

The Sound of **Silence** Project™

Fighting for Cold War Veteran Nuclear Weapons Technicians

Talking Points, 17 February 2024

Project Introduction

The Sound of Silence Project is an all-volunteer nation-wide group of veteran Nuclear Weapons Technicians. Veterans fighting for VA benefits due to ionizing radiation and toxic chemical exposures while maintaining our nation's nuclear weapons at bases, in the field, on ships, and in submarines around the world during the Cold War period.

Request for Congressional Support

We ask each member of Congress to support our proposed draft bill: "***Cold War Veteran Nuclear Weapons Technician Ionizing Radiation and Toxic Exposure Act...***" An act to amend Title 38, United States Code (U.S.C.), to establish Cold War Veteran Nuclear Weapons Technician Presumptive Service Connections related to Exposure to Ionizing Radiation and Toxic Chemicals. The proposed draft bill is available at <https://tsosproject.com/docs.html>.

Nuclear Weapons Technicians – Ionizing Radiation Exposure

Nuclear Weapons Technicians (and related job titles) in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force maintained our nation's live nuclear weapons during the 46-year Cold War period that ended in 1991. Our primary duties were to maintain, repair, disassemble, replace components, assemble, modify, test, calibrate, transport, and store all nuclear weapons in DOD custody worldwide. Those live nuclear weapons emitted dangerous and deadly ionizing radiation through their surface and related exposed components. In structures and magazines, we often worked in three-dimensional ionizing radiation fields without being informed of those dangers.

Our routine tasks exposed us to ionizing radiation every time we worked on or near a nuclear warhead or nuclear weapon. For decades, we were kept in the dark about the true dangers of ionizing radiation (particularly neutron radiation) from the weapons we maintained. Radiation safety requirements and programs were basically non-existent. Personal dosimeter monitoring and documentation programs were limited or non-existent, and the few records that exist generally include incomplete, inaccurate, or falsified information.

Nuclear Weapons Technicians are not currently protected under Title 38 U.S.C.

"Veterans' Benefits" or other related laws, for presumptive ionizing radiation exposure nor presumptive toxic/carcinogenic chemical exposure. This fact is completely contrary to the general belief among members of Congress and others. For example:

- **Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) – RECA does not apply to military veteran Nuclear Weapons Technicians** for ionizing radiation exposure nor toxic/carcinogenic chemical exposure. Under RECA, illnesses and related benefits are addressed in Title 42 U.S.C., "The Public Health and Welfare", and affected civilian personnel are provided medical and monetary benefits. RECA applied to civilian uranium miners, millers, core drillers, ore drillers and Downwinders. It included individuals who participated onsite in an atmospheric detonation of a nuclear device in certain locations. The Act also addressed civilian Energy Employees and members of the Special Exposure Cohort, eligible for medical benefits under section 3629 of the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program (EEOICP) Act of 2000 (42 U.S.C. 7384t)."

- **Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program (EEOICP)** – Applies to civilian Department of Energy (DOE) nuclear weapon workers and contractor employees. It does not cover our nation’s military veteran Nuclear Weapons Technicians.
- **Veterans’ Health Care Eligibility Reform Act of 1996** – It did not apply to Nuclear Weapons Technicians. We are not designated in Title 38 as one of the specific (applicable) categories of veterans. That is due to the fact that in Title 38 U.S.C., Nuclear Weapons Technician duties are not considered a “Radiation-Risk Activity” nor a “Toxic Exposure Risk Activity”, and we are not considered as a Radiation Exposed Veteran nor a Toxic Exposed Veteran.
- **Honoring our PACT Act of 2022** — which included the **Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act of 2022** and several other Acts. It did not provide direct relief to Nuclear Weapons Technicians. In fact, the opposite occurred (on a limited scale). For example:

SEC. 102(a) struck from Title 38 section 1710(a)(2)(F): “**who was exposed to a toxic substance, radiation, or other conditions**, as provided in subsection (e).” and inserted: “**who is a toxic-exposed veteran**, in accordance with subsection (e); or”. That specific change removed the more generic “exposure” language from the Chapter and added a tacit requirement for formal presumption of related occupational exposure not currently provided in Title 38. Per VA, the PACT Act added related presumptive-exposure locations¹ and did not directly provide additional support for NWTs. Essentially, presumptive occupational exposure for ionizing radiation exposure and toxic chemical exposure is not included in Title 38 regarding duties of Nuclear Weapons Technicians.

Numerous legislators and administration officials have unknowingly conflated Atomic Veterans, civilian Nuclear Weapon Workers, and others described in the acts listed above, with military veteran Nuclear Weapons Technicians. That understandable confusion is a fact demonstrated publicly, repeatedly, and in executive orders and legislation since at least 1996. Such confusion has eliminated, and continues to single out, tens of thousands of veteran Nuclear Weapons Technicians and our families from VA health care and other VA program eligibility. Those errors have been demonstrated in numerous comments and documents by members of Congress; congressional staff members; cabinet members, and Commanders in Chief.

Communications from Nuclear Weapons Technicians with members of Congress often end abruptly with a friendly generic response letter, phone message, or being shown the door because those members apparently believe military veteran Nuclear Weapons Technicians are sufficiently covered through one or more of the Acts listed above, and related law. The result is that **the actual veterans who personally helped maintain our nuclear weapons deterrence and defense capabilities during the Cold War remain unknown** to most people.

