

The Perspective of a Gulf War Desert Storm Veteran

By William "Bill" Watts

Good day everyone and thanks to all the Veterans and Doctors who are here or attending on-line. I was asked to give the Veteran's Perspective for this meeting today and in doing so decided not to give my information as a RAC Member, Non-Profit Founder, or committee member of several organizations, but as a 100 % Disabled Veteran who served in Desert Storm. My perspective is just that and not being influenced by anyone but the Veterans I interact with and my personal observations and experiences.

Quickly for those that are not aware there were 500,000 to 700,000 U.S. military personnel that were placed in theater during Operation Desert Storm, with 40 Allied nations adding to this number. More than 18,000 air deployment missions and 116,000 air sorties dropped 88,500 tons of munitions in a six-week time frame. This resulted in a ground campaign that lasted only 100 hours, with approximately 300 Americans losing their lives. The rumor was they were expecting a much higher casualty rate, but due to great execution these numbers were extremely low. In my opinion had the war lasted longer and more deaths had occurred maybe the Desert Storm Veterans would have been looked at differently. Over 1/3 of the Desert Storm Veterans are sick and this number could possibly be higher, as some Veterans don't trust the VA and instead see regular civilian doctors who may not even know how to look for combat related issues.

I served with the 1st Cavalry Division, 2nd Brigade, 4/5 Air Defense Artillery, C – Battery as a communications repair technician and the Companies First Sergeants Driver. Let it be noted I was not feeling well before we arrived in country, and it could have been due to the many vaccines we had taken but as a true soldier I moved forward. We were first housed in what I believe were coal storage warehouses and all they did was remove the coal and sweep once. The latrine facilities were located about 200 yards away and pretty much always had a waiting line. I was sick to my stomach every day and would be doing my best to make it to the facilities and pray the line was short. On our 3rd day in country, it was determined that the Stinger Platoons would be deployed to the desert to provide

Air Defense once the Division deployed out of the staging area. I begged to be one of the ones going out and was allowed to do so as a Stinger Platoon Section Sergeant Driver.

During this time, we mostly lived off MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat) and there were only a few menu items I could stomach without getting sicker. Once the Division moved out, I was moved back with the headquarters platoon to perform communication repairs for the entire company. One evening I was sent to perform Kitchen Patrol (KP) duties and was left overnight in which I had to brave a sandstorm with only a camouflage net, a sleeping bag, and a cot. For lack of better words, I coughed up dust and had dust boogies for days. My Stomach problems continued and now breathing was becoming a problem.

Moving forward -

During combat operations, the 1st Sergeant and I were all over the desert in meetings and checking on the different stinger and Vulcan platoons assigned to different combat units. We went days without sleep and were targeted in attacks by small arms fire, took Iraqi prisoners of war, and cleared vehicles. Also we cleared some major bunkers that were found and to make matters worse the GPS system wasn't that great so we got lost numerous times. We ended up meeting and staying with several different American and Non-American units such as the 3rd ACR and British units. During this time no one ever warned us to stay away from combat destroyed vehicles as depleted Uranium shells were used. There were unfamiliar smells in the air, not just of combat but stomach-turning smells, as well as burning Vehicles, burn pits and what may have been oil wells in the distance. Many years later the Department of Defense or VA sent me a letter informing me that I had been exposed to Sarin Gas in low dose levels for possibly an extended period. Life in the desert was not easy.

It is not about jealousy but respect and fairness for all Eras of Veterans. When I say this, World War One Veterans basically fought with a rifle and tanks, then as technology got better so did the way conflicts were fought. Each conflict paved the way for the next from equipment to training. Korea the forgotten war, Vietnam where soldiers were not even welcomed home, and Desert Storm where personnel were told it is all in your head. Along came 9/11 and every effort was put forth by

Congress and non-profits to help this era of Veteran. Leaving the other Eras to have to fight just to get a small increase in their compensation and pension. As I said above, each prior conflict paved the way for the next. Desert Storm paved the way for the rest of the Gulf War era Veterans. It seems that Desert Storm Veterans were just lumped in with the others as part of the Gulf War to make the numbers look good for VA and the Department of Defense.

A lot of people are fooled into thinking that these major Non-profits that found major financial backing with TV and MUSIC personalities are doing great things for the Veterans. And mostly they do but for POST 9/11 Veterans and the who served prior to 9/11 must fight for every single thing they get. It took years of letters and forms to receive ratings for a lot of the Desert Storm Veteran myself included. Numerous times a Desert Storm Veteran has been told by doctors it's all in your head or Desert Storm what is that? I have never heard of Desert Storm when did that occur? Had there been a higher casualty rate would this be the same response. I personally have to give an experience of this - one of the C&P doctors exam notes on me. One day I was not feeling the greatest and went in with messed up hair, unshaven, a t-shirt with holes in it, sweatpants and old tennis shoes and not in a talking mood but did the exam anyway. A few weeks later there must have been a glitch in the system as I pulled up my medical notes and saw the notes by the doctor. The notes pretty much read Veteran very clean and well groomed, attentive and very well spoken. I could not believe my eyes at the lies placed on my exam record. Was this doctor setting me up for failure or was this a directive?

