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June 14, 2015

Honorable Robert A. McDonald  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave, N.W.  
Washington DC, 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

As President of the National Gulf War Resource Center, I am writing to ask you to make leukemia and aplastic anemia presumptively service connected conditions because of exposure to benzene from petroleum products, particularly from oil well fires, that occurred during Operation Desert Storm deployment.

During the April 20, 2015 Gulf War Research Advisory Committee Meeting, the Senior Program Officer of the Institutes of Medicine (IOM), Ms. Roberta Wedge, provided a presentation that noted that the IOM had found sufficient evidence of an association between exposure to benzene and acute leukemia and aplastic anemia, as well as sufficient evidence of an association with solvents and acute leukemia in volumes 2 and 3 of *Gulf War Reports*.

As the Iraq forces fled Kuwait, they blew up 730 oil wells they had rigged with explosives, exposing thousands of U.S. service members to oil droplets, smoke and soot that must have contained benzene. These service members breathed in all of this toxic matter from the burning oil wells and wore uniforms soaked in oil by these droplets. Many service members wore these uniforms for days on end and ate food contaminated by the oil and soot raining from the sky. The Department of Defense has said "the most severe exposures to U.S. troops from oil well fires occurred when they were in proximity of the damaged or burning wells. During these incidences, troops were literally drenched in unburned oil and/or covered with fallout (i.e. soot smoke and other by-products of combustion from the oil well fires)." ([www.penfield-gill.com](http://www.penfield-gill.com)) some reports say that oil rain droplets extended as far as 50 km from the burning oil wells and came down in a fine drizzle, depending on weather conditions.

Normally, studies that show links to acute leukemia and aplastic anemia from industrial or occupational exposures are based on low-dose exposures over a long period of time. This situation, however, is the reverse. Our soldiers who went through the oil fires were exposed to an extreme

amount of petroleum over a short duration. We believe the oil well fire situation, which has been called one of the “greatest manmade ecological disasters” ([www.content.time.com](http://www.content.time.com)), is unique.

While the oil well fires are probably the worst case of exposure to benzene, they are definitely not the only exposure. Thousands of flights came into Saudi Arabia during the buildup of forces for Operation Desert Shield. How many troops were refueling planes with jet fuel then? How many during Operation Desert Storm? During the first ten days of the air war against Iraq, American pilots flew over 10,000 sorties. In addition, our troops used diesel as well as jet fuel to burn feces and heat poorly ventilated tents with homemade heaters.

The IOM has said that sufficient evidence of a causal relationship exists between exposure to benzene and acute leukemia and aplastic anemia. Based on this finding, and what we believe to be ample direct evidence of exposure to benzene by Gulf War troops, the NGWRC believes that acute leukemia and aplastic anemia should be made presumptive conditions for service in Operation Desert Storm. We know these conditions are rare, but we feel that not having the presumptive status places the burden of proof on Veterans whose energies should be spent dealing with these serious, often fatal conditions.

Most of the time when we ask that conditions be presumptively service connected, VA must ask the IOM to search for and review the evidence. This time the review is already done. We are asking that VA take charge and ensure that Operation Desert Storm Veterans with acute leukemia and aplastic anemia get service connection in a direct and timely manner.

As always, I thank you for your time, your service to our Nation, and your continued service to our Veterans. Secretary McDonald, I also want to acknowledge how grateful I am for the working relationship you and so many others in VA have developed with the National Gulf War Resource Center and me.

Respectfully,

Ronald Brown  
President  
National Gulf War Resource Center