



## DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

October 6, 2014

GORDON A. GRAHAM  
[REDACTED]

In Reply Refer To:  
346/APPEALS/DRO/BU  
[REDACTED]  
GORDON A. GRAHAM

Dear Mr. Graham:

You have filed a Notice of Disagreement with our action. This is the first step in appealing to the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). This letter and enclosures contain very important information concerning your appeal.

### Statement of the Case

We have enclosed a Statement of the Case, a summary of the law and evidence concerning your claim. This summary will help you to make the best argument to the BVA on why you think our decision should be changed.

### What You Need To Do

To complete your appeal, you must file a formal appeal. We have enclosed VA Form 9, Appeal to the Board of Veterans' Appeals, which you may use to complete your appeal. We will gladly explain the form if you have questions. Your appeal should address:

- the benefit you want
- the facts in the Statement of the Case with which you disagree; and
- the errors that you believe we made in applying the law.

### When You Need To Do It

You must file your appeal with this office within 60 days from the date of this letter or within the remainder, if any, of the one-year period from the date of the letter notifying you of the action that you have appealed. **If we do not hear from you within this period, we will close your case.** If you need more time to file your appeal, you should request more time before the time limit for filing your appeal expires. See item 5 of the instructions in VA Form 9, Appeal to Board of Veterans' Appeals.

## Hearings

You may have a hearing before we send your case to the BVA. If you tell us that you want a hearing, we will arrange a time and a place for the hearing. VA will provide the hearing room, the hearing official, and a transcript of the hearing for the record. VA cannot pay any other expenses of the hearing. You may **also** have a hearing before the BVA, as noted on the enclosed VA Form 9, Appeal to the Board of Veterans' Appeals. **Do not delay filing your appeal if you request a hearing. Your request for a hearing does not extend the time to file your appeal.**

## Representation

If you do not have a representative, it is not too late to choose one. An accredited representative of a recognized service organization may represent you in your claim for VA benefits without charge. An accredited attorney or an accredited agent may also represent you before VA, and may charge you a fee for services performed after the filing of a notice of disagreement. In certain cases, VA will pay your accredited agent or attorney directly from your past due benefits. For more information on the accreditation process and fee agreements (including filing requirements), you and/or your representative should review 38 U.S.C. § 5904 and 38 C.F.R. § 14.636 and VA's website at <http://www.va.gov/ogc/accreditation.asp>. You can find the necessary power of attorney forms on this website, or if you ask us, we can send you the forms. You can also find the names of accredited attorneys, agents and service organization representatives on this website.

## What We Will Do

After we receive your appeal, we will send your case to the BVA in Washington, DC for a decision. The BVA will base its decision on an independent review of the entire record, including the transcript of the hearing, if you have a hearing.

Sincerely yours,

*RO Director*

RO Director  
Regional Office

Enclosure(s): VA Form 9  
Where to Send Correspondence



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 1 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

**ISSUE:**

Whether the assigned evaluations for porphyria cutanea tarda were clearly and unmistakably erroneous in the rating decision from September 30, 2008 and the decision review officer decision from March 29, 2010.

**EVIDENCE:**

- Compensation examination dated July 18, 2008
- Rating decision dated September 30, 2008
- Claim for clear and unmistakable (CUE) received August 14, 2012
- Rating decision dated March 29, 2010
- VAMC treatment records dated September 2008 to March 2014
- Cascade Eye and Skin Center treatment records for the period November 1992 to December 2007
- Tacoma Digestive Disease Center treatment records for the period November 2006 to January 2008
- Dr. Oh reports dated January 22, 2008 and July 29, 2008
- Dr. Rynes report dated March 3, 2008
- Dr. Findlay reported dated November 14, 2007

**ADJUDICATIVE ACTIONS:**

- 08-14-2012      Claim received.
- 09-09-2013      Claim considered based on all the evidence of record.
- 04-30-2014      Notice of Disagreement received.
- 04-30-2014      De Novo Review election received from appellant.

**PERTINENT LAWS; REGULATIONS; RATING SCHEDULE PROVISIONS:**

Unless otherwise indicated, the symbol “§” denotes a section from title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Pensions, Bonuses and Veterans’ Relief. Title 38 contains the regulations of the Department of Veterans Affairs which govern entitlement to all veteran benefits.

38 USC Section 5107 (03/02) Claimant responsibility; benefit of the doubt

<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 2 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

(a) CLAIMANT RESPONSIBILITY- Except as otherwise provided by law, a claimant has the responsibility to present and support a claim for benefits under laws administered by the Secretary.

(b) BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT- The Secretary shall consider all information and lay and medical evidence of record in a case before the Secretary with respect to benefits under laws administered by the Secretary. When there is an approximate balance of positive and negative evidence regarding any issue material to the determination of a matter, the Secretary shall give the benefit of the doubt to the claimant.