From 2009 to 2015, I was suicidal and even eventually was placed in a mental health facility. I could care less if I lived or died as I was tired of dealing with the VA, the paperwork and people in general. As I say in speeches, who better to talk to a Veteran about suicide than one who has been there and knows the taste of the end of their 9mm. Suicide, Toxic exposures, and Healthcare should be the very focus of the VA not just for post 9/11 but all eras of Veterans. The VA keeps becoming more technologically advanced, but the majority of Veterans have very little if any computer experience above logging into facebook. I Cofounded a non-profit to help every era of veteran be it the last remaining World War Two Veterans

to a Veteran who is just getting out of service. To Educate, Advocate, and provide Information as no one provides this freely to our service members. A great example of this is I went to the VA for 6 years and kept looking at a line and finally asked what is that for? Another Veteran told me that was for travel pay that they pay for you expenses to drive here. Wow wish I knew that sooner. It's the simple things.

Now that you have heard a little about me, I would like to share some comments that are commonly made by Veterans who served during the 90-91 Desert Storm.

Why are they lumping us all together with Post 9/11 we are different and had different exposures. They are only doing this to make their numbers look good.

Doctors told me it is all in my head.

How many other Veterans have dental issues?

Told that sicknesses such as Chronic Fatigue, Fiber Myalgia, brain fog, IBS, Respiratory Issues, Neuropathy Symptoms are due to old age.

The Doctors need to be trained on Gulf War Illness as they have no idea how to treat me.

The VA is just waiting for us to die off.

Specific Examples

Bill W. – It appears that a directive was put out to deny claims of the Desert Storm Gulf War Veterans.

Eva – "I was diagnosed with Lupus, but I ended up having to go to an outside rheumatologist because V.A. Doctors couldn't or wouldn't diagnose my conditions"

Todd - presumptive doesn't matter, I have many of the presumptive conditions that are documented but have been denied by VA

Leslie - we were around sand/biting flies & spiders- ALLOT. We were told to spray the tent (city), uniforms, skin, etc- with bug spray to repel them- not making the connection. we were working, breathing & sleeping in DEET.

Kirt - I've lost 3 teeth, cataract surgery on both eyes for sub capsular white, 1cm colon polyp removed, Fatty liver disease, 3-inch tumor from my foot, and G.I. - nerve inflammation the V.A. can't pin down. Spinal scoliosis and stenosis. Plural scarring. Prefrontal lobe plaques. So on and so on. All before 60 years old. Nope, that's all normal to have so much going wrong by V.A.

Jason - I would love for my kids to get help too but the va isn't doing a good job of helping us so. our lives have been shortened. We suffer daily and our disease is not only not known but it isn't considered terminal or serious. many of us are on the verge of homelessness and/or so sick.

Loretta - I was treated so poorly that I only go when I must.

Lisa - I no longer trust VA. I have also been told that it's in my head in addition to I'm getting older and it's my weight.

So, as you can see from the comments that are made by Nationwide Veterans it is not just one hospital but Nationwide. This is just a small sample of comments that were made and were randomly picked. The Desert Storm Veterans are just so frustrated with denial after denial and being told it is all in their head. I hear the same comments over and over just worded differently and all the Veterans are asking for is a fair system and help with their issues.

In appearance the VA should be one company and one system, but it is several different companies operating differently. A great example is in Florida you have VISN 8 who is doing great things in certain areas. However, the standards change dramatically from Miami, to Tampa, to Orlando, to Bay Pine and so on. I had a stay in the Cleveland VA Hospital, and it was night and day difference compared to Miami. Someone really needs to look at a standardized VA system that cares for ALL Veterans in the same way. Again, these are my observations and experiences.

In Closing not every Veteran has the opportunity to serve on world class committees and meet doctors who truly want to help the Veterans. Doctors who are not here to just collect a paycheck. Having become an Advocate for research for such great teams as the VISN 8 LPOP group and working with Dr. Greg Holt, Elizebeth Balbin and Precious Leaks-Guterriez as well as Doctors Drew Helmer, Larry Steinman and Peter Rumm just to name a few and seeing how inspired they are in helping Veterans is truly amazing. There are many great studies out there such as the Grail and Nightingale studies that look at cancers, but the Veterans don't trust the VA and it is hard to recruit. The VA needs to show the Veterans that it can be trusted, and truly understand the phrase Quality of Life begins with Quality of Care.....

Thank you.