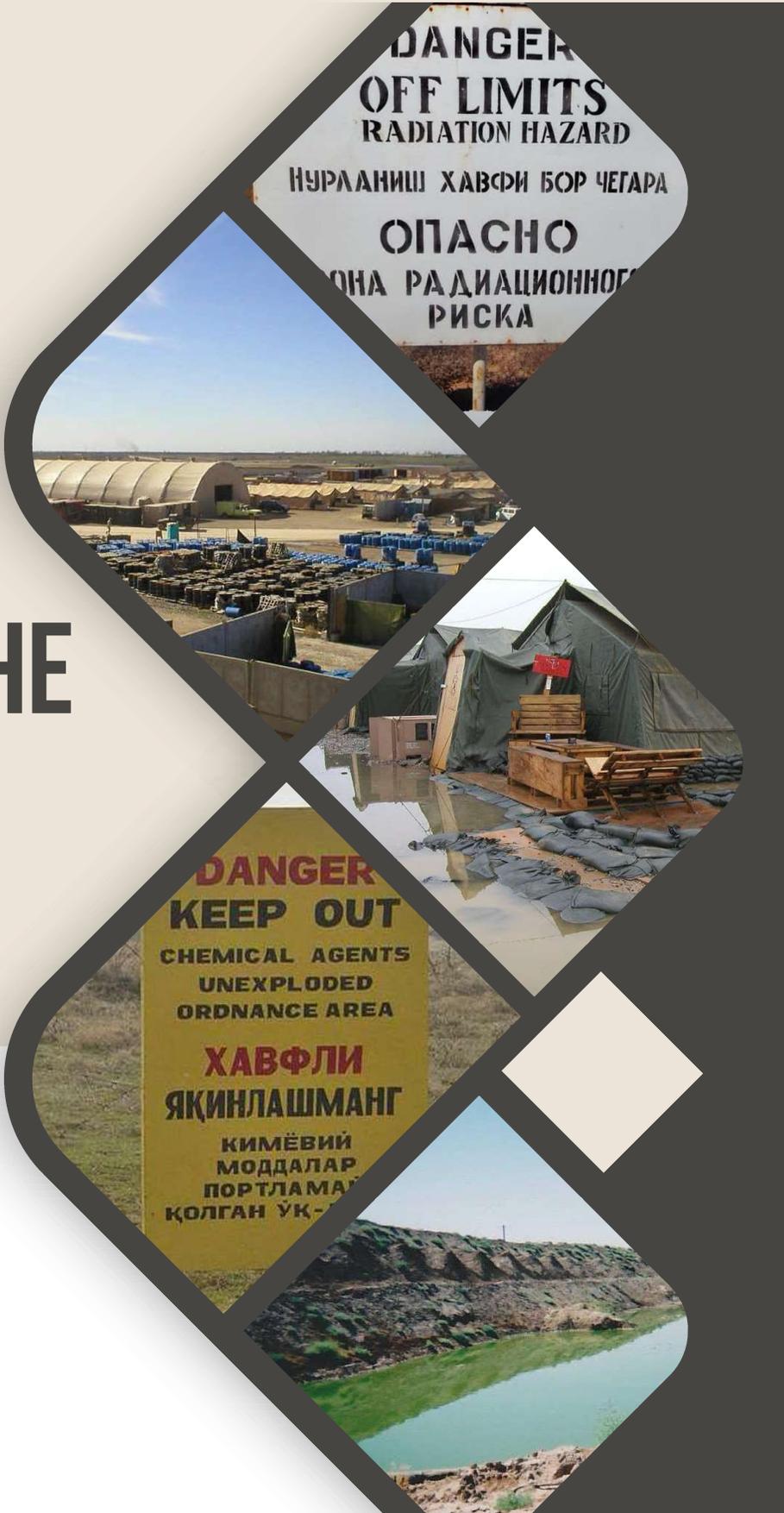


KEEPING THE PROMISE



**Stronghold
Freedom
Foundation**

To serve those who were exposed to toxic conditions while deployed to Camp Stronghold Freedom, Uzbekistan in the service of our country.





