

Mark Jackson of Melbourne, Fla., deployed to Karshi-Khanabad (K2) in Uzbekistan for 10 months with the Army's Criminal Investigation Command. Now he's dealing with several serious medical conditions he believes are linked to his time at K2. He kept detailed notes about his health during his deployment.

Photo by Jacob M. Langston

The Casualties of K2

Veterans suffering from toxic exposure at a secret base in Uzbekistan fight for VA recognition they were denied.

BY KEN OLSEN

Clayton White died on his 41st birthday, after losing his Air Force career, civil service job, health insurance, and four appeals for VA recognition that his debilitating health problems were connected to toxic chemical and radiation exposure at a secret base in Uzbekistan. Among the first U.S. troops sent to the region after 9/11, White is survived by his wife, Natalie (who was 8 months pregnant when he died), their daughter and a mountain of medical debt.

“Physical pain is one thing,” Natalie says of the nearly three dozen diseases – including pancreatitis, diverticulitis and rheumatoid arthritis – that began attacking her late husband in 2009. “But he believed in this country. And to get the brush off, the denials? He felt like nobody cared.”

Approximately 15,000 U.S. servicemembers were deployed to Karshi-Khanabad (K2), a former Soviet military base about 100 miles from the Afghan border, between 2001 and 2005. They were exposed to nearly 400 chemical compounds and radiation from yellowcake uranium and depleted uranium as well as other toxicants that saturated K2 during decades of Soviet mismanagement, which were followed by a catastrophic explosion that demolished an air-to-surface missile bunker and an ammunition depot after the Uzbeks took over the base, according to K2 veterans and declassified government documents.

Nearly half of the approximately 5,000 members of the Stronghold Freedom Foundation have rare cancers and other illnesses, says Mark Jackson, legislative director for the K2 veterans group. Like White, they didn’t qualify for VA service connection for K2-related health issues because until late December military service in Uzbekistan wasn’t recognized in federal law or regulation.

“I served at a place that destroyed my body, that until very recently was not recognized by the federal government,” says Jackson, who was deployed to K2 in 2003 with the Army Criminal Investigation Command. “VA doesn’t care because they don’t have to care.”

VA says it is following the health-care and disability-compensation requirements established by Congress. But the agency isn’t pushing lawmakers to expand K2 veterans’ access to its programs and services. Instead, VA argues it needs more time to analyze the connection between K2’s toxic hazards and veterans’ health problems. The agency is conducting a comprehensive health study of about 10,300 K2 veterans, with initial results expected in January 2022.

“There’s a cost to that,” Jackson says. “I can measure it in bodies. How much more evidence do we need to show radiation and chemical weapons are bad for human health?”

As the 20th anniversary of the first U.S. deployment to this toxic battlefield approaches, the federal government should stop filibustering and start helping, K2 veterans and families say.

“We need health care and we need health-care solutions to cancers that don’t respond to treatment,” says Air Force special operations veteran Paul Widener, Stronghold executive director and member of Burton-Cowell American Legion Post 265 in Jacksonville, N.C., who is dealing with several complex medical problems after six deployments to K2.

“We need health screenings for all of the chemicals we were exposed to, and toxicological tissue testing for the other toxicants members were exposed to, ingested or aspirated,” he says. “We need to do this for the guys who are sick and the guys who died.”

Toxic clues The United States leased part of K2 soon after 9/11 and established Camp Stronghold Freedom on part of what by then was an Uzbek air force base. “We needed to find a way to get into Afghanistan to take down the Taliban,” says Widener, one of the lead special-operations mission planners for Operation Enduring Freedom. K2 had been the main support base for the Soviet war in Afghanistan and seemed ideal.

“We looked at all of the intelligence sources,” he adds. “Nothing said anything bad had happened



LEFT: Flooding and poor drainage plagued K2, including the area around the mess station. Sandbags were filled with contaminated dirt. RIGHT: An Army environmental survey team found a pool of jet fuel 8 feet below the surface, the result of fuel tanks at the former Soviet base that had leaked for 30 years. Photos courtesy Mike Lechlitner

there,” perhaps because all of the U.S. intelligence agencies weren’t linked together at that point.

