

US Navy punishes family that revealed Flint water poisoning

By Zac Corrigan
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Since the time her four children started losing their hair and breaking out in rashes in late 2014, LeeAnne Walters has played a central role in exposing the systematic poisoning of the water supply in Flint, Michigan. This week, Walters has publicly revealed for the first time that her husband, a 17-year veteran in the US Navy, has endured months of daily humiliation, threats, and punishment at work in an effort to silence her.

“It has been heart wrenching to watch them try to destroy my husband on a daily basis,” LeeAnne told the WWS. “Never in a million years did I think we’d be fighting the Navy for our livelihoods after fighting for our lives in Flint.”

Citing the Whistleblower Protection Act, Dennis Walters requested permission, on November 22, to apply for a transfer from his workplace at Naval Base Norfolk, in Virginia, where the continuous mistreatment has been meted out.

In April 2014, as part of a complex and far-reaching plan to monetize the assets of both Detroit and Flint, Democratic and Republican party officials and regulatory bodies—at the city, and state and federal levels—conspired to switch Flint’s water source from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the notoriously polluted Flint River.

After decades of flaunting regulations by General Motors (GM) and other corporations, the river water is so corrosive that after the switch, it damaged parts produced in GM’s Flint Engine Plant. The untreated corrosive water piped through the entire city’s water infrastructure for another year after GM returned to the Detroit-supplied source of treated water caused toxic amounts of lead to be leached into the homes of 100,000 Flint residents, resulting in a massive public health crisis that continues to this day.

LeeAnne and Dennis Walters played a pivotal role in revealing to the world the scale and scope of the poisoning by initiating independent testing of the city’s water. Even though the Walters family had to move from Flint to Virginia after Dennis was stationed there in late 2015, LeeAnne continued to travel to her home in Flint each month. She often drives with a team of volunteers to oversee the testing of hundreds of homes in Flint for lead and chlorine levels in residents’ tap water.

She also monitors the efforts of both state and federal officials to bring the water supply into legal compliance. Close to three years after the switch to the Flint River, and 14 months after the order to return to Flint’s original source, the water is still too toxic for drinking, cooking, brushing one’s teeth, and many residents still complain of hair, skin and lung ailments when bathing in it.

LeeAnne testified, with Dennis at her side, at a hearing before Michigan state legislators in March, 2016, presenting a detailed chronology of events in Flint leading to the uncovering of the toxic nature of the water. “That’s when things took a turn for the worse,” LeeAnne recalls. The Navy, she said, “basically put a gag order on Dennis. The Master Chief told him he couldn’t be involved in Flint or talk to the media, because it was ‘too political.’ We have it in writing—they said it had the potential to demean and discredit the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], even though the EPA was funding our testing!”

“Dennis adhered to this,” says LeeAnne, but the Navy wanted to silence her, as well. “They told him that he needed to ‘get me under control,’” she said, explaining that Dennis’ superiors began to demean and humiliate him on a daily basis. “Because I live in Flint for two weeks out of each month, to do the testing, they

were saying to him, ‘What kind of mother would leave her family like that? Her role as a military wife is to support you, not to be a crusader.’ They even told him that it wouldn’t be long before I left him for some celebrity or millionaire,” that she would supposedly meet through her work in Flint.

LeeAnne said Dennis endured this while being made to work 12 hours a day, six days a week, in unusual shifts which required him to sleep on his office floor. “They told him that [my own work in] Flint seemed to be a problem, that it was keeping him from focusing on work. They even ordered my husband to do ‘voluntary’ therapy for seven sessions, otherwise they would involuntarily lock him up in a psych ward at a mental hospital for eight days. That would ruin his career,” she said. “They told him they would force him into a ‘hardship discharge,’ which would make him lose his retirement benefits.”

She added, “Eventually, I called the ombudsman, but that only made things worse.” Dennis was repeatedly denied leave, denied opportunities to receive training which could advance his career, and stripped of qualifications that allowed him to perform job duties like teaching classes or being a line coach on the gun range, she said.

In May, Dr. Marc Edwards, the scientist from Virginia Tech who tested the Walters water in Flint, tested the water in the family’s military housing in Virginia. The results showed that its lead level was at 16.6 parts per billion. Like the water in Flint, this was above “action level” set by the EPA. LeeAnne says that when she reported the results to the Navy, instead of addressing the problem, the punitive conditions against Dennis were once again escalated. He was charged with “failure to report” for duty, a serious offense that can result in jail time. “But when he asked for time off to find a lawyer in July, the charge was magically dropped,” LeeAnne said.

These revelations underscore the conspiratorial nature of the Flint water poisoning and its coverup. Involved are not only private financial interests, but the City of Flint, the State of Michigan, the Federal government, and, as has now been revealed, even the US military, which has a long history of using such intimidation—and much worse—against whistleblowers.

There are of course the contemporary cases of Manning, Assange, and Snowden.

It isn’t just military and intelligence whistleblowers that are attacked by government bodies. The 2001–2005 lead-in-water crisis in Washington DC was prolonged for years because high-placed health officials fired several whistleblowers in the department who tried to make the danger public. It was the independent intervention of Edwards that eventually revealed the source of the lead contamination and forced local and federal agencies to finally address the problem.

Regarding the campaign against her family, LeeAnne said: “I want to help people in Flint. That’s my passion. It’s my community. But there’s only so much of me, and in a way [the Navy] has diverted some of my attention from what I’m trying to accomplish in Flint. But as far as getting me to stop, I’m not going to bow down to bullies.

“This is why people don’t whistleblow, because this is what happens. My biggest fear is that others will have to go through what we’ve gone through.”

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