

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

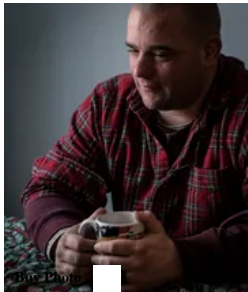
Vermont vet is dying from exposure to toxins in Afghanistan. The VA was slow to help

Jess Aloe, Burlington Free Press Published 8:25 a.m. ET March 7, 2019 | Updated 9:39 a.m. ET March 7, 2019

WHITE RIVER JUNCTION – Wesley Black knew he might die in combat when he was sent to Afghanistan in 2010 to serve with the Vermont National Guard.

He never expected to be sickened by the smoke that blew onto the base, or to spend years after he came home slogging through the military bureaucracy to get help.

Black, 33, is dying of colon cancer caused by toxic smoke from the trash the military burned right outside his combat outpost.



He battled for two years with U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs before his government finally recognized his illness was tied to his service, and gave him access to benefits so he could afford the treatments keeping him alive long enough so his toddler son will grow up with memories of his father.

"There was a long-standing joke with some of my friends — it was delay, deny and hope you die," he said of the VA.

Despite years of alarms being raised about the health impacts of burn-pit exposure while deployed overseas, former soldier Wesley Black says the process to get help through the VA is not easy or simple. In 2010, Black deployed with the Vermont National Guard to Afghanistan. At 34 years old, he is dying from a form of colon cancer that is rare for someone his age and took years to diagnose properly. By the time it was discovered, Black was already at stage 4, effectively a death sentence. (Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

Watch: [Was Afghanistan worth it? Vermont soldiers on fighting a war that's 'never gonna be over'](https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/2019/02/06/afghanistan-worth-it-vermont-soldiers-fighting-war-thats-never-gonna-over/2710313002/) (/videos/news/2019/02/06/afghanistan-worth-it-vermont-soldiers-fighting-war-thats-never-gonna-over/2710313002/)

Black is among an estimated 3.5 million service members — around 10,000 of them in Vermont — who during their deployment breathed the smoke from burn pits the military used to dispose of trash, fuel, batteries, even body parts. But only a fraction of those who have gotten sick have been able to convince the Veterans Affairs to recognize the effects of the exposure as a combat-related illness.

STORY FROM UVM MEDICAL CENTER
Orthorexia: A new eating disorder?

(<https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/sponsor-story/uvm-medical-center/2019/03/13/orthorexia-new-eating-disorder/3104150002/>)

Black had to 'raise hell'

Black keeps the Purple Heart he earned in Iraq and the Bronze Star with valor he earned in Afghanistan as well as the other mementos of his 12 years of military service carefully stored away in a box in his basement in White River Junction.

He also keeps a stack of neatly organized folders that chronicle his other battles: the rounds of chemotherapy, the surgery that removed about a foot of his bowels and the two years of stressful back-and-forth with Veterans Affairs over why he was sick.

Black said he had to "raise hell" to get the military to recognize that his late-stage cancer was related to the burn pits. He believes he is only the second Vermont veteran to receive the VA's "service-connected" designation for a burn-pit related illness. The designation means all of his medical expenses are covered and he's eligible for a small life insurance policy to leave to his wife and son.

More: [Why we spent 8 months working on a documentary about a war that's 'never gonna be over' \(/story/news/local/vermont/2019/02/08/veterans-afghanistan-middle-east-us-soldiers-war-documentary/2711848002/\)](https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/vermont/2019/02/08/veterans-afghanistan-middle-east-us-soldiers-war-documentary/2711848002/)

Veterans Affairs reserves this full coverage for former soldiers who can prove their illness was caused by work they did while on active duty.

Without that designation, he would have declined the treatments that have slowed his cancer, not wanting to leave his wife and young son coping with medical debt.

"You owe us," Black said. "You owe it to us to care for us."

[Buy Photo](#)



Despite years of alarms being raised about the health impacts of exposed to burn-pits while deployed overseas, soldiers facing cancer or other illnesses find the process of getting properly diagnosed and cared for by the VA both difficult and time consuming. (Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

Inconclusive evidence of link

About 11,581 service members nationwide have sought to have the VA officially link their illness to burn pit exposure between 2007 and 2018. Only about 20 percent have been successful.

The Department of Defense set up a [burn pit registry \(https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp\)](https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp) in 2014 for veterans and service members to document their exposure. Nearly 170,000 people nationwide have signed up.

The VA maintains that there is inconclusive evidence to link burn pit exposure and the cancers, emphysema and other illnesses plaguing Black and others returning from deployments.

"There are multiple ongoing and extensive DoD (Department of Defense) and VA studies looking at airborne hazards in Southwest Asia," Terrence Hayes, a spokesman for the agency, told the Burlington Free Press.

