



Fact Sheet: Declassified Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Documents

Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2) is a Soviet-era air base in southeastern Uzbekistan. Following the September 11, 2001, attacks, the U.S. military established Camp Stronghold Freedom at K2 and forces from the U.S. Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps used the base for support missions into Afghanistan between 2001 and 2005. In December 2019, McClatchy [reported](#) that servicemembers who deployed to K2 had been diagnosed with health ailments, including cancer.

On July 9, 2020, the Subcommittee on National Security released previously classified documents produced by the U.S. military in 2001, 2002, and 2004, which reveal:

Servicemembers were exposed to multiple toxic hazards while at K2:

- **Petrochemical Contamination and Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs):** According to the documents, servicemembers were likely exposed to a variety of hazardous petrochemicals and VOCs while at K2, including jet fuel and kerosene. During subsurface soil [testing](#) in 2001, “[e]levated levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) were detected at numerous locations throughout Stronghold Freedom, including tent city, eastern expansion area (Site 3), and adjacent to the aircraft maintenance facility.” A declassified [November 2001](#) Operational Health Risk Assessment found that “[i]nhalation of vapors from exposed, subsurface fuel contaminated soils could potentially cause adverse health effects to personnel at Stronghold Freedom if sufficient exposure circumstances occur.” As a result, the [assessment](#) recommended: “Prohibit digging into soil contaminated with jet fuel.”
- **Particulate Matter 10 (PM10) and Tetrachloroethylene:** A June 2002 Operational Health Risk Assessment [estimated](#) that “between 50% and 75% of personnel at Stronghold Freedom will be exposed to elevated levels of compounds in air,” and a September 2004 health [assessment](#) described the probability of exposure to PM10 levels as “frequent.” According to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), “Small particles less than 10 micrometers in diameter pose the greatest [health] problems, because they can get deep into your lungs, and some may even get into your bloodstream.”

A few air samples also [reported](#) elevated levels of tetrachloroethylene. According to the [Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry](#), “Studies in humans suggest that exposure to tetrachloroethylene might lead to a higher risk of getting bladder cancer, multiple myeloma, or non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

- **Burn Pits:** On September 1 and 2, 2004, visual site inspections [identified](#) multiple open fires burning near K2: “The smell of burning plastic was evident, and ash was noted blowing from the fire site over the ASP [ammunition supply point].” Although K2 is not currently included in the Department of

Veterans Affairs (VA) burn pit registry, according to the [VA](#), “Toxins in burn pit smoke may affect the skin, eyes, respiratory and cardiovascular systems, gastrointestinal tract and internal organs.”

“Up to 100%” of units assigned to K2 potentially exposed to radiation:

- According to a September 2004 health assessment, the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine (USACHPPM) [found](#) that, although “less than 10% of personnel will experience [radiation] exposures above background” at Camp Stronghold Freedom, “the potential for daily contact with radiation exists for up to 100% of the assigned units.” While the Operational Risk Management risk of radiation was assessed to be “low,” the report [acknowledged](#) it made this assessment with “low confidence ... due to the highly variable nature of air concentrations, the lack of detailed information regarding true soldier exposures, the limited temporal scope of the available sampling data, and the limited availability of data on health effects due to the low-level radiation exposure.”
- A former missile site (“Site 1”), located adjacent to Stronghold Freedom’s “tent city,” was [found](#) to contain small pieces of depleted uranium in 2001, and external radiation measurements in 2002 [detected](#) radiation levels four times above background. Although Site 1 was declared “off-limits” in November 2001, by 2002, “erosion and flooding” had “caused changes to the landscape,” but no additional radiation was detected beyond Site 1.

Military leaders were supposed to communicate with K2 servicemembers about potential health risks:

- A September 2004 inspection by USACHPPM [recommended](#): “Continue aggressive health risk communication efforts on the environmental threats identified on Stronghold Freedom to ensure personnel are aware of actual threats and appropriate countermeasures. Regular risk communication efforts will compensate for personnel turnover and provide deployed personnel with facts regarding their health, environmental health threats, and efforts undertaken to mitigate these health threats.”
- According to U.S. Air Force Master Sergeant Paul Widener, Jr. (ret.), who [testified](#) before the Subcommittee on February 27, 2020, and served at K2: “K2 members were told repeatedly that no significant risk from hazards existed. ... There were no briefings on toxic exposures, no protective equipment recommended, issued, or employed.”

Multiple “false-positive” readings were attributed to faulty test equipment:

- In June 2002, testing by an Army unit at K2 resulted in initial [detections](#) of nerve, mustard, and blood agents in two Hardened Aircraft Shelter (HAS) structures, and U.S. personnel were evacuated as a precautionary measure. U.S. Army Soldier and Biological Command (SBCCOM) later [determined](#) these readings were the result of “false positive field results.” However, a July 2002 HAS assessment [reported](#) that “personnel may not have been advised of the negative CW result quoted in the SBCCOM report,” and “[e]very attempt should be made to determine the cause of the false positive results and communicate this information to Stronghold Freedom personnel.”
- On June 5, 2002, a different K2 Army unit [performed](#) an “alpha radiation survey” near their tent, which “indicated high levels of alpha contamination.” It was later [reported](#) that the “instrument check source reading was accurate, but a loose connection between the probe and the instrument caused spurious and inaccurate readings.” Further investigation [found](#) the equipment used by the unit “was faulty.”

The Department of Defense withheld declassified K2 health studies from the Subcommittee for months:

- According to declassification markings, the 2001, 2002, and 2004 K2 assessments were declassified as early as February 24, 2020—three days before the Subcommittee held a [hearing](#) with K2 veterans, nearly a month before the Department of Defense (DOD) provided classified versions of the documents to the Subcommittee on March 18, two months before Chairman Lynch and Rep. Mark Green [wrote](#) to DOD requesting declassified versions of the classified health assessments, and four months before the declassified versions were finally provided to the Subcommittee.
- This delay is time that K2 servicemembers and veterans were denied answers about what they may have been exposed to while serving their country.