



**Statement of Tom Porter**  
**Legislative Director**  
*of*  
**Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**  
*before the*  
**House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health**  
  
**June 7, 2018**

Chairman Dunn, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members worldwide, thank you for the opportunity to share our views, data, and experiences on the matter of burn pits and airborne toxins, what may indeed now be the “Agent Orange” of our generation.

I am here not only as IAVA Legislative Director, but as a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom who was exposed to a variety of airborne toxins from burn pits and other sources at many locations I was deployed to in Afghanistan and Kuwait between 2010 and 2011. Before I went downrange during that period, I had zero breathing problems and completely healthy lungs. In the first couple of weeks after I arrived in Kabul, where the air is particularly bad, my lungs had a severe reaction and became infected. It was controlled with medication over the next year. However, after re-deploying home, I stopped the medications and symptoms came back and I was diagnosed with asthma as a result of my deployment.

Exposure to burn pits used by the military to destroy medical and human waste, chemicals, paint, metal/aluminum cans, unexploded ordnance, petroleum and lubricant products, plastics, rubber, wood, and other waste has been widespread.

And it is not just those working at burn pits. Search for the “Poo Pond Song” on YouTube and you will hear one Soldier’s humorous take on the enormous lake of human waste that tens of thousands of international servicemembers lived, worked, and ate around at our formerly large base at Kandahar, Afghanistan.

You could also learn from the many who have served in Kabul - an enormous city with open sewers and whose population routinely burns dry animal dung to keep warm. Our military serving there get a healthy dose - and are suffering the impacts from breathing airborne feces for extended periods of time. There have been burn pits there as well.



This is to say nothing of the other toxic chemicals and fine particulates our men and women in uniform were exposed to everyday. Our friends around the veteran space, especially those who served in Vietnam, know all too well how detrimental toxic exposures and environmental hazards can be. As Dr. Tom Berger, Executive Director at Vietnam Veterans of America's Veterans Health Council explains, "*Vietnam veterans know only too well the health hazards of exposure to toxic chemicals on the battlefield. That's one of the reasons VVA is so involved in this issue – we don't want to see the newest generation of vets go through the same health care challenges we're (still) facing with toxic exposures, especially with our children and grandchildren.*"

One of our members, Christina Thundathil, a U.S. Army veteran, told us recently of her deployment to Balad, Iraq. Although her specialty was in food preparation, her job in Balad was to drag the full bins from port-o-johns daily, douse the contents with jet fuel, light on it on fire, stir it with her e-tool, then repeat until she had a brick she could then bury in the desert. She's severely injured because of these exposures, and she desperately needs a cure for her ills.

The examples are many. However, little is understood about the long-term effects of exposure to these burn pits and other airborne hazards. With our presence in Iraq and Afghanistan no longer in the headlines, the country must continue investing in the system of care for veterans and their families.

Year after year, we have seen an upward trend in the number of members reporting symptoms associated with burn pit exposure. Eighty percent of IAVA members who responded to our latest survey report being exposed to burn pits during their deployment; over 60% of those exposed report associated symptoms.

Our members have made it clear: 2018 is the year IAVA will educate Americans about burn pits and airborne toxic exposures and the devastating potential impact they could be having on the health and welfare of millions of Post-9/11 veterans and their families.

To see the enormous extent of interest in this issue by veterans, you only need to look at the comments section of any related article, or see our #BurnPits hashtag that has gone viral. These veterans need help now.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has a "Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry," which helps VA "collect, analyze, and report on health conditions that may be related to environmental exposures experienced during deployment." Although established in 2014, only 141,000 have completed the registry questionnaire out of the



3.5 million veterans the VA says are eligible to register. Only 1.7% of the post-9/11 veterans eligible to register have done so, and only 35% of IAVA members exposed have.

A definitive scientific link between exposure and specific illnesses has not yet been made, and the Burn Pit Registry is not well-known and is underutilized. The result is that the data on these exposures is not being collected at the levels desired to inform next steps. Until this point, the Department of Defense (DoD) has not taken formal accountability of toxic exposures by theater locations for deployed servicemembers. It is for this reason that IAVA helped to develop new legislation to tackle this problem.

On May 17, the IAVA team stood alongside Iraq War veteran, Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, and Afghanistan veteran, Congressman Brian Mast, with the support of 23 other veteran service organizations to announce the introduction of the *Burn Pits Accountability Act*. The legislation directs DoD to include in periodic health assessments and during military separations an evaluation of whether a servicemember has been exposed to open burn pits or toxic airborne chemicals. If they report being exposed, they will be enrolled in the Burn Pit Registry unless they opt out.

This legislation is bipartisan, commonsense, and simple. It simply does what should have been done long ago - compels DoD to record exposures before the servicemember leaves the military.

IAVA Board Member and retired General David H. Petraeus, who once commanded all forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, in recently expressing his support for this bill, said "Veterans are currently experiencing illnesses that likely are related to exposure to toxins in the war zones and swift action is needed to understand the impact on health of exposure to smoke from burn pits and other sources.

IAVA has supported and does support other VA-focused toxic exposure legislation, and will continue to, but this is a new solution to tackling this enormous problem.

We ask the Committee to hear the calls of the many exposed veterans and get our arms around the problem now so VA can do the necessary research and better support and inform treatment. Congress should enact the *Burn Pits Accountability Act* THIS YEAR.

Again, I thank the Chairman and Members of the Committee for inviting me to express our members' views on this critical issue. I am happy to answer any questions.



## **Biography of Tom Porter**

Tom Porter has served as Legislative Director for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) since 2015. In this role, Tom leads IAVA's Capitol Hill efforts to advocate for our nation's veterans, while also serving as a media spokesman for IAVA priorities. Prior to joining IAVA, Porter was Vice President at Morgan Meguire, LLC since 2004. He was successful in achieving goals on behalf of a nationwide client base through aggressive and bi-partisan advocacy before Congress and federal agencies. He also served nine years on the staffs of three senior Members of Congress.

Porter is also a Commander in the U.S. Navy Reserve with 22 years of reserve and active service, and a military public affairs officer with service on four continents, including deployments to Afghanistan and the Arabian Gulf. He is a California native and holds a B.A. in Political Science from California State University, San Bernardino.