

‘WE DIDN’T KNOW’

Veterans of El Toro say their service had toxic consequences

BY GREG MELLEN

It’s called “Toxic El Toro.” Over the years, tens of thousands of servicemen were exposed to myriad dangerous chemicals that flowed through the former Marine Corps Air Station in Irvine. They grow into old age wondering at the afflictions they suffer that their friends and neighbors don’t face. They endure long-term ailments after their service. Many die without knowing of, or applying for, disability benefits due them.

The tragic legacy of El Toro doesn’t stop there. Its reputed sins are visited on the children and families of service members.

One of those Marines was Ray Alkofer. From 1951 to 1953 he worked in Hangar 296 on the base, described over the years as a kind of Ground Zero for toxic exposure and contamination. Like his compatriots, Ray was exposed to a number of hazardous substances.

Among the most notable and virulent of these was trichloroethylene. Also called TCE, the popular degreaser has been linked to numerous short and long-term maladies, ranging from neurological to liver and kidney damage and several forms of cancer, according to the Environmental Protection Agency and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

Although TCE has been at the heart of regulatory battles and personal and class action lawsuits, in 2019 the New York Times reported “as many as 2,200 facilities still use TCE to remove grease from metal parts, according to EPA estimates.”

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RAY ALKOFER DIED of a rare neuromuscular disease due to exposure to toxic chemicals.



Courtesy of Bill Alkofer

RAY ALKOFER stands outside the barracks at El Toro Marine Base in 1952. Alkofer served at the Marine Corps Air Station in El Toro from 1951 to 1953.

Military legacy: Veteran’s son shares health stories of former El Toro service members

BY BILL ALKOFER

When my father, Ray Alkofer, was dying from a rare neuromuscular disease attributed to his time as a Marine at the El Toro Marine Air Station, he began telling me stories, many about his experiences and the thousands of retired Marines who were ailing after their service time at the base. In the intervening years since his death in 2011, I began tracking down others who suffered ailments they connected to their time as Marines.

I thought I would have more time to collect their stories. But it turns out I have my own rare disease, a variant of ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease, and my time is running out.

Today, I only have the use of two fingers on my hands. But before I cease to be able to communicate, I wanted to share the stories of some of the Marines



BILL ALKOFER leans against his father’s tombstone during a visit on the Fourth of July 2020. Alkofer’s father died of a rare neuromuscular disease attributed to contact with a toxic chemical while serving in the Marine Corps in the 1950s. Alkofer is also dying of a rare neuromuscular ailment.

Courtesy of Bill Alkofer/Larry Biri

and family members I came across. I tell their stories as an object lesson to other retirees out there who may see something of themselves in these vignettes. If so, I encourage them to get in touch with the VA and

learn about the benefits for which they’re eligible.

WILLIAM MIMIAGA

Retired Marine Maj. William Mimiaga gained his “Monsoon” nickname because of the torrent

of activity that seems to surround him. Even at age 74, he exudes energy despite his numerous health problems.

Mimiaga is one of the tough-

See **Military**, page R5

Virtual worlds could play important role in the future of learning

BY BEN BRAZIL

Classrooms of the future could be held amid scenic mountain ranges, a coliseum or on the moon.

The possibilities are endless in a virtual world.

As cases of the coronavirus decline, schools are starting to reopen their campuses. But Dalton Salvo, a UC Irvine PhD candidate in English, believes remote learning will continue to evolve and play an important role in the future.

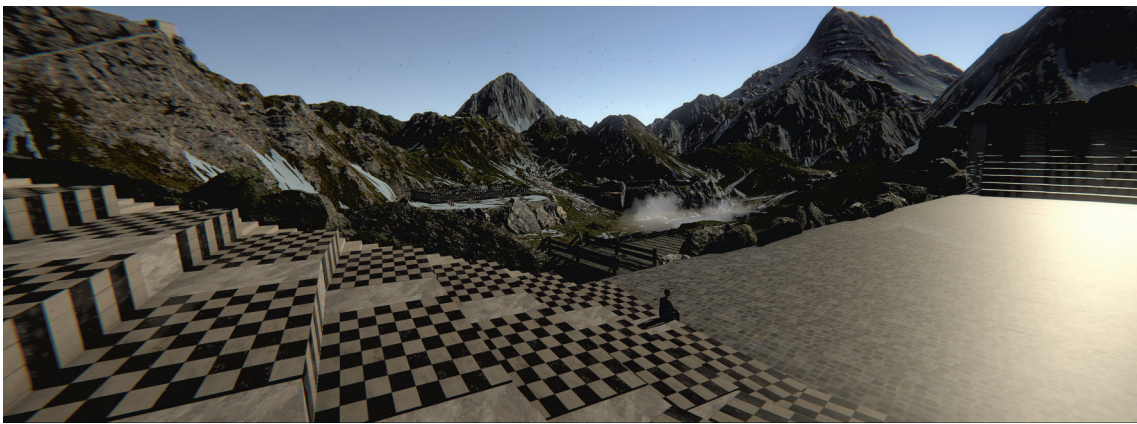
“I see this virtual platform as being a way to improve the possibilities and access for some of our population that may struggle

with just the good old-fashioned, in-person learning,” Salvo said.