April 18, 2024

The Honorable Dennis McDonough
Secretary
Veteran's Affairs Administration
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we write to express our strong support for immediate and comprehensive action on behalf of veterans of Camp Stronghold Freedom, Karshi-Khanabad Airbase, Uzbekistan (K2). The base was in southern Uzbekistan and operational from early October 2001 through mid-2005. K2 was strategic and vital to the success in the early months and years of the war in Afghanistan and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). K2 was located on a former Soviet base and was the site of many decades of extreme pollution and environmental damage. In November 2001, the DoD sent a team of environmental engineers and scientists to test the conditions at K2. This team documented over 400 toxic compounds as well as chemical weapons, nerve agents, and enriched uranium. There was very little done to mitigate the conditions at K2 – as is often the case in combat operations – and for nearly four more years approximately 15,000 U.S. servicemembers were exposed to these conditions. In the years that have followed, approximately 40% of K2 veterans have reported severe and varied diseases – often presenting together – and many of these same veterans have been denied service-connection upon making a claim to the VA. The PACT Act covered some of the diseases seen in K2 veterans, especially certain cancers and respiratory diseases, but many diseases remain denied and uncovered and unrecognized.

With your ability to unilaterally make changes and amendments to the PACT Act and other existing legislation and VA policies, we, the undersigned, demand:

- Presumptive service connection for K2 veterans diagnosed with certain diseases related to the unique and toxic environment at K2 from 2001 through 2005;
- A concession of exposure to radiation (including the existence and presence of enriched uranium) for all veterans who served at K2;
- Official recognition of service at K2 as a Radiation Risk Activity;
- The establishment of a K2-specific training curriculum for all VA claims processors in order to educate them about the unique exposures suffered by K2 veterans;
- Retroactive service-connection date corresponding with diagnosis;
- Waiver of the individual and automatic presumption for K2 veterans making a claim;
- Automatic reassessment for K2 veterans whose claims were previously denied.

The PACT Act provided hope, care, and presumptive service connection for hundreds of thousands of veterans, including some K2 veterans. But because of the unique and toxic environment at K2 and the myriad diseases presenting since 2001, K2 veterans represent a gap in coverage by existing legislation and policies and deserve immediate and comprehensive action by you. This recognition will go far in correcting twenty years of neglect and recognize the ongoing sacrifice made by K2 veterans, their families, and their survivors.

Sincerely,

Matthew Erpelding
Executive Director
Stronghold Freedom Foundation
Matt@strongholdfreedomfoundation.org



The following organizations offered their signatures in support of our asks for K2 Veterans and Surviving Families.

Burn Pits 360

Rosie Torres
Co-Founder/ Executive Director

National Defense Committee

Bob “Shoebob” Carey, Captain, US Navy (Ret.)
Executive Director

Hunter Seven Foundation

Chelsey Simoni
Clinical Nurse Researcher

Korean War Veterans’ Association

Jeff Brodeur
National President

GO2 for Lung Cancer

Elridge D. Proctor
Senior Director, Government Affairs

Reserve Service Association

Jeffrey E. Phillips
Executive Director

Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger

Laura Olah
National Coordinator

Operation First Response

Peggy Baker
Founder/President

Armed Forces Retirees Association

Terry LLoyd

Jewish War Veterans of the USA

Ken Greenberg
National Executive Director

The Military Order of the World Wars

Mike Farrell
Chief of Staff and Chief Operating Officer

Air Commando Association

Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Bill Holt
Chairman

Green Beret Foundation

Anna Richardson
Director of Foundation Relations and Scholarships

Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States

Jeffrey Frisby

Wounded Paw Project

Maj. Ernesto Hernandez, III (Ret. USAF)
Founder

American Retirees Association

Dennis Egge
President

Cease Fire Campaign

Laura Olah
Executive Director

Military-Veterans Advocacy

John Wells
Chairman

American GI Forum

Maj. Ernesto Hernandez, III (Ret. USAF)

AMVETS

Joe Chenelly
National Executive Director

Grunt Style Foundation

Tim Jensen
President, Board of Directors

I - ISSUE

Soviet radiation hazard signs hung on wires warning all; black ‘Goo’ and ‘Green Liquid’ oozed from the ground; strange-looking water streamed through tents from overflowing ditches when it rained; ponds nicknamed ‘Skittles’” glowed in iridescent colors, and personnel wearing hazardous contamination suits ordered the evacuation of unprotected service members living in structures that housed them – these are initial observations and experiences at Camp Stronghold Freedom.

Camp Stronghold Freedom, Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base, Uzbekistan (former Soviet Union), was the tip-of-the-spear, the launching pad for the initial ground attacks against al-Qa’ida and the Taliban two weeks after the 9/11 attacks. K2 became the US military’s foothold in the region, the key strategic base for US Army and Air Force Special Operations. This base was the foundational air bridge for Operation Enduring Freedom, enabling successful airlift missions and staging for the US Army’s 10th Mountain Division to enter Afghanistan. Over the next four years, until March 2005, more than 15,777 US military members were stationed or passed through this strategic location.

