



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Benefits Administration
Washington, D.C. 20420

NOV 19 2009

Mr. Joe L. Covington
549 Marino Road
Bryan, TX 77808

Dear Mr. Covington:

I am responding to your follow up letter of November 4, 2009, in which you continue to express concern regarding the decision by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) not to extend the presumption of herbicide exposure to "blue water" Navy Veterans who served aboard ships operating on the offshore waters of Vietnam.

This decision is based on the factual circumstances of tactical herbicide use in Vietnam. It is not a sign of disrespect for blue water Navy Veterans whose sacrifice and honorable duty supported the war effort. Aerial spraying of herbicides occurred over the Vietnam landmass, not over the open seawaters. There may have been some runoff into the South China Sea from inland waterway herbicide use in the Mekong River Delta area, but this was a unique and limited environment. The vast majority of blue water Navy Veterans were stationed on aircraft carriers operating from Yankee or Dixie Station, over 100 miles off the Vietnam coast. Many others served on destroyers that patrolled the northern coastal waters of South Vietnam, far from the Mekong River Delta. These facts do not support the general conclusion that blue water Navy Veterans were exposed to tactical herbicides in the same manner as Veterans who served on the ground and on the inland waterways of Vietnam.

Statements made by the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine (IOM) regarding who was exposed to herbicides in the Vietnam theater of operations are speculative and academic in nature. Congress assigned IOM the task of reviewing scientific studies and reporting what diseases may be associated with herbicide exposure based on those studies. IOM draws its conclusions regarding disease associations primarily from studies of non-Veteran populations. Therefore, it is outside the bounds of IOM's task to speculate on which groups of Veterans serving in the Vietnam theater were exposed to tactical herbicides.