

Military to track health of 56 sailors

Submariners exposed to possible toxins during 2004 fire

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HMCS Chicoutimi makes its way into Faslane naval base in Scotland in October 2004. Sailors who survived the deadly electrical fire aboard the submarine almost five years ago will be the subject of a long-term health study, The Canadian Press has learned. (FRANK GUNN / CP)

OTTAWA — Submariners who survived the deadly electrical fire aboard HMCS Chicoutimi almost five years ago will be the subject of a long-term health study.

The navy and the military's medical branch have signed a formal arrangement for a first-of-its-kind review that will assess and track the medical conditions of submariners who were exposed to smoke with possible toxins.

It's the first time the Canadian Forces has embarked on a systematic study of its members following an "occupational exposure," says a briefing note obtained by The Canadian Press.

The agreement commits both military branches to monitor the 56 sailors — both serving and retired — until at least 2014 when an assessment will be made whether to follow them until the end of their lives.

The study was one of the last orders issued by Vice-Admiral Drew Robertson before he retired as chief of maritime staff last month, and is among the steps taken after The Canadian Press reported in 2008 that sailors were falling ill with debilitating medical conditions.

Part of the challenge will be to keep track of crew members as they leave the military, the document said.

Lt.-Col. Marcie Lorenzen, an interim medical adviser to the maritime staff, said the study is groundbreaking for the military but not necessarily precedent-setting.

"It's probably what we should be doing and would have been doing had we had the information technology in the past to do it," she said in an interview Wednesday.

Be it former soldiers exposed to atomic tests in the 1950s, troops sprayed with Agent Orange in the 1960s, peacekeepers with illnesses or survivors of a submarine fire, the military has faced repeated criticism about the way it handles long-term health concerns of its members.

Lorenzen said the Chicoutimi study could pave the way for similar projects in future, depending upon the nature of the mission and the members involved.

An assessment shows over half the Chicoutimi crew suffered from post-traumatic stress following the October 2004 fire, which crippled their submarine off Ireland in the stormy North Atlantic. Over 20 sailors have subsequently complained of breathing trouble, said the May 7, 2009, briefing note.

The study will examine each man's medical condition before the fire and compile a database of their ailments as the years unfold. That information will be compared against a control group of submariners, who were not exposed to the raging fire caused when electrical cables were inundated with water.

In a series of 2008 interviews, sailors also spoke about unexplained fainting spells, short-term memory loss and chronic conditions, such as asthma. There were also reports of neurological disorders.

Roughly half the crew members have been discharged, will soon leave the military or have been placed on a medically disabled list.

Many of the sailors said at the time they were angry the navy had not provided them with a detailed chemical analysis of the smoke and its potential health effects, as promised in the aftermath of the fire.

They were also upset about having to fight running battles with Veterans Affairs over pension entitlements. They said they felt "forgotten."

Through the National Research Council, the military eventually came up with a chemical analysis and other tests. But queries to National Defence and internal emails show no testing was carried out dealing with "cold smoke."

The crew was most concerned about possible exposure to burning Peridite, an epoxy and known carcinogen used to glue insulation to the deck and hull.

When the chemical analysis was eventually released, it showed that the fumes and soot likely contained established carcinogens such as benzene, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and dioxins and furans.

And it clearly stated that the crew likely inhaled cancer-causing contaminants.

The British-built Chicoutimi was on its maiden voyage to Canada from Faslane, Scotland, when a fire broke out on Oct. 4, 2004. Lt. Chris Saunders of Halifax died later in an Irish hospital.