

Camp Lejeune: An Unforgivable Injustice Against Our Veterans

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November 2022

As an accredited Veterans Attorney/Advocate, I have the privilege of helping our Veterans achieve useful and life-enhancing benefits such as the Department of Veterans Affairs Aid and Attendance Benefits Program. I have sat at the bedside of World War II Veterans to listen to their stories and helped surviving spouses of veterans restore needed benefits and income streams. This experience instills a strong desire to protect and advocate for veterans in every manner I can. It is with this sentiment that I will take a break from my normal, more light-hearted movie reviews and focus on Camp Lejeune, one of the most egregious injustices committed against our veteran population.

Background:

To provide context, let's first examine Camp Lejeune itself. Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune is a 246-square mile United States Military Training Facility located in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Its major features are 14 miles of access to beaches which provide functionality for both amphibious assault training as well quick deployments. Camp Lejeune was constructed in April 1941 and serves as a major training facility, garrison, and deployment point to this day. Thousands of Veterans and their families have resided and trained at this facility.

The Injustice:

Tragically, between the years of approximately 1957 through 1987, the soldiers of Camp Lejeune and their families were exposed to an intolerable level of toxins via the Base's drinking and bathing water. Volatile compounds, such as benzene, industrial solvents, and other chemicals, were found in the Base's drinking water intermittently during this time period. Despite the knowledge of the dangerous nature of this contamination and legal measures put in place to prevent further harm, these harmful contaminants were dumped near the base's well and water sources continued to operate.

The contamination of Camp Lejeune's water supply caused real and irreversible damage to our Service Members, their spouses, and their children. The damages from this reckless oversight precipitated into numerous instances of rare diseases, cancer, and a total of 15 other medical conditions related to the exposure. Despite this, the entire obscene proceedings were covered up for almost two decades.

The Turning Tide:

In 1999, the United States Marine Corps ("USMC") began to notify former residents of Camp Lejeune that they may have been exposed to hazardous chemicals. Unfortunately, for many this information was far too late. Former residents were already starting to experience the myriad of ailments described above including *birth defects among children* born on base during the contamination years. Sadly, these individuals and families generally attributed their woes to bad luck as opposed to malfeasance.

In 2005, the Department of Justice (“DOJ”) and the Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) investigated the USMC’s handling of the issue and found no criminal culpability. However, a 2007 report by an EPA investigator suggested that charges of Obstruction of Justice should be levied against certain leaders in Camp Lejeune. Unfortunately, he was overruled.

The movement to right this overwhelming wrong truly caught traction in 2007 when retired Marine master sergeant, Jerry Ensminger discovered a 1981 document describing a radioactive dump near a rifle range at the camp. Even more alarming, it was learned that base officials knew about this this document as early as 2004. Ensminger had a daughter who lived at Camp Lejeune during his service. Appallingly, she passed away of cancer at the age of 9. These revelations precipitated in the formation of an advocacy group called *The Few, The Proud, The Forgotten*. This group works tirelessly to find and inform potential victims of the water contamination at Camp Lejeune. Congress responded to these efforts by requiring the USMC to notify former base residents. The online registry contains *over 100,000 names...*

The Camp Lejeune Act of 2022:

The Camp Lejeune Justice Act passed the U.S. House on March 3, 2022, by a vote of 256-174 and then by the Senate on June 16, 2022, by a vote of 342-88. The Act provides monetary relief for those injured by exposure to Lejeune and its contaminated water. The prerequisite for remuneration is thirty cumulative days of being exposed between 1953 and 1987, “living” or “working” or “otherwise”. In a stark reminder of those touched by this, the Act includes *in-utero* exposure. Damages must be demonstrated, and a causal connection must be established between those damages and the exposure to Camp Lejeune’s toxic water. Typical barriers to recovery are: the requirement to prove negligence and government immunities have been stripped from these matters in order to make it easier for those harmed by Camp Lejeune to collect some modicum of compensation.

How to Act:

So, why have I gone into this degree of tragic and infuriating detail? What can be done to make you, your loved ones, or people you know whole? It is vital to address the wrongs committed against our Veteran population and their beloved families by spreading information and providing avenues for those effected to get help. If you believe you or somebody you know may have been exposed to Camp Lejeune’s toxic water, please consider the following factors:

- **Did the individual serve or live at Camp Lejeune between August 1953 and December 1987?**
- **Did the individual live there for at least 30 cumulative days?**
- **Did the individual who lived at Camp Lejeune for 30 days have family also residing at the Camp?**

If you believe that any or all of these criteria are met by you or somebody you know, please do not hesitate to contact our office so we may provide resources and help.

In summation, a tremendous injustice has been committed upon our Veterans. Generations of our Service Members and their families suffered atrocious and irrevocable injuries. To add insult to injury, this could have been avoided or at least mitigated had action been taken by those in charge. Our Veterans have lived up to their oaths to protect us. It is time for us and our representatives to live up to their service.