gas exposure in secret training exercises during World War II, it was the final victory of the war. And in winning his claim, Mr. Hammond chalked one up for all his buddies who participated in the tests at Camp Blanding, Fla.

Mr. Hammond has suffered through four and a half decades of chronic bronchitis, repeated bouts of pneumonia and other respiratory problems, as well as laryngitis and recurrent eye problems. But it wasn't until 1991 that he finally became convinced that something had caused his problems.

His first realizations came after reading news stories about other veterans who had gone through secret mustard gas testing during the war and who were filing disability claims with the VA. "The government was admitting for the first time that these tests had gone on," he said.

Secrecy Places Burden of Proof on Veterans

That's when Mr. Hammond went to the DAV National Service Office in Pittsburgh for help in filing his claim. As NSO Supervisor Daniel D. Barry recalls, there wasn't anything about the mustard gas

"It's been a long haul, but it's been worth it. I want to encourage all the other guys out there who were exposed, whether they filed a claim already or not, to hang in there..."

exposure in Mr. Hammond's service record, because of wartime secrecy. Consequently, Mr. Hammond had to prove his case more than 50 years after the fact. Much of the evidence presented to the VA regional office consisted of "buddy statements," which corroborated Mr. Hammond's account of the mustard gas tests.

Mr. Hammond's experiences, no doubt, are similar to those of countless others who were duty bound to subject themselves to the harmful effects of chemical agents but only later discovered just how damaging those experiments were. And because it has taken more than half a century for the government even to admit that American troops had been put at risk, veterans have the added burden of proving their cases without any official documentation in their service records.

Mr. Hammond left college to join the Army in 1942, soon after the U.S. entered

the war. In early 1943, he was sent to Camp Blanding for training as a member of the 30th Quartermaster Company with the 30th Infantry Division, the "Old Hickory Division."

As part of routine field training exercises, Mr. Hammond's unit underwent poison gas training that included exposure to mustard gas. The training involved the men first receiving one or two drops of mustard gas on an arm.

Scars Still Visible After 50 Years

"It immediately caused blisters that later welled up to the size of half dollars," Mr. Hammond recalled in a published interview.

More than 50 years later, the scars left by the mustard gas blisters are still visible on Mr. Hammond's arm.

"Then they took us to a good-sized tent. It was hot and humid that day, and they had the gas in the tent," Mr. Hammond said. "We were told not to put our gas masks on until we were told. We went in and it was hazy inside." This allowed the men to get the taste and feel of the gas.

"Guys started going down. Some started throwing up," Mr. Hammond said. "I was coughing and my eyes were burning. Then we were ordered to put our gas masks on, clear them, and get out [of the tent]. We were sent back to our units without a shower and still wearing our impregnated fatigues. I think that was a big mistake."

Mr. Hammond said his superiors at Blanding told the men to keep the training exercise to themselves because the tests were secret. Indeed, there was no mention of that test in Mr. Hammond's military service record.

That brought him face to face with VA requirements that he prove both physical injury and his presence at the tests — more than 50 years after the fact.

Mr. Hammond said he owes a great deal to the help he received from NSO Barry and Erie County VA Director Bill Hill.

After filing a claim in the fall of 1991 for service connection for residuals of mustard gas exposure and undergoing a battery of medical tests at the VA, Mr. Hammond was notified that he did not qualify for disability compensation because tests failed to show evidence of bronchitis symptoms.

Mr. Hill then notified the VA in Washington, D.C., that the determination was in error, noting that the government doctor's diagnosis specifically read, "Clinically, [Mr. Hammond] has the symptoms of chronic bronchitis. Refer to lab tests."

DAV Requests Administrative Review

On Sept. 22, 1992, the DAV presented Mr. Hammond's case before the hearing officer at the VA regional office in Pittsburgh and requested an administrative decision, NSO Barry said.

VA officials at the hearing then acknowledged Mr. Hammond's disability, but said in order to qualify for compensation, he still had to prove he was subjected to mustard gas tests "because the Army didn't keep records of it."

Mr. Hammond also was told that he would need sworn statements from fellow soldiers. For Mr. Hammond, the task seemed like "Mission Impossible." But in the end, he was almost as surprised as the military.

After sending a letter to the 30th Division's newsletter asking for help, Mr. Hammond received replies and so-called buddy statements from nine former comrades, most of whom had gone through the gas tests with him.

Those who described the training process all gave similar details. One letter from a former sergeant in the 30th Division's chemical warfare section described the training process from an instructor's perspective. He stated that to the best of his knowledge, all units of the 30th Division went through the training. He also said that neither the instructors nor

the trainees wore protective clothing.

Another letter was from one of the company officers who described taking his men through the poison gas training.

Documents provided by the Department of Defense (DoD), which list potential chemical and biological exposure sites, refer to Camp Blanding as a training area but provide no other information about it. Another DoD report, "Service Records of Chemical Warfare Units, World War II," reveals that several chemical warfare related companies were assigned to Camp Blanding during World War II, any or all of which could have been involved in the mustard gas training there.

Compensation Made Retroactive

Granted, the evidence presented in support of Mr. Hammond's claim "is all circumstantial," noted VA Compensation and Pension Service Director J. Gary Hickman in his administrative review decision. Although there is "no official confirmation of any one individual's exposure to mustard gas," he noted, "there is no documentation, official or otherwise, which refutes the veteran's statements."

As a result of the administrative review, Mr. Hammond was awarded service connection for bronchitis at a 10 percent evaluation retroactive to Aug. 22, 1991,

the date of his initial claim.

DAV National Service Director Kenneth D. Wolfe said Mr. Hickman's ruling is a welcome application of federal regulations that direct the VA to resolve all doubt in favor of the veteran.

"Mr. Hickman's willingness to use the authority that the law gives him is precisely what is called for at all levels of the VA," Mr. Wolfe said. "If more people at the VA — from the regional office on up — would exercise their legal authority to resolve some of these claims, veterans wouldn't have to wait years to get the compensation they deserve for illness and injury resulting from their military service."

The VA action in the Hammond case also extends the presumption of exposure to mustard gas to all members of the 30th Quartermaster Company who participated in training exercises at Camp Blanding in early 1943, said NSO Barry.

As Mr. Hammond noted, "It's been a long haul, but it's been worth it. I want to encourage all the other guys out there who were exposed, whether they filed a claim already or not, to hang in there and work with the VA and guys like Bill Hill and Dan Barry."

Veterans who believe they were exposed to mustard gas as a result of their military service are urged to contact their DAV National Service Office.

VA Finalizes Mustard Gas Compensation Eligibility

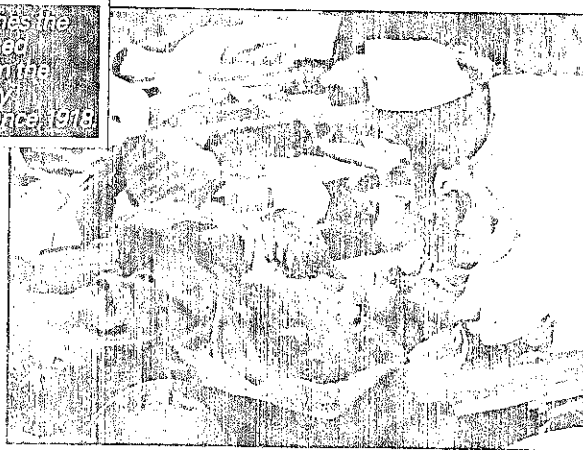
Final regulations published in the *Federal Register* extend compensation eligibility for mustard gas and Lewisite exposure to cover any verified full-body exposure during military service. This includes veterans exposed to mustard gas under battlefield conditions in World War I, those present at the German air raid on the harbor of Bari, Italy, during World War II, and those engaged in manufacturing and handling vesicant (blistering) agents during their military service. Under previous regulations eligibility was limited to veterans who participated in field or chamber tests of such chemical agents during World War II.

The new regulations make veterans exposed to mustard gas eligible for service-connected compensation for the following chronic forms of cancer: nasopharyngeal, laryngeal, lung (except mesothelioma, which is typically linked to asbestos exposure), and squamous cell carcinoma of the skin, as well as acute non-lymphocytic leukemia.

Veterans exposed to Lewisite could be granted service connection for chronic forms of laryngitis, bronchitis, emphysema, asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

The VA had already been paying compensation to veter-

A nurse bathes the eyes of gassed soldiers from the 82nd Infantry Division, France, 1918.



ans who were exposed to significant levels of mustard gas and who suffer from laryngitis, bronchitis, emphysema, asthma, conjunctivitis, keratitis, and corneal opacities.

Eligible veterans who suffer from one or more of these conditions and have not filed a compensation claim are urged to contact their DAV National Service Office.

Claims filed by veterans that were denied under previous regulations will be reviewed under the new rule. Claims that have been on hold pending publication of the final regulations will now be processed.