

Highlights of [GAO-25-107504](#), a report to congressional committees.

#### Why This Matters

Open-air burning emits toxins that can be harmful. The U.S. military's use of open-air burning in certain operations since 1990 is well documented. Federal law granted presumptive coverage for specified conditions to veterans of these operations due to their exposures, simplifying the disability claims process. However, little has been reported about open-air burning during the Vietnam War.

#### GAO Key Takeaways

Military archives we reviewed and a nongeneralizable sample of 145 veterans we interviewed, who served in Vietnam from 1964 to 1975, indicate that the military commonly used open-air burning to dispose of waste. Nearly all (90 percent) of these veterans cited concerns about their exposure.

As of May 2025, the Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has not specifically researched whether there is any association between veterans' health effects and exposure to open-air burning in Vietnam. Historically, research on health effects from exposures that occurred in Vietnam has focused on herbicide use (such as Agent Orange). VHA officials said their ongoing reviews of available information have not indicated that exposure to open-air burning was a major contributor to Vietnam veterans' long-term health.

Officials also said additional data that would be needed to inform research, such as data on the extent to which veterans were exposed to open-air burning, are not available. Thus, VHA would need to collect self-reported data from Vietnam veterans on their exposure to inform any future needed research. Officials cautioned that this would be limited by recall bias, or veterans' potentially inaccurate recollection of past events, among other challenges.

#### Burnout Latrines in Vietnam. Accelerants Were Used to Burn Human Waste in 55-gallon Drums. (1967)



Source: Philip Varsel Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University (1967). Photo used with permission. | GAO-25-107504

#### How GAO Did This Study

We reviewed military archives from the Vietnam War and interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 145 veterans who reported exposure to open-air burning in Vietnam. We also reviewed relevant VHA documents and spoke with VHA officials and other agencies about researching health effects related to open-air burning.

#### Service Members in Vietnam Burn a Range of Waste in 55-gallon Drums Called Burn Barrels. (Year Unknown)



Source: Donald L. Swafford Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University (year unknown). Photo used with permission. | GAO-25-107504

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