We are all familiar with the pejorative term: “IT’S THE PITS,” Obviously referring to something deplorable. For veteran USAF Crash Rescue Firefighters, “the pits” is what we called our live fire training ground. Every base where I was stationed during my 20 year career had “Pits.” Usually several acres in size with one or more aircraft fuselages or mock-ups that were used during training exercises to simulate fighting an aircraft crash fire and rescuing “dummies” representing aircrews.

From day one as a new recruit firefighter you spent a lot of time fighting “pit fires.” All of the USAF fire schools featured pit areas. My first exposure was while attending entry level firefighting training at Shaw AFB South Carolina in 1949.

The academic part of our training introduced us to fundamental fire science. We were learned that a fire consists of three elements, fuel, heat and oxygen. It was called the “Fire Triangle.” The principal of extinguishing a fire was to eliminate one or more of those elements. In aircraft crash firefighting training back then, the principle fuel element was 145 octane aviation gasoline. JP-1 and JP-4 Jet fuels were coming soon to a theater near you. Our primary source of fuel was contaminated fuel drained from aircraft. Aircraft maintenance would bring 55 gallon drums of gasoline to the Pits and deposit them for future use.
Apparently the word got out that the fire department training area was an ideal spot to dispose of all sorts of contaminated flammable fluids. Our accumulation of 55 gallon drums included motor oil, hydraulic fluid, and alcohol, virtually any flammable liquid. There was never a short supply.

Gasoline burns at approximately 500 degrees Fahrenheit. Usually we would dump mixtures of a variety of combustibles on the ground all around the aircraft fuselage to simulate an actual crash fire. There was never a thought about what happened to the unburned chemicals soaking into the earth and polluting underground water supplies. Ask the EPA about that. Billions of taxpayers’ dollars have been spent cleaning up these pits at Air Force Bases around the country. Otis AFB was among the first of these Super Sites. Yet the VA will not recognize the terrible impact that these dangerous chemicals had on the military firefighters.

Early in my career we used high pressure water fog and Co2 to knock down aircraft fires. In the training pit we never used Co2, probably because it was expensive and water was cheap. Our protective clothing consisted of standard turn-out gear, helmet, a bunker coat, pants, rubber boots and leather gloves. We did not use any kind of self-contained breathing apparatus. Primitive MSA rebreathing apparatus was available back then but never used. Early versions of firefighting hoods were being introduced. They were made of asbestos and visibility was very limited and nobody thought that they were either efficient or safe to use. The apparatus that we used were the 135, 110, 155 high pressure Crash Trucks and the Cardox Co2 truck. All of these vehicles were vintage WWII
apparatus. We did not really start to use foam in the USAF for fire suppression until the early 1950’s.

The firefighting tactic was to attack the fire with two high pressure fog nozzles with four linemen and one rescue man. We would approach the fire from the upwind direction using 1000 PSI water fog to push the flames away downwind and hold back the flames while rescue was performed. We would then continue to attempt to extinguish the remaining fire. Typically this exercise took only a few minutes.

The most difficult problem to deal with was the intense heat and smoke. It was not unusual to lose your eyebrows and the exercise was exhausting. Typically we would have at least 5 or 6 live fire exercises during a day at the pits. We did a lot of pit fire training, each shift would schedule pit fires weekly.

I think that it is safe to say that Air Force Crash Rescue Firefighters experienced many more practice fires than actual aircraft crashes. During my career I responded to about 100 aircraft crashes. Seldom was there ever a fire the magnitude and intensity of our training exercises.