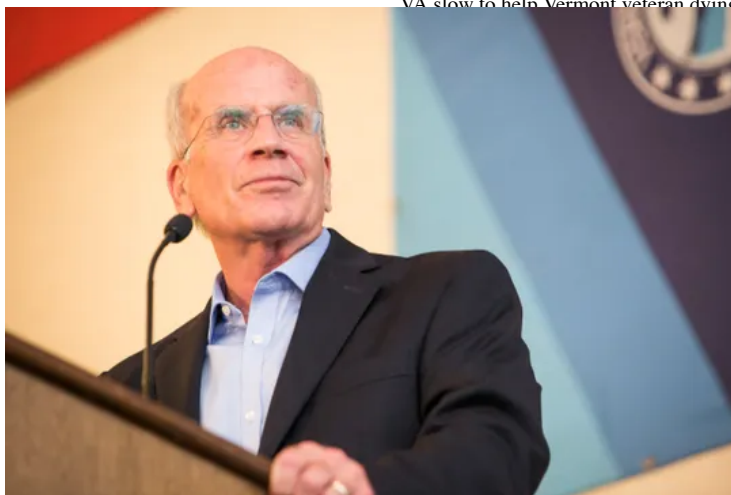
Cancer caught too late

Black went to Iraq in 2006 and Afghanistan in 2010 as a member of the Vermont National Guard. He had respiratory problems while serving. When he came home, he began having gastrointestinal problems.

Black was finally diagnosed two years after he first began seeking help, despite his oncologist later noting that his symptoms were "early indicating signs of colorectal cancer."

Black had Stage IV colon cancer.

At the time, Black was 31. He had just finished his probationary year as a firefighter. His son had just turned one, and he and his wife were in the process of buying their house.



Rep. Peter Welch speaks after his midterm victory at the Hilton in Burlington, Vermont on Tuesday, November 6, 2018. (Photo: MONICA DONOVAN/for the FREE PRESS)

By the time his doctors caught the cancer, it was too late: It had spread to his liver.

Even with his diagnosis, his initial attempt to claim that his illness was service-connected was denied. After he appealed, the VA decided the original decision had been based on a "mis-read" of his oncologist's letter.

It was a two-year fight, he said, that involved going to the state veterans affairs office to raise a stink and having Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt, flag his file. His claim was granted this summer.

"It was certainly a headache because everyone knew I had cancer," he said. "But no one wanted to be the person who said 'hey, listen we really think this is what caused it.'"

The next Agent Orange

Federal watchdog agencies and military doctors began sounding the alarm about the burn pits, and flaws in the Department of Defense's understanding of the potential health risks, well over a decade ago.

In 2006, Lt. Col. Darrin Curtis was deployed to Balad Air Base in Iraq to assess the environmental hazards. He wrote a memo voicing concerns that the pits presented acute health risks to the service members stationed nearby as well as a possibility of long-term health risks.

Russell Keith was a medic for Kellogg, Brown and Root, formerly owned by Halliburton, the contractor that ran the pits.

"Please do not let the exposure to smoke at the burn pit become the next Agent Orange or Gulf War Syndrome," Keith testified in front of a Senate committee 10 years ago.



An incendiary grenade is used to light refuse on fire at a Vermont National Guard base in Afghanistan in 2010. (Photo: COURTESY)

The looming health crisis

In the past two decades, the military and military contractors have used hundreds of burn pits to dispose of trash in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

In Afghanistan, Black remembered standing guard while the wind blew the smoke from the pit directly towards him. The pits were used to burn everything: vehicles, tires, plastics, oil, chemicals, batteries and biomedical waste. Sometimes, they used diesel fuel to light them.

They even burned human body parts.

"We've got to get rid of it," Black said. "So what do you do? You drop it in a bio-hazard bag, you put it in the trash, and it goes out to the burn pit."

If he hadn't breathed those toxins, he said, he believes he would have lived into his seventies or eighties. He would have been able to have the big family he wanted. He would not be writing daily emails for his son to read as he grows up.

Black has a message for the military authorities: "The biggest thing that I would like them to do is realize that this is a looming health crisis."

Connecting the dots

Brig. Gen. Michael Heston, died late last year from pancreatic cancer.

Heston, once the assistant adjutant general of the Vermont National Guard, was adamant about getting his men to sign up on the burn pit registry, his widow, June Heston, said. He told her about airplanes needing to be moved away from the pits because the smoke was causing damage. But it still took months for the Hestons to connect the dots when he got sick.

[Buy Photo](#)



June Heston's husband Mike, a one-star general in the Vermont National Guard, died from a rare form of pancreatic cancer that she blames on his exposure to burn pits while deployed overseas. (Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

"We did not even think of the burn pits," she said. "We thought it was parasites."

After Michael Heston was diagnosed, someone sent June Heston an article about a woman in the Minnesota National Guard who died of pancreatic cancer at 36. The story led her to begin researching burn pits.