For half a decade, Salvo has been studying how virtual environments immerse and engage users. When COVID-19 took hold last year, his work became all the more important as schools transitioned to remote learning.

Salvo is currently focusing on a virtual program called Breakroom, which was created by Sine Wave Entertainment and is similar to the popular game Second Life. The app is primarily marketed toward the business community on its website.

Salvo believes that virtual pro-



Courtesy of Dalton Salvo

See **Virtual**, page R4

VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS could be used for distance learning, says Dalton Salvo, a UC Irvine PhD candidate.

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ROIC



Ben Brazil

SEVERAL RVS are parked on Valencia Drive in Fullerton.

Fullerton to start enforcing parking laws where homeless live in RVs

BY BEN BRAZIL

Fullerton will begin enforcing parking restrictions on a street where several homeless people have been living in their recreational vehicles.

The City Council unanimously voted on Tuesday to implement the regulations on Valencia Drive between Raymond Avenue and State College Boulevard. The city had stopped enforcing the parking regulations due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Now homeless individuals who live on Valencia Drive and activists who have been helping them are concerned about where they will go.

Father Dennis Kriz, a Fullerton pastor and homeless advocate, said the homeless living on Valencia may be forced to move into nearby communities.

“Since the city and county have not been able to identify any places to direct the people to, either the RVs will end up staying where they are on Valencia

and continue to irritate the business owners there, or most of the RV dwellers will pick up and leave to go elsewhere, putting the burden of dealing with them on other nearby communities,” Kriz said. “As such, nothing will be solved until the city and county identify where these people can legally go.”

The RV parking on Valencia Drive has been a point of contention over the last several months.

In November, the City Council approved an ordinance that bans all RV parking on public and private streets without a special permit.

The city then delayed enforcement of the ordinance after Brooke Weitzman, an attorney who represents homeless people in Orange County, sent a demand letter in December telling the city to delay enforcement of the ordinance because it’s unconstitutional.

The parking regulations that were approved this week don’t include the RV ordinance. City Manager

Ken Domer said in an email that the city, which disputes Weitzman’s claim of unconstitutionality, will begin enforcing the RV ordinance by May 1.

He said the city will on Monday begin enforcing the parking regulations, which include three-hour commercial vehicle parking and two-hour noncommercial vehicle parking limitations, among other regulations.

Domer said the city distributed fliers notifying people of the parking regulations. Those fliers have referral information for homeless support services.

Domer also said his staff has been on Valencia almost every day to attempt to connect people with support services. The city is working with faith-based and homeless provider groups.

“We will always seek to offer assistance first to someone who is experiencing homelessness, which includes working with the faith-based groups,” Domer said. “The amount of out-

reach directed at Valencia this past month has been very extensive and has included Pathways of Hope, Wound Walk, CityNet, the Tri-Parish Council, County of Orange Behavioral Health, among others.”

At the City Council meeting, a few public speakers spoke out against the parking regulations.

“We can’t afford to get rent to live somewhere — I’m fighting for disability myself and I had a stroke,” said a man named James, who said he was homeless and living near Valencia Drive.

“My understanding is that you guys are just trying to pass the buck, but there’s no solutions being created. This is a group of people that once you kick us out, we’re homeless. I can’t afford to move five times a day and get ticketed hundreds of dollars a week. I don’t know what to do. I’m scared for my life, my livelihood. I don’t want to be homeless, and you guys just

See **Fullerton**, page R5

9th Circuit considers judge’s pandemic-related dismissal of cases

Appellate justices set aside the decision to free a suspect in gun and drug crimes.

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF

On paper, the judge’s order was clear: Jose Reyes, an undocumented immigrant accused of gun and drug crimes, is a danger to the community and should be in jail.

But in court this week, U.S. District Judge Cormac Carney emphasized he truly believes Reyes should be free from custody, and he questioned the propriety of a U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals mandate that led to his contradictory order.

