

Detroit Free Press

METRO

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**MEDICATION IN CASE OF MELTDOWN:** People who live or work within 10 miles of Michigan's nuclear power plants will soon get vouchers for free potassium iodide pills that can partially protect the thyroid gland from radiation exposure if there is an accident. James McCurtis of the Michigan Department of Community Health said the state had stockpiled pills. The companies that operate the nuclear plants provided about \$62,000 to cover the distribution.

— ASSOCIATED PRESS



# What was in Marines' water?

## Study probes vets' health problems

By MEGHA SATYANARAYANA  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Shelby Township resident James Fontella is a breast cancer survivor who believes contaminated water at the Camp Lejeune military base in North Carolina caused his illness.

The Marines are trying to determine whether he and 3,346 other Michiganders with various illnesses are correct about a possible link.

They are among 144,000 people nationwide participating in a study on the health effects of drinking water at Camp Lejeune between the mid-1950s and the mid-1980s.

The list includes servicemen such as Mike Doyle and John Yeip of Warren and Pat Flynn, who lives near Iron Mountain, all with kidney problems; Natalie McPherson, whose husband, Anthony, died of Hodgkin's disease; Tim Hefron of Grand Rapids, who has lumps in his chest; and Joshua Smith of Chelsea, Kathleen Armstrong of Redford Township and Richard Herr of Jackson — three breast cancer survivors.

Fontella, a 63-year-old Vietnam veteran, wants more than confirmation. He wants compensation.

As a veteran, he can't sue the government, but he and two others asked Sen. Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee to co-sponsor a bill that would ensure hospital, medical and nursing home care for Camp Lejeune veterans and families.

Camp Lejeune is a Superfund site now — the federal government ordered the military to clean it up.

**■ CONTAMINATION ISSUES AFFECT MICHIGANDERS. 14A**

## METRO

# United by service — and cancer

Did Camp Lejeune water make Michiganders sick?

By MEGHA SATYANARAYANA  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

James Fontella has been on a crusade since the day a stranger called him.

"You're not going to believe this," Mike Partain, a 41-year-old breast cancer survivor in Florida told the Shelby Township man.

It was December 2008 and Fontella, 63, listened — he'd lost his right breast to cancer in 1998. Partain told him of a picture he'd seen of a bare-chested Fontella on the Internet, showing his mastectomy scar and his Marines jacket. Partain said there were others like them — men with breast cancer, which is 100 times less common in men than women.

There was one more link: Camp Lejeune in North Carolina.

On the base between the 1950s and 1980s, they drank and bathed in well water that was polluted with a chemical degreaser and a dry cleaning solvent that might be carcinogens — and two other chemicals, benzene and vinyl chloride, that definitely are. Camp Lejeune is a Superfund site now, listed for a hazardous waste cleanup.

Partain, the son of a Marine officer and a mother who was pregnant with him while they lived on the base, had more to say. He said the Marines contaminated some of the water, ignoring their own clean water regulations set in 1963, and they knew about it long before they closed off the wells. Fontella was crushed.



PATRICIA IZZO

James Fontella is a Marine Corps veteran and breast cancer survivor who spent time at Camp Lejeune, now a Superfund cleanup site.

"I have in the past finished all and every correspondence ... with a Semper Fi," he said of the Marines' pledge of Semper Fidelis — always faithful. "I don't do that any more and won't until the Marine Corps admits they made mistakes and takes care of the troops. I had a bumper sticker on the back window of my truck that said 'Once a Marine Always a Marine.' I've taken it down."

He is one of 3,346 Michiganders — former servicemen and family members — on a Marines registry of 143,825 people who will be used to study Camp Lejeune-related illnesses.

## Medical help sought

Fontella, Partain and another man — Jerry Emsinger of North Carolina whose daughter, conceived at Camp Lejeune, died of leukemia at age 9 — are trying to get elected officials to support a bill that would give them and their families medical and nursing home benefits for illnesses linked to the base. Many of them don't qualify for veterans health care because their illnesses are not combat-related. They also are seeking a congressional hearing on the issue.

Camp Lejeune housed some 1 million servicemen and family members during the 30-year stretch in question. The Navy, which runs the base, now confronts nearly 1,700 claims of wrongdoing from people across the country. Four lawsuits were filed; two were dismissed and two are pending, said Jen Zeldis, a spokeswoman for the Office of the Navy Judge Advocate General, the legal branch of the Navy.

Servicemen gave up their rights to sue the federal government when they enlisted, said Craig Kabatchnick, director of the veterans law program at the North Carolina Central University.

Documents that are available publicly point to two contaminated wells — one beside an off-base dry cleaner, the other contaminated by on-base activity and poor upkeep where men like Fontella lived.

One facility had a tank that once spilled 30,000 gallons of fuel. Even though a Navy lawyer once commented about it in a memo, the tank continued to leak 1,500 gallons each month for years. Many fuels contain benzene, which causes cancer.

## How to make the connection

Connecting illnesses to contaminated water will be a difficult task, said Devra Davis, an epidemiologist at the University of Pittsburgh. She is examining that connection for the group of 21 Camp Lejeune men who developed breast cancer, including Fontella. There may be other factors involved, she said, and the lack of an answer doesn't mean there is no link.

"Life is a mixture. When we do study people in the real world, it's very difficult to reach a conclusion that a given single chemical was involved, but the absence of a single definitive answer doesn't mean it wasn't involved," she said.

Capt. Brian Block, USMC spokesman, said they are awaiting the results of two studies, one that models the base's water supply and one that looks at health effects in babies. But the Marines commissioned another study through the National Research Council. This summer it concluded there is no way to find an association between illnesses and the water because the contamination was so long ago, and efforts to re-create the conditions for study would be inadequate.

This study has been blasted by other researchers as being faulty and for assessing the need to study only probable carcinogens, rather than all chemicals found in the water.

Some of the most ardent detractors of the NRC study are participating in other Camp Lejeune-related research for other federal agencies. Davis said the Veterans Affairs department has yet to comb its extensive electronic medical records system to see how many veterans like Fontella could be affected.

"It's ill-advised and unfair to say no more studies," said Davis, whose son is a Marine. "We owe it to the men and women in the Marines to take care of their health."

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