Surreal

by

*Eyes Right*

**Greenbelt, MD –** Late last summer, as I was having coffee with fellow veterans at the American Legion Post in Greenville, Maine, one of my friends recommended that I drive to Augusta to meet with a Veterans Affair (VA) advisor to assist me filing a disability claim. I had never considered filing previously although I had long believed that the disease, cardiac sarcoidosis, which almost killed me, was “service-related.”

A few years ago Congress passed the PACT act which extended VA health care and benefits for veterans exposed to Agent Orange and other toxic substances. Included in the legislation were “presumptive-exposure locations” – meaning that if you were in one of these locations at any time during the designated time frame, it was presumed that you were exposed. There were also “presumptive conditions” which automatically assumes that your condition was caused during your service. Due to my service during the Vietnam War, I was covered.

I drove the 90 miles to the VA Medical Center in Augusta and met with the VA advisor who assisted me with the claim. As I was leaving, he advised me not to hold my breath on VA action, as his experience suggested it could be a long wait.

It has been.

Six months passed and each time I checked my status on line, I became familiar with the word “Pending.” So, I called the VA to ask for clarification. The very polite lady who answered told me that it was indeed pending, but that I should hear something “soon”

That something turned out to be an email last week from “QTC – A Leidos Company” directing me to appear for a medical exam the following week at an address in Greenbelt, Maryland (about 35 miles away on the east side of D.C.). There was no name of the physician. When I drove over there, I found that the address was for a large complex of office suites, A through R. When I called QTC to ask for help, I was told that they would call me back after they called the doctor to find out his suite. IN 15 minutes, they called to tell me to “look for Suite H.”

I found it in the back of the building. A sign in front read “Capital InHospital Consultants & Internal Medicine, PA, Alphonsus Okoli, MD, FACP.” (not a typo on InHospital). I entered the door to be blasted by loud music and a loud TV. I was alone. There was no receptionist…no one, initially, just a small waiting room with four garish, non-matching chairs. In a few minutes, Dr. Okoli appeared from a small room and asked me to sign my name and information on a crookedly-Xeroxed sheet of paper. He then directed me to this small room which was quite cold.

Dr. Okoli was, to be charitable, a strange-looking fellow. He was (he later told me) 68 years old and had both a goatee and a mustache. On his head he had an interesting hat, sort of like the one associated with Charlie Chaplin. He was wearing a coat to keep warm but no white physician coat. When he attempted to take my blood pressure with a obviously inexpensive portable bp machine (I have a better one), it did not work the first four times. The remainder of the “exam” consisted of going over my meds and listening to my heart on his stethoscope. He concluded my visit by telling me that “someone” would contact me about getting a blood sample. I am pretty sure that this is what he said, but I had great difficulty understanding his words throughout the exam due to his strong (Nigerian, I think) accent.

The following day, an Amanda Davis, a Medical Records Expediter from Leidos, emailed me to “Verify Attendance” with the appointment that had been scheduled. I called her to record my visit and was told that someone would contact me “shortly.”

So far, no calls. Apparently, Leidos goes with low bidders as their subcontractors. I have no idea how much this physical ended up costing the VA, but in terms of a substantive exam, it was a zero. Last time I checked, the VA has a slew of physicians both at the VA hospital in D.C. and also at our local Army hospital where there is a VA office. Instead, I got a subcontractor of a contractor. Stay tuned on this one.

I thought you might like to know.

E-R