

How Many Panama Canal Zone Veterans Are There?

Tony Farrell, November 10, 2023

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This morning I received a newsletter from the office of Congressman Morgan Luttrell, who is the chairman of the Disability and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) Subcommittee of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs (HCVA). Something in an op-ed piece he wrote about fentanyl abuse in the armed services prompted me to write a response. While I understand fentanyl abuse is a growing problem and respect Representative Luttrell's position on the issue, I suggested that passing the PANAMA CANAL ZONE VETERANS ACT will affect many more Veterans than legislation about fentanyl will.

Well, how many? If I'm going to argue that passing our legislation is in the interests of the greater good, I needed to present numbers. (Disclaimer: I'm not a mathematician or statistician. I don't even play one on TV. My methodology is described in the end notes.)

For the purposes of this report, the term "Panama Canal Zone Veterans" refers to U.S. troops stationed on the U.S. bases and posts of the Panama Canal Zone on standard tours of duty. Exclusion of any other group, such as troops there on temporary duty, or troops who transited through the Panama Canal, is not intended to discount their accounts of toxic exposure in any way.

A report published by the Institute for Policy Studies in 2014 estimated that the 16 bases and posts within the Panama Canal Zone were populated by approximately 6,500 troops.ⁱ If one considers the year 1958 as the first year toxic herbicides were obtained from the United States and deployed in the Canal Zone, then **the total U.S. troop population of the Panama Canal Zone was somewhere between 133,250 and 266,500**, depending on tour length.ⁱⁱ

In my response to the congressman, I failed to consider an estimate of how many Veterans within those boundaries are likely able to receive VA assistance and compensation today. So I consulted a life table using 18 as the minimum age of a given servicemember. Starting in 1958, a male servicemember born in 1940 had a life expectancy of 60 years. Were that servicemember alive today, his age would be 83. I performed this calculation for each subsequent year until the current age met life expectancy. The two figures matched for Veterans who served in Panama in 1975. A male servicemember born in 1957 would have a life expectancy of 66 years and would be 66 years of age today.

Using 1975 as our benchmark, then, let's reexamine the total U.S. troop population of the Panama Canal Zone to adjust for life expectancy. Instead of using 41 years (1958 through 1999) as our range of operations, we reduce the range to 23 years (1975 through 1999) and recalculate.

Again using tour lengths between 12 and 24 months, we can estimate that **the number of Panama Canal Zone Veterans likely to benefit from VA care and compensation basically number between 75,000 and 150,000.**ⁱⁱⁱ

In summary, based on the calculations previously described, I estimate that between approximately 133,250 and 266,500 U.S. troops who were stationed within the Panama Canal Zone acquired various illnesses as a direct result of exposure to toxic herbicides over at least 41 years, between at least 1958 and 1999. Of those numbers, approximately two-thirds are Veterans able to apply for VA benefits once THE PANAMA CANAL ZONE VETERANS ACT is signed into law.^{iv}

ⁱ Ipsadmin. "U.S. Panama Policy: Canal, Bases, And Dollars - Institute For Policy Studies." Institute for Policy Studies, 7 May 2014, ips-dc.org/us_panama_policy_canal_bases_and_dollars. Note: the article does not distinguish between permanent duty and temporary duty troops; for the purposes of this paper, the disposition of the 6500 troops is assumed to be permanent.

ⁱⁱ The number is a product of simplified calculation, based on research available at <https://hr2447.com> and the assumption the data in end note 1 is approximately correct. The approximate total of servicemembers affected varies by tour length. (6500 servicemembers x (41 years / 2 year tours)) = 133,250 servicemembers. If you consider rotations at 18 months, the product is 188,500 servicemembers, and at 12-month rotations, 266,500 servicemembers. During my service, the standard was 18 months unaccompanied, and 24 months accompanied.

ⁱⁱⁱ With the same assumptions mentioned in endnote ii; 6500 servicemembers x (23 years / 2 year tours)) = 74,750 servicemembers. If you consider rotations at 18 months, the product is 99,664 servicemembers, and at 12-month rotations, 149,500 servicemembers.

^{iv} Comparison of the figures in endnote iii with those of endnote ii yield a ratio of 0.66; in other words, the Veterans likely surviving today are about two-thirds of the total number of exposed U.S. troops.