

Gulf War Veterans – 30 years later



Oil well fires rage outside Kuwait City in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm. The wells were set on fire by Iraqi forces before they were ousted from the region by coalition forces. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. David McLeod/National Archives)

Gulf War veterans still facing hardships linked to service

In August 1990, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait triggered an international response and a coalition force buildup in the Persian Gulf region known as Operation Desert Shield. Several months later, in January, as it became clear Iraq would not withdraw its forces, the allied coalition—now more than 700,000 strong—began a weeklong air bombardment offensive, called Operation Desert Storm, to wipe out Iraq's defenses, weapons capabilities, communications networks and more.

The Gulf War, though short-lived compared to other, lengthier, conflicts in U.S. history, still has profound physical and psychological impacts on the men and women who lived through

it. Ranging from combat injuries to invisible wounds such as post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury, even toxic exposure to chemicals and oil fields, Gulf War veterans are still fighting for their health and well-being 30 years later.



National Employment Director Jeff Hall enlisted in the Army in 1988. Hall was injured during the Persian Gulf War when his vehicle struck an Iraqi anti-tank mine.

“It wasn’t until we talked about the fact that we were exposed to depleted uranium, oil well fires and burn pits that I realized how much I’d really been affected,” said National Employment Director Jeff Hall—an Army veteran who served as a member of Company B, 3rd Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment, Tiger Brigade, 2nd Armored Division, in Operation Desert Storm.

On March 11, 1991, while on combat operations west of Kuwait City, Hall was wounded when his vehicle struck an Iraqi anti-tank mine, resulting in concussion blast injuries to his lower

and upper extremities.

Hall has dealt with those physical injuries over the last three decades. However, in 2017, he began experiencing irregularities with his heart and was ultimately diagnosed with cardiac and pulmonary sarcoidosis, an inflammatory disease that affects the lymph glands and organs such as the heart and lungs.

“When you’re a much younger person, you might be able to withstand it,” said Hall. “But as we’ve always said to other people with disabilities themselves, like a knee injury, it might not bother you today, but when you’re 55, it’s going to bother you differently.”

“Disabilities get older with time,” Hall added.

An Army veteran and Purple Heart recipient who survived a Scud missile attack that killed 28 American and allied forces and injured 98 more, Felecia Weston has lived every day for the last 30 years with crippling migraines and haunting survivor’s guilt.

“For a long time, I kind of punished myself, and I believe it’s one of the reasons why I never got married, because I don’t feel like I should be loved,” said Weston. “There are so many people who are not here, but I am, so I don’t deserve love. I don’t deserve to have kids. I don’t deserve to have all of these things other people have, because a lot of people that I was with didn’t come back.”

Weston said she made a promise to herself and to her God that if she did survive, she would spend her life caring for her fellow veterans. That’s exactly what she’s done as a DAV benefits counselor and advocate for more than 20 years.



Past National
Commander
Delphine
Metcalf-Foster
was injured in
January 1991
while serving
in Saudi Arabia
in support of
Desert Shield
and Desert
Storm. She
retired from
the Army
Reserve with
the rank of
first sergeant
in 1996.

Past National Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster—who served in Saudi Arabia in support of Desert Shield and Desert Storm with the Grave Registration Company—said she often reflects on how her experience affects her daily life, even after three decades.

“This never has left any of us. As a matter of fact, it still comes up today,” said Metcalf-Foster. “I have talked to four of my company members since [the COVID-19 pandemic], and the mental toll of facing the unknown reminds them—and myself—of

what we had to endure then. It was really devastating.”



Washington
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Reese enlisted
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leader in the
82nd Airborne
Division during
the war.

Wartime experiences—and the health effects suffered as a result—are part of what inspires one generation of veterans to fight for the next, said Washington Headquarters Executive Director Randy Reese, a rifle squad leader in the 82nd Airborne Division during the Persian Gulf War.

Lessons from the past—in particular, the long-term effects of Agent Orange—more quickly informed action to create the VA Persian Gulf War Health Examination Registry, authorized in November 1992, and the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, in 2014, to evaluate the health problems and unexplained illnesses that may be caused by exposure to toxins.

“Thirty years seems like it was yesterday. We just got to keep

that focus to make sure that each generation is handed the torch to bring their hand up to the next generation to continue our legacy at DAV," said Reese. "Even when politicians say it's over, that's just not exactly right."