



News from the HomeFront

Spring 2023



Front-Line Mission for Peace Since 1969

Quaker House Addressing Environmental Injury from Military Participation

Wayne Finegar, Executive Director

“Yes to the Troops, No to the Wars.” Quaker House puts that into action everyday. Joanna talks in her article about the continuing challenges of domestic violence. And Steve reports that the GI Rights Network is seeing increased pressure to raise retention numbers that is effecting people seeking discharge. This work is the core of Quaker House until we have an end to wars and militarism. At the same time, military participants are facing new challenges and new concerns.

While Ukraine fills our media with violence and mayhem, gone is attention to the daily experience of the military participant, unless there is a flash-point. A year ago newspapers were reporting on suicides on Navy vessels, now there is silence. Despite a recent report showing cases of mold on military bases, the *New York Times* website only has articles from 2019 and 2020. Most days, the only mention of diseases from contaminated water or air on military bases comes from advertisements by lawyers seeking PACT Act clients.

I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s and remember the reports about Love Canal, Super Fund sites, and other areas of industrial contamination. In 1983 the movie *Silkwood* told us about a woman investigating workers exposure to radiation at a plant making fuel rods for a reactor. Then in 2000, *Erin Brokovich* taught people about water contaminants causing cancer. I don't remember big movies about people poisoned by their military participation.

Last summer I wrote a post for the Quaker House website noting that the Department of Defense was accepting applications for compensation for exposure to contaminated water at Camp Lejeune. As of the beginning of April, that post has received 77 comments. The vast majority of these were from former military members or their families asking if a disease or condition was related to their presence at Fort Bragg or another facility.

In February, the US Environmental Protection Agency proposed limits on the “forever chemicals” or PFAS at no more than 4 parts per trillion (ppt). In December of 2022, *Military Times* reported on 24 installations with water levels over 70 parts per trillion, including Fort Bragg (98 ppt). Fort Leavenworth in Kansas was found to have 649 ppt in 2016. It isn't clear how many would be over the new EPA standard of 4 ppt. It might be easier to count the number that don't exceed the new standard. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine listed people who were particularly at risk from PFAS contamination. They included workers at air fields, military bases, and incinerators.



Contamination continued on page 2

Contamination continued from page 1

It took levels of 25,000 ppt for a settlement at Camp Lejeune which already had 20,000 claims filed by early February. The government has estimated that it will spend over \$163 billion in just 10 years. If we assume those numbers would apply to 450 current US military facilities (and ignore all the past ones), it would cost the nation over \$73 trillion. As a comparison, all Social Security benefits cost the government an estimated \$1 trillion per year. These are numbers that are almost impossible for us to imagine, and they would cripple the government.

Neither the Pentagon nor the Veterans Administration have a history of advocating for current and past military participants, their families, and civilians suffering long-term disease and disability. To the contrary, past history says that they will fight accepting responsibility for these injuries. From 2007 (when the Disabled American Veterans started highlighting the issue) to 2020 the VA rejected nearly 80% of claims for injury due to burn pit exposures, and it took the recently passed PACT Act to remove the requirement of proving a relationship between exposure and injury. The price of the act is expected to be over \$300 billion over ten years separate from the Camp Lejeune claims.

54 years ago, Quaker House started in response to the immediate, urgent, needs of military participants suffering from their inability to participate in war and militarism. In the 2010s, we were ahead of many in addressing the harms of sexual assault, substance abuse, and domestic violence caused by military participation. Now the Pentagon has

special programs and criminal procedures that claim to be able to handle these issues.

Quaker House wants to extend our commitment to those affected in the military, whether participants themselves or as family members or civilians. We want to work with groups who have focused on the medical and environmental elements of contamination to address the damage done to participants by the simple act of being present on base, of drinking the water, or of breathing the air.

If you have knowledge of people who have had their health damaged or destroyed from their participation, please contact Quaker House. If you have ideas and energy to help us with this work, please contact Quaker House. As always, we rely on the wisdom and support of everyone who shares our commitment to serving those who have been injured by our nation's militarism.



Martin Luther King Jr. Peace Vigil in Fayetteville

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THANK YOU for helping us continue our mission!

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Are Recruiting Shortfalls Impacting Command Decisions?

Steve Woolford, GI Rights Counselor

The story is a familiar one: A Marine had been suffering from anxiety and depression, and no one was helping him. When his condition continued to decline, he left training without permission (called *unauthorized absence* in the Marine Corps). Two months later he called us about surrendering. We told him that normally this length of absence would signal to the command that he would never be a Marine they could rely on, and typically they would discharge people in his situation. In this case, when the Marine turned himself in, he was sent back to restart his training.

Another person called after his training had been interrupted by hospitalization for attempted suicide. At first he was told he would be separated, but suddenly he was given orders to restart training. Before he hung up, he put a friend on the phone. This friend had been hospitalized multiple times for suicide attempts. He too had just been told he was going back to try another round of training. He described a conversation with his sergeant. The sergeant said that he had already had chances to kill himself by now, so the fact that he hadn't completed the act showed that he was just trying to get attention. At one point, this same trainee was ordered to train with a rifle, even after protesting that he felt suicidal and didn't feel safe picking up a lethal weapon.

