

Lejeune Water Victim Speaks Out

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Spina bifida. Asperger's syndrome. Tourette's. Bipolar disorder. Organic brain dysfunction. These are just a few of the diseases William McMurray Jr. suffers from, ailments he says his doctors couldn't explain for the first 20 years of his life -- until they learned of water contamination aboard Camp Lejeune.

His is but one story in what many call the greatest case of contamination in U.S. history. A million Marines, sailors and their families drank, bathed, brushed their teeth, cooked, swam and washed their cars, clothes, dishes and pets in bad water at Lejeune for decades.

"I spent so long not knowing why I am the way I am," McMurray, 29, said in telephone interviews last week from his Tyler, Texas, home. "When they finally found the conditions and why I was like this I was so ticked."

The horrors of the contamination weren't understood immediately. One base housing resident reported the unexplainable death of his dog. Another said goldfish always ended up floating at the top of the aquarium. More than 1,000 babies were stillborn or died in infancy aboard the base from 1947 to 1987, according to an exhaustive survey of death certificates filed at the Onslow County Register of Deeds.

The Department of the Navy recommended 50 years ago the regulation of many of the worst chemicals that found their way into Lejeune's water supply, according to 1963's Manual of Naval Preventive Medicine, which was just recently made public.

But throughout the 1960s and 70s, military and civilian employees poured oil into storm drains, improperly disposed of car batteries and tossed out used tires and countless other items around the base, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which recorded an incident involving the burial of dog carcasses used in radiological testing.

By then, the wells that supplied the base's potable water swirled with more than 70 toxic chemicals including trichloroethylene, tetrachloroethylene, benzene and vinyl chloride, according to EPA reports.

By 1980, military and civilian scientists were sounding alarms that Lejeune's water was poisonous, but wells were not closed for another four years and only after state officials became involved, according to transcripts of Congressional hearings on the matter.

McMurray was born at the Naval Hospital on Oct. 24, 1982. His father, a hospital corpsman and Vietnam veteran, had moved his family into base housing in the year prior. By the time McMurray was born, his mother had already had one miscarriage and months spent drinking and using the polluted water in their Tarawa Terrace home.

McMurray was born in a specialized laboratory because of his multiple dysfunctions and doctors didn't expect him to live long. Even if he did survive, they told his parents, he would never walk. McMurray proved them wrong, but not without consequence. As he grew his development stalled, and he was barely able to speak. It took years before he uttered his first words, and he spent most of his childhood in and out of hospitals undergoing tests for the myriad of conditions with which he has been diagnosed, he said.

Beginning in 1984, military officials began to point publicly to a small, off-base dry cleaner as the source of contamination without disclosing to environmental regulators that depot storage tanks at Hadnot Point aboard base had leaked around 1,500 gallons of fuel into the ground every month for years. When the contamination made headlines, the base's commanding general assured his Marines and their families that their water was safe when chemical levels were among the highest ever seen in a public water system, according to a series of investigative reports published by newspapers in Florida, which is home to more than 12,000 veterans affected by water contamination -- the most of any state except North Carolina.

Trichloroethylene was found at 1,400 parts per billion at Naval Hospital; 1,148 ppb at an elementary school; and 18,900 ppb in a water well -- up to 280 times higher than what the EPA considers safe today, according to a review of hundreds of previously safe-guarded military documents made public by the Senate in July.

Lejeune was declared a Superfund site in 1989, giving the EPA authority to clean it up. For the next two decades, veterans fought for answers and help from the government with thousands dying of cancer. Military officials made it difficult for anyone, even federally-funded researchers, to obtain any pertinent information or documentation on the contamination, according to court records and archived reports.

The federal government in 2005 cleared the Marine Corps of any criminal conduct in handling the contamination. An EPA investigator later testified before Congress that he wanted to charge several Lejeune officers with obstruction of justice but had been overruled by a Justice Department counterpart.

When McMurray finally came to terms with his conditions in 2010, he took his case to Veteran's Affairs, with whom he's been fighting ever since. By 2011, good news for veterans and dependents like McMurray began to trickle out as the EPA officially ruled Lejeune water contaminant TCE to be a human carcinogen. The issue reached its tipping point in 2012 when lawmakers from North Carolina and Florida crossed the aisle to push through bipartisan legislation. The resulting Aug. 6 law requires Veteran's Affairs to provide medical treatment to military members and -- for the first time -- dependents who spent at least a month aboard Lejeune from 1957 to 1987.

Total costs are estimated at \$3.9 billion over 10 years. Civilian workers could be entitled to medical benefits under a different law, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

McMurray said his Veteran's Affairs case is expected to reach full resolution within the next few weeks. Several lawsuits filed by other former Lejeune residents are still pending in federal court. A federal report on the number of diseases linked to the contamination is expected to be completed in 2014.

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