



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