### §3.102 Reasonable doubt.

It is the defined and consistently applied policy of the Department of Veterans Affairs to administer the law under a broad interpretation, consistent, however, with the facts shown in every case. When, after careful consideration of all procurable and assembled data, a reasonable doubt arises regarding service origin, the degree of disability, or any other point, such doubt will be resolved in favor of the claimant. By reasonable doubt is meant one which exists because of an approximate balance of positive and negative evidence which does not satisfactorily prove or disprove the claim. It is a substantial doubt and one within the range of probability as distinguished from pure speculation or remote possibility. It is not a means of reconciling actual conflict or a contradiction in the evidence; the claimant is required to submit evidence sufficient to justify a belief in a fair and impartial mind that the claim is well grounded. Mere suspicion or doubt as to the truth of any statements submitted, as distinguished from impeachment or contradiction by evidence or known facts, is not justifiable basis for denying the application of the reasonable doubt doctrine if the entire complete record otherwise warrants invoking this doctrine. The reasonable doubt doctrine is also applicable even in the absence of official records, particularly if the basic incident allegedly arose under combat, or similarly strenuous conditions, and is consistent with the probable results of such known hardships. (Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501(a))

### §3.103 Procedural due process and appellate rights.

(a) Statement of policy. Every claimant has the right to written notice of the decision made on his or her claim, the right to a hearing, and the right of representation. Proceedings before VA are ex parte in nature, and it is the obligation of VA to assist a claimant in developing the facts pertinent to the claim and to render a decision which grants every benefit that can be supported in law while protecting the interests of the Government. The provisions of this section apply to all claims for benefits and relief, and decisions thereon, within the purview of this part 3.

(b) The right to notice:

(1) General. Claimants and their representatives are entitled to notice of any decision made by VA affecting the payment of benefits or the granting of relief. Such notice shall clearly set forth the



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office</i>		Page 3 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

decision made, any applicable effective date, the reason(s) for the decision, the right to a hearing on any issue involved in the claim, the right of representation and the right, as well as the necessary procedures and time limits, to initiate an appeal of the decision.

(2) Advance notice and opportunity for hearing. Except as otherwise provided in paragraph (b)(3) of this section, no award of compensation, pension or dependency and indemnity compensation shall be terminated, reduced or otherwise adversely affected unless the beneficiary has been notified of such adverse action and has been provided a period of 60 days in which to submit evidence for the purpose of showing that the adverse action should not be taken.

(3) Exceptions. In lieu of advance notice and opportunity for a hearing, VA will send a written notice to the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary at the same time it takes an adverse action under the following circumstances:

(i) An adverse action based solely on factual and unambiguous information or statements as to income, net worth, or dependency or marital status that the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary provided to VA in writing or orally (under the procedures set forth in Sec. 3.217(b)), with knowledge or notice that such information would be used to calculate benefit amounts.

(ii) An adverse action based upon the beneficiary's or fiduciary's failure to return a required eligibility verification report.

(iii) Evidence reasonably indicates that a beneficiary is deceased. However, in the event that VA has received a death certificate, a terminal hospital report verifying the death of a beneficiary or a claim for VA burial benefits, no notice of termination (contemporaneous or otherwise) will be required.

(iv) An adverse action based upon a written and signed statement provided by the beneficiary to VA renouncing VA benefits (see §3.106 on renouncement).

(v) An adverse action based upon a written statement provided to VA by a veteran indicating that he or she has returned to active service, the nature of that service, and the date of reentry into service, with the knowledge or notice that receipt of active service pay precludes concurrent receipt of VA compensation or pension (see §3.654 regarding active service pay).

(vi) An adverse action based upon a garnishment order issued under 42 U.S.C. 659(a). (Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501(a))

(4) Restoration of benefits. VA will restore retroactively benefits that were reduced, terminated, or otherwise adversely affected based on oral information or statements if within 30 days of the date on which VA issues the notification of adverse action the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary asserts that the adverse action was based upon information or statements that were inaccurate or upon information that was not provided by the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary. This will not preclude VA from taking subsequent action that adversely affects benefits.



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 4 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR		POA

(c) The right to a hearing.

(1) Upon request, a claimant is entitled to a hearing at any time on any issue involved in a claim within the purview of part 3 of this chapter, subject to the limitations described in §20.1304 of this chapter with respect to hearings in claims which have been certified to the Board of Veterans Appeals for appellate review. VA will provide the place of hearing in the VA office having original jurisdiction over the claim or at the VA office nearest the claimant's home having adjudicative functions or, subject to available resources and solely at the option of VA, at any other VA facility or federal building at which suitable hearing facilities are available. VA will provide one or more employees who have original determinative authority of such issues to conduct the hearing and be responsible for establishment and preservation of the hearing record. Hearings in connection with proposed adverse actions and appeals shall be held before one or more VA employees having original determinative authority who did not participate in the proposed action or the decision being appealed. All expenses incurred by the claimant in connection with the hearing are the responsibility of the claimant.