I served as Training NCO for the Crash Crew as several major USAF Bases, including Otis AFB, Presque Isle AFB, Wheelus Field Libya and Ramstein AFB in Germany. I also graduated from the advanced fire protection training at Lowry AFB and The HH-43 Helicopter Crash Rescue program at Stead AFB. There is no doubt that I participated in literally hundreds of pit fire training drills. During that
time period foam and other firefighting agents were introduced into the system, including carbon tetrachloride and Clorobromo methane. The fire department also was responsible for maintaining hand held fire extinguishers many using highly toxic substances. It is reasonable to assume that USAF firefighters were exposed to many toxic substances during firefighting exercises and recharging fire extinguishers. As a firefighter I was also exposed to toxic substances fighting numerous structure fires.

Forget the obvious fact that crash rescue firefighting is dangerous. Many USAF firefighters have been killed in the performance of their job. Most military aircraft carry weapon systems which are prone to explode during a crash or the resulting fire. Explosions are not unusual. However, the silent killers of firefighters are the vast array of toxic chemical substances that we were exposed to, not to mention dense black smoke with all of its contaminants.

Since my time in the Crash Rescue Service new technology and equipment have mitigated many of the dangerous conditions during firefighting activities. Superior protective gear and breathing apparatus have been developed and deployed. In fire ground training dangerous chemicals and hazardous materials are prohibited.

Unfortunately for the men who served in the post WWII era and the Korean War time period it was too late. The damage has been done. Of the remaining survivors cancer is a common factor. Of all of the men that I served with there are only two survivors. Both of us have experienced multiple cases of bladder cancer.
Bladder and other cancers are not at all uncommon among veteran firefighters. 81% of all service connected death of firefighters is cancer related.

Thirty eight states and The Nation’s Capital Washington D.C. have enacted laws recognizing the likelihood that firefighters are at a very high risk of contracting cancer in the performance of their duty. These so called “presumptive laws” provide for disability compensation for firefighter cancer victims. These government bodies are keen to recognize the many hazardous conditions that firefighters are regularly exposed to in the line of duty. Yet the Federal Government has to date, failed to step up to this terrible problem. Cancer deaths of firefighters by far exceed heart attack deaths, some 80% versus 20%. Yet the Veterans Administration recognizes high blood pressure and heart disease as a disability, while totally disregarding firefighter cancer victims.

In the January 13, 2016 posting of “firefightersclosecalls.com,” Dr. Barry Steen, Urologist, wrote; “Firefighter’s are among the most prominent groups at risk for bladder cancer.” The Federal Government Center for Disease Control (CDC) says that “firefighters are 14% more likely to die from cancer than the average person.”

Ironically, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts in their presumptive law specifically names the Massachusetts Air National Guard 104th Fighter Wing Firefighters, in identifying groups covered by their law. The 104th fire station is at the former Otis AFB where I served two tours of duty in the active Air Force.
Many years ago I applied to the VA for a disability related to my bladder cancer. I was declined. The VA failed to recognize the connection between my firefighting duties and bladder cancer. I think that it is time for the Veteran Administration to reexamine this situation.

There is another rather ironic situation that also needs review and change. If a retired military person is receiving a disability payment based on less than 50% disability, that payment is deducted from the retiree’s retirement pay. They justify this deduction by claiming that the retiree will benefit from the fact that the disability payment is tax free. This might make sense if this same rule applied to Federal Government retirees who are military veterans receiving any level of VA compensation for service connected disabilities. The rationality appears to be that the funds come from different government budgets. On the other hand military retirees would be “dibble dipping” if they receive both military retiree’s pay and a VA disability payment for less than fifty percent disability. This is the textbook definition of a dual standard. It is clear that if a veteran decided to leave the military to pursue a career working for the Federal Government he/she has an advantage over the people who decided to make a career in the active military. Men and women in the military work for the Department of Defense, yet they are treated differently than their civilian counterparts, many performing the exact same duties... firefighting for example! That’s true, the USAF employees hundreds of civilian firefighters.
Today we hear a lot about “fairness” relative to government programs. The United States Constitution is supposed to guarantee fair and equal treatment under the law. Isn’t it about time that our military retirees were given the same rights at civil service employees performing virtually the same job?