

## **USS Ponchatoula AO-148 and Toxic Exposures:**

The Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes certain medical conditions to have been caused or aggravated by exposure to certain toxic substances. Presumptive Exposure status to toxic substances means that exposure to the toxic substances should be Presumed by the DVA for purposes of providing medical treatment and processing disability claims for those Ponchatoula sailors who served aboard on specific exposure dates recognized by the DVA.

### **Established Toxic Events:**

#### **Agent Orange:**

USS Ponchatoula is recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs as having Presumptive Exposure status for two incursions into the inland waterways of the Republic of South Vietnam in 1969 and in 1971 for Agent Orange claim purposes. All other incursions into the Vietnam Theatre of Combat by Ponchatoula are considered “blue water” operations by the VA. DVA does not believe there was sufficient exposure to tactical herbicides by blue water sailors unless you can document (to VA’s satisfaction) that you had boots on the ground or a documentable incident involving direct exposure.

#### **Agent Orange-Related Illnesses**

VA believes that contact with Agent Orange, a toxic chemical used to clear trees and plants during the Vietnam War, likely causes several illnesses. Find out if you can get disability compensation or benefits if you had contact with Agent Orange while serving in the military and now have 1 or more of the illnesses listed below.

#### **Cancers believed to be caused by contact with Agent Orange**

**Chronic B-cell Leukemia:** A type of cancer that affects your white blood cells (cells in your body’s immune system that help to fight off illnesses and infections)

**Hodgkin’s Disease:** A type of cancer that causes your lymph nodes, liver, and spleen to get bigger and your red blood cells to decrease (called anemia)

**Multiple Myeloma:** A type of cancer that affects your plasma cells (white blood cells made in your bone marrow that help to fight infection)

**Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma:** A group of cancers that affect the lymph glands and other lymphatic tissue (a part of your immune system that helps to fight infection and illness)

**Prostate Cancer:** Cancer of the prostate (the gland in men that helps to make semen)

**Respiratory Cancers** (including lung cancer): Cancers of the organs involved in breathing (including the lungs, larynx, trachea, and bronchus)

**Soft Tissue Sarcomas** (other than osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi’s sarcoma, or mesothelioma): Different types of cancers in body tissues such as muscle, fat, blood and lymph vessels, and connective tissues

#### **Other illnesses believed to be caused by contact with Agent Orange**

**AL Amyloidosis:** A rare illness that happens when an abnormal protein (called amyloid) builds up in your body’s tissues, nerves, or organs (like your heart, kidneys, or liver) and causes damage over time

**Chloracne** (or other types of acneiform disease like it): A skin condition that happens soon after contact with chemicals and looks like acne often seen in teenagers. Under our rating regulations, it must be at least 10% disabling within 1 year of contact with herbicides.

**Diabetes Mellitus Type 2:** An illness that happens when your body is unable to properly use insulin (a hormone that turns blood glucose, or sugar, into energy), leading to high blood sugar levels

**Ischemic Heart Disease:** A type of heart disease that happens when your heart doesn't get enough blood (and the oxygen the blood carries). It often causes chest pain or discomfort.

**Parkinson's Disease:** An illness of the nervous system (the network of nerves and fibers that send messages between your brain and spinal cord and other areas of your body) that affects your muscles and movement—and gets worse over time

**Peripheral Neuropathy, Early Onset:** An illness of the nervous system that causes numbness, tingling, and weakness. Under our rating regulations, it must be at least 10% disabling within 1 year of contact with herbicides.

**Porphyria Cutanea Tarda:** A rare illness that can make your liver stop working the way it should and can cause your skin to thin and blister when you're out in the sun. Under VA's rating regulations, it must be at least 10% disabling within 1 year of contact with herbicides.

If you have an illness you think is caused by contact with Agent Orange—and you don't see it listed here—you can still apply for benefits. You'll need to show that you have a disability and include a doctor's report or a hospital report stating that your illness is believed to be caused by contact with Agent Orange.

### **Atomic Veterans: Operation Dominic 1962:**

USS Ponchatoula is recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs for Presumptive status to Ionizing Radiation during its participation in Operation Dominic in 1962. The VA recognizes the following diseases / ailments to be Presumptive for ionizing Radiation exposure:

**Presumptive cancers:** If you have developed a "presumptive cancer," which is presumed to be due to radiation exposure during your military service, all you have to do is verify that you are an Atomic Veteran to be eligible for disability compensation. Your service connection is established without considering the dose received. **There are 21 presumptive cancers defined by law:** leukemia (except chronic lymphocytic leukemia); cancer of the thyroid, breast, pharynx, esophagus, stomach, small intestine, pancreas, bile ducts, gall bladder, salivary gland, urinary tract (kidneys, renal pelvis, ureter, urinary bladder and urethra), bone, brain, colon, lung, and ovary; lymphomas (except Hodgkin's disease); multiple myeloma; primary liver cancer (except if cirrhosis or hepatitis B is indicated); and bronchio-alveolar carcinoma (a rare lung cancer).

