

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

“The Exposure at Qarmat Ali: Contractor Misconduct and the Safety of U.S. Troops in Iraq”

Danny Langford
Former KBR Employee

My name is Danny Langford. I live in Texas City, TX. For the last 23 years, I have been a rotating equipment technician working on pumps, turbines, and other rotating equipment, principally at the Union Carbide plant in Texas City until I retired in 2000. Since then, I've worked in the oil patch all over the world. In 2003, I was called by a KBR recruiter named Rocky Giddings, who I had known for a number of years, about working on a Halliburton/KBR project called Restore Iraqi Oil (RIO) following the United States's invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003. After an orientation program in Houston, which included a full and complete physical, which I passed with flying colors, I left for Iraq on July 10, 2003. On the plane trip over to Kuwait, I met Ed Blacke, who was a safety man also going to work on project RIO for KBR.

After a four or five day in-country orientation in Kuwait, I was assigned to the Qarmat Ali water treatment plant near Basra in southern Iraq. I immediately began work on the intake pumps, followed quickly by work on the pumps in the injection building and the first stage backwash pumps. We were told that the working conditions were going to be severe in terms of heat and dust storms, and they were.

Additionally, I immediately noticed, as did all the workers, that much of the Qarmat Ali treatment plant was covered in a layer of bright orangish dust, but we were not told what that material was or what its purpose was. We could see that the orange stuff that was all over the plant was coming from, and had come from, large bags of an orange-colored chemical that were stored in two locations – one was the injection building where I did a lot of work on the pumps

and the other was a storage shed that had no roof and two sides missing. In both locations, some of the bags were ripped open, spilling the contents out on the ground and the floor. Once I realized the source of the orange material, it looked to me like someone had spread it all over the plant on purpose because it was everywhere. In the injection building, the Iraqi workers swept up the spillage, but the material was on the pumps, the pipes, and everything in the building. If you had to work in there, you were going to get it on your hands, face, and all over your clothes.

In the first two weeks on the job, there were several pretty severe dust storms, at which point, the visibility was poor and all the loose material on the ground became airborne. We had been given helmets and flack jackets, but we had not been issued any personal protective equipment as would be required for working around any kind of airborne chemical contamination. That is to say we had no respirators, breathing masks, or any other type of personal protective equipment that would keep the stuff out of our noses, throats and lungs and off of our bodies. During this initial two-week period, at the end of every working day, my boots, pants and clothing would be caked with this orange material, and I began having problems with a bad sore throat, irritated nasal passages, a hacking cough, and irritated eyes. Also about this time period, I began having regular nose bleeds and began spitting up some blood. I went to the KBR clinic where an EMT or a physician's assistant there told me I was probably allergic to sand and gave me antihistamines for my nasal, sinus, and throat irritation. I was not impressed with his diagnosis or recommended treatment.

It was some time near the end of July that Ed Blacke pulled me aside and told me to stay out of the injection building -- that there was some contamination in there that he didn't like and that he was investigating further and was going to get to the bottom of it, but in the meantime, that I was to avoid as much as possible going in there. Within a couple of days of that

conversation, on July 29, 2003, two health, safety and environmental (HSE) supervisors from Kuwait showed up at the plant and held a safety meeting to address our concerns about the cause of the type of symptoms that I have described, which were common throughout our workforce. At that meeting, these men told us that the plant was safe, that the plant had been checked out, and that it was OK for us to go back to work. When asked specifically about the chromium contamination, they said, and I quote, that it was “at most a minor irritant” and that “exposure to it would not pose any serious health risk.” At that point in the meeting, Ed Blacke, whose concerns had brought these two fellows to the plant, said he disagreed and this contaminant was a problem, at which point Ed was asked to leave the meeting and was escorted from the meeting by one of the HSE supervisors. That was pretty much the last we ever saw of Ed Blacke, and we were ordered to return to work, again without any personal protective equipment.

A few days after that safety meeting, two or three other representatives from KBR in Kuwait came to the plant to present the workers with some sort of award. While they were there, one of our co-workers, Tommy Bayless, asked them about the chromium exposure and when they avoided answering him, Tommy said “this is a bunch of BS” and within 24 hours, Tommy Bayless was on an airplane back to the States.

Meanwhile, the rest of us were continuing to work at the plant, but we were not happy about the misinformation about the working conditions and the dangers that we felt we might be exposed to. I was also concerned about the Army personnel who were providing security for us. Those soldiers were from the Indiana National Guard and they were suffering from the same sort of symptoms that we suffered, as were the Iraqi workers whose exposure to the sodium dichromate was, if anything, worse than anyone else’s.

In mid to late August, we were sent down to Kuwait to give blood so that they could test for chromium and other heavy metals in our blood, however, after giving the blood, we were sent back to the plant and told to keep working. Within another week or ten days, they pulled us out of the plant, said they were shutting it down to clean it up, gave us the results of our blood tests, which showed elevated levels of chromium and other heavy metals, and told us that after they got the plant cleaned up, we were not going to be forced to go back to it if we didn't want to and we could go to another assignment. I chose not to go back to the plant and worked at the main camp in Basra. It was reported to me by co-workers who did go back that after they paved over the plant, they delivered a truckload of hooded respirators and breathing equipment and full hooded suits for the workers who continued to work at the plant.

I was in good health prior to going to Iraq and had the acute symptoms that I have already described and when I came home on R&R in October of 2003, I ended up going to the emergency room at Mainland Center Hospital in Texas City, where I had extremely elevated blood pressure and extremely high levels of chromium in my blood. I also had some sort of serious infectious process of unknown origin, and my doctors told me that the tops of my lungs were severely irritated. I have been treated with chelation therapy since that time to attempt to remove some of the chromium from my system, and since October of 2003, I have had short-term memory problems which my doctors have told me may be related to my exposure to the sodium dichromate.

I am here today because it was wrong for Halliburton and KBR to expose all of the workers and the Army and security personnel at this water treatment plant to a highly toxic and poisonous contaminant such as sodium dichromate. They took the attitude at the time that there was nothing anyone was going to be able to do about it because they were immune from lawsuit

and/or any other accountability. I only hope that that is not the case, and that is why I am here today.