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# The Pentagon's War on America: The Marines

by Adam Sarvana

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## Part I – Poisoned Patriots: Through the Looking Glass

For the United States Marine Corps, boot camp means thirteen weeks of forced marches — often in hot, humid, chigger-infested pine forests — alongside bad food, tough discipline and screaming drill instructors. It is designed to weed out individuals not suitable for the military. According to recruiting materials, it accustoms recruits to dangerous, highly stressful scenarios and teaches them how to behave as soldiers rather than civilians in the face of adversity. It teaches them to conquer their fear, push the limits of their endurance and ultimately to become a better version of themselves.

But there are challenges the recruiters do not mention and for which drill instructors do not train. Boot camp does not teach Marines how to survive rare forms of cancer or nervous system failure. It does not teach them how to watch their children die.

It may be asking too much for the Marine Corps to teach those things. But it is, or should be, reasonable for the Corps — a unique institution that looks after its own and whose motto is *Semper Fidelis*, or "Always Faithful" — to acknowledge its responsibilities when it brings these tragedies into the lives of its recruits.

From 1957 to 1987, hundreds of thousands of unprepared men, women and children who lived

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on or near Camp Lejeune, N.C., the largest Marine Corps base on the East Coast, were the unwitting victims of a decades-long water contamination disaster that is still claiming lives. Although some former residents have filed disability claims and wrongful death lawsuits, money has faded into the background for many of the survivors as a reason to put their stories forward. Now what they want most is awareness of what they have gone through, how they were treated by the military they served, and the continuing damage inflicted on families who even now are sometimes denied health benefits by a government that has never admitted responsibility.

The story of Camp Lejeune and the people who were sickened there has been told in pieces over the years, only to disappear, flare up again and die down. Now, recently uncovered information — much of it damning to the Marine Corps and federal health officials — can be made available and the story told with fresh insights. The picture that emerges, after interviewing veterans who lost children to rare diseases and after extensively reviewing a variety of private and public documents, is of a site where up to a million people were potentially affected over the years and where the Marine Corps continually put people in harm's way without warning.

Camp Lejeune was pushed back into the national spotlight in late April, when the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), a branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), announced that the Marine Corps had for years systematically misrepresented the nature and scope of historical water contamination at the site. The military has long denied that water saturated with trichloroethylene (TCE) and perchloroethylene (PCE), degreasing and dry cleaning solvents now known to have



The Latvian platoon marches in the Pass in Review as part of Exercise COOPERATIVE OSPREY '98's closing ceremony at Camp Lejeune.  
Photo by SGT Thopgmas W. Ammnos

permeated the base's drinking and bathing water systems for decades, was responsible for the multitude of cancers and other rare health problems experienced by former base residents and civilians living near the fence line. Although the problem was identified as far back as 1980 by military engineers testing water treatment systems, the last contaminated well was left running until 1987. By then, according to information from a 2007 U.S. House of Representatives hearing on the issue, up to one million people could have been affected by the tainted water.

That number may underestimate the damage, because the contamination is now known to be even worse than previously suspected. In 1997, ATSDR issued a report that largely exonerated the military. More than a decade later, on April 28, 2009, it withdrew that report and announced that the Marine Corps for years concealed the fact that benzene, a known human carcinogen found in gasoline, was found at high levels during well testing in 1984 alongside the other

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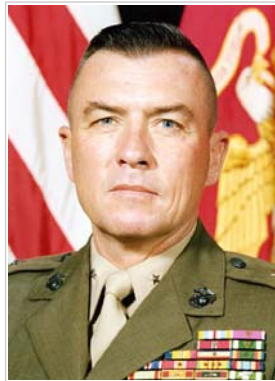
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already familiar contaminants. This breakthrough is giving some veterans new hope that a fuller picture of what happened to them at Camp Lejeune will soon emerge.

The Marine Corps misrepresentations described by federal health officials are, according to former Camp Lejeune residents, part of a much larger pattern. Ex-military personnel who lived at various times at Camp Lejeune spoke to Natural Resources News Service of having watched their children waste away, wondering how they had failed to protect them, and of later developing their own unexplained health complications. In all instances, the military and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) argued that there was insufficient evidence that TCE and PCE were responsible.

