

Written Testimony of Congressman Paul D. Tonko (NY-20)
Before the House Armed Services Committee
on the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015
10:00 am, Wednesday, April 9, 2014
2118 Rayburn House Office Building

Thank you Mr. Chairman for the invitation to testify before your committee today. I come before you first to advocate for the thousands of Veterans who served at Fort McClellan, Alabama and are seeking to know whether their service time there made them ill.

Shortly after I was first elected to Congress in 2008, I met with a constituent named Sue Frasier who had served at Fort McClellan in the 1970's as part of the Women's Army Corps. Sue described for me the numerous health problems she had experienced since her time at Fort McClellan, including fibromyalgia, autoimmune disorders, and asthma. Most significantly, Sue had to undergo a hysterectomy at age 37.

Sue's story is not an isolated one. As my office began to investigate this issue further, we've heard from hundreds of vets from all over the country who served at Fort McClellan that are experiencing similar health issues, consistent with PCB exposure. While there were many potential contaminants located on base, many suspect that these issues may be traced to a chemical manufacturing plant in neighboring Anniston, Alabama that released tons of PCBs into the air, soil and water.

I have introduced legislation that would notify those who served at Fort McClellan of potential contamination and create a voluntary health study to assess the validity of their claims. This issue has gained the support of 52 co-sponsors, including members of both parties on this Committee. I want to personally thank those of you on this Committee on both sides of the aisle that have lent your support to this pro veteran legislation. Our mission here is simple: obtaining basic information. Unfortunately, after five long years and support from many members on this Committee, we are still stalled. We have yet to have a hearing or a vote on this important issue. And this inaction has a price - while we wait, these veterans become sicker.

This is an issue that deserves debate in an open forum. I do not pretend to have all the answers, and I'm happy to work with anyone from either party to find a solution to this issue. However, what we cannot do is continue to turn a blind eye to these Veterans who are simply seeking to understand why they are so sick.

My bill, H.R. 411, is identical to previously enacted legislation tackling a similar issue at Camp Lejeune. Caring for our veterans is a top priority and this is a debate worth having.

I urge this committee to consider language in the NDAA to address the needs of the Fort McClellan Veterans.

I also hope you will include language based on H.R. 3337, the Lieutenant Colonel Todd J. Clark Hero Flight Act, which bears the name of Todd Clark, an Albany, New York native who was tragically killed in action on June 8, 2013 in Afghanistan.

Todd wished to be buried at Fort Sam Houston; however, his family also wanted to have a hometown service to allow friends and family the opportunity to honor him.

But they were shocked to learn that they would be responsible for defraying part of the cost of transporting their son's body from Albany to San Antonio. After 17 years of service, five deployments, four bronze stars, and two purple hearts, I think you can understand why the Clark family believed asking them to pay out-of-pocket to allow friends and family to honor Todd was insulting.

Currently, it is the Department's policy to only provide one flight at Government expense for deceased service members. In this case, DOD paid for transport from Dover Air Force Base to Albany, but was unable to cover the cost to San Antonio.

I have suggested allowing for one stopover en route to final destination. This would enable service members who wish to be buried in a national cemetery to also have a hometown memorial service without worrying about the cost of transportation. This stopover would be completely optional, and it is very likely most families would utilize only one flight.

I understand DOD cannot be asked to fulfill burdensome requests, such as many flights crisscrossing the nation. One "stopover" represents a reasonable compromise that insulates the Department from extravagant costs while allowing families greater flexibility to fulfill their loved one's last wishes.

Some will argue that families should use the \$100,000 death gratuity to cover this expense. But I think we would all agree, for a family that has just lost a loved one, that money is better spent on mortgage payments, college funds, and rebuilding their lives. The cost of funeral arrangements is the last thing they should be worrying about.

Truthfully, I do not know how many people have paid this expense or changed their arrangements to avoid extra costs, but I do know the Clarks are not alone.

When a service member and her family make the ultimate sacrifice, the least we can do is make sure family and friends have ample opportunity to honor and memorialize her. How we treat our fallen heroes and those who grieve for them says a lot about us as a nation. All I am asking is that we do a little bit more.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for hearing my testimony today. I would be happy to answer any questions or follow-up with additional information.