

Vietnam Veterans of America: Veterans sickened by plutonium after hydrogen bombs dropped at Palomares, Spain, sue Pentagon for records

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(Washington, D.C.)—Today, Vietnam Veterans of America and the VVA Connecticut State Council filed suit in U.S. District Court in Connecticut to compel the Department of Defense to release records related to U.S. airmen's exposure to ionizing radiation while responding to a January 17, 1966, hydrogen bomb accident near Palomares, Spain.

“The Department of Defense has withheld access to critical health information, including the results of medical testing by military doctors, from Palomares veterans for over fifty years,” said John Rowan, President of Vietnam Veterans of America. “Without key information about the extent of their exposure, these veterans have been unable to pursue the disability benefits that many desperately need.”

In one of the worst nuclear accidents in U.S. history, a U.S. Air Force B-52 bomber collided with a KC-135 tanker aircraft, releasing four hydrogen bombs. The Palomares “Broken Arrow” incident irradiated large swathes of the Spanish countryside after two of the bombs broke open upon impact. In an effort to recover the weapons, the U.S. Air Force ordered approximately 1,600 airmen to the site of

the accident, where they were exposed to dangerous levels of radiation daily, for weeks or months at a time. The Air Force failed to provide the airmen with adequate protection, however, and did not warn them of the danger of their assignment.

Many of the veterans who participated in the Palomares cleanup operation have sought veterans' disability benefits for illnesses and health conditions related to exposure to ionizing radiation, but have been denied. "Palomares veterans have waited decades for even basic information about the medical risks that prolonged exposure to radioactive plutonium dust carries," said Vietnam veteran Patti Dumin, President of the VVA Connecticut State Council. "They cannot wait any longer - the Pentagon owes them answers."

The lawsuit asks the court to compel the Department of Defense to conduct a reasonable search and immediately produce the wrongfully withheld records under the Freedom of Information Act. Jacob Bennett, a law student intern with the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at Yale Law School's Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization, said, "Palomares veterans and the American public are entitled to know the full extent of the damage that this Broken Arrow disaster inflicted on young service members' health. We intend to vindicate our clients' FOIA rights to help Palomares veterans access the benefits they deserve."