(2) The purpose of a hearing is to permit the claimant to introduce into the record, in person, any available evidence which he or she considers material and any arguments or contentions with respect to the facts and applicable law which he or she may consider pertinent. All testimony will be under oath or affirmation. The claimant is entitled to produce witnesses, but the claimant and witnesses are expected to be present. The Veterans Benefits Administration will not normally schedule a hearing for the sole purpose of receiving argument from a representative. It is the responsibility of the VA employee or employees conducting the hearings to explain fully the issues and suggest the submission of evidence which the claimant may have overlooked and which would be of advantage to the claimant's position. To assure clarity and completeness of the hearing record, questions which are directed to the claimant and to witnesses are to be framed to explore fully the basis for claimed entitlement rather than with an intent to refute evidence or to discredit testimony. In cases in which the nature, origin, or degree of disability is in issue, the claimant may request visual examination by a physician designated by VA and the physician's observations will be read into the record. (Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501(a))

(d) Submission of evidence. Any evidence whether documentary, testimonial, or in other form, offered by the claimant in support of a claim and any issue a claimant may raise and any contention or argument a claimant may offer with respect thereto are to be included in the records.

(e) The right to representation. Subject to the provisions of §§14.626 through 14.637 of this title, claimants are entitled to representation of their choice at every stage in the prosecution of a claim.

(f) Notification of decisions. The claimant or beneficiary and his or her representative will be notified in writing of decisions affecting the payment of benefits or granting relief. All notifications will advise the claimant of the reason for the decision; the date the decision will be effective; the right to a hearing subject to paragraph (c) of this section; the right to initiate an appeal by filing a Notice of Disagreement which will entitle the individual to a Statement of the



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office</i>		Page 5 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

Case for assistance in perfecting an appeal; and the periods in which an appeal must be initiated and perfected (See part 20 of this chapter, on appeals). Further, any notice that VA has denied a benefit sought will include a summary of the evidence considered. (Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501, 1115, 1506, 5104.)

§3.104 (05/2001) Finality of decisions.

(a) A decision of a duly constituted rating agency or other agency of original jurisdiction shall be final and binding on all field offices of the Department of Veterans Affairs as to conclusions based on the evidence on file at the time VA issues written notification in accordance with 38 U.S.C. 5104. A final and binding agency decision shall not be subject to revision on the same factual basis except by duly constituted appellate authorities or except as provided in §3.105 and §3.2600 of this part.

(b) Current determinations of line of duty, character of discharge, relationship, dependency, domestic relations questions, homicide, and findings of fact of death or presumptions of death made in accordance with existing instructions, and by application of the same criteria and based on the same facts, by either an Adjudication activity or an Insurance activity are binding one upon the other in the absence of clear and unmistakable error.

[29 FR 1462, Jan. 29, 1964, as amended at 29 FR 7547, June 12, 1964; 56 FR 65846, Dec. 19, 1991; 66 FR 21874, May 2, 2001]

§3.159 (05/08) Department of Veterans Affairs assistance in developing claims.

(a) Definitions. For purposes of this section, the following definitions apply:

(1) Competent medical evidence means evidence provided by a person who is qualified through education, training, or experience to offer medical diagnoses, statements, or opinions. Competent medical evidence may also mean statements conveying sound medical principles found in medical treatises. It would also include statements contained in authoritative writings such as medical and scientific articles and research reports or analyses.

(2) Competent lay evidence means any evidence not requiring that the proponent have specialized education, training, or experience. Lay evidence is competent if it is provided by a person who has knowledge of facts or circumstances and conveys matters that can be observed and described by a lay person.

(3) Substantially complete application means an application containing the claimant's name; his or her relationship to the veteran, if applicable; sufficient service information for VA to verify the claimed service, if applicable; the benefit claimed and any medical condition(s) on which it is based; the claimant's signature; and in claims for nonservice-connected disability or death pension and parents' dependency and indemnity compensation, a statement of income.



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 6 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

(4) For purposes of paragraph (c)(4)(i) of this section, event means one or more incidents associated with places, types, and circumstances of service giving rise to disability.

(5) Information means non-evidentiary facts, such as the claimant's Social Security number or address; the name and military unit of a person who served with the veteran; or the name and address of a medical care provider who may have evidence pertinent to the claim.