Unsurprisingly, servicemembers immediately began experiencing strange illnesses from exposure to many unknown and undisclosed toxins at K2. Many of our veterans have died. Many are sick and dying from cancers, respiratory issues, rare autoimmune syndromes, and many undiagnosed illnesses; yet, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DoD) continue to ignore and neglect our veterans’ suffering.

The VA claims they do not possess sufficient evidence to establish service connection for those members facing unique health problems related to their exposures at Camp Stronghold Freedom. The VA and DoD seem hesitant to investigate or acknowledge the consequences of their actions. As a result, service members who survived the battlefield returned home to become delayed casualties of war, suffering and dying from cancers, and a multitude of illnesses caused by their exposure to toxic chemicals and radiation at K2.

The VA and DoD maintain their claims that they don't "know enough" about these toxins and the radiation exposure to take action, and they choose to ignore their significance to our service members and their families. In fact, documents now publicly available, show that the VA and DoD actually are aware of these facts and continue to ignore them.

In 2001, the US Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine-Europe (CHPPM-EUR), dated 27 October - 27 November 2001, conducted an environmental site characterization of Stronghold Freedom, documenting the following issues: ambient air detection levels were greater than the long-term military environmental guidelines for many chemicals including inhalation of vapors from exposed subsurface fuel contaminated soils. They confirmed radioactive samples did have elevated natural uranium, which was determined by further study. However, the progeny for natural uranium was absent, suggesting that the uranium underwent a concentration process. The potential radiation exposure at this site was an internal health hazard. An independent governmental review, conducted by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Diseases (ATSDR), Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed these findings and the presence of other potentially harmful compounds.

Because the VA refuses to completely acknowledge the connection between K2 and toxic exposures, thousands of veterans have been refused VA care for their conditions. They are denied outside referrals to doctors who specialize in this field, and if their disease takes their life, their dependents do not receive critical benefits such as Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and health care to aid them in the years to come without their loved ones. For every soldier returning with horrific health defects, there are untold numbers of service members and their families who continue to be subjected, unknowingly, to the toxic conditions at K2.

The DoD and VA must acknowledge the reality and gravity of the problems for all personnel who set boots on the ground at K2. They must take immediate action to ensure that these veterans and their families are not only taken care of but that the DoD and VA will also take action to locate and notify all K2 veterans of the grave threat to their health. Their wartime service for the United States of America at Camp Stronghold Freedom demands nothing less.

II - WHY K2 WAS BAD?

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on America, the US established its first in theater operating base at Karshi-Khanabad (K2), Uzbekistan. K2, a Soviet-era air base, was renamed Camp Stronghold Freedom and provided a strategic footprint for military operations against al Qaeda and the Taliban. US Army, Airforce, and Marine Corps forces used the base for direct combat support missions from 2001 until 2005.

The Servicemen and Women who served and moved through Camp Stronghold Freedom were not aware of a *silent, nearly invisible enemy*; the toxic, radiologic and chemical agents they were exposed to continually for the duration of their stay.

Exposures

Service members at K-2 encountered several hazardous exposures including:

- **Jet fuel:** Exposure to jet fuel may have occurred as a result of a leaking Soviet-era underground jet fuel distribution system.
- **Volatile organic compounds** - Air samples collected during environmental assessments contained concentrations of volatile organic compounds from jet fuel vapors that did not exceed Military Exposure Guidelines or other health exposure criteria.
- **Particulate matter and dust** - All service members who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations were exposed to particulate matter and dust. The levels in the air varied depending on the season and weather conditions.
- **Enriched uranium** - Testing and DoD records confirm the existence of enriched uranium at K2 in the soil and radiological particulates in the air. Army testing teams found air was the pathway of greatest long term exposure concern
- **Asbestos** – Asbestos was present in roof tiles and soil but was not detected in air samples.
- **Lead-based Paint:** K-2's one-stop, In-processing Center was the only structure identified on the base with lead-based paint.

<https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/karshi-khanabad.asp>

U.S. Army Lt. Gen. (Ret.) John Mulholland, who led Task Force Dagger, was among the first into Uzbekistan and Afghanistan in the opening days of Operation Enduring Freedom in the Fall of 2001. Mulholland told CBS News that the Russians, who had previously occupied the base, treated K2 like a "dumping ground," and he personally called in the environmental testing teams when personnel got sick after digging a protective dirt barrier around the base. Mulholland said there were "immediate concerns" about toxic materials found at K2 including jet fuel, solvents, as well as depleted and yellowcake uranium. He said the yellowcake was identified to him by

military personnel with knowledge of these materials. Asked about the suffering service members, Mulholland advocated "erring on the side of the veteran" and not subjecting them to endless studies.