“My job here is very limited. It’s just to make findings on flight risk and danger to the community,” Carney said during an in-person hearing on Monday. “I’ve already spoken that I think Mr. Reyes needs to be released.”

The judge’s unusual conflict continues his acrimonious relationship with the Central District of California’s pandemic-related ban on jury trials, which ends May 10 but still lingers for Carney as the 9th Circuit considers five criminal cases he dismissed because of it.

Appellate justices have yet to hear argument about Reyes’ case, but they quickly decided to set aside Carney’s dismissal in the mean-

time. They also ordered Carney to reconsider his decision to allow Reyes to leave jail, telling him to focus only on Reyes’ risk to the community and the chance that he might flee before trial.

That meant Carney could no longer consider his constitutional objections to the trial ban when deciding whether Reyes should stay in jail.

“Maybe they haven’t made their decision on whether Mr. Reyes should be released or not, but my belief is he should be released,” Carney said. “I think the Central District violated his constitutional right with that indefinite suspension, and you can’t continue to detain him or

you undermine that constitutional right.”

But without considering the constitutional violation, Carney determined Reyes’ criminal history, which includes felon convictions for immigration and drug crimes and the nature of his current charges warrant incarceration.

Reyes’ lawyer, Deputy Federal Public Defender Elena Sadowsky, argued for his release and said Reyes’ nephew would pay a \$15,000 bond.

And while Reyes entered the country illegally, he did so when he was 2 years old, and he has lived his entire life here since, Sadowsky wrote in court documents.

“During his nearly 18 months of incarceration so

far, Mr. Reyes has detoxed and reflected on his past struggles with substance abuse,” Sadowsky wrote. “Inspired by Bible study, he has repudiated his old way of life. Drug treatment would militate against the danger to the community.”

Assistant U.S. Attorney Ashley Fillmore, however, in court documents described Reyes as “a repeat felon, a drug dealer, a ghost gun dealer — including, in this case, an AR-15-style assault rifle with no serial number — and a repeat offender of this country’s immigration laws.”

She supported Carney’s decision Monday to keep him in jail, though the judge said he believes his previous stance supporting

his release will eventually be validated.

He referenced the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent overturning of California’s pandemic-related ban on in-home church services.

The decision reversed a ruling from the 9th Circuit, and Carney noted that some of the 9th judges who decided that case also ordered him to reconsider Reyes’ release.

He said the constitutional issues are similar.

“I think the Circuit is going to have to deal with that,” Carney said. “I don’t see how you can look at that indefinite suspension as constitutional.”

MEGHANN M. CUNIFF is a contributor to Times OC.

For Child Abuse Prevention Month, nonprofit offers virtual programs

The Children’s Bureau, a nonprofit working to prevent child abuse, is offering special virtual programs for families in Orange County in recognition of Child Abuse Prevention Month.

Previous events have included a virtual dinner party with chef Wolfgang Puck, Grammy winner Marc Cohn and Iron Chef Judge Billy Harris as a host to raise awareness of child abuse. Proceeds from the ticketed event went toward Children’s Bureau programs.

For the upcoming event on Monday at 5 p.m., the Corbin and Oak View Family Resource Centers are hosting a family-bonding session with games, activities and information on family resources available at the centers. The event is free to O.C. residents.

“Primary Prevention is about supporting the well-being of community, families and children. It is about a parent’s understanding of their child’s development. It’s making sure children strengthen their social and emotional skills,” said Senior Director of Prevention Jose Ramos in a statement.

“It’s about connecting families to community resources to live comfortably and connecting them to each other for support and encouragement and strengthening the overall



Courtesy of Children’s Bureau

THE CHILDREN’S BUREAU is offering special virtual programming during Child Abuse Prevention Month.

community.”

The agency, with locations in Orange and Los Angeles counties, is working remotely to provide parents with support, tools and resources in virtual settings.

Ongoing services include family resource centers, school readiness programs, parenting classes, support groups, mental health counseling, foster care, foster adoption and more.

The efforts reach more than 14,000 children and parents annually throughout Orange County, many of whom qualify as low-income.

IF YOU GO

What: Family Bonding event
Where: Online
When: Monday, 5 to 7 p.m.
Cost: Free
Information: To register, call Corbin Resource Center at (714) 480-3737 or Oak View Resource Center at (714) 842-4002

For those seeking services, local centers can be found through all4kids.org.
— From staff reports

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LGBTQ Center OC to mark five decades with a virtual ball

The LGBTQ Center OC is celebrating a milestone this year — a 50-year anniversary.