(b) VA's duty to notify claimants of necessary information or evidence. (1) When VA receives a complete or substantially complete application for benefits, it will notify the claimant of any information and medical or lay evidence that is necessary to substantiate the claim (hereafter in this paragraph referred to as the "notice"). In the notice VA will inform the claimant which information and evidence, if any, that the claimant is to provide to VA and which information and evidence, if any, that VA will attempt to obtain on behalf of the claimant. The information and evidence that the claimant is informed that the claimant is to provide must be provided within one year of the date of the notice. If the claimant has not responded to the notice within 30 days, VA may decide the claim prior to the expiration of the one-year period based on all the information and evidence contained in the file, including information and evidence it has obtained on behalf of the claimant and any VA medical examinations or medical opinions. If VA does so, however, and the claimant subsequently provides the information and evidence within one year of the date of the notice, VA must readjudicate the claim.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103)

(2) If VA receives an incomplete application for benefits, it will notify the claimant of the information necessary to complete the application and will defer assistance until the claimant submits this information.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5102(b), 5103A(3))

(3) No duty to provide the notice described in paragraph (b)(1) of this section arises:

(i) Upon receipt of a Notice of Disagreement; or

(ii) When, as a matter of law, entitlement to the benefit claimed cannot be established.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103(a), 5103A(a)(2))

(c) VA's duty to assist claimants in obtaining evidence. Upon receipt of a substantially complete application for benefits, VA will make reasonable efforts to help a claimant obtain evidence necessary to substantiate the claim. In addition, VA will give the assistance described in paragraphs (c)(1), (c)(2), and (c)(3) to an individual attempting to reopen a finally decided claim. VA will not pay any fees charged by a custodian to provide records requested.



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office</i>		Page 7 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

(1) Obtaining records not in the custody of a Federal department or agency. VA will make reasonable efforts to obtain relevant records not in the custody of a Federal department or agency, to include records from State or local governments, private medical care providers, current or former employers, and other non-Federal governmental sources. Such reasonable efforts will generally consist of an initial request for the records and, if the records are not received, at least one follow-up request. A follow-up request is not required if a response to the initial request indicates that the records sought do not exist or that a follow-up request for the records would be futile. If VA receives information showing that subsequent requests to this or another custodian could result in obtaining the records sought, then reasonable efforts will include an initial request and, if the records are not received, at least one follow-up request to the new source or an additional request to the original source.

(i) The claimant must cooperate fully with VA's reasonable efforts to obtain relevant records from non-Federal agency or department custodians. The claimant must provide enough information to identify and locate the existing records, including the person, company, agency, or other custodian holding the records; the approximate time frame covered by the records; and, in the case of medical treatment records, the condition for which treatment was provided.

(ii) If necessary, the claimant must authorize the release of existing records in a form acceptable to the person, company, agency, or other custodian holding the records.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(b))

(2) Obtaining records in the custody of a Federal department or agency. VA will make as many requests as are necessary to obtain relevant records from a Federal department or agency. These records include but are not limited to military records, including service medical records; medical and other records from VA medical facilities; records from non-VA facilities providing examination or treatment at VA expense; and records from other Federal agencies, such as the Social Security Administration. VA will end its efforts to obtain records from a Federal department or agency only if VA concludes that the records sought do not exist or that further efforts to obtain those records would be futile. Cases in which VA may conclude that no further efforts are required include those in which the Federal department or agency advises VA that the requested records do not exist or the custodian does not have them.

(i) The claimant must cooperate fully with VA's reasonable efforts to obtain relevant records from Federal agency or department custodians. If requested by VA, the claimant must provide enough information to identify and locate the existing records, including the custodian or agency holding the records; the approximate time frame covered by the records; and, in the case of medical treatment records, the condition for which treatment was provided. In the case of records requested to corroborate a claimed stressful event in service, the claimant must provide information sufficient for the records custodian to conduct a search of the corroborative records.

(ii) If necessary, the claimant must authorize the release of existing records in a form acceptable to the custodian or agency holding the records.



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 8 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(b))

(3) Obtaining records in compensation claims. In a claim for disability compensation, VA will make efforts to obtain the claimant's service medical records, if relevant to the claim; other relevant records pertaining to the claimant's active military, naval or air service that are held or maintained by a governmental entity; VA medical records or records of examination or treatment at non-VA facilities authorized by VA; and any other relevant records held by any Federal department or agency. The claimant must provide enough information to identify and locate the existing records including the custodian or agency holding the records; the approximate time frame covered by the records; and, in the case of medical treatment records, the condition for which treatment was provided.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(c))

(4) Providing medical examinations or obtaining medical opinions. (i) In a claim for disability compensation, VA will provide a medical examination or obtain a medical opinion based upon a review of the evidence of record if VA determines it is necessary to decide the claim. A medical examination or medical opinion is necessary if the information and evidence of record does not contain sufficient competent medical evidence to decide the claim, but:

(A) Contains competent lay or medical evidence of a current diagnosed disability or persistent or recurrent symptoms of disability;

(B) Establishes that the veteran suffered an event, injury or disease in service, or has a disease or symptoms of a disease listed in §3.309, §3.313, §3.316, and §3.317 manifesting during an applicable presumptive period provided the claimant has the required service or triggering event to qualify for that presumption; and

(C) Indicates that the claimed disability or symptoms may be associated with the established event, injury, or disease in service or with another service-connected disability.