The USS Ponchatoula radiation dosimeter badges were reportedly "destroyed" in archives by humidity; so that information is not available to assist with Ionizing Radiation exposure claims. The Defense Nuclear Agency Report on Operation Dominic conclusively documents Ponchatoula's participation in Operation Dominic, including three shots (Adobe, Aztec and Arkansas) where the Ponch was anchored within 23 – 28 Nautical Miles from ground zero; but it also lists Ponchatoula's badge readings as 0.000. Ponchatoula is the only ship on the list in the London Roads anchorage off Christmas Island with readings of 0.000. Yet I've had reports of shipmates standing on the stern during each shot, and

physically feeling the heat and shockwave from each blast. Other ships anchored there at the same time had dosimeter readings ranging from 0.65 to 3.1.

**Potential Exposure to Asbestos:** USS Ponchatoula was a steam powered ship. Asbestos was used for insulation around the many steam pipes throughout the ship. The flooring tiles also contained asbestos fibers. The asbestos containing materials were frequently disturbed during yard periods or for emergency repairs. Veterans may file a claim for disability compensation for health problems they believe are related to exposure to asbestos during military service. VA decides these claims on a case-by-case basis.

### **Eligibility Requirements**

- You must be a Veteran who was discharged under conditions other than dishonorable
- You must have been exposed to asbestos while in military service
- You must have a disease or disability related to the asbestos exposure that occurred in military service

Exposure to asbestos can be a serious health risk if asbestos-containing material is disturbed in such a way that the particles and fibers become airborne. Symptoms of asbestos-related diseases, such as shortness of breath, coughing, and chest pain, often do not appear until 20 to 50 years after the exposure.

If you are concerned about health problems associated with asbestos exposure during your military service, talk to your health care provider or local VA Environmental Health Coordinator.

### **How Veterans may have been exposed to asbestos**

Veterans who served in any of the following occupations may have been exposed to asbestos: mining, milling, shipyard work, insulation work, demolition of old buildings, carpentry and construction, manufacturing and installation of products such as flooring and roofing. Veterans who served in Iraq and other countries in that region could have been exposed to asbestos when older buildings were damaged and the contaminant released into the air.

### **Health problems associated with exposure to asbestos:**

Breathing asbestos mainly causes problems in the lungs and the membrane that surrounds the lungs, including:

**Asbestosis:** Scarring of lung tissue that causes breathing problems, usually in workers exposed to asbestos in workplaces before the Federal government began regulating asbestos use (mid-1970s).

**Pleural plaques:** Scarring in the inner surface of the ribcage and area surrounding the lungs that can cause breathing problems, though usually not as serious as asbestosis. People living in areas with high environmental levels of asbestos, as well as workers, can develop pleural plaques.

**Cancer: The two types of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos are lung cancer and mesothelioma,** a cancer of the thin lining surrounding the lung (pleural membrane) or

abdominal cavity (the peritoneum). Mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer usually caused by asbestos exposure.

### **Agent Orange Resource Index:**

Department of Veterans Affairs Website: <https://www.vets.gov/disability-benefits/conditions/exposure-to-hazardous-materials/agent-orange/registry-health-exam/>

Ponchatoula in Republic of Vietnam (RVN) Waters:

- a. Dates - NavSource: USS Ponchatoula in RVN Waters from 1959-1973
  - b. USS Ponchatoula Deck Logs October 1966
  - c. Google Earth Maps – Deck Log Coordinates October 1966
  - d. Unrep with USS Voglegsang (DD-862) outside Da Nang Harbor Oct. 28, 1966 (Photo)
  - e. Typical Replenishment Cycles by Oilers during the Vietnam War (excerpt from book by Vice Admiral Edwin Bickford Hooper, USN (Retired): “Mobility, Support, Endurance A *Story of Operational Logistics in the Vietnam War 1962 – 1968*”  
<https://archive.org/details/mobilitysupporte00hoop>
2. Presumptive:
    - a. An Thoi (1969) and Mekong Delta (1971)
    - b. Jim Stoner Affidavit – An Thoi

Agent Orange Claims Guides:

- i. Agent Orange Claim Instructions
- ii. Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association “Boots on the Ground” Claims

### **Atomic Veteran Resource Index:**

Department of Veterans Affairs Website: <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/docs/radiation/atomic-veteran-brochure.pdf>

3. AO-148 @ Christmas Island (Excerpts from DNA Report)
4. Defense Nuclear Agency Report on Operation Dominic I (Full Text):  
[http://www.dtra.mil/Portals/61/Documents/NTPR/2-Hist\\_Rpt\\_Atm/1962\\_DNA\\_6040F.pdf](http://www.dtra.mil/Portals/61/Documents/NTPR/2-Hist_Rpt_Atm/1962_DNA_6040F.pdf)

### **Asbestos Resource Index:**

Department of Veterans Affairs Website: <http://www.benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/claims-postservice-exposures-asbestos.asp>

### **Legal Assistance:**

Commander (Ret.) John B. Wells  
Military-Veterans Advocacy  
C/o Law Offices of John B. Wells  
769 Robert Blvd., Ste. 201 D  
Slidell LA 70458  
1-800-817-5123

<http://www.johnwellslaw.com/index-11.html>