

# 'I'd known that kid ... That wasn't him'

**Bill Noel's mental health declined rapidly after his second anthrax shot, leaving him spaced out, angry and paranoid. He died after setting himself on fire.**

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VIRGINIA BEACH -- Bill Noel was a Navy man and a family man, happy to serve his country as a senior chief petty officer supervising the USS Abraham Lincoln's defense systems and eager to help his kids with their math homework - often by telephone a continent or more away.

That's the Bill Noel everyone knew before March 5, 2003 - the day when he got his second anthrax shot.

The Bill Noel afterward was physically sick and mentally ill, eventually so depressed and confused that he lit a cigarette after spilling gasoline on his pants, engulfing himself in flames and burning 80 percent of his body.

He died from those burns and their complications nearly a year later, his autopsy report reads.

The father who set himself on fire hadn't been acting normal for months, says his daughter, Jackie Noel, now 16. Less than two weeks after the second shot, he began calling home 10 to 20 times a day - demanding to know this and that, impatient and angry, she says.

"He wasn't," she recalls, "my dad."

## EVIDENCE OF MENTAL ILLNESS DISMISSED

Col. John Grabenstein, head of the military's anthrax vaccination program, says the Pentagon's research shows no reason to think that there's an increased incidence of mental health problems resulting from the shots. An Army study that found what could be a statistically significant increase in incidents of mental health problems after vaccination - involving more than 2,000 troops - might be the result of mere chance, not cause and effect, he says.

Grabenstein says troops normally have a higher rate of mental health problems after deployment, even in peacetime. The military decided not to look deeper into the data after reviewing it. A panel of civilian experts in vaccines and health statistics agreed.



Critics of the vaccine program say the military isn't telling the public all the health problems resulting from the shots, including mental illnesses. The vaccine wasn't widely used until the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Thousands of veterans of that conflict came home complaining of a combination of illnesses that included mental lapses, depression and stress.

After the mandatory anthrax vaccination program resumed in 1998, the military didn't report more than 3,000 diagnoses of mental illnesses - from 1998 to 2000 - to the nation's central clearinghouse for information on post-vaccination illnesses, government records show. That clearinghouse - the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, or VAERS - is used so researchers, the government and vaccine makers can identify problems that don't show up during trials that lead to vaccine licensing.

Noel's case wasn't reported to VAERS until months after his death. Even then, his widow - not the dozens of military doctors who treated him for months - was the one who filed the report. Laura Noel says those doctors refused to even discuss a possible connection between the vaccine and her husband's health.

The military says its medical professionals are expected to file those reports, but congressional inquiries found compliance was a problem. From 1998 through 2000 - the only years for which data is available - troops were hospitalized 20,765 times after receiving the anthrax vaccine. During that same period, fewer than 100 hospitalizations or other serious events were reported to VAERS.

Laura Noel is convinced that her husband's case is one of those that the military is trying to hide from the public.

After 23 years together, "I know my husband," she says: He didn't simply succumb to stress. He'd handled six deployments with ease, always chatting easily and frequently by phone with his kids and wife while at sea, then sliding easily back into home life upon return, she says.

After that second shot, everything changed.

Physical problems came first. During 20 years in the Navy, there were only a dozen entries in Bill Noel's medical record for sick bay before the anthrax shots - always for minor ills or small injuries related to his job or from working at home.

A few days after the second anthrax shot, Bill called from the Middle East and complained of flulike symptoms and shortness of breath, Laura says. He said he was so sick, he was worried that he might not be able to climb the stairs of the ship later in the week to phone home for her birthday.

He was even too sick to smoke, she says - the first time that she could remember her pack-and-a-half-a-day husband going without.

## CALLS HOME SHOW SIGNS OF TROUBLE

A week later, he was still tired and short of breath. And - exhibiting the first signs of mental illness - he

was angry, and he was demanding and unreasonable during frequent phone calls home, his family says.

"I'd known that kid since he was 18 years old," says Jean Freeman, his mother-in-law. "That wasn't him."

The transformation began before any fighting started, and he wasn't exposed to any trauma that might explain such a change, Laura says.

Operation Iraqi Freedom began exactly two weeks after Noel got that second shot. Back home, his family was watching the airstrikes over Baghdad on television when the phone rang, Freeman says.

It was Bill - on his cell phone - demanding to know what his wife was up to. At the time, Freeman says, they were watching planes take off from his carrier. She asked him why he wasn't paying more attention to the attacks. He acted as if they weren't important.

## WHEN HE CAME

## HOME, IT GOT WORSE

He couldn't sleep, gained 50 pounds and was calling home more times each day than he'd been calling in a week, fellow crew members and his family say. The calls were increasingly angry and paranoid. "He used to call my mom and freak out if he couldn't get her" - sometimes phoning 10 to 20 times a day at all hours, Jackie says.

When he came home a few months later, it got worse, family members say. Laura says that she "couldn't even go to the bathroom" before her husband would be knocking on the door, demanding to know what she was doing and why.

None of the bad symptoms went away. New ones appeared in dizzying succession. A rash that started where the vaccine needle went in had spread up and down his arm and to his chest, then down to his legs. He was often confused, withdrawn and unable to concentrate.

This went on for weeks until he confronted his wife, saying he'd become an awful father and husband, she says. She persuaded him to contact a base clinic for a mental health screening.

Afterward, he slept soundly for the first time in days, Laura says. So she felt safe leaving the house, to help a friend.

Jackie and her brother, Jeff, were home that day, the first day of school. When their father woke up, he was like a zombie, Jackie says. Bill asked for some paper, saying that "he was going to write some thoughts down to apologize for being needy, paranoid, nasty and unsure how to be a father." His bewildered daughter handed him a sheet of paper, and he walked outside to their backyard shed.

A few hours later, Laura phoned Jeff, then 16, and asked how Bill was doing. Jeff looked out the window and saw his father striding back to the house, lighting a cigarette.

Bill burst into flames.

He then jumped into the family's swimming pool. A next-door neighbor - a police officer who'd seen the commotion - ran over with a blanket and sent for help.

In an ambulance on the way to a hospital, Bill talked about how he'd spaced out and forgotten that he'd spilled gasoline on himself in the shed, Laura says.

It was Sept. 3, 2003 - eight weeks after Bill Noel returned home and about six months after the second anthrax shot.

He struggled for 51 weeks in three hospitals before he died. Medical records show that he had recurring problems during that time - many atypical of burn patients. There were also problems with a misplaced feeding tube that caused complications in his lungs.

Doctors who reviewed the records for the Daily Press say there was no proof of a reaction to the vaccine. But they noted that the military medical examiner didn't conduct any tests after the death that might have revealed such a reaction.

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