(ii) Paragraph (4)(i)(C) could be satisfied by competent evidence showing post-service treatment for a condition, or other possible association with military service.

(iii) Paragraph (c)(4) applies to a claim to reopen a finally adjudicated claim only if new and material evidence is presented or secured.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(d))

(d) Circumstances where VA will refrain from or discontinue providing assistance. VA will refrain from providing assistance in obtaining evidence for a claim if the substantially complete application for benefits indicates that there is no reasonable possibility that any assistance VA would provide to the claimant would substantiate the claim. VA will discontinue providing



<b>Statement of the Case</b>	<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>	Page 9 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR [REDACTED]
		POA [REDACTED]

assistance in obtaining evidence for a claim if the evidence obtained indicates that there is no reasonable possibility that further assistance would substantiate the claim. Circumstances in which VA will refrain from or discontinue providing assistance in obtaining evidence include, but are not limited to:

- (1) The claimant's ineligibility for the benefit sought because of lack of qualifying service, lack of veteran status, or other lack of legal eligibility;
- (2) Claims that are inherently incredible or clearly lack merit; and
- (3) An application requesting a benefit to which the claimant is not entitled as a matter of law.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(a)(2))

(e) Duty to notify claimant of inability to obtain records. (1) If VA makes reasonable efforts to obtain relevant non-Federal records but is unable to obtain them, or after continued efforts to obtain Federal records concludes that it is reasonably certain they do not exist or further efforts to obtain them would be futile, VA will provide the claimant with oral or written notice of that fact. VA will make a record of any oral notice conveyed to the claimant. For non-Federal records requests, VA may provide the notice at the same time it makes its final attempt to obtain the relevant records. In either case, the notice must contain the following information:

- (i) The identity of the records VA was unable to obtain;
- (ii) An explanation of the efforts VA made to obtain the records;
- (iii) A description of any further action VA will take regarding the claim, including, but not limited to, notice that VA will decide the claim based on the evidence of record unless the claimant submits the records VA was unable to obtain; and
- (iv) A notice that the claimant is ultimately responsible for providing the evidence.

(2) If VA becomes aware of the existence of relevant records before deciding the claim, VA will notify the claimant of the records and request that the claimant provide a release for the records. If the claimant does not provide any necessary release of the relevant records that VA is unable to obtain, VA will request that the claimant obtain the records and provide them to VA.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(b)(2))

(f) For the purpose of the notice requirements in paragraphs (b) and (e) of this section, notice to the claimant means notice to the claimant or his or her fiduciary, if any, as well as to his or her representative, if any.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5102(b), 5103(a))



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 10 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

(g) The authority recognized in subsection (g) of 38 U.S.C. 5103A is reserved to the sole discretion of the Secretary and will be implemented, when deemed appropriate by the Secretary, through the promulgation of regulations.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(g))

§19.32 Closing of appeal for failure to respond to Statement of the Case.

The agency of original jurisdiction may close the appeal without notice to an appellant or his or her representative for failure to respond to a Statement of the Case within the period allowed. However, if a Substantive Appeal is subsequently received within the 1-year appeal period (60-day appeal period for simultaneously contested claims), the appeal will be considered to be reactivated. (Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7105(d)(3))

§20.302 Rule 302. (07/08) Time limit for filing...

(a) Notice of Disagreement. Except in the case of simultaneously contested claims, a claimant, or his or her representative, must file a Notice of Disagreement with a determination by the agency of original jurisdiction within one year from the date that that agency mails notice of the determination to him or her. Otherwise, that determination will become final. The date of mailing the letter of notification of the determination will be presumed to be the same as the date of that letter for purposes of determining whether an appeal has been timely filed. (Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7105(b)(1))

(b) Substantive Appeal.

(1) General. Except in the case of simultaneously contested claims, a Substantive Appeal must be filed within 60 days from the date that the agency of original jurisdiction mails the Statement of the Case to the appellant, or within the remainder of the 1-year period from the date of mailing of the notification of the determination being appealed, whichever period ends later. The date of mailing of the Statement of the Case will be presumed to be the same as the date of the Statement of the Case and the date of mailing the letter of notification of the determination will be presumed to be the same as the date of that letter for purposes of determining whether an appeal has been timely filed.