Problems emerged as soon as U.S. troops arrived in October 2001. Uzbek construction workers became ill while building an earthen berm around the American enclave, and a team from the Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine (CHPPM) was dispatched to investigate. The results showed K2 was “dirty, polluted and radioactive,” says Mike Lechlitner, a DoD employee who helped with that initial environmental survey when not engaged in his primary job of supporting special operations forces making forays into Afghanistan.

One 8-foot-deep test hole found a pool of jet fuel, potentially the source of the fumes that sickened Uzbek construction workers, Lechlitner says. Another turned up a mixture of hydraulic fluid, solvents and other hazardous waste that had been dumped on the ground behind a Soviet/Uzbek aircraft maintenance hangar for decades, likely the source of the black goo U.S. troops found across the base when they first arrived. The United States may have compounded these toxic exposure problems by building the vast berm around its portion of the base with the heavily contaminated soil, says Lechlitner, a member of American Legion Post 175 in Severna Park, Md.

Meanwhile, he contacted sources in Washington, D.C., in search of more information about the base’s history. They told him the Soviet jet fuel farm at K2 had been leaking for 30 years and that the Soviets had run a chemical weapons decontamination line at the base in 1987. He also learned about the 1993 explosion that took out the ammunition bunker and spread the contents of the missile depot – including asbestos – throughout the area where U.S. troops later lived and worked. It also pulverized an unknown quantity of yellowcake uranium the Uzbeks

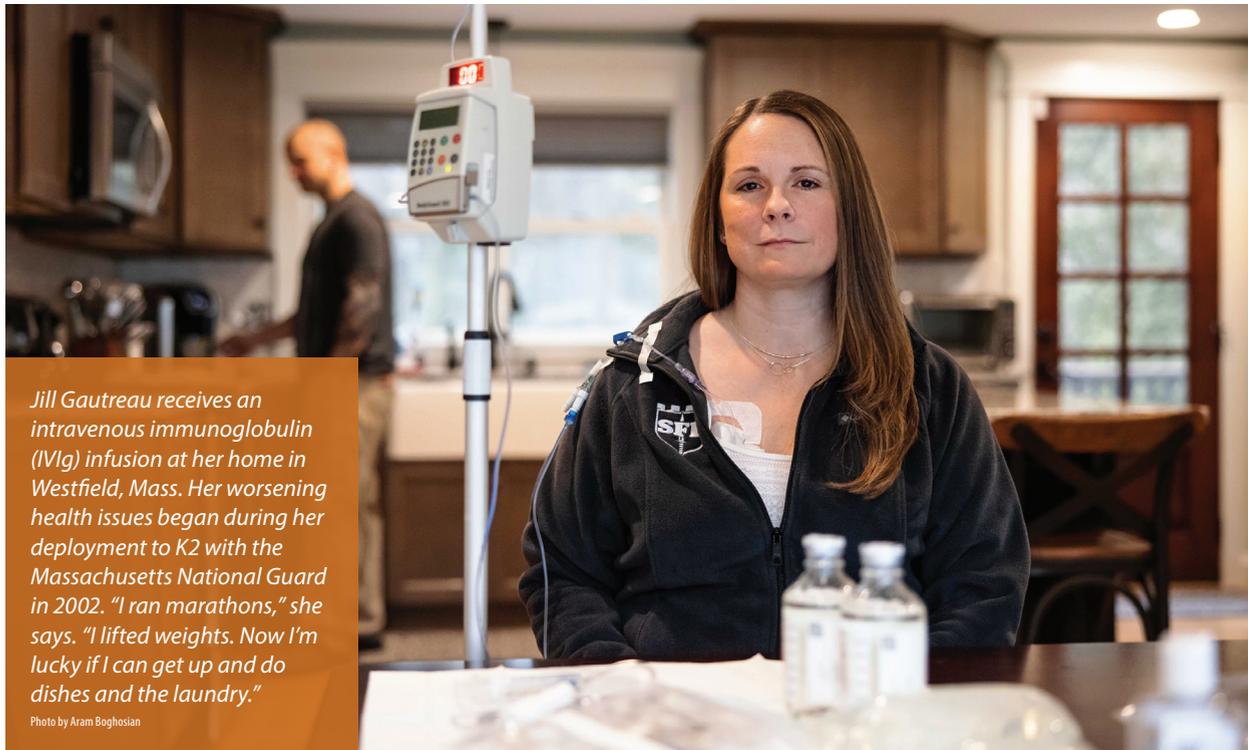
had stored at the base and spread the dust across K2, which accounted for radiation levels up to nine times higher than normal.

