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Exposed: Nuclear Weapons Technicians' battle in Congress for VA benefits

HENDERSON, Nev. (Feb. 8, 2024) — Throughout the Cold War, Nuclear Weapons Technicians from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps played a crucial role in the maintenance, disassembly, reassembly, repair, and testing of nuclear weapons in the operational custody of the Department of Defense across the globe. Unbeknownst to them, their duties routinely exposed them to dangerous levels of ionizing radiation without their informed consent or adequate protective measures, leading to serious health repercussions.

Ionizing radiation, which includes alpha and beta particles, gamma rays, X-rays, and neutrons, is known for its ability to damage living cells and DNA, potentially causing mutations and birth defects. Despite the significant risks associated with exposure to gamma radiation and neutrons, technicians were not adequately informed nor protected, leading to illnesses, diseases, and deaths.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) does not recognize the work of Nuclear Weapons Technicians as a "Radiation-Risk Activity" or a "Toxic Exposure Activity," which significantly hinders their ability to file for VA benefits. As a result, these veterans are not deemed "Radiation-Exposed Veterans" nor "Toxic Exposed Veterans," leaving them to face their health challenges without the support they rightfully deserve.

The Sound of Silence Project is dedicated to supporting Cold War-era Nuclear Weapons Technicians by raising awareness of their plight and advocating for legislative changes. The project seeks Congressional approval for the proposed "Cold War Period Veteran Nuclear Weapons Technician Act," which aims to amend Title 38, United States Code, to establish presumptive service connections for health issues related to exposure to ionizing radiation and toxic chemicals. This amendment would enable veterans to apply for VA benefits without the burden of proving specific exposure levels from weapons and related toxic chemical exposures.

Despite the clear need for legislative action, many members of Congress mistakenly believe current laws adequately protect Nuclear Weapons Technicians, a misconception that further impedes progress. The secrecy surrounding their work during the Cold War, often under threat of imprisonment, has left many veterans unable to speak openly about their experiences, with some taking their secrets to their graves.

The Sound of Silence Project calls on the public and members of Congress to support the proposed draft bill. Recognizing and supporting these technicians is not only a matter of acknowledging their service and sacrifice but also ensuring they receive the benefits and care they deserve. We urge everyone to share this information and contact their Congressional representatives to advocate for the prompt introduction and approval of this crucial bill, honoring the service and sacrifices of tens of thousands of Cold War-era Nuclear Weapons Technicians.

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