

MILITARY EXPOSURES & YOUR HEALTH

INFORMATION FOR VETERANS WHO SERVED DURING THE GULF WAR ERA (1990-PRESENT) AND THEIR FAMILIES

2020

ISSUE #3



INTRODUCTION

As a Veteran who served since 1990, you may be concerned about the coronavirus (COVID-19), including your risk and how VA now offers health services. This issue of the *Military Exposures & Your Health* newsletter features information on COVID-19 risk and prevention; the expanding telehealth option for Environmental Health Registry Exams; and temporary roles taken by VA Environmental Health Coordinators and Clinicians related to the pandemic. This issue also highlights Gulf War Veteran William “Bill” Watts, Sr.’s commendable volunteer work, Veteran Douglas Turner’s technology assistance for the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, and more. Find past issues of this biannual newsletter online at:

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/meyh/publications/index.asp>.

At the time of publication of this newsletter, the coronavirus (COVID-19) has been affecting the nation. VA is committed to the health and safety of Veterans. During this pandemic, environmental health registry evaluations are deferred or offered via telehealth, depending on the location. Read the latest information on the coronavirus (COVID-19) at: <https://www.va.gov/coronavirus/>

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PRODUCED BY VA POST DEPLOYMENT HEALTH SERVICES

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CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) AND VETERAN HEALTH

VA is committed to protecting and caring for Veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic. VA offers [online resources](#)¹ to keep you up-to-date on the latest information regarding COVID-19, and you can check with your [local VA medical center](#)² for current procedures regarding obtaining care. VA is partnering with other federal agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), to monitor the outbreak of the virus.

COVID-19 and Veteran Risk

Veterans have the same risk for coronavirus infection and illness severity as the general population, based on the current understanding of this virus. Simply being a Veteran does not increase your risk. According to the CDC, those who may be at [higher risk](#)³ for more severe complications from COVID-19 include:

- Adults age 65 or over
- Smokers
- Those who reside in a nursing home or long-term care facility
- Those who have an underlying health condition, such as chronic lung disease, asthma, or breathing problems (see information box)
- Those who have a serious heart condition, diabetes, severe obesity, chronic kidney disease, or liver disease or have a compromised immune system (such as from an immune disease or those who take immune weakening medicines)

COVID-19 Prevention

To prevent coronavirus infection, Veterans should follow the precautions recommended by the CDC, including:

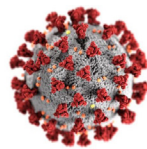
- Frequent hand washing for at least 20 seconds
- Avoiding touching your face
- Keeping six feet of space between yourself and others
- Covering your coughs and sneezes
- Wearing a face mask to protect others
- Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces

Find more [prevention tips from the CDC](#)⁴.

VA Health Services

To protect Veterans' health and safety, VA is currently deferring [environmental health registry](#)⁵ evaluations at many locations or offering them via telehealth, depending on the location. To find out about environmental health registry exams nearest you, contact your local [Environmental Health Coordinator](#)⁶.

To find out the latest information on operating status and care at your local VA medical center, review [your local VA medical center](#)² web page.



novel coronavirus

ARTICLE LINKS:

1. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/n-coronavirus/>
2. <https://www.va.gov/find-locations/>
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>
5. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/benefits/registry-evaluation.asp>
6. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>
7. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/index.asp>
8. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp>
9. <https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/AHBPCE/index.asp>

Airborne hazards and coronavirus

Some Veterans report deployment exposures to respiratory irritants, such as smoke from [burn pits](#)⁷, oil fires, explosives, or sand and dust storms. These exposures may cause symptoms, including irritation of the sinuses, mucous membranes, and the respiratory tract.

Studies have shown that those diagnosed with an underlying lung disease, such as asthma, COPD or chronic bronchitis, regardless of cause, may be more susceptible to respiratory illnesses and may place individuals at higher risk for severe COVID-19 illness.

VA has been communicating with Veterans and Service members who initiated or completed the [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#)⁸ questionnaire through email, providing resources and suggesting actions to take during the coronavirus pandemic. VA also modified its initial letter to registry participants to address COVID-19.