“Nothing compares to the environmental hazards 50 years of Soviet rule did to Karshi-Khanabad,” Lechlitner says.

DoD classified the results of the environmental survey, tried to spread a protective layer of clean soil and gravel across the U.S. section of the base, and stayed four years, during which other toxic hazards surfaced – including reported detections of nerve gas in an aircraft hangar used as an operations center. Clayton White was one of many U.S. troops who worked, and in some cases slept, in that hangar. And in January 2003, engineers found hundreds of glass ampules containing small amounts of chemical warfare agents buried on the south side of the U.S. base that were likely used by the Soviets for training.

Warning signs John Spanogle’s Army special operations unit was one of the first to arrive at K2. They weren’t told of the base’s toxic history and there were no signs warning of its hazards. But he remembers the smell, the black goo, the fluorescent green puddles of standing water after their tents flooded, and the fact that you could grab a handful of dirt and light it on fire – not to mention the dust constantly blown around by the helicopters. He feels betrayed as he tries to make sense of the sudden onset of esophageal problems a few years after he was in Uzbekistan, followed by fatty liver disease, extreme high blood pressure and severe acid reflux. Then there’s the number of cancer deaths among his fellow K2 veterans.

“It’s my generation’s Agent Orange,” says Spanogle, a member of G. Chandler Bond American Legion Post 275 in Adrian, Mich.



Jill Gautreau receives an intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIg) infusion at her home in Westfield, Mass. Her worsening health issues began during her deployment to K2 with the Massachusetts National Guard in 2002. "I ran marathons," she says. "I lifted weights. Now I'm lucky if I can get up and do dishes and the laundry."

Photo by Aram Boghosian

There were signs warning of chemical agents and unexploded ordnance by the time Jill Gautreau arrived with a contingent from the Massachusetts National Guard in August 2002. DoD told her to ignore them. "They said those were old signs from when the Russians were there ... that everything was safe," Gautreau says.

An MP, she patrolled the Soviet-era chemical weapons bunkers and leaking jet fuel tanks, as well as guarded Skittles Pond, so named because its hazardous contents changed from one unnatural color to another.

Gautreau developed a strange blister rash on her inner thigh a month after she arrived. Her lymph nodes and abdomen soon began to swell, and that, along with dizziness and extreme fatigue, made her so sick she was unable to leave her bunk for two or three days at a time. Blood began appearing in her urine. Gautreau was sent to the Army medical center in Landstuhl for an evaluation that was inconclusive, then returned to K2.

She was diagnosed with endometriosis after returning home, then Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS), which causes her carotid arteries to spasm and her heart rate to spike to the point she nearly passes out. "Basically, my autonomic nervous system is broken and my body is in fight-or-flight all the time," Gautreau says. As a result, she had to leave the National Guard and her civilian job as a police officer.

Gautreau went back to school and earned her nursing degree. She had to leave that career after developing an incurable neurological disease called Stiff Person Syndrome, which causes excruciating

muscle spasms that can drop her to the floor without warning.

"I'm watching my body slowly become deformed, and obviously feeling the pain that comes with that progression," Gautreau says. "I ran marathons. I lifted weights. Now I'm lucky if I can get up and do the dishes and laundry." It's a rare and exhausting treat to attend one of her son's hockey games.

Gautreau feels fortunate that VA granted service connection for her endometriosis, although the agency does not link it to her K2 deployment. She also receives a moderate Social Security disability benefit. Both will be dramatically reduced after her son turns 18. And while she has insurance through her husband's job, the costs of her care are steep and certain to increase. "It scares me," she says. "Am I going to be able to afford medicine and supplies?"

Like a bullet Jackson was told he was lucky he was being sent to K2 in July 2003 "because it was safe." A marathon runner, he regularly used a track that looped through a minefield and chemical dump – and was adjacent to a field contaminated with something that caused it to glow at night. He began experiencing intestinal trouble a few weeks after he arrived, noting this and other persistent health problems in his journal throughout his deployment.