As the record shows, it was in the military's financial interest to do so. Testing at the base from October 1980 to March 1981 showed that water at one of the camp's treatment plants was, in the original report's words, "highly contaminated" with then-unnamed volatile organic compounds, a chemical group that includes TCE and PCE. The contaminants were specifically identified in 1982, but the water systems were allowed to continue servicing homes, schools, swimming pools and other facilities on and around the base. It was not until July 1984 that base officials began testing individual wells; by February 1985, they had shut down 10 with high solvent readings. According to the



Maj. Gen. L. H. Buehl

United States Marine Corps

Associated Press (AP), one well had TCE levels as high as 18,900 parts per billion; the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) now states that water is unsafe to drink with TCE levels higher than 5 parts per billion. Despite these anomalous reading, closed wells were periodically turned back on throughout 1985 to ease temporary water shortages. In April 1985, Major General L. H. Buehl told residents of Tarawa Terrace, a nearby residential area, that the wells had been shut down strictly as a precaution based on "minute" chemical readings. The affected wells were closed for good only in 1987; Buehl is now deceased.

Sick veterans and former residents, noticing a pattern, started pushing for an investigation.

ATSDR, which is responsible for assessing the health implications of contamination at Superfund cleanup sites, disappointed many in the Camp Lejeune community in 1997 when it found that adults had "little or no increased cancer risk" from contaminated water and declined to rule on possible effects on developing fetuses. Instead, the report recommended fetal effects should be studied — an effort that, 12 years later, has no end in sight, despite intense pressure from a few federal lawmakers and a vocal group of former residents to provide some closure for those who lost family members and often their own health.

Who are these "poisoned patriots," as a 2007 House Energy and Commerce Committee hearing chaired by Rep.

Bart Stupak (D-Mich.) labeled them? Tom Townsend, a former Marine Corps major who lived at Camp Lejeune in the mid-'50s and again in the 1960s, was working temporarily at Camp Garcia, a now-deactivated airfield on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, when he heard his infant son — being cared for at Camp Lejeune with Townsend's wife — had developed a



Committee on Energy and Commerce House of Representatives 2002. Photo from Archives.

rare heart defect. “My bosses said I was invaluable and I couldn't go [see him], but after some sparring I got on a plane and left,” Townsend recalled. After he reached his family, “My son turned blue after a day in the hospital.” They decided to take him to Bethesda Naval Hospital several hours away in Maryland, hoping to save his life, although Townsend couldn't make the trip himself. When his wife, who he said had poor depth perception, made the drive alone, she found at Bethesda that although there was a notice inside the medical area to expect her child, “people were playing cards, they weren't ready,” Townsend said. “She was a mild-mannered Catholic, and she took a chunk out of their ass.”

Their son didn't survive his condition long. After he passed away, Townsend remembered, “I was told to go back to Camp Garcia, and my wife had to clear out our house” at Camp Lejeune. “I didn't feel we were being taken care of too well. Marines should act better than that. I don't know if my bosses were scared or what, but we left.” His wife died in 2006, after 52 years of marriage, when she developed what Townsend called “an abdomen growth” despite years of vigorous health. “It's still a mystery how it developed,” he said. “She worked out every day. She could do more pushups than I ever could.”

Sam Sims, who lived at Camp Lejeune from 1969 to 1971 and again from 1975 until his discharge the following year, had it worse. In 1970 his five-month-old daughter Pamela became ill while he was “in and out of the country,” he said. He and his wife “couldn't figure out why she was crying day and night” — until she abruptly passed away. According to medical records reviewed for this story, the official cause of death was hemorrhagic pulmonary edema and pneumonia brought on by “fibrocystic disease of the pancreas,” which is highly unusual in infants. A year later, the same process played out:



another daughter, listed only as “Infant Sims,” was born Dec. 28, 1971 and died Jan. 5, 1972 of died of “hypocalcemia, cause undetermined, manifested by severe convulsions.” A third

daughter, Bridgett, died of “dehydration and sepsis” in 1973 when she was a week old. At first, Sims said, “I didn’t know if I had a disease from overseas” that could have affected his children. He noted that he has two grown children, including a forty-one-year-old son born before the family moved to Camp Lejeune who’s “never had a health problem in his life.”

Sims didn’t know what to do, and his superiors were hard pressed to respond to three unexplained deaths in one family. “The Marine Corps thought I was doing something to my kids,” he said — and so when, despite everything, he attempted to reenlist in 1976, they declared him ineligible and “put me out.” After that, by his own reckoning, he “bounced from job to job,” always carrying “a guilty feeling about something you think you might have caused.” Despite never fighting in Vietnam, he was diagnosed by a non-military contract doctor during a VHA evaluation as having permanent and totally disabling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), for which he now receives benefits. As for a separate disability claim he filed in 2000 with the Navy, “They just tell me they’re working on my case.” Sims did not know when he filled out the paperwork nine years ago that he was entering the federal government’s equivalent of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Coming Up Next: Part II – Poisoned Patriots: The Cover-up



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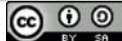
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