In addition, the VA [Airborne Hazards Burn Pit Center of Excellence](#)⁹ is conducting a study to investigate whether previous exposure to airborne hazards experienced by combat Veterans makes them more susceptible to developing more severe COVID-19 illness.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CLINICIANS AND COORDINATORS FILL NEW ROLES DURING CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Many Environmental Health Clinicians and Coordinators took on new roles to address the [coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)¹ pandemic. They provided safe and organized COVID-19 testing, took new clinical positions to treat Veterans, managed the reassignments of medical center staff, and monitored medical staff health; many while continuing to manage previous duties. Below are some of the new roles that dedicated VA Environmental Health Clinicians and Coordinators across the country took in the early months of the pandemic.

COVID-19 Drive-Through Testing

Anisa Moore, MD, who is Section Chief of the Environmental Health Department at VA Eastern Colorado Health Care Services and Lead Environmental Health Clinician for Veterans Integrated Service Network 19, worked as Medical Director of the COVID-19 Clinical Testing Center at the Rocky Mountain Regional VA Medical Center (VAMC) COVID-19 drive-through test site. Drive-through testing allows hospitals to minimize contamination and streamlines the testing process; if patients are tested in a clinic or hospital room, the room can't be used for at least two hours while it is decontaminated.



Andrea Middlestead DNP, NP-C

Dr. Moore has returned to her usual position.

Staff Reassignments to Care for Veterans

"The Southern Arizona VA Health Care System in Tucson, Arizona VA has sent one medical doctor, one nurse practitioner, and two medical support assistants to the Labor Pool/COVID-19 task force," said Boaz Rabin, MD, FACP, Clinical Director, Compensation and Pension Department, Southern Arizona VA Health Care System.

The VHA Compensation and Pension/Environmental Health Department at the Fargo VA Medical Center reassigned three providers to other services as a part of their site's COVID-19 response. Jackie Steckler, PA-C, was assigned to Rheumatology, Andrea Middlestead DNP, NP-C, was assigned to Cardiology, and Keith Fischer, MD was assigned as a hospitalist. "All three providers returned to their regular roles in late June," said Carol Ness, MD, C&P/Environmental Health, Fargo VAMC.

Helping Health Care Workers

Katia Gugucheva, MD, Environmental Health Clinician with the Orlando VA Medical Center, has been detailed to occupational health screening and following VA employees who have been exposed to Veterans (patients) who tested positive for COVID-19. "We follow the CDC recommendations for these exposed employees and do our best to monitor and take care of them the best we can," said Gugucheva. "They express to me genuine gratefulness for what the VA, as an employer, is doing for them, and they feel safe that the VA will continue to care for them if they become very ill," she said.

Terri Dymeck, NP, Northern Arizona VA Health Care System, normally conducts Environmental Registry Exams and works in Compensation & Pension as a nurse practitioner. "I have been detailed

from my area doing employee health COVID tracking, where we make clinical decisions regarding the care and follow up of employees who are suspected as being COVID-positive," she said.

Nancy Raml DNP, FNP-BC, Medical Examiner, Compensation & Pension, and Environmental Health Registry Clinician, Zablocki VA Medical Center, Milwaukee, WI, has been trained to perform pre-employee health physicals to assist with the rapid intake of the new health care workers. "I have assisted with processing N95 mask requests, reviewing employee hazardous drug questionnaires, and working in the Staffing Resource Team (which reallocates staff to meet the daily COVID-related needs of the medical center) pool, screening employees' temperatures, assisting in the emergency department transporting COVID-19 test samples to the lab, and transporting emergency room patients to radiology for imaging and to the inpatient units if admitted," she said. During this assignment, she still responds to Veterans' registry questions via email or telephone. In late June, she began conducting in-person environmental health registry exams again with the facility's leadership and direction.

ARTICLE LINKS:

1. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/n-coronavirus/index.asp>



Team members document the vital signs in the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS), wipe down the machines in between patients, and ferry the specimens to the lab.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COORDINATOR DOUG TURNER: PROVIDING TECHNOLOGY HELP FOR THE BURN PIT REGISTRY

The [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#)¹ is a web-based registry in which Veterans with service in certain locations from 1990 to the present can document their deployment exposures and their health concerns. They can then schedule an in-person health exam.

Since the questionnaire is only available online, some Veterans find that they need help with the technical aspects of the registry. Douglas Turner, Environmental Health Coordinator at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System*, has assisted local Veterans.

