



Black plumes of smoke were generated around the clock at Balad Air Base in Iraq. Below, Kelly Kennedy, who broke the story on burn pits through Army Times, received the Bugle Award from the DAV for her coverage on this and other health issues impacting military members, veterans and their families.

BURN PITS

Toxic exposures impact Iraq, Afghanistan veterans, families and survivors

In a 2006 memorandum to the Pentagon, Air Force Lt. Col. Darrin Curtis, who was in charge of assessing environmental health hazards at Balad Air Base in Iraq, raised serious concerns about toxic exposures from burn pits.

The letter, which was signed by Lt. Col. James R. Elliott, the Air Force's chief medical officer at Balad, confirmed the environmental dangers that open air burn pits posed to the soldiers and airmen who lived on one of the largest U.S. installations in Iraq.

Smoke from burning plastics, Styrofoam, paper, wood, rubber, waste, metals, chemicals and oils were contaminating the air. Based on studies he conducted on the ground, Curtis cited an "acute health hazard" to troops from the black plumes of smoke the burn pit generated around the clock.



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Like many military facilities, the air base at Balad had been captured after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and was used to advance the war effort. At the time military commanders had few options for ridding themselves of the waste their forces generated.

But as the war effort intensified, Balad Air Base and its adjacent Army Logistics Support Area Anaconda, became a hub for personnel, equipment and operations. By 2006, the base had ballooned into a city with 25,000 men and women. Hundreds of thousands of tons of trash were burned daily. Without enough incinerators, smoke from the open air pits smoldered and lingered low to the

ground, often cascading over housing areas and giving the base a signature stench.

As the city grew, so did the type of trash it was generating. While considered an “interim solution,” use of the pits at Balad went on for years. “It’s amazing that the burn pit has been able to operate without restrictions over the past few years,” Curtis wrote.

Defense Department documents dated for 2007 indicated that dioxin levels at Balad were 51 times what the military considered acceptable. Similarly, particulate exposure was 50 times higher than was considered acceptable. For people deployed at the base for more than a year, volatile compounds and cancer risks from dioxin exposures were twice as high as acceptable.

When the DAV learned of Curtis’ study, its leadership was concerned. Of peak interest was information regarding cancer-causing dioxins that had left thousands upon thousands of deployed troops exposed.

Further, Balad wasn’t the only base where burn pits were in use. Throughout Iraq, Afghanistan and their areas of operations, burn pits were—and remain—a major concern.

“I am a Vietnam War veteran, and when I hear about dioxins, it raises an immediate red flag – especially when we look at the long-term impact that Agent Orange exposure has had on our community,” said National Service Director Garry Augustine. “It makes you wonder if we’re not looking at something much, much bigger.”

Then a member of the DAV’s legislative staff in Washington, D.C., sent a copy of Curtis’ report to *Army Times* reporter Kelly Kennedy, who writes about health issues.

Kennedy’s story, “Burn Pit at Balad Raises Health Concerns,” was the first major news report about an issue she has followed ever since.

For the past few years, Kennedy has chronicled the government’s response to exposure concerns. The Defense Department first denied any long-term health consequences related to exposures, but information and data have since pointed to long-term health problems from exposures.

Kennedy’s reporting, along with the DAV’s advocacy and legislative initiatives, have brought the issue to national prominence. As a result thousands of veterans and active military members have come forward with their exposure concerns.

“The VA also has issued a 30-page letter training its staff on the environmental hazards veterans may have faced through burn pits and other exposures,” said National Commander Wallace E. Tyson. “We’re horrified to hear about how some veterans who have stepped forward have been treated, but we’re hopeful that we’re not going to repeat the mistakes we made with Agent Orange.”

The training letter marks the first time that the VA has addressed an environmental hazard while troops were still being exposed.

“This issue speaks to the very reason why we are united as a community of veterans,” said National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson. “The veterans who are suffering right now deserve the benefit of the doubt. They need someone to stand up for them and for our government to own up to its responsibilities to them.”

