

by **E. J. Montini**

[The Arizona Republic](#)

Shortly after speaking with Rep. Harry Mitchell about casualties of the Iraq war that may not occur until long after the fighting ends, I received an e-mail from Cindy Leach, whose father was a recent casualty of the Vietnam War.

In 2007, Leach's dad, James Hunt, developed cancer related to his exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange in Vietnam 35 years ago. He died one year ago this month.

"He was a dedicated Navy man for over 20 years and he loved 'his Navy,' " Leach wrote.

She contacted me to say that her father was among those honored last month at an "In Memory" ceremony that is held at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington each year. Leach learned about the ceremony through a column I did about Jim Manwarren, a local bookstore owner I knew who died in 1998 from an Agent Orange-related cancer.

It took decades for the federal government to acknowledge that Vietnam veterans were dying prematurely from non-combat injuries related to their service. Who knows how many lives might have been saved?

Even now, their names aren't on the Vietnam Memorial but only acknowledged through the "In Memory" service.

Leach told me, "My mother, siblings and the rest of our family were in Washington, D.C., April 20 honoring him and 122 others . . . what a glorious day for all - especially for Dad."

You'd think that the lessons learned from the way we treated veterans returning from Vietnam

would have prepared us to deal with those now fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and with those who have recently returned.

But, no.

I was speaking to Rep. Mitchell about the American Army sergeant charged with the murders of five soldiers at a stress clinic in Baghdad. He was on his third tour of duty in Iraq.

Mitchell has focused much of his time on the struggles of veterans. He was one of the sponsors of a revamped GI Bill. He also has pushed the Veterans Administration and the Department of Defense to better prepare for and treat veterans who have returned home with concussion-related head injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"In this instance, they recognized that this soldier was having a problem and sent him to the clinic," Mitchell said. "Those who seem to have the problems often have been on multiple deployments. We can only imagine the stress. You're fighting insurgents where there are no lines, where every person you see, every bump in the road keeps you looking over your shoulder. Add to that the fact that soldiers are being asked to do things they weren't trained to do. And then there's all the stress coming from back home."

In order to prevent PTSD from becoming the Iraq war's Agent Orange - a killer that continues taking lives long after the fighting has stopped - Mitchell believes that the government must be more proactive.

"The idea is not simply to take the stigma from PTSD and some of these other conditions," he said. "We have to reach out and treat it before it becomes a bigger problem in the future."

When Cindy Leach's father was diagnosed with cancer the VA required him to prove that he had been in Vietnam, even though the government had notified him in the 1980s that he had been exposed to Agent Orange.

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"We sent the VA paperwork about a foot high," she told me. "You'd think the government would know better by now. It's crazy."

It is. It's crazy that while we're entangled in Iraq and Afghanistan we're still losing veterans from Vietnam. The only thing more crazy would be to let it happen again.