We are noticing more and more situations like these where the military is holding on longer to people who previously would have been discharged as unfit. Many of these cases involve trainees undergoing mental health struggles. It's evident that these trainees are not adapting to military life; however, instead of letting them go, the military recycles them for another term of training to see whether this time around, somehow they might graduate.

The reason may be explained by recent news stories that say military recruiting is

missing targets and will likely continue to struggle. According to NBC News on June 27, 2022:

"Every branch of the military is struggling to make its 2022 recruiting goals... 'This is the start of a long drought for military recruiting,' said Retired Lt. Gen. Thomas Spoehr of the Heritage Foundation, a think tank. He said the military has not had such a hard time signing recruits since 1973, the year the U.S. left Vietnam and the draft officially ended. Spoehr said he does not believe a revival of the draft is imminent, but, 2022 is the year we question the sustainability of the all-volunteer force...The pool of those eligible to join the military continues to shrink, with more young men and women than ever disqualified for obesity, drug use or criminal records. Last ... [May], Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville testified before Congress that only 23% of Americans ages 17-24 are qualified to serve without a waiver to join, down from 29% in recent years."

Regardless of whether the military can make its recruiting targets, it's very disturbing to hear the risks the military is currently taking with people's lives. As counselors, we offer support and explain to people how they can stay safe in these circumstances. We encourage them with information on



how they can keep bringing attention to their medical limitations in ways that normally lead to discharge. We make sure they have resources at their fingertips in case they go into crisis. We let them know they have not been forgotten, that someone on the outside is following their situation.

Some get impatient and decide to refuse to train. We warn them that refusing to train does put them at risk of punishment (for refusing an order). At the same time, we are honest that in the past, refusal to train often leads the military to give up on the trainee in question and to initiate discharge. We try to make sure each person makes their own safe, informed decision about how to deal with irrational circumstances. We also warn that discharges may take longer now than in the past, but they have our support as long as they need it.

It would be better if policy makers would decide to cut back the US military mission in order to accommodate the shortfall in troops instead of pressuring participants to stay in the military. Perhaps one day, no one will agree to fight, and all wars will end.



Ukraine War Protest at Market Square

For now, it's difficult to know how long this new normal will last and hard to think about what tragedies it might take for the military to rethink its current push for retention. We hope we can prevent at least some of those tragedies from occurring.

Fort Bragg Is Becoming Fort Liberty
on June 2, 2023
Base finally removing name of enslaver

Breaking Domestic Violence Silence

Joanna Nunez, Quaker House Counselor

I originally was planning to write an article about the fact that more military participants are joining later in life, and that is an important topic given to what we see as stressors and therapy needs. Then a relative sent me this article (www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2023/03/22/soldier-3-children-killed-in-mass-shooting-at-sergeant-majors-home/) about a shooting spree involving a military family that took place in South Carolina recently. This is not the first domestic incident involving guns, military participants, and the deaths of family members. In 2018, a good friend of mine witnessed this when his cousin and her two children were killed by their father, an active-duty participant. He then turned the gun on himself. When I was trying to find information on my friend's family, I typed into the search bar "service member kills family and self" and the name of their town. I was surprised to see that a family just a few towns over was suffering a similar fate after discovering that one of their deputies killed his 3 relatives, one of which was his child, and then himself.

Unfortunately, because I live in America, I feel almost desensitized when I hear or read about a mass shooting, as they seem to happen almost weekly. Given that the military is often seen as a microcosm of society, it was only a matter of time for violent domestic killings to start increasing

within the military community. What can be done about this? Fort Bragg's Garrison Commander, Col Wilcox attended Fayetteville's Domestic Violence Vigil in October of 2022. He encouraged victims to "break the silence" (the theme of the month) and that the Army would start by "demonstrating to soldiers and their families what healthy and loving relationships look like".

Victims of domestic violence have told us they often are afraid to break the silence. If their spouse's command doesn't respond to the allegations, they are putting themselves and their families at a greater risk by speaking out. Victims also worry that the military participant will be punished with a loss of rank and pay, which many can't afford.

Perhaps the military can demonstrate healthy relationships and look into ways that can get abusers help without punishing the family members. They also need to ensure the family's safety once abuse is reported. Their current protocol of placing the abuser in the barracks for 72 hours often just leaves the abuser angry and the family unprotected after three days.

While Quaker House can't protect our clients physically, we do provide a safe place for them to vent, talk, and express their emotions, while getting services and resources.

Help Quaker House Keep in Touch!



We are working to make use of as many of the available tools of communication as we can. But we find that we can't reach many of our supporters quickly because we don't have email addresses for them and they aren't connected to our social media feeds.

You can scan the QR Code to go directly to a sign-up form that will allow us to add your email address,

or go to tinyurl.com/3u26cmc9.



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