“I’ve helped dozens of people with the burn pit registry, although most go through it pretty well on their own,” said Turner, a Veteran who served in the Army between 1977 and 1980 and in the active Army reserve until 1986. He has helped people on the phone, via email (without sending personal protected information), and in person. “They’re very appreciative,” said Turner.

For Veterans without computer access, Turner has directed them to the VA library’s free public access computers and even sat down with them to help with questions.

Turner has helped Veterans get approved to participate in the burn pit registry when it initially didn’t show their qualifying deployment. Sometimes, there is missing or inaccurate information in Department of Defense’s (DoD) deployment database even though Veterans are eligible, particularly for Veterans who were deployed before 9/11, for special forces, or those re-deployed within three months. Veterans may need to select “Request an Eligibility Review” within the registry for a manual review of their service.

Where to go for technical help with the registry

- The registry help desk provides support from 8 a.m. – 8 p.m. Eastern Time at 1-877-470-5947.
- The registry FAQ answers questions about the DS Logon; printing, emailing, and saving the questionnaire; internet browsers and operating systems; and website maintenance issues.
- For help with your DS logon, call the Defense Manpower Data Center Support Center at 1-800-477-8227.
- Contact your [Environmental Health Coordinator](#)³ nearest you. Your coordinator can also help you schedule an in-person exam.

Turner is also committed to helping Veterans schedule a follow-up exam. Veterans need to contact an Environmental Health Coordinator to set up a health exam after completing the questionnaire.

If you need technical help with the burn pit registry, you can call 1-877-470-5947. The registry [FAQ](#)² answers many questions. Most of all, remember your [Environmental Health Coordinator](#)³ is a great resource for help.

***At the time of publication, Doug Turner has left his position as Environmental Health Coordinator at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System.**

ARTICLE LINKS:

1. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp>
2. <https://veteran.mobilehealth.va.gov/AHBurnPitRegistry/index.html#page/faq>
3. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>



Doug Turner

MCCLUNG APPOINTED HEALTH PHYSICS SOCIETY BOARD MEMBER

Danny McClung, BS, RRPT, health physicist and radiological consultant for VA’s Post Deployment Health Services (PHDS), has been appointed as a board member of the Academic, Industrial, and Research Radiation Safety Section of the Health Physics Society. Mr. McClung also received the 2020 John C. Taschner Leadership Award from the Health Physics Society for his contribution to health physics while in military service and for his service to the general public in contributing to the relationship between the military, VA, and the health physics profession. The Health Physics Society is a scientific organization of radiation safety professionals that aims to support its professionals and promote excellence in the science and practice of radiation safety.

TELEHEALTH: AN OPTION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH REGISTRY EXAMS

Environmental Health Registry exams have traditionally been available in person at VA Medical Centers across the country. Registry health exams have also been available through telemedicine in certain locations, such as the VA Puget Sound VA Health Care System and the [Orlando VA Medical Center](#)¹. After the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic began, more offices began offering registry exams through telemedicine.

Terin Bickford, Environmental Health Coordinator at the Portland VA Medical Center, explained that her office began to offer remote exams during the pandemic. “In light of the uncertainty around in-person appointments in the time of COVID-19 and social distancing, the Portland Environmental Health Registry Program wanted to ensure that Veterans still had access to registry exams to evaluate possible environmental exposures during their military service,” said Bickford.

The Portland VA Medical Center arranged for Veterans to be able to have Environmental Health Registry exams remotely via VA Video Connect (VVC), said Bickford. Bickford’s office secured cameras for providers, offered training on the equipment, shared best practices for providers in video telehealth, and set up VVC clinic space.

“Our process for scheduling registry exams is the same, but now, prior to the visit, we send a link the Veteran can use on his or her smart phone or home computer,” said Bickford. “Occasionally, we have technical issues, but they’ve been easily overcome, and we’ve found Veterans very willing to use technology to connect with us in a way that doesn’t jeopardize their health and well-being,” she said.

During VVC exams, providers evaluate Veterans in a similar way to in-person exams and use information from their most recent primary care visit for information that can’t be obtained from video, such as weight and blood pressure, Bickford explained.

