

Tuesday 23rd October 2007

Souvenir from Bosnia: bladder cancer

By OLOF VAN JOOLEN

[Paul van Kester has bladder cancer, possibly as a result of depleted uranium

Photo: JOOST HOVING]

MAASSLUIS – Doctors removed 45 tumours from the bladder of Paul van Kester. They don't understand how it is possible. Bladder cancer occurs in the elderly, and Paul is only 26. Eventually a German doctor made a link "Is it possible that you served in the army?" she asked the Bosnia veteran.

When Italy recognised earlier this month that 255 Bosnia veterans had developed cancer as a result of exposure to depleted uranium the pieces of the puzzle fell into place for the Dutch soldier.

Corporal Van Kester made two tours of duty in Bosnia as a tank driver, between 2001 and 2003. His unit was responsible for clearing up the debris of a civil war. On his first mission he spent the most time on a shooting range where there had been heavy fighting. The Czech explosive clearance team were responsible for the clean up.

The Dutch were responsible for the security. "The Czechs collected munitions and grenades. At the end of the day they blew up everything that they couldn't bury," remembers the veteran. The operation took six weeks. For much of that time, Van Kester and his comrades slept in the field to guard the expensive equipment of the clearance team.

By the end of 2006, Van Kester had retired. It felt as if he was passing razor blades when he urinated. Yet he didn't pay much attention. "I'm not someone to go to the doctor quickly," says Paul. The pain got worse, and when he began to see blood in his urine he went to his doctor. The doctor found nothing.

When a colleague in a German hospital repeated the tests a few months later something did appear. Paul seemed to have twenty swellings of various sizes in his bladder. There followed a painful operation. The German doctor did not have any doubts. It was only through exposure to depleted uranium that someone so young could develop so many tumours.

For Van Kester everything fell into place. He read that the material is carcinogenic when it forms tiny particles hanging in the air after an explosion. "I was always close when the Czech soldiers blew the stuff up, so it is possible that I breathed something in. Of course, I was also sleeping in the area."

He has since undergone 3 further operations. Even if he feels better, there are new tumours in his bladder, and he has to go under the knife once again. The doctors have said that it is not possible to continue in this way. If the cancer cells continue to grow, the bladder must be removed.

Van Kester is scared. But even more frightening is the possibility that the cancer will spread. "So far, I have only had cancer in my bladder, but that can change very easily". After a short pause "I don't even want to think about that."

Carcinogenic?

Italy becomes the first NATO country to recognise the danger of depleted uranium

The US first used depleted uranium in the first Gulf War in Iraq. Ammunition containing depleted uranium can penetrate armour better than conventional versions. In Bosnia the material was fired in the form of 30mm ammunition against Serbian tanks, from the A10 fighter plane. According to NATO, the US fired 31,000 of this sort of projectile during the conflict, containing a total of nine tonnes of depleted uranium.

The debate over the dangers is made up of two opposing parties. NATO, and the Dutch Ministry of Defence, maintain that there are no serious consequences. In the other camp are people such as Wim van de Burg, the chairman of the military trade union AFMP. Along with a growing number of scientists, he is convinced of the damage. The trade union says that it suspects that six of its members have already died. Via EUROMIL, the European organisation of military trade unions, AFMP knows of another 25 cases.

When Italy recognised the role of depleted uranium in causing cancer in 255 veterans it became the first NATO country to do so; 37 of the veterans have already died. In the Netherlands research is ongoing amongst Balkan veterans.