

ANCHORS AWAY, ALMOST

By Blake Hyfield

The House voted 382-0 in June in favor of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, which must go to the Senate for final approval. The Senate will start its hearings, starting August 1st. The Act provides eligibility for disability compensation to "Blue Water" Navy veterans -- those sailors aboard aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and other ships who contend they were exposed to Agent Orange through the ships' water systems. These ships would distill waters off Vietnam for everyday use aboard ship – cooking, drinking, showers, etc. The dioxin-laden herbicide has been found to cause respiratory cancers, Parkinson's disease and heart disease, as well as other conditions.

At issue are current VA regulations regarding veterans who served on ships off the coastline of Vietnam but never had “boots on the ground”. A VA policy decision in 2002 stripped Blue Water Navy veterans of their eligibility for compensation, unless they could prove they set foot in Vietnam. Bills were introduced in 2011, 2013 and 2015 to address the problem, but progress stalled because of cost concerns. On the other hand, troops on the ground or who patrolled inland rivers during the war (brown-water Navy) are presumed to have been working with or near Agent Orange and are given special exemptions if they now suffer from the long list of presumptive diseases. This “blue water fix” will equal the playing field as respects this.

One major issue facing Congress is the cost of this Blue Water extension. Extending the benefits for 10 years would cost \$1.1 billion, according to estimates from the Congressional Budget Office. To make up the cost, the legislation raises fees for servicemembers and veterans who use the VA's home loan program. The increase amounts to between \$2.14 and \$2.95 each month - sort of a “robbing Peter to pay Paul approach.

As with any VA Act, blue water Veterans affected may still have a months-long wait before VA officials establish procedures and rules for paying out the new benefits. Let's hope it does not take too long!

Note: Several military oriented web sites were used to write this article.