Many VA Medical Centers are now offering telemedicine for Environmental Health Registry exams and plan to continue offering it in the future. If you are interested in having an [Environmental Health Registry exam](#)² through telemedicine, please contact your local [Environmental Health Coordinator](#)³ and ask if it is an option.

ARTICLE LINKS:

1. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/publications/agent-orange/agent-orange-2019/telehealth.asp>
2. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/benefits/registry-evaluation.asp>
3. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>

AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND OPEN BURN PIT REGISTRY REACHES MAJOR MILESTONE

In March 2020, the [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#)¹ exceeded 200,000 registrants. The registry, which began in June 2014, allows Veterans and service members to self-report their exposures and health concerns in an online questionnaire that can be used to initiate discussions of health concerns with a provider.

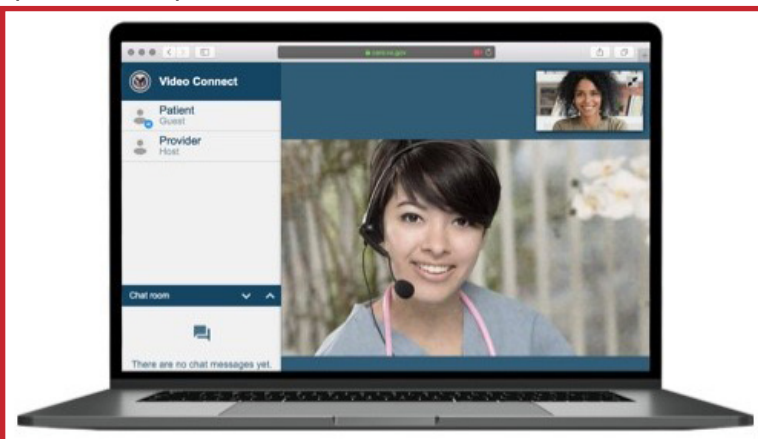
“Concerns about the long-term effects of exposure to burn pits remain a priority,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “By joining the registry, Veterans, service members and the Department will further understand the impact of deployment-related exposures on health.”

The Department of Defense (DoD) encouraged registry participation in a letter sent in March to more than 700,000 active-duty, Guard, and Reserve members, which ultimately helped push participation beyond the 200,000 mark. VA and DoD have an active partnership in the registry and addressing issues related to airborne hazards and open burn pits.

In addition to completing a questionnaire, registry participation involves an in-person exam by a provider. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many VA facilities are deferring exams to protect registry participants, medical staff and other patients. Some VA facilities are offering registry exams through telehealth (see previous article). Learn more about this [registry](#)², including eligibility and how Veterans can sign up.

ARTICLE LINKS:

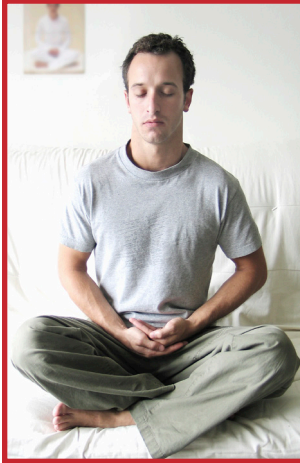
1. <https://veteran.mobilehealth.va.gov/AHBurnPitRegistry/>
2. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp>



Telemedicine interface

MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION CLASSES AVAILABLE BY PHONE FOR VETERANS

A free, phone-based program called “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” is available to Veterans of all eras. Mindfulness meditation has been shown



to be effective in treating several health conditions, such as insomnia, anxiety, high blood pressure, chronic pain, depression, and PTSD. This program complements existing treatments and is safe to participate in while taking prescribed medications or with current exercise plans.

VA’s [War Related Illness and Injury Study Center](#)¹ (WRIISC) manages the “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” program. The WRIISC begins each call with a topic related to mindfulness, followed by a guided meditation practice. While the lasting benefits of mindfulness meditation come with regular practice, many Veterans report feeling more relaxed and able to cope with symptoms by the end of each call.

The WRIISC offers an hour-long session on the first two Fridays of each month, from 11a.m.-noon EST. Veterans can call in as many times as they like. The toll-free call-in number is 1-800-767-1750, access code 54220.

