



# LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES & POLICY INITIATIVES

118TH ★  
CONGRESS



## Congressional GAO Study Addressing Burn Pits in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War

Title III of the *PACT Act*, signed into law August 10, 2022, expands healthcare and benefits, and includes a concession of exposure to burn pits for those who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other key locations during the Persian Gulf War and the Global War on Terrorism in Southwest Asia. However, the *PACT Act* (P.L. 117-168), does not address the Vietnam-era veterans' exposure to the effects of daily burning human waste in Southeast Asia.

### *Understanding the Issue*

Burning solid waste generates many pollutants, including dioxin, particulate matter, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, volatile organic compounds, carbon monoxide, hexachlorobenzene, and ash. Health effects from burning waste smoke depends on several factors, including the nature of the waste being burned, duration of exposure, and proximity to the burning smoke. Vietnam veterans who burned human waste are at greater risk for possible health effects. It is important for VA to acknowledge that Vietnam-era veterans were exposed to toxins, like other pre-911 servicemembers.

In addition to the visible air pollution and temporary, acute health effects like eye and throat irritation, breathing difficulties, and skin irritations, there are volatile organic compounds (VOCs) released from burning feces.<sup>1</sup> Among these VOCs, several are known to cause severe, chronic illness.

According to Department of Defense (DoD), “proper” disposal of waste during deployment is essential to prevent health problems and protect service members. In certain situations, when sanitary and waste management facilities are not available, human waste is mixed with diesel fuel and gasoline, then burned in a burn barrel or burn-out latrine. There is a long history of this practice.<sup>2, 3</sup> Burn-barrel latrines and burn pits were used in hundreds of base camps, fire bases, and landing zones throughout Vietnam. Open-air burning of human waste and other potentially toxic materials released harmful chemicals into the environment.

VVA calls on the Government Accountability Office (GAO), through an act of Congress, to study the likelihood that daily exposure to burn pits and burn-barrel latrines during the Vietnam War may be causing severe, chronic conditions adversely affecting Vietnam veterans' health and wellness today.

---

*Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is the only national Vietnam Veterans organization congressionally chartered and exclusively dedicated to Vietnam-era veterans and their families.*

[www.vva.org](http://www.vva.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine E. Garner, Stephen Smith, Ben de Lacy Costello, Paul White, Robert Spencer, Chris S. J. Probert, and Norman Ratcliffe, (2007) “Volatile Organic Compounds from Feces and their Potential for Diagnosis of Gastrointestinal Disease,” *FASEB J* 21(8), 1675-88.

<sup>2</sup> War Department Field Manual, FM 21-10, Military Sanitation, p. 55, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, July 1945.

<sup>3</sup> HQ, Dept. of the Army ATP 4-25.12, Unit Field Sanitation Teams, April 2014, pp. 5-18 – 5-20.