Toxic/carcinogenic chemical exposure

Nuclear Weapons Technicians used toxic and carcinogenic chemicals without adequate respiratory and other personal protection or restrictions. Heavy gloves could not be used for the most critical work on nuclear weapons, and latex gloves failed quickly during such tasks. Few, if any, maintenance areas had fume exhaust systems. Standalone fuming hoods, had they been available, were not practical for use during operations. Trichloroethylene (TCE), perchloroethylene (PCE), benzene, vinyl chloride (all named in the Camp Lejeune case) and over 30 other chemicals, organic solvents, and volatile organic compounds were routinely used.

¹ <https://www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materials-exposure/ionizing-radiation/> retrieved 2-17-24

VA does not recognize our ionizing radiation and chemical exposures

As mentioned, VA does not identify the primary duties of Nuclear Weapons Technicians as a “Radiation-Risk Activity” and a “Toxic Exposure Risk Activity”. Subsequently, we are not considered a “Radiation-Exposed Veteran” and “Toxic Exposed Veteran”. Though the Veterans Administration could have engaged in “Rulemaking”, to fix that critical problem (albeit not a permanent fix), the Secretary declined to protect Nuclear Weapons Technicians in that manner.

Because the law (Title 38 U.S.C.) does not require it, VA will not “presume” that any cancer or other illness is occupationally related, so we have to fight uphill battles with VA as individuals. The Sound of Silence (SOS) Project was created to help correct those critical, arguably deadly, errors.

Review of Veteran’s appeals to denied claims reveal VA uses absence of DD Form 1141 *Record of Occupational Exposure to Ionizing Radiation* as a weighted measure to tilt decisions regarding exposure dose. Subsequently, VA mistakenly relies on radiation dose “estimations”.

Exposure doses for each activity, on each weapon system, for individual technicians, and each location and mission during the Cold War period cannot be accurately recreated. Job descriptions and evaluations were often quoted by VA to state that there was no mention of actual exposures to ionizing radiation from specific weapon types. Those “omissions” by DOD organizations were common practice. To put those facts in an evaluation from an operational organization would possibly be a security violation.

Nuclear weapons maintenance and storage areas that contained multiple nuclear weapons were essentially three-dimensional ionizing radiation exposure zones. No significant relative epidemiology research is known to have been conducted and proven otherwise, and it is not possible to recreate actual work conditions from activities during the Cold War.

Secrecy Hampered Ability to File VA Claims

Nuclear Weapons Technicians remained silent about their duties in spite of the need to explain to VA their exposure to nuclear weapons ionizing radiation and the toxic chemicals we used. In 1996, the late Governor Bill Richardson, then Congressman, compelled the DOD to remove the secrecy requirements, albeit focused on “testing”.

The subsequent Secretary of Defense memorandum included the following:

“Inquiries continue to be received regarding the appropriate action that should be taken to release veterans from secrecy obligations so they may justify medical treatment for conditions allegedly arising from exposure to nuclear radiation. Congressman Bill Richardson has specifically requested a public statement be issued announcing personnel are relieved of any security obligation they may have incurred in connection with their military involvement in nuclear testing to establish the validity of a service-connected disability.

In the interest of fairness to the many veterans who have so honorably served our country, in coordination with the Department of Energy, I hereby authorize veterans seeking to establish a medical disability in connection with exposure to nuclear radiation to divulge to the Department of Veterans Affairs the name and location of their command, duties performed, dates of service, and related information necessary to validate exposure to nuclear radiation. This authorization does not relieve veterans of responsibility for continuing to protect specific technical information that could contribute to the development of a weapon of mass destruction or the application of nuclear technology.”

Most never learned of the 13 February 1996, Secretary of Defense memorandum releasing us (theoretically) from the secrecy requirements. Many died before the release of the letter. The few who now know likely learned through research conducted by The Sound of Silence Project. Ambiguities in the memorandum, its limited release, and other factors cause many to believe it does not apply to them. Many took those secrets to their graves and others will do the same without formal specific and detailed notification of a comprehensive release.

Nuclear Weapons Technicians are caught in yet another major dilemma. The original secrets, which many continue to keep, provide continuing hardships for Nuclear Weapons Technicians and our families.

Appeal to Members of Congress

While we kept “secrets” about our profession from our families, family members also served the Nation while providing support and enduring hardships that those conditions brought. Those secrets that were held not only included information about their actual duties with nuclear weapons, but also the unrestricted ionizing radiation and toxic chemical exposures.

Though veterans throughout the U.S. are victims of exposures, **each member of Congress has a duty to help protect all U.S. military veterans, regardless of place of residence.** Veterans, our families, and surviving family members are YOUR "constituents" regardless of where we may cast a vote, where we may reside, or where we may be laid to rest.

Our residence is the United States of America, as it was while and wherever we served. Your promotion and subsequent vote are critical in changing federal law to require VA to provide proper care and support for all exposed veterans, and to our families.

Tens of thousands of veterans, and our families, who played a major and critical part in maintaining our Nation’s strong and reliable nuclear weapons defense and deterrent capabilities, ask for your active support and your subsequent vote in Congress.

In an April 26, 2022, letter to a retired Nuclear Weapons Technician, the President wrote: *“...I have always believed that our country has only one truly sacred obligation: to care for those who serve our Nation in uniform and their families, both while they are deployed and after they come back home.” ...The debt we owe to our veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors can never be repaid. I consider it among my most solemn responsibilities to make sure that they receive the care, support, and opportunities that reflect their extraordinary service and sacrifice...”*

Time is running short. For many, it is too late.

It is time for the leaders of the Nation we served to act.

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

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