ARTICLE LINKS:

1. <https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/>

REPORT RELEASED ON LONG-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS OF ANTIMALARIAL DRUGS

In response to Veteran concerns, VA asked the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) to review the existing evidence on the long-term effects of antimalarial drugs. On February 25, 2020, NASEM released the report, *Assessment of Long-Term Health Effects of Antimalarial Drugs When Used for Prophylaxis*.

In this report, NASEM reviewed the scientific literature on antimalarials, particularly mefloquine and tafenoquine, that may be associated with neurological and psychiatric effects in adults. NASEM also examined the currently available medications and the long-term health effects that might occur as a result of their use.

NASEM concluded that there is inadequate or insufficient evidence of an association between mefloquine use and long-term neurologic and/or psychiatric health outcomes. NASEM did find sufficient evidence of an association between tafenoquine and vortex keratopathy or medication-induced corneal deposits. However, they did not find this clinically significant or persistent, meaning that you would likely not notice an effect. If you took the drug and have concerns, consult an eye specialist.

VA is currently reviewing the content of the report in a formal, multi-step process and performing an independent review of the evidence. Any recommendations for policy changes will be sent forward for consideration by VA Secretary Wilkie.



Mefloquine Hydrochloride 250 MG Oral Tablet

STUDY ON HEALTH OF VETERANS DEPLOYED TO K-2

Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, also known as K-2, was a Soviet-era air base, one square mile in size, in southeastern Uzbekistan near the border of Tajikistan. It was used by U.S. Army, Air Force, and Marine forces from 2001-2005.

Veterans who were deployed to K-2 may be concerned about health effects from various exposures, including jet fuel, volatile organic compounds, particulate matter and dust, and depleted uranium. Learn more about [environmental exposures during service at K-2](#)¹.

In 2015, the Department of Defense (DoD) conducted a preliminary [study](#)² to look at cancer outcomes among active duty service members deployed to K-2. Using healthcare claims data from the military health system, DoD researchers found a higher risk of certain cancers, such as malignant melanoma and cancers of the blood forming cells such as leukemia and lymphoma, but the results were based on only a few cases of each type of cancer and failed to provide a definitive answer on risk.

As a result, VA’s Post Deployment Health Services and DoD will be conducting a broader study on the health of Veterans who deployed to K-2. VA and DoD hope this new study will provide more conclusive scientific evidence on the relationship between various diseases and environmental exposures at K-2.

First, VA and DoD are working to identify those who deployed to K-2. Then, researchers will identify two comparison groups: 1) Veterans and service members who deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) between 2001 – 2005 but never deployed to K-2, and 2) Veterans and service members who were on active duty between 2001 – 2005 but

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never deployed to K-2 or OIF. The next step will be to compile healthcare utilization data from the military health system and from VA that will be used to assess and compare the occurrence of various diseases between study groups. In addition, researchers will review cause-of-death data to compare rates of death among the K-2-deployed, OIF-deployed, and non-deployed Veterans. Researchers will also compare rates of death among those deployed to K-2 to the general U.S. population.

The researchers will mail a letter to Veterans who deployed to K-2 to invite them to receive a health examination at their local VA medical center. These Veterans will need to contact their nearest [Environmental Health Coordinator](#)³ to schedule the exam. The exam may include laboratory tests, such as a depleted uranium test, and other evaluations. Depleted uranium kits will be sent to the Baltimore VA's Toxic Exposure Fragment Surveillance Center for processing. In addition, Veterans who have health concerns that they believe may be related to service at K-2 are encouraged to file a claim for disability compensation. This claim will require a separate exam by Compensation and Pension and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

ARTICLE LINKS:

1. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/karshi-khanabad.asp>
2. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26276948/>
3. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>

GULF WAR VETERAN WILLIAM "BILL" WATTS, SR.'S SERVICE TODAY FOCUSES ON HELPING FELLOW GULF WAR VETS

Gulf War Veteran William "Bill" Watts, Sr., earned numerous awards during his tours of duty, which included tours in Egypt and Korea along with service as a Gulf War combat Veteran, but the reward he values the most today is the one he receives as an advocate helping his fellow Gulf War Veterans with their individual challenges.



