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VVA Applauds House Veterans Affairs Leadership for Introduction of H.R. 299, *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019*

(Washington, D.C.) -- “On the eve of the House vote on H.R. 299, the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019*, VVA applauds Veterans Affairs Chair Mark Takano (D-CA) and Ranking Member Dr. Phil Roe (R-TN) for their leadership and their deep resolve in ensuring our Blue Water Navy veterans receive the healthcare and benefits they have earned by virtue of their service during the Vietnam War,” said John Rowan, VVA National President. “We expect that our Senators in the 116th Congress will do the right thing and pass the bill when it appears before them.”

H.R.299, the first bill introduced this Congress by Chair Takano, is similar to a bill that was passed unanimously in the House of Representatives last Congress but was stalled in the Senate by Sens. Mike Enzi (R-WY) and Mike Lee (R-UT), despite overwhelming bipartisan support. Members from both sides of the aisle will again vote to extend benefits to some 90,000 service members who served in the territorial waters off Vietnam and were exposed to Agent Orange.

“Contrary to the VA’s assertions, noted Rowan, “we have the science that shows the pathways of exposure to this insidious herbicide.” Earlier this year, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie voiced opposition to the legislation, reversing an earlier commitment by his predecessor, Dr. David Shulkin, to “do the right thing.” Secretary Wilke has now reversed his earlier position and has urged the administration not to appeal the U.S. Appeals Court decision in *Alfred Procopio, Jr., V. Robert Wilkie*, which will, in fact, restore healthcare and benefits to many veterans who served in the waters off Vietnam. It will also extend benefits to veterans who served in Thailand and those who served along the DMZ in Korea at any time. “We applaud Secretary Wilke for his support in moving forward to assist Blue Water Navy Veterans,” said Rowan.

In February 2002, the VA abruptly terminated benefits to the 534,300+ Blue Water U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, and FMF Marine veterans, thereby limiting the scope of the *Agent Orange Act of 1991* to veterans who could provide proof of “boots on the ground” in Vietnam which encompassed ground forces and the inland rivers. Suddenly, offshore veterans stopped receiving VA health care and disability compensation. The *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act*, when signed into law, will right this wrong.