In 1971, the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center of Orange County was established as a volunteer-based 24/7 helpline just two years after the Stonewall riots in New York. As the gay and lesbian movement progressed, the center began to create programs and eventually incorporated as a nonprofit in 1975.

Over the years, the nonprofit adjusted its services to meet the needs of the LGBTQ community such as medical and counseling support for HIV/AIDS patients starting in the 1980s,

youth support in the 1990s and marriage equality and NOH8 campaigns in the 2000s.

“Together, we have made great strides over the last 50 years,” Peg Corley, executive director, said in a statement. “Our vision for the next 50 is to turn the tide, once and for all, against disparities and intolerance and usher in a new era of equity and understanding for all of Orange County. We are proud to be your partner in this all-important work.”

Corley said the LGBTQ Center OC is evolving again. More programming is focusing on meeting the needs and increasing the visibility of LGBTQ persons

of color, immigrants and seniors.

Immigration resources include legal representation, citizenship classes and advocacy for asylum seekers in ICE detention.

The center will celebrate virtually on Saturday through its annual fundraising gala, the Indigo Ball.

The ticketed event will include musical performances by Men Alive, an all-gay men's chorus, a live auction and speakers who have had a connection to the center over the decades.

Lorri L. Jean, Los Angeles LGBTQ Center CEO, and Dr. Christopher Ried, Orange County Health Care Agency medical director of

IF YOU GO

What: Indigo Ball
Where: Online
When: Saturday at 7 p.m.
Cost: \$50 to \$350
Information: lgbtqcenteroc.org/indigoball

HIV/STD services, will also be celebrated as honorees.

Tickets come at two price points — \$50 Golden tickets come with a 50th-anniversary lapel pin while \$350 Weekend Getaway tickets come with a one-night stay and dinner for two at the Hyatt Regency in Newport Beach.

— From staff reports



Courtesy of LGBTQ Center OC

A GROUP REPRESENTING the LGBTQ Center OC made its way to Washington, D.C., on April 25, 1993, for the National March on Washington for Gay Rights.

TOXIC

Continued from page R1

Ray Alkofer said when he served there was virtually no consideration to handling of the chemical or wearing protective gear.

“We washed the planes and swabbed the decks with that stuff,” Ray told his son Bill Alkofer, of the industrial solvent dispensed in 55-gallon drums.

“Sometimes we slept in that hangar. We didn’t know we were being exposed. A lot of my best buddies got sick. A lot of them died.”

Ray died in 2011 of a rare neuromuscular disease — Multiple System Atrophy — which left him in his final days gasping in a wheelchair and feeling “completely useless.”

Since the early 2000s, studies and clinical observations noted “patients with multiple system atrophy (MSA) suggested an associated (sic) with occupational exposure to TCE,” according to a 2008 study by Newcastle University.

Bill Alkofer, Ray’s oldest son, says about his dad, “In his eyes you could see the fear and uncertainty as he faced his inevitable demise.”

Now the ghosts of El



Courtesy of Bill Alkofer

LAURA ALKOFER assists her husband, Ray, with grooming as he neared the end of his life in 2011 of Multiple System Atrophy.

Toro stalk Bill, who faces a similar and bleak outlook.

Bill is a longtime award-winning photojournalist in Southern California and a Long Beach resident. He was diagnosed in early 2019 with his own rare neuromuscular disease, a variant of ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease) that shares striking similarities to Ray’s disease and potential genetic links.

Bill’s disease, which has no known treatment, has a life expectancy of three to five years from diagnosis. He’s 59.

Both the father’s and son’s diseases are caused by mutations to the same gene. Experiments have

shown links between multiple systems atrophy and ALS, technically, hexanucleotide repeat expansions of the C9orf72 gene. They can be shared by family members, according to a 2013 study printed in JAMA Neurology.

Bill is not the only one of Ray’s children with health issues. His sister, Mary Ramsey, 62, suffers from a heart valve deficiency and has undergone two surgeries. Studies suggest there may be a link between parents exposed to TCE and heart disease among their children. Both Mary and Bill were born with heart murmurs.

It will never be known

whether Bill inherited the mutated gene from his dad or if it was specifically caused by TCE. However, he admits to a “cold curiosity.” Science may be years away from a solution and Bill likely won’t live to see it.

His plea is for Marines and their families to make sure they receive all the benefits to which they are entitled.

BATTLING THE VA

For many Marines it is hard to come to grips with the idea that a service they devoted their lives to can be so lacking in empathy once they retire.

Ray, who was originally misdiagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, began experiencing symptoms in 2008. While Ray battled the decline of his health, his wife, Laura Alkofer, fought the VA to get benefits while caring for her dying husband.

