



JESSICA ROUTIER IS RUNNING FOR ARMY STAFF SGT. DANIELLE NIENAJADLO

Spokane, Washington, US

U.S. Army

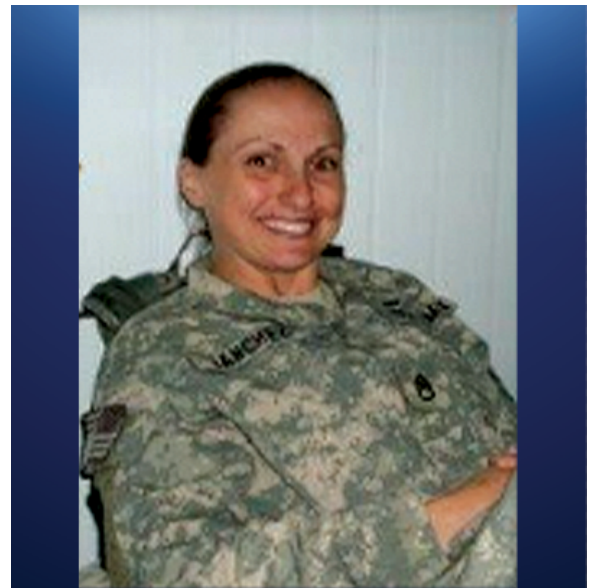
SSGT, 602nd Maintenance Company, Ft. Hood Texas

3/20/2010, Seattle, WA, USA

Before her last deployment, 31-year-old Staff Sergeant Danielle Nienajadlo passed her Army physical with flying colors. So when she started having health problems several weeks after arriving at Balad Air Base in Iraq, no one knew what to make of her symptoms: headaches that kept her awake; unexplained bruises all over her body; an open sore on her back that wouldn't heal; vomiting and weight loss. In July 2008, after three miserable months, Nienajadlo checked into the base emergency room with a 104-degree fever.

She was sent to Walter Reed Army Medical Center and learned she had been diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia, a fast-progressing form of the disease. She told her doctors and her family she had felt fine until she started inhaling the oily black smoke that spewed out of the base's open-air trash-burning facility day and night. At times, the plume contained dioxins, some of which can cause the kind of cancer Nienajadlo had.

“She breathed in this gunk,” says her mother, Lindsay Weidman. “She'd go back to the hooch at night to go to bed and cough up these black chunks.”



Army Staff Sgt. Danielle Nienajadlo



In the past 17 months, more than 500 veterans have contacted Disabled American Veterans (DAV), a national nonprofit serving vets, to report illnesses they blame on the burn pits. Throughout Iraq and Afghanistan, contractors - many of the burn pits are operated by companies like former Halliburton subsidiary KBR - have dumped hundreds of tons of refuse into giant open-air trenches, doused the piles with fuel, and left them to burn. The trash includes plastic, metal, asbestos, batteries, tires, unexploded ordnance, medical waste, even entire trucks. (The military now operates several actual incinerators and has made efforts to create recycling programs, but the majority of war-zone trash is still burned in pits.)



Veterans' groups worry that the smoke floods bases with a stew of carcinogens, toxins, and lung-clogging fine particles. An Army study released in early 2009 found that particulate matter at 15 sites exceeded both EPA and US military standards. Even short-term exposure could sicken—or kill—service members, the report warns. As early as 2006, an Air Force engineer stationed at Balad warned superiors in a memo that smoke from the burn pits presented “an acute health hazard” for service members. “It is amazing that the burn pit has been able to operate without restrictions over the past several years,” the engineer, Lt. Colonel Darrin Curtis, wrote. Military statistics also show a steep increase in respiratory problems in troops since the start of the Iraq War.

In a written statement, KBR told Mother Jones that it operates burn pits “pursuant to Army guidelines and regulations.” The military’s own air sampling has turned up dioxins, volatile organic compounds, heavy metals, and other potential hazards in the air at Balad. The Pentagon has insisted they were at levels that posed no significant threat—though last December, a top military health official acknowledged to the Salt Lake Tribune that smoke from the pits may cause long-term health problems. (Neither Pentagon officials nor the White House responded to requests for comment on this story.)

Staff Sergeant Nienajadlo died March 20, 2009, exactly 13 years from the day she enlisted. She left behind three children, ages 3, 8, and 10, and a husband who is also in the service. Before she fell ill, Nienajadlo confided to her mother that she was scared of serving in Iraq. But she worried about mortar attacks and roadside bombs—not the Army’s own trash.

