

UK Veterans Face Long-Term Impact of Asbestos Exposure

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Health problems caused by asbestos exposure remain a serious issue in Britain, with hundreds of military veterans dying from mesothelioma, a deadly cancer linked to the cancer-causing mineral, often decades after their service.

Among them is Lt Col Crawford Harvey, 77, a career officer in the Royal Corps of Transport who served across the UK, Northern Ireland, and Africa. His wife Jacqueline passed away in

2022 from mesothelioma after a year-and-a-half-long illness. Six months ago, Lt Col Harvey received the same diagnosis.

“I began to hear of a lot of my peer group dying of cancer,” he shared with *The Daily Mail*. “It was everywhere years ago. But many old soldiers just shut their gob, got on with it, and quietly faded away.”

From 2016 to 2025, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) paid out £112.5 million in compensation to 803 veterans suffering from mesothelioma. In comparison, 405 personnel were killed in hostile action in Afghanistan during the UK’s 20-year deployment. When factoring in deaths from related illnesses like asbestosis and lung cancer, estimates suggest more than 3,000 asbestos-related deaths among veterans during that same period.

Asbestos was once standard in construction and military equipment for its fire-resistant properties. Royal Navy veteran Lt Commander Jeffrey Picken served for 37 years aboard ships and submarines, where asbestos was widely used. He died from mesothelioma in 2018. His widow, Veronica, said: “You could say the asbestos was there to protect him. But it killed him, and probably some of his crewmates too.”

Royal Air Force (RAF) assistant air traffic controller Bernice Scullion died in 2020 at age 48. She had worked in several installations that later tested positive for asbestos, including RAF Shawbury, RAF Leeming, and RAF Northolt. Her statement to Irwin Mitchell solicitors described dusty basements and crumbling buildings where asbestos notices were posted, but little seemed to change.

Her husband, Kevin Scullion, also an RAF veteran, said: “There are so many of these unmodernised post-war structures that, in my opinion, aren’t fit to live or work in. Most have asbestos in them.”

Despite changes made under the Mesothelioma Act in 2016, veterans remain at a disadvantage when it comes to compensation. Those diagnosed can receive a maximum of £140,000, while civilian claims often exceed £250,000. Additionally, MoD rules prevent bereaved families of veterans from claiming after the veteran dies, unlike civilian cases handled through public courts.

Mesothelioma UK, a charity supporting affected families, described this disparity as “disgraceful.”

Campaigners have called on the government to implement a national asbestos register and begin phased removal from public buildings, including schools, hospitals, and military facilities. The MoD has acknowledged that as of 2023, 2,699 items of military equipment still contained asbestos. This includes nuclear submarines, Challenger tanks, Warrior vehicles, and helicopters such as the Puma and Chinook.

Much of the exposure is believed to stem from deteriorating infrastructure. As of March 2023, 47,800 military properties remain in active use across the UK, many dating back to the mid-20th century. These include barracks, service family homes, and training facilities.

Lt Col Harvey recalled: “By the time I left in 2005, the Army was more aware of the dangers of asbestos. But in the 1960s and 70s, there was little understanding. You lived in what you were given.”

The lack of modernisation, coupled with a military culture that often prioritises resilience over complaint, has left many veterans exposed to long-term health consequences without adequate support.

Bernice Scullion, before her passing, had spent time on clinical trials for mesothelioma treatment. Her husband, Kevin, now working as a private contractor on an RAF base, said that while awareness has increased, many younger personnel still don't recognise the term. “I could probably walk into the crew room and ask, ‘Does anybody know what mesothelioma is?’ I don't think any of them would.”