Ray always extolled what the Marine Corps did for him as a young man: provided a sense of community and brotherhood. He was reluctant to admit what he believed it did to him: left him crippled, his body withering as his legs became useless and his lungs fought a desperate and futile battle to keep him alive.

Laura waged a two-year almost daily battle with Veterans Affairs, before finally securing full disability and survivor benefits.

The VA, after initially denying her claim, reconsidered and offered what it called a “100% evaluation” — or full benefits — writing, “This action represents a full grant of benefits site on appeal as service connection for MSA with loss of both feet has been established.”

Ray died six months after the benefits were approved at age 81.

“I am sure he took comfort to know mom would be taken care of,” Bill said.

Laura said she was the first person to get full disability benefits specifically for MSA caused by exposure to TCE. She has since become a VA benefits advocate. Her battle cry is “You are foolish if you don’t apply for benefits. You have been made to suffer. You deserve compensation.”

Telling the story of Ray and the importance of fighting for benefits has been on Bill’s bucket list.

For many, a bucket list may include adventures or luxury stays at exotic locales. Bill’s goal is to help others. Like telling vets about what they were exposed to and to learn about their options. Kicking over that “pail on the

trail,” as Bill calls it, has become all the more immediate as his own health fails.

“If my family’s story can encourage one family to apply for the benefits due them, it will help me rest easier,” he said.

Another retired Marine from Long Beach is Maj. William “Monsoon” Mimiaga. He suffered what he called “cluster headaches” that would bring him to his knees during two stints at El Toro.

Since retiring, Mimiaga has had a litany of health ailments, including breast cancer that required a double mastectomy. He has also suffered from heart failure, prostate issues and PTSD. He said he visits the Long Beach VA eight to 12 times per month for treatments.

However, he said his battle with the VA to receive disability was almost as difficult as fighting his illnesses.

“It’s always a struggle to get your benefits from the VA. You need grit. The VA’s philosophy is ‘deny, deny, deny,’ until they die,” Mimiaga said. “But no matter how hard it is you’ve got to keep at it. Because if you should pass away, your widow and the people you leave behind should be taken care of.”

Mimiaga’s quest for disability was denied five times before he was able to get 70% disability, and it wasn’t until 2019 that he received full disability.

Bill Alkofer, describing his own worsening health, says, “My arms don’t work and I’m down to two fingers on my hands. My legs are failing and I’ve had three falls on stairs. I live in dread fear that the next fall will kill me.”

Bill recently had to sell his car, needs assistance to leave his apartment and is increasingly feeling trapped.

“But Dad would probably tell me to never, never, never give up,” he says. “That pail is still on the trail.”

Bill will soon have to leave his home in Long Beach.

“When the ground thaws, I will be moving back to the Midwest, where my sister can provide care like my mom did for my dad,” he says.

HANGAR 296

The hazards of El Toro are an open secret. The EPA listed El Toro as a Superfund site in 1990. The agency’s website says: “A total of 25 potentially contaminated areas were identified on the Air Station.”

Much of the site has been cleared, although

“about 600 acres of additional soil cleanup still needs to be completed,” according to Julia Giar-moleo, a spokesperson for the EPA.

Hangar 296 is listed as the primary source of contamination in groundwater, which was “the principal threat at the site,” according to the EPA.

Marines who served at El Toro said being around TCE irritated their eyes, noses and throats and caused difficulty breathing and nausea.

Part of the El Toro base was converted to a recreation complex known as Orange County Great Park. There is a tethered balloon ride in the park from which Hangar 296 can be seen. The 200,000-square-foot facility is easily identified by the painted sign that reads “Raider Country.” According to Bill, a balloon operator he met told him on most weekends retired Marines take the ride to look at the hangar.

“Every time I see a retired El Toro Marine, I wonder if they’re sick like my dad was,” Bill says. “Often we engage in conversation. When I ask them ‘How’s your health?’ They’ll wonder how I know they’re sick. Then they rattle off a litany of diseases”

MILITARY FUNERAL

As his dad’s health began failing in 2008, Bill started shooting a documentary. He remembers this interaction.

“On the Fourth of July in 2010 I asked how he was feeling. ‘I’d like to have my life back,’ he said. What seemed to bother this North Dakota farm boy most is that he couldn’t keep working. He told me, ‘I’m not so old that I wouldn’t be able to do some compensating work if I hadn’t been poisoned. I love the Marine Corps. I’m proud to have served in the Marine Corps. But I had no idea that I was being poisoned. I thought I was safe on the base. I took for granted that everything was safe. It wasn’t.’”