“We’re going to go to bat for these veterans in Washington, and our National Service Officers are going to help them with free representation in their communities,” said Washington Headquarters Executive Director David W. Gorman. “We don’t know what impact this is going to have in the long

term, but we’re going to be there to fight for them as long as we’re needed.”

A number of lawsuits have been filed against Defense Department contractors from burn pit victims and their survivors since *Army Times* first reported the story. In that time, legislative efforts have largely curbed the use of burn pits — though not completely.

“I think the burn pits have already left a legacy. I was in Afghanistan, and they’re still burning, and everyone here seems very aware about the potential health hazards,” Kennedy said. “I’d rather see those fires extinguished, but I’m glad that people know enough that they can talk to their doctors about them if medical problems, such as respiratory problems or cancers, develop.”



Kelly Kennedy accepts the Bugle Award from National Commander Bobby Barrera, left, and National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson.



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BURN PITS PROFILES

The Krawczyks | Erie, Pennsylvania

Before leaving for Iraq in December 2004, Army 1st Sgt. Bill Krawczyk ran six to eight miles a day. He coached and played sports. In his reserve unit, there were only two soldiers who could outpace the 46-year-old on his physical fitness test. They were teenagers. He was awarded the Army Physical Fitness Badge and maintained his combat readiness in civilian life.

"I used to be really healthy," he said.

Since returning from Iraq, he rarely leaves the house. He's gained 25 pounds, mostly the result of steroids, one of 22 different medications he takes daily.

He doesn't know the extent of his illness. His body can no longer fight infections. His immune system is attacking his body, he said.

He's had 15 surgeries, 12 hospitalizations and numerous antibiotic-resistant staph infections. He's suffered from kidney failure. He gets cysts and has had to undergo cancer treatment to increase the hemoglobin in his blood.

At Balad, the first sergeant worked less than 200 yards



from the burn pit. He was responsible for ensuring the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who cycled through the base made it home or to their assigned areas within the country.

"The smoke was so bad some days you couldn't even see if you walked outside," Krawczyk said. "You'd go in and shower and you'd come out and there would be so much sand and grit and soot that your teeth would have actually turned black from the particles that were in the air."

"They burned everything with jet fuel. They didn't care what was burned," he said. He saw Air Force personnel dumping clothing they had taken from the wounded.

“One time I saw a dog run down the street with a human arm or leg right next to the burn pit,” he recalled. “Some of the stuff was absolutely horrible.”

In May of 2005, while he was still in Iraq, he had three cysts drained. While working 16-hour days he was accustomed to being tired. The majority of the infections came shortly after he returned home. He was unable to continue his work as a production manager for a Fortune 500 company, and his wife, Paula, quit her job to care for him. The illness has been financially devastating.

While he receives VA and military benefits, he is not allowed to draw combat-related compensation from the Army.

“I can’t get my combat special compensation package processed because the Army does not feel that infectious

disease is part of war,” he said. The military diagnosed his illness as “recurrent fevers.”

“Every civilian doctor we’ve spoken to says this is the result of some type of exposure,” said Paula Krawczyk. “We’ve had a couple of military doctors who have agreed with that. But nobody in the Army will put it on the record.”

Krawczyk said he’d gladly trade his Bronze Star, Combat Action Badge and all his military decorations to regain his health.

“It’s a different kind of war—there’s different kinds of illnesses,” Paula said. “And yeah, they’re responsible. He didn’t go on vacation to Iraq. He was assigned there to do his duty because he’s a soldier. So the government and the military need to be responsible.”

The Wilkines | Eustis, Florida

In 2006, Maj. Kevin Wilkins, an Air Force Reserve nurse, went to Balad Air Base, Iraq, to save lives, leaving behind his wife, Jill, and their children, Keaton, McKenna and Serrine.

When he returned home, he seemed more tired than usual. He had a constant headache that Jill said lasted for almost a year.

“We were kind of thinking sinus infection, or the pollen or the orange blossoms here in Florida,” Jill recalled. Never one to complain, the Air Force Reserve major deployed again the following year.

