

Testimony of
Jim Holmes
Before the
Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee
of the
House Committee on Appropriations
On
PFAS Contamination at Patrick Air Force Base

March 11, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Jim Holmes and I recently retired from the United States Army Reserve. During my twenty-five plus years I served both on active duty and in the reserve component, performing multiple combat deployments that ranged from Operation Desert Shield / Desert Storm to Operation Iraqi Freedom. From the day I enlisted on December 8, 1988 I knew that there was certain risk associated with my service in the Armed Forces. I knew that I was signing a contract that require me to risk my own physical health, mental health, personal safety and up to my life in defense of the Nation. I fully understood and willingly accepted these risks. What I did not sign up for is the risking of my daughter's health, wellbeing and ultimately her life as a result of my service.

On January 10, 2018 I was flying Hurricane Maria recovery missions when I received a phone call from my family doctor that would forever change the lives of myself, my wife and my daughter. My wife took Kaela to the Eye doctor because she was having blurred vision. We thought she just needed new glasses. What we found out is that Kaela had an extremely rare and aggressive form of brain cancer called DIPG. DIPG is a form of brain cancer that forms inside the brain stem and affects 150-300 children annually in the United States. It is difficult to treat and 100 percent fatal.

Kaela was a beautiful, intelligent, loving daughter who loved her Army family with all her heart. She made a positive impact on everyone she ever encountered, excelled in school and never disappointed me once in her seventeen years of life.

Kaela bravely fought the cancer for fifteen months. During this time, she displayed a mental and physical toughness that few people in this world know. Unfortunately, on March 29, 2019, three days after her seventeenth birthday, Kaela passed away with my wife, our family dog and myself at her side.

What hurt almost as bad as Kaela's passing was finding out a few months after her death that her cancer was possibly caused by a water contamination at Patrick Air Force Base, Florida. We had lived on South Housing at Patrick from 2004-2005 and at Central Housing from 2008-2013. Kaela also attended Sea Park Elementary for five years, went to the Patrick Air Force Base after school program and Satellite High School all of which are in Satellite Beach, FL just south of the Base.

Not once in the sixteen years we've lived in the Patrick Air Force Base/Satellite Beach, FL area were we ever made aware that the ground water was severely contaminated with a hazardous substance called PFAS. The Air Force and 45th Space Wing never publicly disclosed to those of us living on and around Patrick that their own water samples had shown that they were 57,000 times above the EPA's safe drinking water level of 70 parts per trillion. The failure to disclose such critical information show a complete lack of care for the health and safety of the service members, dependents and civilians that live on and around Patrick Air Force Base.

The PFAS contamination at Patrick has been attributed to the reckless deployment of Aqueous Film-Forming Foam Concentrates (AFFF) during training exercises over the past forty years. The Department of Defense created and patented AFFF in the late 1960's and knew by the early 1970's that it was toxic to fish and by the 1980's it was also shown to be toxic to animals. By the 2000's PFAS was found to be building up in our blood. During this time the residents of Satellite Beach, Fl have experienced a much higher rate of brain and breast cancers than the general population. Even as residents were raising alarms over the high rate of cancer in the local area the Air Force stood quiet.

Fortunately, Congress stepped in recently and banned the use of AFFF during training exercises. This is a commonsense action that should have been taken by the Department of Defense decades ago. The fact that congress had to make the DOD discontinue using AFFF in training exercises once again shows the DOD's complete lack of concern for the health of the general public.

The next step in this PFAS journey is to make the water safe for the service members, dependents and civilian population that resides around Patrick Air Force Base. The Air Force will lead you to believe that all is well because they use City of Melbourne water. What they don't tell you is that the infrastructure at Patrick Air Force Base and Satellite Beach is extremely old. Broken water mains happen regularly on the base and Beach side communities. Each time a drop in water pressure occurs the pipes are flooded with this toxic mess. The Air Force and the City of Melbourne currently do not test the water after pressure drops to ensure that PFAS levels are below the EPA's 70 parts per trillion safe drinking level. This once again shows an extreme lack of concern for the health and care for all that reside around Patrick Air Force Base.

The people of Satellite Beach, FL need Congress to immediately ban all use of AFFF firefighting foams that contain PFAS and PFBS and force the United States Air Force to take responsibility for polluting our water with toxic chemicals over the years. Every home in Satellite Beach, Patrick Air Force Base and Cocoa Beach, FL should be equipped with a point of entry filtration system, provided through a pilot program funded by the federal government, to ensure that safe

drinking water is being provided after water main brakes, routine system maintenance and pressure drops.

The time since Kaela passed away has been difficult. I lost my only child due to being poisoned by the same military that I faithfully served and fought for. When I learned of the connection of PFAS and Kaela's cancer I got rid of all my awards, certificates and uniforms. The only thing I own with a military connection is my retired ID card. I will have to live the rest of my life knowing that my decision to serve in the military and reside on a United States Air Force Base resulted in the death of my beautiful daughter. I pray that no other service member will ever have to unknowingly sacrifice the life of their child by serving their country.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and allow my families tragedy to be heard. When Kaela was born on March 26, 2002 the War on Terror had just begun. My biggest worry was that I would be injured or killed in combat and that Kaela would grow up without a father. I spent every free moment I had building a lifelong connection with my daughter and making sure that she knew for certain that her father loved her. I trained hard, bought life insurance and did my best to ensure that she would be taken cared of if something happened to me. I never imagined that she would be the one paying the ultimate price for my service.