Ray Alkofer had a full military funeral: a casket draped with a flag, taps and a rifle salute.

“When my mother, sister and I visited Dad’s gravesite this past Fourth of July,” Bill says, “I was fatigued from my own disease and reclined against the family headstone and saw my name carved in the granite. We had just added a plaque to the tombstone. It’s the logo of the United States Marine Corps.”

GREG MELLEN is a contributor to TimesOC.

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VIRTUAL

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grams like Breakroom improve on a few issues with remote learning, including lack of participation and attentiveness.

Salvo, who teaches classes at UC Irvine, pointed out that not all students may be comfortable with in-person schooling. This may include people living with disabilities or who have issues traveling to campus.

“Everybody’s more hesitant, less participatory, and it’s far more difficult to build that comfortable environment where you can just shoot ideas off of one another,” Salvo said of current remote learning.

“A primary obstacle also is just lack of attention. I find it hard to stare at video

conferences and stay focused all day long. I personally don’t require my students to use their webcams.

“So it’s inevitable, but all of a sudden, you end class and there’s like two or three students that just checked out, they walked away and left their Zoom running.”

Salvo said those issues may be resolved with a more immersive virtual environment.

In Breakroom, users create an avatar and use it to navigate through various virtual worlds.

Salvo said the simple task of moving an avatar through the virtual space could make students more attentive.

“If you leverage the navigable possibilities of a virtual environment, you use a larger space and you’re not limited to a classroom any-

more,” he said.

A class could start in a virtual auditorium, and students would need to move their avatar into independent breakout rooms.

“You can use very subtle elements of the space itself, and as long as you design your teaching strategies accordingly, you can actually necessitate somewhat of a more engaged participation from the students by building new mechanisms that actually require them to do a few things periodically throughout the duration of that class,” Salvo said.

Salvo is currently creating a virtual center for a conference in May.

He’s also hoping to eventually design an entire class in Breakroom for his dissertation.

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MILITARY

Continued from page R1

est Marines I have met. “Monsoon” spent 31 years in the Corps, entering as an 18-year-old in 1964. He did two infantry tours in Vietnam and served in the Gulf War. He was stationed at El Toro from 1968-70 and again in 1990-93.

During his first stint, he began to suffer from cluster headaches. He says the pains only went away when he left El Toro. When he returned in 1990, so did the headaches. They would last sometimes for five days.

“The world was spinning. The pain brought me to my knees and with the pain came nausea and vomiting,” he said.

Mimiaga also worked in Hangar 296 in the combat readiness storage program. There, he said, copious amounts of TCE degreaser were used on aircraft and vehicles. Like most of his fellow Marines, Mimiaga never wore protective clothing, gloves or masks.

Many times large amounts of the solvent were simply dumped into the ground.

“They’re never going to get rid of that base contamination,” Mimiaga said. “It’s a volcano that never disappears. It remains there slowly rumbling.”

In 2000, “Monsoon” was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer, which spread into his lymph nodes and later required a double mastectomy.

He has also battled lung cancer, heart failure, prostate issues and PTSD. He is now cancer free.

After Mimiaga retired from the Marine Corps and settled in Costa Mesa, he began a 20-year teaching career in Long Beach, earning a California state teacher of the year award in 2006.

Mimiaga isn’t a fan of plans to build a veteran cemetery at the former El Toro base.

“Why would I want to be buried in the ground with the toxins that killed me in the first place?” he asked. “Cremate my remains and scatter them in the sea. I’ll travel with the tide so I can visit places I’ve never visited before,”

Despite all his ailments and struggles with the VA, Mimiaga said given the choice to do it all over again, he’d be a Marine.

“People seem surprised by that. But we’re a band of brothers — we’re family. There’s a bonding — a camaraderie. We continue to march long after we’ve dropped our packs,” he said. “We’ve shared the same experience, the same emotions. We’ll march on in the same direction. Oorah



Photos courtesy of Bill Alkofer

RETIRED MARINE CORPS Maj. William Mimiaga outside the former Hangar 296 at El Toro Marine base where he was exposed to trichloroethylene. Mimiaga has suffered from breast cancer, lung cancer, heart failure, prostate issues and PTSD.

and Semper Fi.”

ROBERT O'DOWD

Robert O’Dowd, 78, from Philadelphia, has an encyclopedic knowledge about the contamination at the former base. His Facebook page has become a kind of clearinghouse of information and a virtual town square discussion space for those who served or who say they were affected by El Toro. He is also the author of “A Few Good Men, Too Many Chemicals,” a 450-page book in its second printing.