Bill Watts

"I am in favor of Veterans helping Veterans. Quality of life begins with quality of health care," said Watts, whose work with Veterans has earned him the Congressional Veterans Commendation Award. His work includes volunteering with Veterans in his community and meeting with researchers and health professionals to make sure that the health concerns of Gulf War Veterans are recognized and addressed.

Watts and other Gulf War Veterans are now marking their 30 anniversary of

their Gulf War service. Watts served in the United States Army from 1989 to 1996, in the 4/5 ADA 1st Cavalry Division, 2nd Infantry Division, 24th Infantry Division and 3rd Infantry Division.

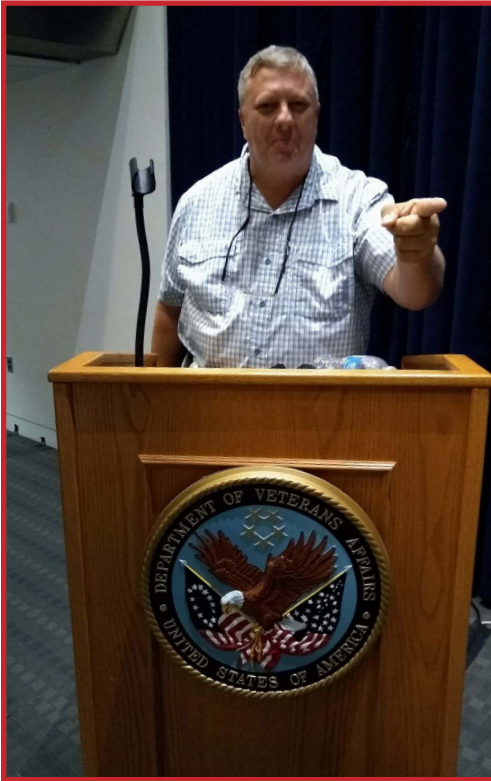
One of Mr. Watts' passions is helping Gulf War Veterans manage their health problems by finding non-drug alternatives. As a resident of the South Florida city of Doral, he volunteers with the non-profit [Fishing with America's Finest](#)¹ and also serves as the group's first director of operations. Fishing with America's Finest takes combat Veterans bass fishing in the Florida Everglades to help reduce the stress and anxiety from PTSD. "We try to teach them to the point that they can go on fishing tournaments if they want to," he said. He is also a team member of [Dive4Vets](#)², a group that takes Veterans who suffer from physical and mental health issues scuba diving to help them heal.

As a Gulf War Veteran, Watts is eligible for the [Gulf War Registry](#)³ and [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#)⁴, and enrolled many years ago. "Participating in the registries were pretty easy from what I remember," he said.

Watts understands that some Gulf War Veterans are older and may not be comfortable with completing an



continued on page 8



ARTICLE LINKS:

1. <http://www.fishingwithamericasfinest.org/>
2. <http://www.dive4vets.org/>
3. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/benefits/registry-exam.asp>
4. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/burnpits/registry.asp>
5. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/coordinators.asp>
6. <https://www.va.gov/RAC-GWVI/index.asp>
7. <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/medically-unexplained-illness.asp>

online-only registry like the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry. A local [Environmental Health Coordinator](#)⁵ can help with this process.

Watts also is also actively involved in research that benefits Gulf War Veterans. He is a sitting member on VA's [Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses](#)⁶. He also participates in research on the health of Gulf War Veterans at the Miami VA Hospital and volunteers to coordinate and recruit local Veterans for research.

Watts also has to deal with his own [health issues related to Gulf War service](#)⁷. Being as active as possible helps him with his symptoms, along with medications. "You have to be active or it will drive you crazy and bring you down even more," he said.

GULF WAR VETERANS BENEFITS RESOURCES

Benefits Overview

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/benefits/index.asp>

Health Care Overview

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/benefits/health-care.asp>

VA Disability Compensation

<https://www.va.gov/disability>

Gulf War Registry Exam

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/benefits/registry-exam.asp>

Burn Pit Registry

<https://veteran.mobilehealth.va.gov/AHBurnPitRegistry/#page/home>

Illnesses Presumed Related to Service

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/medically-unexplained-illness.asp>

Infectious Diseases Presumed Related to Service

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/infectious-diseases.asp>

Survivor Benefits

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/gulfwar/benefits/survivors.asp>

eBenefits

<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/homepage>

Veterans Crisis Line

<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs