

Karshi Khanabad (K2) Contamination Hearing
Scott W. Welsch
National Oversight Committee
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Witness Statement One

Hello, I am Chief Warrant Officer 2 (Retired) Scott W. Welsch of Lenexa, Kansas. I was on ground at Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan, otherwise known as K2 from July 9, 2002 to March 16, 2003, and was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in 2013. Thank you, Chairman Lynch and distinguished members of the Committee for giving me the opportunity to represent my fellow K2 veterans. I will describe the toxic conditions that we faced there, and the devastating effect that our exposure has had and will continue to have on our health. I will ask that after almost twenty years of inaction, Congress, DoD, and VA do the right thing: take care of K2 veterans and their survivors.

I was deployed to K2 in the early onset of the War on Terror; we arrived to the base in a combat landing in the middle of the night. Our C-17 landed in darkness, and we unloaded our gear under the guise of night. We did not receive any toxic condition briefings. We were not issued any protective gear. We were assigned living quarters of six man tents. The entire area was surrounded by a large dirt berm, created from earth dug up and pushed from the inside of the camp to the outer perimeter. Guard shacks were set up on top of the berm. The guard shacks were manned 24/7 by lower enlisted assigned guard duty. To get to my place of duty each day it was a ten-minute walk across camp.

There were rumors floating around that contaminants existed on the base. There were signs posted that stated, "Keep Out, Chemical Agents". There were ponds that glowed green. All of these were literally feet from where we lived, worked, and performed physical training. These physical signs all made the rumors not quite so much rumors, but more so truths.

One night, we awakened to the sound of large equipment directly outside our tent. We dismissed it and went back to sleep, as we were physically exhausted. Upon awakening the next day, we opened our front tent flap and found that an enormous hole had been dug right at the entrance to our tent. We simply shrugged our shoulders and started using the back tent flap. We had a job to do and a mission to accomplish. We didn't ask any questions. However, now looking back at what I know now, I regret not asking questions: What did they find? What were we sleeping directly on top of? Why did they not find whatever it was they found BEFORE they set up tent city? Was it a chemical hazard, a biological hazard, a nuclear hazard, an unexploded ordinance? We weren't told anything. Not then and not now.

What was so special about the location of K2? Was there some reason why we couldn't have been established somewhere that the water wasn't glowing? It was

chosen simply because we were able to attain it with a Status of Forces Agreement with the Uzbekistan Government and there was an already established airbase. Despite the conditions that would put our Servicemen and women's health in jeopardy. And then, after occupying it for over four years, and sending over seven thousand U.S. troops to work in its abandoned hangers and sleep in its tents, we were asked to leave by the Uzbek government due to strained relations. We did not voluntarily pull out because we discovered the area was dangerous to our troops health. The strained relations were not due to controversy over why we were operating next to glowing water or on top of soil deeply contaminated with radiation. The strained relations were because we accused Uzbek authorities of killing and jailing ordinary Muslims under the guise of fighting religious extremism and terrorism.

Some facts we know for sure about K2:

FACT: Engineers built the berms around the base with radioactive soil pushed from the inside of the area.

FACT: Servicemembers deployed to K2 were required at times to dig in radioactive soil from the berms to fill and refill sandbags for Force Protection from possible physical attacks.

FACT: Contract Uzbek workers became gravely ill while digging to prepare tent city and were unable to continue working. American Civil Engineers were required to take over the project.

FACT: Sandbags filled with radioactive soil were distributed throughout the entire camp. It was distributed around tents, around MWR tents, around the chow hall, around the gym, and around every living and working area. We literally laid our heads next to the radioactive sand every time we went to sleep.

FACT: Sandbags would get wet and damaged due to exposure to elements.

FACT: Local soil was found to be contaminated with soluble and insoluble radiation from uranium, depleted uranium, POL hydrocarbons, and chemical agents (among other things).

FACT: Everyone who deployed or was transient through K2 was exposed to the same initial conditions that were claimed to have been mitigated.

Commanders at K2 were provided with a script to read to troops in the beginning of their K2 deployment that began with the following paragraph:

“Chemical field tests have detected low levels of a vapor that appears to be a nerve agent in one of the facilities on this base. The facility housing FOB 192 has been evacuated for safety. All buildings occupied by coalition forces will be surveyed for contamination. Samples collected will be sent to a lab for further testing and all personnel exposed to the suspected contaminated area will be monitored by medical personnel. All these actions are being taken to ensure your safety.” (DHCC Document)

But, command knew that more than just nerve agents contaminated the base. Moreover, ALL personnel on K2 were exposed to contaminated areas. At no time were any members at K2 provided protective gear or monitored by medical personnel. Despite regulations requiring radiation monitors being available in guard towers on the berms, none were ever provided.