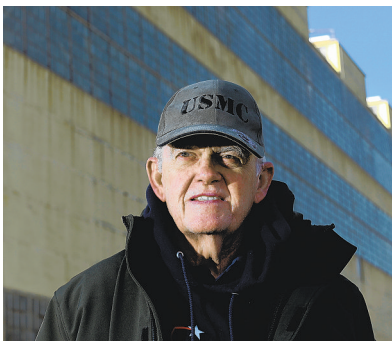
O’Dowd was stationed at El Toro in 1963-64, after joining the Corps as a 19-year-old in 1962. He served overseas during the Vietnam War. He said he was exposed to TCE when he worked and sometimes slept in Hangar 296.

O’Dowd said he was also exposed to radium 226, a highly radioactive element.

O’Dowd said Marines used radium-rich luminescent paint on all aircraft instrument panels to allow pilots to fly at night without electric light. Leftover paint, he said, was dumped into the wastewater treatment system.

O’Dowd has suffered from a long list of maladies he attributes to his exposure to toxic chemicals. He’s had two bouts with bladder cancer, prostate cancer, migraines, gastroesophageal reflux, a brain vessel disease, allergies, atrial fibrillation, peripheral neuropathy, hyperprolactinemia, foot drop and impaired cognitive function.

After taking on the VA for nine years, he finally received 100% disability due



ROBERT O'DOWD

was stationed at El Toro from 1963 to 1964. He was exposed to TCE while working in Hangar 296. After taking on the VA for nine years, he finally received 100% disability.

FULLERTON

Continued from page R2

made it illegal to be homeless in Fullerton.”

Resident Cary Johnson said there are several RVs parked in front of his condominium complex.

“I understand this is not meant to disparage or be disrespectful of any of the other citizens here speaking and promoting their side, but there is lots of trash,” Johnson said. “My wife and I are willing to give funds, time, whatever to help support all citizens, whether they’re unhoused or not. But there has to be a solution. I would just ask you to find a solution for that and we’re willing to be part of that solution. But currently it’s just kind of untenable.”

At the meeting, Councilman Ahmad Zahra said voting to enforce the parking regulations was a difficult decision to make. He said the nonprofits have done as much as they could.

“Unfortunately, we can’t help everyone, and we hope we could, but that’s oftentimes not the case,” Zahra said. “But as a governing body, we have to strike also a balance. And we also have to look at the other side, which is our other residents who are also a part of this equation. And so I still encourage everybody who is in an RV or motorhome to really seek out our services.”

Earlier this month, the city sent Weitzman’s firm, Elder Law and Disability Rights (ELDR) Center, a letter stating that the RV ordinance is constitutional, but the city will be making a few minor revisions to the ordinance. Domer said the

city will slightly change the definition of RV and will make more clear the guidelines the patrol and parking enforcement use prior to issuing a citation.

Weitzman’s demand letter stated that “Fullerton seeks to criminalize merely parking or stopping on public or private property any vehicle capable of human habitation.”

Domer said the RV definition in the ordinance will be changed from “any vehicle or trailer which is capable of human habitation ...” to “any vehicle or trailer which is designed or equipped for human habitation ...”

Weitzman said her firm hasn’t formally responded to the city’s letter, but it doesn’t change its stance. She said her firm may file a lawsuit if the city begins enforcing the RV ordinance.

“Nothing in their letter changes any of those facts, that a law that allows the immediate towing and targets all drivers of probably all vehicles, but at a minimum all RVs who park at any time, for any reason, anywhere in the city, is clearly unconstitutional,” Weitzman said.

Weitzman did say that the parking regulations that were approved this week are harmful to homeless people, but they are not the law that her firm is currently in dispute with the city about.

“Those are things that they did already have, either in place or in the works, for things that apply the same to everyone,” Weitzman said of the parking regulations. “And they don’t ban people from being in the city.”

Kriz believes that the city

should renew its safe parking program for the people living out of their RVs and cars. Fullerton was the first Orange County city to have a safe parking program, which ended a few months ago. The program provided a safe parking lot for homeless people living out of their cars, but the program came to an end after it ran out of funding.

Kriz’s church, St. Philip Benizi Church, is part of the Fullerton Tri-Parish Homelessness Collaborative, which advocated for the safe parking program. The faith group has also worked with the city to connect the homeless people on Valencia with homeless services.

Both Kriz and Weitzman have pointed out, like many other homeless advocates, that homeless people rightfully resist going to shelters, which have faced COVID-19 outbreaks and an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit for sexual harassment and poor conditions.