The VA and DoD maintain their claims that they don't "know enough" about these toxins and the radiation exposure to take action, and they choose to ignore their significance to our service members and their families. **In fact, now publicly available Defense Department documents and primary source environmental testing data show that the VA and DoD were aware of these facts and continued to ignore or dismiss them.**



Stronghold Freedom Foundation/ Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Reported Illnesses

Neurological Disorders:

- **Reported:** ALS, MS, Essential Tremors, Ataxia, Epilepsy/Seizures, various Spine disorders, nerve and disc issues, Dysautonomia, POTS, Lewy Body Dementia, Cognitive Dysfunction, Memory Issues, Peripheral Neuropathy, Cluster Headaches, Migraines, vision issues, tinnitus, Guillain Barre syndrome, Neurocognitive Disorder(early dementia), Neurological Hearing Loss, Undiagnosed neurological issues

Immune Dysregulation Disorders:

- **Reported: Autoimmune:** the body attacks itself. Type 1 Diabetes, Rheumatoid Arthritis, Seronegative RA, MS, Lupus, Crohn's Disease, Inflammatory Bowel Syndrome, Hidradenitis Suppurativa, Psoriasis, Schamberg's Disease, Autoimmune Epilepsy, Fibromyalgia, Chronic Fatigue, Psoriatic arthritis
- **Immune Suppression:** increased risk of infection and cancer. Hypogammaglobulinemia (HGG)
- **Allergic Diseases:** Asthma, Allergic Rhinitis, Atopic Dermatitis, GI responses, Chronic Sinusitis.
- **Inflammatory Diseases:** exaggerated, excessively prolonged dysfunctional inflammatory response with increased risk of cancers. Coronary Artery Disease, Cardiomegaly, Asthma (often diagnosed after service), Eczema, Liver disorders, Prostatitis, COPD, Scleroderma, Pigment Dispersion Syndrome, Eosinophilic Esophagitis, Chronic Joint pain, and Inflammation, Cholecystitis, Sarcoidosis, Osteoarthritis, Costochondritis, elevated B/P, Diverticulitis/diverticulosis, bowel obstructions, appendicitis, GERD, Chronic pain, urological issues, Mitral Valve Prolapse. Heart Arrhythmia, Lymphomatoid Papulosis, Eustachian Tube Dysfunction

Hematological/Bone Disorders:

- **Reported:** Multiple Myeloma, Monoclonal Gammopathy (MGUS), Polycythemia vera, Thrombocytosis, Osteoporosis, Anemia, Hypercoagulable State, Thrombophilia, Bone and Joint malignancies, Plasma Cell Disorders, Cyclic Neutropenia, Granulomatous Disease, Immune Thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP), Hairy Cell Leukemia

Endocrine System Disorders:

- **Reported:** Non-cancer Thyroid Disorders, Hypothyroidism, Pituitary Disorders, Hormonal Imbalances, Reproductive Issues for female vets with high rates of miscarriages, Infertility, Endometriosis. Sterility, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome(PCOS), Adrenal Adenoma, Fibrocystic Breast Disease, early menopause,
- **Legacy issues:** A large number of birth defects and congenital issues were reported.
- **Gulf War Illness:** Chronic, undiagnosed, multi-symptom illnesses.

Cancers:

- **Reported:** Head, neck, brain of any type, gastrointestinal of any type, lung, pancreatic, kidney, male and female reproductive, lymphoma (any), melanoma, Multiple Myeloma, spinal, bone, Ocular Melanoma, Testicular cancer, Basal Cell cancer, Squamous Cell Cancer, Spindle Cell Pulmonary Cancer, Prostate Cancer.

Respiratory:

- **Reported:** Chronic Bronchitis, Constrictive bronchiolitis, Obliterative bronchiolitis, Interstitial Lung Disease (ILD), Emphysema, Chronic Obstructive pulmonary Disease(COPD), Pulmonary Fibrosis, Breathing issues, Pleurisy, sleep apnea, scarred lungs

Reported by Stronghold Freedom Foundation:

K2 Diagnosis/Disability Survey conducted 03/23/2023.