His headaches continued. In March 2008, he was so affected that the visit to the hospital where he worked landed him in the emergency room.

Following a CAT scan, Jill said the physician who knew Kevin started asking him questions about things he may have been exposed to. They had found a mass in his brain.

“It was the first time I had heard Kevin describe the items that were thrown into the burn pits. I was extremely surprised ... at the details of the burn pits, because we never spoke about it,” Jill said.

Five days later, despite removal of the tumor, the major died. He had just turned 51.

“There was not one thing wrong with him when he went over there. When he came back he was sick,” said Jill. “If he was the only person who came back sick or with a brain tumor, then I wouldn’t question it. But I already know other people with brain

tumors. There are others,” said Jill.

Since her husband’s death, Jill Wilkins’ focus in life has been on the victims of the burn pits. She’s organized a Facebook page where veterans and survivors get information and support one another.

She’s also been involved in a class action lawsuit against the Defense Department contractor that ran burn pit operations in Iraq.

“Something just keeps pulling me to keep doing it,” Wilkins said about her efforts to support fellow victims. “It’s almost a way for me to keep boasting about [Kevin]. He was a wonderful husband, father, nurse. He was all of the above.”



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The Wymores | St. Charles, Missouri

Before his deployment to Balad, Tech. Sgt. Tim Wymore was constantly on the move. The father of three and Air National Guard member played softball and golf. His children played soccer and football. He and his wife, Shanna, rode motorcycles on the weekends and traveled with the teams.

“We were constantly gone. I always made a joke, ‘Why do we have a house? We’re never home,’” Shanna said. “When he came home from Iraq, it was completely different.”

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became a prevailing theme in the Wymores’ lives. Tim would take different routes home when they were out, not that the 18-year veteran felt like leaving home often. He was overly cautious. He was also physically ill.

Wymore suffered from three lesions on his brain, which doctors are now calling a “white matter” disease. He experienced a thickening in his right lung. His lungs are so damaged that doctors have to adjust their cardiogram images to see his heart functioning.

Shortly after returning home, Wymore lost most of his colon to a bacterial infection. He said he suffers from chronic fatigue, sleep apnea, erratic white blood cell counts, enlarged prostate, hypertension and chronic pain. He also is showing early signs of multiple sclerosis and can barely walk.

In December 2009, the former machinist went on

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disability when he blacked out at work. His PTSD symptoms have improved with care. However, his physical illness has advanced. He has trouble breathing and walking and spends his days in a wheelchair or on the couch.

While civilian doctors have told the Wymores the combination of symptoms must have come from environmental exposure, the government has given the veteran no clear diagnosis. Shanna said his VA neurologist said his problems

are the result of PTSD, a claim he said his PTSD care providers dismiss. While Wymore has been granted total disability benefits through the VA, they have not been made permanent, and he fears for the future of his family if he dies.

“I never smoked in my life. I’ve never done anything to affect my respiration in my life,” said Wymore. “It’s just a sad situation that a person at 44 has to go through, and there are so many others out there like me.”

Wymore eventually was given an appointment at the VA’s War Related Illness and Injury Study Center in East Orange, N.J. They still have no real answers on the extent of his illness or his long-term health prospects.

Shanna doesn’t receive aid and attendance benefits and their bank has moved to foreclose on their home.

“We’re hanging on by a string,” she said.

This project was funded by the DAV National Service Foundation. Meet the veterans featured in this site and learn more about burn pits by visiting www.dav.org.

■ Nina Berman is a documentary photographer with a primary interest in the American political and social landscape. Her work has been extensively published, exhibited and collected, receiving awards in art and journalism from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the World Press Photo Foundation, the Open Society Institute and Hasselblad among others. She is the author of two monographs, *Homeland* and *Purple Hearts—Back from Iraq*, both published by Trolley. Her photographs of wounded veterans from the Iraq war have been exhibited at galleries and museums worldwide including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In 2009, she became a member of the NOOR photo collective.