

Our United States Marine Corps prides itself on being the toughest branch of the military and if you believe in their bravado, the best fighters. However, even the toughest men and women are not immune from industrial-strength toxins. And for those stationed at Camp Lejeune, a prominent Marine Corps base in Jacksonville, North Carolina, from 1953-1987, it was an unavoidable problem.

The water for Camp Lejeune during this time was largely provided through wells. These wells were contaminated with compounds known as volatile organic compounds (VOCs). These chemicals were found in all forms of potable water, from drinking to washing. Therefore, even if a resident of the camp never drank water, they were exposed by bathing, washing their hands, and brushing their teeth. The VOCs in question, including trichloroethylene (TCE), benzene, tetrachloroethylene (PCE), and their derivatives, were present at levels up to 3400 times higher than permissible. Over seventy contaminants have been identified. The high level of these chemicals in the water turned the water delivery system into a poisonous cocktail so toxic that at least fifteen major health conditions, including multiple types of cancers, miscarriage, and Parkinson's disease, are associated with it.

Originally the toxic condition of Camp Lejeune's water supply was not known. The contaminants are all colorless and thus nothing "looked off" about Camp Lejeune's water. Though TCE and benzene carry a sweet odor, the odor is not overpowering and may not be noticed when dissolved in water. TCE and PCE are frequently used in degreasing metals and dry cleaning respectively. Both processes would have been extremely common on a military base, explaining the prevalence of the chemicals and their derivatives.

In the early 1980s, concerns began to be raised about the prevalence of chemical contaminants in the Camp Lejeune water. Testing began in response to an EPA regulation in 1980. An Army lab found hydrocarbon contamination in the water. This information was presented to the officials of the USMC as early as 1981. This report, along with later reports, as is so often the case when anyone raises concerns, was ignored. In 1982, both the base chemist and the base commander were informed that the water in the Camp wells were poisoned. In response, the company responsible for testing the water had their testing schedule severely reduced. Around the same time, in a report submitted to the EPA, the Marines insisted there was no ["immediate threat to human health"](#) on the post. This is despite both the base chemist and the commander of the base having been informed over a year earlier that the water was effectively a poison. When a second water testing company found PCE, TCE, and benzene in the water, the Marines finally started taking action. The contaminated wells were shut down.

However, it was not until 1999 that the USMC began to tell former residents of Lejeune that they had been exposed to contaminated water. In 2008 the US Congress mandated that people who had lived at the base be notified. As of 2009, at least [135,000 people were listed](#) in a health registry. The number has likely gone up since then. In 2014, the [CDC issued a report](#) that stated Marines stationed at Lejeune had a significantly higher risk of multiple cancers and several other diseases than Marines stationed at Camp Pendleton. The same report estimated up to 1 million people were exposed.

It was not until 2012 that justice began to be done for the servicemen and women and their families stationed at Lejeune from 1953-1987. In that year, Congress passed a law, authorizing the VA to provide free medical care for veterans who served at least 30 days at Lejeune and had one of multiple conditions. Further, [disability compensations](#) are available for some conditions. Family members who were there at the time are also eligible for reimbursement of any medical expenses not covered by insurance for the same conditions. A further compensation package was recently passed as part of another bill and signed into law.

While improvements have been made, the mere fact that for thirty years, members of the United States Marine Corps, and their dependents were either negligently or deliberately exposed to poisoned water is unconscionable. The fact that it took an additional twenty years for them to receive any form of compensation is simply absurd. Veterans give up time, and in many cases health, blood, and even their lives to serve the citizens of the United States. They should never have been subjected to water not fit for fish. The United States owes its soldiers better than poisoned water. Steps need to be taken to ensure that the catastrophic lapses that led to the poisoning of perhaps 1 million people do not happen again.

If you feel that you or someone you know may have been affected by the contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, you can get more information from the Department of Veterans Affairs online at <https://www.va.gov/disability/eligibility/hazardous-materials-exposure/camp-lejeune-water-contamination/> , issues like this underscore why it is important to support Veterans for public office.