It may well have been very easy to neutralize the hazardous threats at K2, and we wouldn't be standing here before you now. It could have all been controlled by containment/encapsulation. It would have required a few days' effort and money, but it would have been well worth the cost. We do not know whether real containment would have worked because the DoD didn't try. I don't know why the abnormally high readings of chemical agents were ignored as an “error” when taken, but it's not surprising that the uninitiated would refuse to believe it until they were neck deep in the stuff, and then try to down play the mistake.

“Yellow cake radiation would read very hot and pose inhalation threats as well as contaminating everything it touched. Only a few people in the Army are certified to deal with un-encased open radiation sources like that. And, I am certain that they were not brought in to K2. That the Soviets would train with it is both outrageous and unremarkable. They always liked exposing their men to “real” combat conditions. It's why they had such high training casualties. It's also why they disposed of their leftovers so haphazardly. Like they did at K2.” (“Quote”)

As I previously stated, regardless of any suspicions of hazards to our health at the time, we knew we had a job to do and that we had to support warfighters downrange. So, we were working in real time. We drove on and continued our mission. We stomped through the contaminated dust that went up in our faces in the summer. We waded through the contaminated mud caused by the flooding in the spring and fall. We tramped through the snow in the winter. Then, we redeployed and came home. Expecting to go back to life as usual.

I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in 2013. My thyroid and partial parathyroid were removed in 2014. I have no family history of cancer. I had genetic counseling done, and they specifically stated that the cancer did not fit a pattern suggestive of a hereditary cause. Thyroid cancer is caused by exposure to high levels of radiation or a family history, and family history had been ruled out. The timeline for the symptoms and diagnosis are directly in line with my deployment to K2. I provided documentation to VA doctors showing the exposures and a letter from my

endocrinologist stating that it is more likely than not that the cancer was caused by exposure while deployed to K2.

My synthroid dosage is changed each endocrinologist appointment. Each time the dosage is changed, my energy level and mood is affected. This affects my family relations, and my work relationships. It impacts my diet, my physical fitness, my cognitive abilities, my sleep, my blood pressure, my well-being, and my overall life experience. They claim that since my thyroid has been removed, my cancer is in remission.

I get daily unexplained headaches due to neurological issues acquired at K2. The migraines started in 2003. I have been prescribed medication (Topiramate) that I take daily and medication (Sumatriptan) that I take "as needed" when they occur. The medication that I take "as needed" is only prescribed at six tablets per prescription, and I can only order it once every two months. I have had nerve ablations done to try to alleviate the headaches. None of the aforementioned helps with the headaches.

At one time, I worried that since I was younger than my wife, I would outlive her in old age. However, now every day all I can think about is how will she go on after I am gone? Do we have all of my final arrangements in order? How will my two sons be taken care of?

I found the K2 Toxic Exposures group a couple years ago. I joined them, and I volunteered to help reaching out to K2 veterans to help gain insight on how many more were having issues related to deployments at the base. It was eye opening once we began compiling the data. Absolutely eye opening. I knew there had to be others, but SO MANY. I had no idea. Soldiers, Marines, Airmen, contractors, and family members are self-reporting illnesses and fatalities to us. To date, we have 1326 self-reported exposure related illnesses and 30 reported deaths. However, we have been told that empirical data is not relevant for Veterans Affairs purposes. To date, the VA has not contacted me with a questionnaire asking me about my K2 illnesses. So, this empirical data is the only data being compiled, and the VA should be asking *us* for *our* data, instead of criticizing or downplaying our efforts. The agency should be doing the holistic whole approach to reach out and gather the data. Not us reaching out to them. Senator Wilke has asked K2 veterans to come forward, but we have been, and too many of our claims for benefits have been denied. K2 veterans deserve presumptive service connection for toxicogenic conditions, like those who served at Camp Lejeune or were exposed to Agent Orange. If they want the data, fine, but they cannot refuse to accept our data while also refusing to conduct their own comprehensive longitudinal study.

I would like the Veterans Administration to address this issue and make the effort to attain a full list of all members that were deployed to K2, as they have done for service members and families exposed to toxins at Camp Lejeune, for example. Then, contact each and every one on this list to get them in for a full physical and

work up. If any exposure related health conditions are discovered, members should receive life long health care for treatment and the appropriate VA disability rating. For previously recognized illnesses, I feel the VA should also give the lifelong treatment and accurate disability ratings. Finally, we would like the DoD to release any and all documents that are relevant to conditions at K2. K2 veterans deserve to know what we were exposed to so that along with our doctors, we can take steps to preserve our health as best as 7,000 service members exposed to dozens of toxins and radioactive materials can.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story and I trust that you will take the appropriate actions to provide the care that we desperately need.