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Chairman Jeff Miller
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
336 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Corrine Brown
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
2111 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Brown:

The VA's recent decision to continue to deny care and benefits to "Blue Water" Vietnam Veterans makes clear that Congress must take action to finally fix this problem. That is why I urge you to pass the bipartisan Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act (HR 969), of which I am an original cosponsor, to ensure that all those who served on naval ships in the waters surrounding Vietnam – and exposed to Agent Orange – get the care and support they deserve.

The widespread use of nearly 20 million gallons of the herbicide throughout Vietnam and on its inland waters to clear vegetation as part of "Operation Ranch Hand" from 1961 to 1971, led to these chemicals entering the surrounding harbors, bays, and seas. The "Blue Water" Navy ships took in this contaminated water and distilled it for showering, drinking, laundry, and cooking. Thus, some 90,000 Navy sailors were likely exposed to this toxic chemical used during the war even if they did not set foot on land.

Unfortunately, the VA continues to interpret the Agent Orange Act of 1991, which first established a presumption of exposure for those who served in Vietnam, as including only veterans who have actually set foot on land or the inland waterways of Vietnam. In the decision of *Gray v. McDonald*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims required that the VA re-evaluate and clarify Blue Water sailors' eligibility for Agent Orange related benefits under current law. The VA stood by its current position and sailors who served in the seas outside of Vietnam's internal waterways remain ineligible for benefits.

Like many veterans in my district who regularly share their concerns about this issue with me, I am deeply disappointed in the VA's continued refusal to act. It is long past time to right this wrong, and passage of Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act will fix this problem once and for all by specifying in law that those who served in the territorial seas of Vietnam are included in the presumption of exposure to Agent Orange.

Passage of this bill will make a meaningful difference in the lives of Vietnam veterans not just in eastern Connecticut but across the country. It will not only provide the care and compensation that they deserve for their suffering – it would also provide a long-overdue acknowledgment of the risk they took in service to our country.

I appreciate the many important issues before your committee in ensuring that the VA is fulfilling its solemn duty to our veterans. However, given the magnitude of this problem, I hope you will make passage of this bill a top priority this year.

Sincerely,



JOE COURTNEY
Member of Congress