Sick Gulf War vet talks to ‘60 Minutes’

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LAFAYETTE — The pictures taken of Carol Picou before and during her tour of duty in the Persian Gulf show a happy, healthy woman with bright eyes, a dazzling smile and a strong body.

Five years later, she hardly looks the same and now suffers from so many neurological problems that her doctor says she is the victim of the chemicals in the drugs, sand and bombs she was exposed to while working at a field hospital during the Persian Gulf War.

Her story is not a pleasant one. It will be the focus of a segment on Sunday’s edition of “60 Minutes.”

The program is scheduled to air at 6 p.m. on KLFY-TV 10 in Lafayette and on WAFB Channel 9 in Baton Rouge.

As a nurse in a combat support hospital unit, Picou and her fellow soldiers followed the infantry as it moved into Iraq in the spring of 1991.

The soldiers in her unit were exposed to bomb sites where depleted uranium was used, were exposed to contaminated sand and other substances, and were given a course of a drug called “investigational” by the military — pyridostigmine bromide — which was supposed to protect them from the effects of chemical warfare, she said.

Now Picou has no control of her bladder or bowel, severe headaches and body pain, fatigue, muscle aches and pains, rash, hypothyroidism with its related weight gain and hair loss, loss of peripheral vision, edema, neurological deficits, muscle deterioration, fungus and lesions on her feet, mottled skin and atypical uterine cell tissues that are suspicious for cancer.

Picou traces many of her neurological symptoms to her course of pyridostigmine bromide, because the drug is sometimes used to treat neurological problems. Picou was ordered to take the drug three times a day, 30mg each dosage, even though she had never been tested or treated for thyroid problems.

She was discharged from the Army on disability because of her loss of bladder and bowel control. After 17 years, she was a civilian again with myriad health problems.

“I went from being a strong, productive person to being a disabled person,” she says.

She believes that the U.S. Department of Defense knows that the so-called “Gulf War Syndrome” is related to toxic exposure, that the military knew of the side-effects before they handled the depleted uranium and the bronze tablets, and that the DOD is dragging its feet in treating and responding to the problems.

Picou’s condition and the way she has been treated by the military have prompted her and her husband to create MISSION Project, an acronym for Military Issues Surfaceing in Our Nation.

“We noticed that all these soldiers were getting sick,” she says. “If you call the VA, they will tell you that the total number of deaths from Desert Storm veterans is close to 7,000. Young, healthy people should not be dying like this.”

Of the 150 people in her unit, 40 are sick and six have died so far, she says.

Through the project, Picou and her husband network with other American soldiers, and with people from other countries who were in Iraq or Saudi Arabia or Kuwait during the war. She has pictures of babies born to U.S. soldiers with terrible birth defects — and photos of Iraqi children with nearly identical conditions.

“What did we do over there?” she asks, looking at a photo of a child born without an ear and eye.

“Saddam Hussein has to be stopped, but these people were innocent,” she says. “It’s not right and it’s not fair and it’s got to stop.”

Picou says she believes, and her doctors agree, that she is the victim of the chemicals in the drugs, sand and bombs she was exposed to while working at a field hospital during the Persian Gulf War.

Since serving in the Persian Gulf War, Lafayette resident Carol Picou has myriad health problems which will be documented Sunday on ‘60 Minutes.’

Carol Picou says she believes, and her doctors agree, that she is the victim of the chemicals in the drugs, sand and bombs she was exposed to while working at a field hospital during the Persian Gulf War.

They lobby Congress for bills that help soldiers get medical treatment and benefits, and they speak to any group that will listen about the dangers of “depleted uranium” and other new weapons.

“We have all these sophisticated weapons and related illnesses and no sophisticated medicine to take care of it,” Picou says. “The military is using this sophisticated weaponry without looking into the side-effects of it. Our goal is to find out what happened, to keep the soldiers informed, to ban the use of experimental drugs, and to ban the use of weapons until we know the side effects.”

Picou and her husband want to hear from any Gulf War veteran who may have medical problems related to their service.

“When does this stop?” she asks. “When can a soldier go and defend his country without being destroyed? When I go to VA hospital, I see the guys from World War II and from Vietnam, and I think, ‘Will I be here in 30 years? Will I be sitting here waiting for help?’

The Picou can be contacted by writing to P.O. Box 2574, Lafayette, 70509, by calling 236-3599, or at their Internet site: http://www4.linknet.net/missionproject.