(2) Special rule in certain cases where additional evidence is submitted. Except in the case of simultaneously contested claims, if (i) a claimant submits additional evidence within 1 year of the date of mailing of the notification of the determination being appealed, and (ii) that evidence requires, in accordance with §19.31 of this title, that the claimant be furnished a Supplemental Statement of the Case, then the time to submit a Substantive Appeal shall end not sooner than 60 days after such Supplemental Statement of the Case is mailed to the appellant, even if the 60-day period extends beyond the expiration of the 1-year appeal period. (Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7105 (b)(1), (d)(3).)



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 11 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

(c) Response to Supplemental Statement of the Case. Where a Supplemental Statement of the Case is furnished, a period of 30 days from the date of mailing of the Supplemental Statement of the Case will be allowed for response. The date of mailing of the Supplemental Statement of the Case will be presumed to be the same as the date of the Supplemental Statement of the Case for purposes of determining whether a response has been timely filed. Provided a Substantive Appeal has been timely filed in accordance with paragraph (b) of this section, the response to a Supplemental Statement of the Case is optional and is not required for the perfection of an appeal. (Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7105(d)(3))

#### §4.1 Essentials of evaluative rating

This rating schedule is primarily a guide in the evaluation of disability resulting from all types of diseases and injuries encountered as a result of or incident to military service. The percentage ratings represent as far as can practicably be determined the average impairment in earning capacity resulting from such diseases and injuries and their residual conditions in civil occupations. Generally, the degrees of disability specified are considered adequate to compensate for considerable loss of working time from exacerbations or illnesses proportionate to the severity of the several grades of disability. For the application of this schedule, accurate and fully descriptive medical examinations are required, with emphasis upon the limitation of activity imposed by the disabling condition. Over a period of many years, a veteran's disability claim may require reratings in accordance with changes in laws, medical knowledge and his or her physical or mental condition. It is thus essential, both in the examination and in the evaluation of disability, that each disability be viewed in relation to its history.

#### §4.2 Interpretation of examination reports

Different examiners, at different times, will not describe the same disability in the same language. Features of the disability which must have persisted unchanged may be overlooked or a change for the better or worse may not be accurately appreciated or described. It is the responsibility of the rating specialist to interpret reports of examination in the light of the whole recorded history, reconciling the various reports into a consistent picture so that the current rating may accurately reflect the elements of disability present. Each disability must be considered from the point of view of the veteran working or seeking work. If a diagnosis is not supported by the findings on the examination report or if the report does not contain sufficient detail, it is incumbent upon the rating board to return the report as inadequate for evaluation purposes.

#### §4.3 Resolution of reasonable doubt

It is the defined and consistently applied policy of the Department of Veterans Affairs to administer the law under a broad interpretation, consistent, however, with the facts shown in every case. When after careful consideration of all procurable and assembled data, a reasonable doubt arises regarding the degree of disability such doubt will be resolved in favor of the claimant. See §3.102 of this chapter.



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office</i>		Page 12 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

#### §4.6 Evaluation of evidence

The element of the weight to be accorded the character of the veteran's service is but one factor entering into the considerations of the rating boards in arriving at determinations of the evaluation of disability. Every element in any way affecting the probative value to be assigned to the evidence in each individual claim must be thoroughly and conscientiously studied by each member of the rating board in the light of the established policies of the Department of Veterans Affairs to the end that decisions will be equitable and just as contemplated by the requirements of the law.

#### §4.7 Higher of two evaluations.

Where there is a question as to which of two evaluations shall be applied, the higher evaluation will be assigned if the disability picture more nearly approximates the criteria required for that rating. Otherwise, the lower rating will be assigned.

#### §3.105(a) Revision of decisions (Error).

Previous determinations which are final and binding, including decisions of service connection, degree of disability, age, marriage, relationship, service, dependency, line of duty, and other issues, will be accepted as correct in the absence of clear and unmistakable error. Where evidence establishes such error, the prior decision will be reversed or amended. For the purpose of authorizing benefits, the rating or other adjudicative decision which constitutes a reversal of a prior decision on the grounds of clear and unmistakable error has the same effect as if the corrected decision had been made on the date of the reversed decision. Except as provided in paragraphs (d) and (e) of this section where an award is reduced or discontinued because of administrative error or error in judgment, the provisions of §3.500(b)(2) will apply.

#### §4.14 Avoidance of pyramiding

The evaluation of the same disability under various diagnoses is to be avoided. Disability from injuries to the muscles, nerves, and joints of an extremity may overlap to a great extent, so that special rules are included in the appropriate bodily system for their evaluation. Dyspnea, tachycardia, nervousness, fatigability, etc., may result from many causes; some may be service connected, others, not. Both the use of manifestations not resulting from service-connected disease or injury in establishing the service-connected evaluation and the evaluation of the same manifestation under different diagnoses are to be avoided.