Within two years of leaving K2, Jackson couldn't climb a flight of stairs. His thyroid had been destroyed by radiation exposure. He also has gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), diverticulitis, degenerative osteoporosis, non-iron-deficiency anemia, a radiation-induced autoimmune disorder and, although fit and trim, is prediabetic.

Jackson is also awaiting test results related to a possible cancer diagnosis. None of this matches his family's health history.

"What happened to me is just like getting hit with a bullet," he says. "It's doing the same damage, just doing it slower."

Two years after Brian Liebenow's K2 deployment, he had a cancerous tonsil removed, followed by chemotherapy as well as radiation treatment that damaged his face, head and neck. The subsequent reconstructive surgeries ruined the Air Force veteran's ability to swallow – he now relies on a feeding tube – and caused other problems, including partial paralysis of his left side. A severe sunburn on his neck and shoulder, in the area treated with radiation after his tonsil surgery, developed into skin cancer. That required surgery, which led to a wound infection that progressed to the point his left arm had to be amputated.

He and his wife, Elizabeth, believe Liebenow's service at K2 cost them the ability to have children and feel fortunate they were able to adopt their daughter. Liebenow also is one of the rare K2 veterans who was medically retired from the military with health benefits, which has saved his family from bankruptcy. But like Gautreau, he knows many K2 veterans don't receive any help from DoD or VA, either because the base was off the books or because they are no longer on active duty when they develop cancers, autoimmune diseases and other illnesses.

And then there are the widows and children left behind, including Kim Brooks, whose 36-year-old husband, Tim, died of a rare and aggressive brain cancer in May 2004, two years after returning from K2. Left to raise four young children, she returned to teaching school and volunteers as Family Care Team and Surviving Spouse director for the Stronghold Freedom Foundation, coordinating support calls across five time zones. Meanwhile, Claire Partain's husband, John, gave up fighting for VA benefits not long before he died of esophageal cancer in September 2019.

Tepid response The American Legion – long a leading advocate for veterans exposed to Agent Orange, radiation, chemicals, Gulf War-related hazards, burn pits and other environmental hazards – says K2 veterans should get immediate help. This includes VA providing medical exams and treatment for veterans dealing with illnesses tied to toxic exposures at the former Soviet base, as well as assessing the risks the exposures pose for their children, says Ralph Bozella, chairman of the Legion's National Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation

Commission. "In the meantime, we need to go to Congress and fight for service-connected disabilities related to their service at K2 and the resulting diseases, and for fully funding research and new treatments for these diseases," he says.

Since 2016, The American Legion has also called for DoD to disclose all hazardous environmental exposures at any facility used by U.S. troops so they can seek appropriate medical treatment, Bozella adds. And the organization is advocating for VA to establish a national center for research on the diagnosis and treatment of health conditions of the descendants of servicemembers exposed to toxic substances.

"The government has to be cognizant of any environmental hazards and needs to protect these veterans and their offspring," Bozella says.

Stronghold representatives have contacted every member of Congress in an effort to secure federal legislation making K2 veterans eligible for presumptive VA service connection for their complex health problems. "The first thing they say is, 'How much is it going to cost?'" Jackson says. "And that's bipartisan."

There's a sliver of hope. On Jan. 19, President Donald Trump signed an executive order directing DoD and VA to conduct a one-year study of toxic exposure among K2 veterans, similar to the study authorized in the latest National Defense Authorization Act.

In addition, legislation signed in early January requires VA and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to conduct a 10-year study of cancers and other diseases of K2 veterans. The Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 also opens VA's burn-pit registry to U.S. servicemembers who served in Uzbekistan. But more studies mean more delays for veterans who need immediate help, more families like White's who are left with little more than debt and despair.

White died in his sleep March 9, 2018. Today, his widow, who is self-employed, puts her daughter to bed and works until 1 or 2 a.m. to cover their bills, including paying out-of-pocket for their health insurance. And while she continues to pursue Clayton's VA claim, she's not optimistic.

"It comes down to some bean counter who decides this population isn't important," Natalie says. "But more than anything, I want my husband to be recognized for his service and sacrifice. He's another casualty of K2, and the loss of his life caused another needless casualty – a fatherless daughter." 🌿

Ken Olsen is a frequent contributor to The American Legion Magazine.