Domer said the city will not be considering another safe parking program but would partner on a regional response.

“The RV dwellers all have our cards [and cellphone numbers],” Kriz said of him and his fellow activists. “We will be able to remain in contact with them wherever they go and will continue to advocate for some place for them to legally park and exist. The city has maintained that only in Fullerton has enforcement been a problem, we believe by scattering the RVs across the county, this will come to be seen as a countywide problem.”

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visit to the doctors the heartbeat grew slower.”

Brinkley eventually lost the baby.

Brinkley became pregnant for the fourth time in 1995 while she was living on the base but soon thereafter moved to Missouri.

The baby was born with a fever and immediately put on antibiotics. At 18 months, the girl developed a heart murmur. Now 24, she battles with fibromyalgia, depression, high blood pressure, diabetes and a thyroid disease.

Brinkley’s own health deteriorated to the point that she went on disability at age 40. She now suffers from migraines, pancreatitis, a bile duct disease, retroperitoneal fibrosis, blood clots, a ruptured spleen and heart problems. Her health issues send Brinkley to medical appointments about eight times a month.

“I felt so angry and useless,” she said. She also feels shame that

down by her health problems.

“Every day I feel like I’m battling COVID. Ten to 15 days a month I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck. I don’t see my life ever improving. My pancreas is failing, I have liver disease and my kidneys are working at 1%,” she said.

She is also contemplating her mortality.

“I feel comfortable coming to grips that this might be the end,” she said. “I’ve made my peace — several times. When it happens, it happens.”

Even after all she’s been through, Brinkley understands why Marines are reluctant to talk about the toxins at the El Toro base.

“As a military spouse, I understood the loyalty Marines feel toward the Corps. You are a family and you’ll deny any wrongdoing,” Brinkley said, adding after a long pause. “Until you’re the one with cancer or a rare neurological disease or ALS.”



Courtesy of Bill Alkofer/Whitney Curtis

SHERRI BRINKLEY stands for a portrait last year outside her home in Park Hills, Mo. Brinkley lived with her husband and children at Marine Corps Air Station El Toro in the early 1990s.

her children bear what she calls the legacy of El Toro.

“I feel guilty that I exposed my children to all of those toxins. Some days I feel resentful, some days I feel guilty and sometimes I want to scream and yell,” she said.

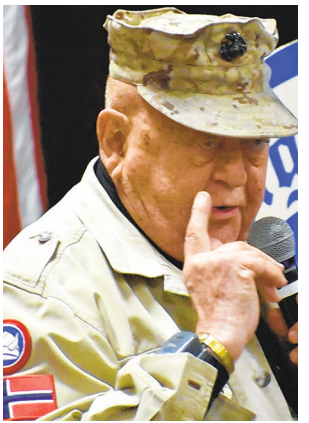
She also recalls during the holidays when Santa would visit Hangar 296. He’d toss candy to the kids and they would scramble across the floor to pick it up.

Nowadays, she feels worn

JOHN ULDRICH

John Uldrich was one of several retired Marines who encouraged my mom to fight for disability benefits for my father. It turns out Uldrich lived in Minneapolis just across the Mississippi River from my home in St. Paul at the time. I’d cross over the bridge and have bagels and coffee with Uldrich every once in a while.

He’d served at El Toro from 1957 to 1958. My mom met him in a discus-



JOHN ULDRICH served at El Toro from 1957 to 1958. TCE was responsible for several illnesses. Uldrich died in January 2019 at the age of 83.

sion group in 2008.

Uldrich and I didn’t talk about the Marine Corps that often. We spent a lot of time bird watching. But when we did talk about the Marines, Uldrich always used the adjective “beloved.”

Uldrich was exposed to TCE while servicing F9 jets in Hangar 296.

“TCE was used in great abundance as the final stage degreaser,” he said. “When the crews were done, the excess TCE was squeezed out of the hangar and directly onto the ground.”

The chemicals made their way into the base water supply, creating a toxic plume.

“I not only bathed and drank that water but swam in it as well,” he said. “I was a member of the El Toro Bulldogs Swim Team.”

He recalls the water he drank and bathed in as sickly sweet with a burning taste.

He believes his exposure to TCE and other toxins were responsible for prostate cancer, an enlarged heart, skin cancer, eye diseases and several other illnesses. Uldrich told me that he fought the VA for nearly a dozen years before finally getting disability and a settlement.

Uldrich died in January 2019 at the age of 83.

BILL ALKOFE is a photojournalist living in Long Beach.

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