#### §4.15 Total disability ratings

The ability to overcome the handicap of disability varies widely among individuals. The rating, however, is based primarily upon the average impairment in earning capacity, that is, upon



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office</i>		Page 13 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

the economic or industrial handicap which must be overcome and not from individual success in overcoming it. However, full consideration must be given to unusual physical or mental effects in individual cases, to peculiar effects of occupational activities, to defects in physical or mental endowment preventing the usual amount of success in overcoming the handicap of disability and to the effect of combinations of disability. Total disability will be considered to exist when there is present any impairment of mind or body which is sufficient to render it impossible for the average person to follow a substantially gainful occupation; Provided, That permanent total disability shall be taken to exist when the impairment is reasonably certain to continue throughout the life of the disabled person. The following will be considered to be permanent total disability: the permanent loss of the use of both hands, or of both feet, or of one hand and one foot, or of the sight of both eyes, or becoming permanently helpless or permanently bedridden. Other total disability ratings are scheduled in the various bodily systems of this schedule.

§4.118 (7815) (effective 08-30-02) Schedule of ratings-skin

- 7815 Bullous disorders (including pemphigus vulgaris, pemphigus foliaceus, bullous pemphigoid, dermatitis herpetiformis, epidermolysis bullosa acquisita, benign chronic familial pemphigus (Hailey-Hailey), and porphyria cutanea tarda):
- More than 40 percent of the entire body or more than 40 percent of exposed areas affected, or; constant or near-constant systemic therapy such as corticosteroids or other immunosuppressive drugs required during the past 12-month period. 60
  - 20 to 40 percent of the entire body or 20 to 40 percent of exposed areas affected, or; systemic therapy such as corticosteroids or other immunosuppressive drugs required for a total duration of six weeks or more, but not constantly, during the past 12-month period. 30
  - At least 5 percent, but less than 20 percent, of the entire body, or at least 5 percent, but less than 20 percent, of exposed areas affected, or; intermittent systemic therapy such as corticosteroids or other immunosuppressive drugs required for a total duration of less than six weeks during the past 12-month period. 10
  - Less than 5 percent of the entire body or exposed areas affected, and; no more than topical therapy required during the past 12-month period. 0
- Or rate as disfigurement of the head, face, or neck (DC 7800) or scars (DC's 7801, 7802, 7803, 7804, or 7805), depending upon the predominant disability.



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office</i>		Page 14 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

§4.117 (7704) Schedule of ratings-hemic and lymphatic systems

7704 Polycythemia vera:

During periods of treatment with myelosuppressants and for three months following cessation of myelosuppressant therapy	100
Requiring phlebotomy	40
Stable, with or without continuous medication	10

Note: Rate complications such as hypertension, gout, stroke or thrombotic disease separately.

**VA, in determining all claims for benefits that have been reasonably raised by the filings and evidence, has applied the benefit-of-the-doubt and liberally and sympathetically reviewed all submissions in writing from the Veteran as well as all evidence of record.**

**DECISION:**

No revision is warranted in the evaluations of porphyria cutanea tarda (PCT) as a clear and unmistakable error (CUE) is not present.

**REASONS AND BASES:**

Clear and unmistakable errors are errors that are undebatable, so that it can be said that reasonable minds could only conclude that the previous decision was fatally flawed at the time it was made. A determination that there was a clear and unmistakable error must be based on the record and the law that existed at the time of the prior decision. Once a determination is made that there was a clear and unmistakable error in a prior decision that would change the outcome, then that decision must be revised to conform to what the decision should have been. In this case, the previous disability evaluation is continued as no clear and unmistakable error is shown.

**Initial CUE alleged in August 2012:**

In our rating decision from September 30, 2008, we granted service connection for PCT with an evaluation of 10 percent from February 23, 2007. The 10 percent evaluation was assigned based upon criteria from diagnostic code "7815: Bullous disorders." More specifically, we rated your condition under the criteria for "intermittent systemic therapy such as corticosteroids or other immunosuppressive drugs required for a total duration of less than six weeks during the past 12-month period."



<b>Statement of the Case</b>		<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 15 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA	

While phlebotomies are not a type of systemic therapy in the strictest sense, we rated it analogous to this requirement in order to assure a compensable evaluation. Your evaluation was not based upon the other criteria for a 10 percent evaluation, requiring “at least 5 percent, but less than 20 percent, of the entire body, or at least 5 percent, but less than 20 percent, of exposed areas affected.” We had no evidence to support that at least 5 percent of the skin of your entire body or exposed surface areas (head, face, neck) was affected by the condition, which is why we rated it based upon the treatment for the condition.

As a result, we assigned a single 10 percent evaluation based upon your phlebotomy treatment. Following your notice of disagreement with our decision to assign a 10 percent evaluation, we performed a de novo review of your case in March 2010. In our rating decision from March 29, 2010, we assigned a 40 percent evaluation for PCT under “7704: Polycythemia vera” in lieu of the 10 percent evaluation under “7815: Bullous disorders.” The 40 percent evaluation was based upon the fact that you require phlebotomy for your PCT, which is a more accurate set of diagnostic criteria to apply to your condition. As a result, we discontinued the 10 percent evaluation that was assigned based upon the intermittent systemic therapy requirements of “7815: Bullous disorders.”