Direct Communication via SFF Care and Support Team

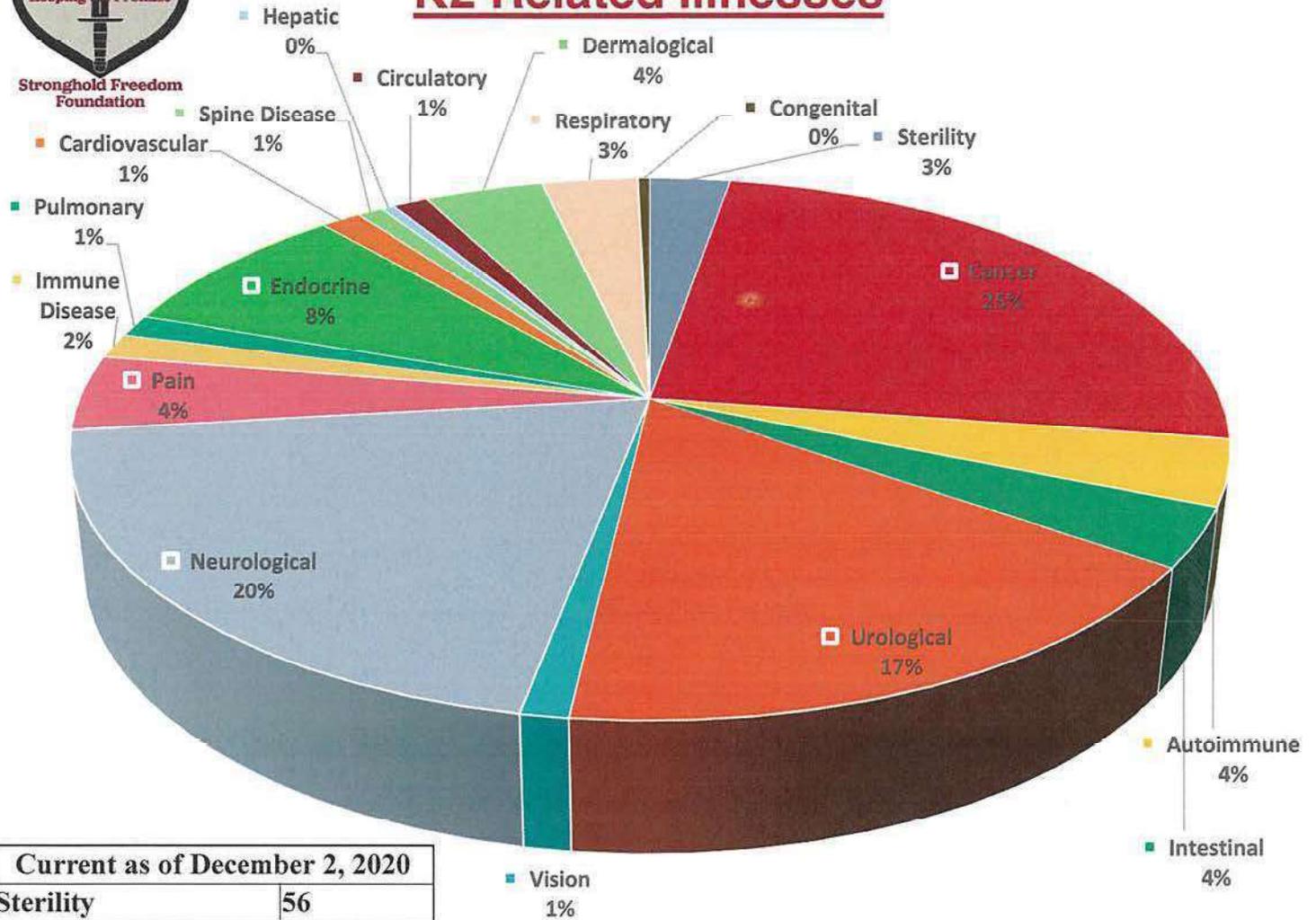
Daryl Riddle RN/Care and Support Team Director/Board Member

Surviving spouse LTC Richard R Riddle USAF





K2 Related Illnesses



Current as of December 2, 2020	
Sterility	56
Cancer	514
Autoimmune	81
Intestinal	73
Urological	355
Vision	24
Neurological	419
Pain	93
Immune Disease	32
Pulmonary	27
Endocrine	171
Cardiovascular	28
Spine Disease	18
Hepatic	9
Circulatory	24
Dermatological	82
Respiratory	67
Congenital	8
Total	1944

* Incidents of first order birth defects of offspring have been reported but not noted on this chart