

Invited Testimony of Paul B. Widener, Jr.
Hearing on Occupational Health Hazards at Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base,
Uzbekistan
Committee on Oversight and Reform

Thursday, February 27th, 202 at 12:30 p.m.
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2154

Thank you, Chairman Lynch and distinguished members of the Committee for inviting me to testify. My name is Paul B. Widener, Jr., MSgt USAF (Retired). I am here today as a special operations veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) at Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2), Uzbekistan. I deployed with Air Force Special Operations Command to K2 each year from 2001-2005. I deployed 5 times, serving 22 + months in total. I come before you to plead for you to correct the failure of the DoD and Department of Veterans Affairs to safeguard and act for the health interests of approximately 7,000 + service members exposed to known radiation and toxic conditions.

Immediately after 9/11, I participated in strategic planning for the initial Aircraft shelters of OEF. An air bridge to northern Afghanistan was necessary to defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda allies. Special ops planners evaluated all available detailed intelligence about K2. No radiation, NBC remnants or any other form of contamination was identified at that time. K2 was selected as a deployment location for special ops and supporting conventional forces. It is essential to emphasize linking of intelligence between agencies only occurred after OEF was well underway.

Immediately into the deployment, K2 personnel encountered dangerous, troubling conditions from radiation, toxic substances and unknown contaminants. Environmental surveys were completed. Each time a new contaminant or hazard occurred in a different location, the finding was classified and removed from open source. Troubling denials, rationalizing contaminant detection to construction, paint fumes or whether it was true or not. The DoD asserted piling up contaminated radioactive soil into a berm originally built as a force protection measure would protect service members inside from exposure to higher levels of radiation from the radiation field feet from the other side of the berm.

Many fell ill while deployed. Headaches, vision problems, a wide variety of GI disorders, skin rashes – several had hair literally fall out in patches. My duty station was less than 10' from a shelter with known radiation and nerve agent

contamination. The DoD did not mitigate any risks within the work and living area of K2. Structures weren't sealed, setbacks or no go zones did not exist in living or working areas. No DoD/NATO warning signs or placards placed.

One warm day in 2002, the entire 20th SFG staff was incapacitated requiring medical treatment. Investigation showed presence of nerve agent in the aircraft shelter coming up through the floor. Fearing denial of the cause of their incapacitation, 20th SFG tested the K2 compound for chemical/toxic agents using specially trained and qualified personnel to deal with radiation, chemical and biological issues. Testing revealed nerve agent, blister agent wide presence of cyanide in the compound and water sources. In another event, another aircraft shelter tested positive for mustard agent. Two Air Force personnel received a real world chemical agent decontamination following removal of their equipment while in full MOPP posture. Another false alarm, but they stated "You cannot go back in there..".

K2 members were told repeatedly, "no significant risk from hazards existed". Asked about long term effects, we were told "long term exposure to risks is unknown." Why did the DoD manufacture chemical agents and radiation danger and warning signs? Amazingly, in the very location Uzbek construction workers fell gravely ill and were unable to work due to toxic conditions, these same hazards remarkably disappeared when Americans occupied the same space. Personnel at K2 had no entries placed in their records.

No briefings on toxic exposures. No protective equipment recommended, issued or employed. Several doctors deploying to K2 wrote nexus letters to warn home station health providers and document exposure to contaminants. Every doctor letter and every Post Deployment Health Surveys documenting toxic exposure was removed from DoD medical records.

There was NO CATEGORIZATION OF K2 as a hazardous duty location with radiation, chemical and toxic agents. Nor was the VA provided a list of personnel and hazards. The Deployment Health Control Center at Walter Reed repeatedly told the VA that no hazards or risks existed. This was patently false.

K2 members CANNOT access testing for Depleted Uranium, the Burn Pit Registry, Toxic Exposure Registry or be evaluated for Radiation Exposure. Despite Secretary Wilkie's assertion on 5 February 2020 "the VA is waiting and ready to help K2 veterans", there is no access to care, or service connection for exposure conditions when a member leaves active duty (Direct connection of exposure routinely occurred for active duty service members).

There are no compensable illnesses for exposures despite decades of DoD medical research into the long term effects of ionizing and depleted uranium, studies into effects of chemical agents and a diverse and wide body of evidence relating to health impacts to toxic agents at K2. Our cohort cancer rates of completed surveys for 1200 of 3700 K2 members indicate cancer rates of 14%. We are tracking over 20 separate disease processes. We have 400 member reported cancer cases by members since December 2019.