In your initial claim for CUE, you asserted that we made a clear and unmistakable error because we should have assigned both the 40 percent and the 10 percent evaluations since it would not be prohibited pyramiding of symptoms under 38 CFR 4.14. You stated that the 40 percent evaluation was based upon the phlebotomies, and the 10 percent was based upon percentage of skin affected by your PCT condition. Your assertion is incorrect. The September 2008 rating decision supported the 10 percent evaluation with the following:

“While the condition is currently in remission and primarily only affects your hands, we are assigning this [10 percent] evaluation based on your intermittent need for phlebotomies.

We discussed the results of your VA exam in support of this determination. There was evidence of scattered scars and old bullae and skin tears, with less than 6 inches involved total. The lesions were considered in remission because your treatment of avoiding sunlight and having phlebotomies performed was successful in preventing the condition. As a result, we granted the 10 percent evaluation based purely upon the treatment used to successfully treat your condition.

When we assigned the 40 percent evaluation for your phlebotomies in our March 2010 rating decision, we were required to discontinue the 10 percent evaluation for your phlebotomy procedures in order to avoid paying you twice for the same disabling symptoms. The Avoidance of Pyramiding regulation, 38 CFR 4.14, states that the evaluation of the same disability under various diagnoses is to be avoided. Both the use of manifestations not resulting from service-connected disease or injury in establishing the service-connected evaluation and the evaluation of the same manifestation under different diagnoses are to be avoided.



NAME OF VETERAN

GORDON A. GRAHAM

VA FILE NUMBER

SOCIAL SECURITY NR

POA

In this case, we cannot grant you a 40 percent evaluation under phlebotomies and also grant you a 10 percent evaluation that was based upon phlebotomies considered analogous to intermittent systemic treatment. As we are compensating you for the phlebotomy procedures under both of those evaluations, we are required to assign only one evaluation. In this case, we chose to assign the higher of the two evaluations because you met the criteria for both evaluations.

In order to obtain a separate 10 percent evaluation, it would need to be based upon the disfiguring aspects of that skin condition rather than the treatment for the condition. As the examiner found less than 6 square inches of non-disabling scarring with no active disease process, a separate 10 percent evaluation is not warranted. As a result, there is no CUE present.

Subsequent CUE alleged in the April 2014 Notice of Disagreement:

In your notice of disagreement, you argue for an entirely different CUE than was alleged in the August 2012 claim for CUE. While this CUE was not raised or addressed in your August 2012 claim or the September 2013 rating, we consider this new CUE inextricably intertwined with the CUE upon which the notice of disagreement was filed. As a result, we will address the new CUE as well.

In your April 2014 Notice of Disagreement (NOD), you now state that the mere fact that the July 18, 2008 VA exam noted that you are totally disabled shows that it was a CUE to assign a 10 percent evaluation in September 2008 and then 40 percent evaluation in March 2010. Instead, you argue that a 100 percent evaluation is warranted because the words "totally disabling" were used in the examination.

Our regulations do not allow for a 100 percent evaluation based mere upon a designation of "totally disabled." In fact, 38 CFR 4.15, "Totally disability ratings," gives examples of total disabilities:

The following will be considered to be permanent total disability: the permanent loss of the use of both hands, or of both feet, or of one hand and one foot, or of the sight of both eyes, or becoming permanently helpless or permanently bedridden. Other total disability ratings are scheduled in the various bodily systems of this schedule.

In this case, your PCT is currently in remission so long as you avoid sun exposure and have intermittent phlebotomies performed. Otherwise, the condition is not disabling. This is not equivalent to blindness, losing the use of two extremities, or becoming permanently bedridden. In particular, the regulation notes that other total disability ratings are scheduled under the various body systems. For instance, we were able to assign you a 100 percent evaluation for hepatitis C because you met the schedular requirements for the total disability. You only meet the requirements for a 40 percent disability based upon the treatment need for your PCT.



<b>Statement of the Case</b>	<i>Department of Veterans Affairs</i> <i>Regional Office</i>		Page 17 10/06/2014
NAME OF VETERAN GORDON A. GRAHAM	VA FILE NUMBER [REDACTED]	SOCIAL SECURITY NR	POA

This claim does not warrant consideration of an extraschedular disability consideration, especially given that we have already granted a 100 percent combined evaluation. The last time you were seen at the VAMC on March 17, 2014. Your doctor noted that you haven't had any flares of PCT in some time. This supports that the established 40 percent evaluation is warranted, and there is no error, let alone a clear and unmistakable error, in the decision to award a 40 percent evaluation.