June Heston brought the information she discovered to her husband's doctor at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. If she hadn't, she said, no one would have made the link between the pits and the cancer.

The doctor had never heard of burn pits, she said, like many in the medical profession. But he "did his homework," and wrote what she was told was "the most compelling letter" the VA had seen from a doctor, swaying the agency to grant the service connection.

More than 200 burn pits

In 2010, when Black went to Afghanistan, there were over 200 burn pits across the country, according to the Government Accountability and Oversight office. The military has since mostly phased out their use.

The Defense Department has commissioned several studies of burn pits over the past 10 years, though a 2016 Government Accountability and Oversight report found that the researchers had yet to examine the link between individual burn pit exposure and long-term health issues.



Rosie Torres said their family almost lost their home and had their cars repossessed trying to seek medical care for her husband, Le Roy Torres, a former captain in the Army Reserves. The family is supporting efforts to establish a burn pit registry in Texas to help veterans and their survivors list health problems that they believe are linked to burn-pit exposure. Torres has been unable to claim service-related disabilities for exposure to overseas military burn pits. (Photo: Rachel Denny Clow/Caller-Times)

The government has not acted fast enough, said Rosie Torres, who began advocating for recognition for burn pit victims in 2010.

Torres's husband was one of the service members who sued Kellogg, Brown and Root over their handling of the pits. After working through the courts for nearly 10 years, the Supreme Court declined to hear their appeal early this year.

"There needs to be recognition," she said. Her organization, [Burn Pits 360](http://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/DeC3CKr7JZf20NL61hA93S8?domain=burnpits360.org) (<http://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/DeC3CKr7JZf20NL61hA93S8?domain=burnpits360.org>), has heard from around 6,000 people who have struggled to get help. She estimated about 3.5 million people nationwide have been exposed.

Congressional attention

Congress has taken some steps to help veterans exposed to burn pits, Welch said. In early March, the House unanimously approved a measure to let family members add deceased veterans to the registry, a flaw highlighted by [advocates like](https://www.burlingtonreepress.com/story/news/columnists/john-moritz/2019/02/22/texas-veterans-advocates-burn-pit-registry-exposure/2941749002/) ([/story/news/columnists/john-moritz/2019/02/22/texas-veterans-advocates-burn-pit-registry-exposure/2941749002/](https://www.burlingtonreepress.com/story/news/columnists/john-moritz/2019/02/22/texas-veterans-advocates-burn-pit-registry-exposure/2941749002/)), Torres.

Welch acknowledged that the federal government should have reacted faster.

"It should have been studied from the beginning," he said.

In the meantime, as the research slogs on, Welch said the government should assume that the cancers and other illnesses of the soldiers, marines and airmen are linked to the smoke.

"The cost of the war has to be the cost of caring for the warriors," he said.

DIG DEEPER
Editors' Picks



- [March Madness: Coverage of UVM basketball in the 2019 NCAA tournament](https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/sports/college/vermont/2019/03/18/ncaa-tournament-coverage-uvm-big-dance/3203393002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
 (.https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/sports/college/vermont/2019/03/18/ncaa-tournament-coverage-uvm-big-dance/3203393002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
- [Bristol man wins third-annual Vermont Beardies](https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/entertainment/2019/03/18/vermont-beardies-winner-make-wish-vermont/3201910002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
 (.https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/entertainment/2019/03/18/vermont-beardies-winner-make-wish-vermont/3201910002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
- [A look back at former Burlington Mayor Frank Cain's legacy](https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/2019/03/19/former-burlington-mayor-frank-cain-dies-his-legacy-vermont/3199940002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
 (.https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/2019/03/19/former-burlington-mayor-frank-cain-dies-his-legacy-vermont/3199940002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
- [Do you know why the abbreviation is UVM and not UVT?](https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/vermont/2019/03/18/why-university-vermont-abbreviation-uvm-and-not-uvt/3200284002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
 (.https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/vermont/2019/03/18/why-university-vermont-abbreviation-uvm-and-not-uvt/3200284002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
- [5 reasons to root for the Catamounts in the NCAA tournament](https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/sports/college/2019/03/18/uvm-basketball-5-reasons-root-catamounts-ncaa-tournament/3201802002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)
 (.https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/sports/college/2019/03/18/uvm-basketball-5-reasons-root-catamounts-ncaa-tournament/3201802002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=storylines)

Were you exposed to burn pits while deployed? Contact Jess Aloe at 802-660-1874 or jaloe@freepressmedia.com. Follow her on Twitter [@jess_aloe](https://twitter.com/jess_aloe) (http://www.twitter.com/jess_aloe).

Read or Share this story: <https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/politics/2019/03/07/veterans-affairs-vermont-burn-pit-exposure-sickening-agent-orange-afghanistan-iraq/3053746002/>

