



## Polio and the Military . . . A Little History

A Bruno Byte

From Dr. Richard L. Bruno, HD, PhD  
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**Question:** Has anything been written about the effects of military service on polio survivors? I had polio at age 8. Navy service at age 21 - 25 aboard aircraft carrier (lots of ladder climbing). After I left the Navy I went on to college. I was an electrical engineer (office work) until retirement at age 68. The strength in my legs degenerated until age 51, when I could no longer walk without assistive devices. Now I have to use power mobility equipment. Didn't my time in the Navy trigger PPS?

**Dr. Bruno's Response:** It is amazing that childhood polio survivors who regained normal muscle strength were inducted into the military despite their history of polio and even obvious muscle atrophy seen during their induction physicals. In 2005 I negotiated with the U.S. Veterans Administration and wrote the VA regulation on PPS treatment but also on receiving benefits. The benefits negotiations were a hard slog. We finally agreed that PPS symptoms (e.g., leg muscle weakness) would have to have been reported *before* discharge or *within 1 year* of discharge to be considered service related. If your record shows leg muscle weakness during that time frame you have a good argument that PPS symptoms are service connected and should be able to collect benefits. For those who contracted polio while serving in the military there is no question that polio and its sequelae are service connected.

G.I.s having polio brings up an interesting point about who gets polio. In 1946, although there was an outbreak of polio among American Marines stationed in northern China, not one case was reported among the Chinese. Albert Sabin was told by a British physician in the region that he frequently saw paralytic polio in the foreigners but rarely saw the disease among natives.

Polio also occurred with unexpected frequency in American servicemen stationed in the Philippines and Korea despite the fact that there had been no prior polio epidemics and that even individual cases of polio among the local populations were rare. In Hawaii, where there was no segregation of racial groups at all in terms of work, play or housing, between 1938 and 1947 whites had almost 3 times more polio than did Japanese residents, at least 4 times more polio than Chinese residents, and nearly 6 times more polio than Hawaii's Filipino residents.

These findings suggest that one factor that predisposes to getting polio is a gene associated with your racial or ethnic background. Apparently, the poliovirus has a peculiar affection for white Germanic folk and southern Europeans.

### **The Encyclopedia of Polio and Post-Polio Sequelae**

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