Our nation's bravest warriors are sick and dying from their service at K2. According to Dr. Omar Hamada, 20 SFG Flight Surgeon and Dive Officer, significant cancer and health risks existed from exposures at K2.

There are K2 veterans who will not see 2021 from this side of the grave. We beg for you to right this injustice. Ensure OEF combat veterans receive the medical care they deserve related to or caused by toxic exposures and radiation they encounter while defending the cause of liberty and freedom!

My experience at K2 left me suffering to a constellation illnesses.

While at K2 I developed the following conditions:

Deep unremitting headaches

Vomiting

Vision issues

Unexplained pain and burning under my skin.

My skin on my back, my arm and upper legs burns like it is on fire, literally. If pressure is placed onto my back, it increases my pain like a blow torch is cutting into my tissue.

Skin rashes

Open sores in my private areas

Gastro Intestinal Issues – developed IBS which continues to today.

GERD

Began gradually losing my voice (I grew polyps multiple times on my vocal cords)

Accumulation of over 70 kidney stones.

Lithotripsy of both kidneys, multiple times

Post Deployment Additional Illnesses

Anal bleeding

Mallory-Weiss tear (my stomach ruptured open and I vomited a column of blood.

I passed out and woke up in a hospital, I think they had to cauterize the tear, don't remember, I was in the hospital for a week)

Inability to process food, eliminating undigested food within 20 min through the GI system.

Colon cancer detected, excised in Houston, Texas while my wife was hospitalized for her cancer at MD Anderson Cancer center.

Multiple polyp removal from intestinal tract

Diverticulitis

1st Transient Ischemic Attack in Houston, Texas, Hospitalized a week and a half, had to bring in parents to care for my wife with Stage 4 cancer and also me I was sufficiently recovered and could walk, speak, see and care for my wife again.

Diagnosed with chronic cluster, complex and ocular migraines.

Significant memory impairment and decreased ability to perform certain cognitive tasks.

Damage to long, mid and short term memory.

Polyps removed from Vocal Cords, surgically, twice.

Extreme GI distress led to DoD and VA doctors prescribing me 4 proton pump inhibitor drugs, against the direction and black box warnings of the FDA. This was due to erosion of the skeleton, joints and damage to the spine.

I was diagnosed with very severe osteoporosis and erosion of my major joints at age 47. An endocrinologist stated I had the bones of an 80+ year old man who was malnourished and not well.

Continued inability process food, weight decreased to 138 pounds, I am 6'1" tall.

Repeated bouts of prostate illnesses and unexplained infections.

One day, my bladder stopped working, entirely. I became catheter dependent for elimination for a little over 5 years. Gradually, it began working again. Functions most of the time now.

Lost the ability to fulfill marital duties with my wife.

Had my second Transient Ischemic Attack in Yorktown, VA in 2009.

Continued to have frequent and frank anal bleeding through 2014.

Was finally medical retired in approximately 2011.

Had my third Transient Ischemic Attack in 2011.

Have developed early onset cataracts.

Frequent vision changes in acuity, frequently unable to read without magnifiers.

Frequent changes of visual acuity requiring frequent prescription changes

Accumulation of over 250 kidney stones from my late active duty period until recently.

End State:

I have no ability to remediate my migraines due to the mini-strokes meaning no migration termination or prophylaxis.

I have unremitting pain. To the point I was on full time high dose morphine, in addition to the 30 other separate medications I was taking to support 98.6.

Because I have decreased cognitive capability, my neurologist advised me to get off of all of the medications I can so I can preserve cognitive function.

I got off of all of the medications and just suck up my pain, every day. Although it sucks, it won't kill me; not today.

While I was here in DC during my last legislative trip, first week of February 2020, I lost 60% - 70% of the vision in my right eye. I thought it was migraine related.

The vision gradually returned, although I cannot read out of my right eye.

Apparently it is not migraine related. Good news is, I don't have a brain tumor or an aneurysm. It apparently is related to the increased cranial pain I have been experiencing in the center and left side of my brain since November, of unknown origin.

I have not been able to work since I was medically retired. I am 100% percent with the VA. I receive social security.