

Landlords reap profits from dilapidated US military housing tainted with lead, mold, brown tapwater

By Zaida Green
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Mushrooms sprouting from carpets, collapsed ceilings, peeling lead paint, tapwater as brown as tea—these are a few of the health hazards assailing soldiers’ families across the US, Reuters investigations show.

The private military housing industry, touted by billionaire real estate mogul John Picerne as “recession-resistant,” brings property developers some \$4 billion annually in rent payments paid by the federal government via direct deposit. These fifty-year leases, which the Pentagon deems “confidential business transactions,” also funnel undisclosed hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars of federal funds in the pockets of contractors through construction, development, and management fees.

Picerne’s Corvias and other companies have their fingers in more than just military housing. Whilst tenants suffer collapsed ceilings, chipping lead paint, mold, brown tapwater, rotted roofing, wasp infestations, and rodent faeces in children’s bedrooms, the contractors’ ultrarich clientele—and the landlords themselves—enjoy vacation mansions furnished with bespoke gilded chandeliers, crystalware for crimson banquet halls designed to seat dozens, and taxidermied pythons mounted on 20-foot vaulted ceilings.

“I bet he doesn’t have mold growing in those mansions,” commented Leigh Tuttle, wife of an Army major, on the multimillion-dollar estates owned by Picerne. The Tuttle moved into a renovated 1980s duplex on Fort Polk, Louisiana that has left their five-year-old son dependent on nebuliser treatments even after moving off-site. Corvias told her that the mold blooms on the floors and the air ducts were “just dust.” After testing confirmed that the “dust” was, in fact, mold, Corvias replaced the carpets but didn’t clean the air ducts.

In Camp Pendleton, California, the family of Marine Corporal Matt Limon took out a \$4,000 loan in order to move from the rodent-infested duplex managed by Lincoln Military Housing, which controls most of the 7,900 housing

units on base. Matt’s wife, Sharon, told Reuters that their two-year-old son “doesn’t say very many words, but ‘mouse poop’ is one of them. I would pick him up out of bed in the morning and he’d have mouse poop stuck to his leg.” Hordes of mice left trails of excrement across the carpet and chewed through food containers in the pantry. The traps set by Lincoln were ineffective. Neighbours told the family about the rodent infestations in their own homes. After the Limons left, Lincoln sent the family a \$1,084 bill to replace the carpet, blaming a stain on their puppy.

Former Marine Corps Sergeant Ethan Andrews, whose family also moved off Camp Pendleton housing, escaped the \$3,000 penalty imposed by their lease—through the arduous process of discharge. The Andrews described their home as smelling “like a sewer”; mushrooms sprouted from sopping carpets (which a Lincoln employee described as “totally normal”) which their toddler learned to walk across in rubber boots.

When water burst through the ceiling and flooded the living room, Lincoln blamed a floor puddle on the family dog. And as for the black mold under the baseboards: “They told us it was glue,” recounted Stephanie, Ethan’s wife. Her husband had planned to serve out the rest of his service term as a Marine, but feared for his son’s health, and made the decision to evacuate from the house as soon as possible. His change in military status exempted him from the \$3,000 penalty fee which would’ve driven his family into bankruptcy.

Philip Rizzo, Lincoln’s Vice President of Operations, told Reuters that Lincoln had offered the Limons in June to drop the carpet bill if the family signed a non-disclosure agreement. “Mrs Limon was still going on Facebook [to disclose housing conditions in Camp Pendleton]... And we said, ‘that has to stop.’”

Contractors strive to buy the silence of their tenants, offering “clemency” and “debt forgiveness” in exchange for the signing of non-disclosure agreements. The family of

Army Colonel J. Cale Brown, whose developmentally disabled eight-year-old son JC was exposed to lead as an infant in Fort Benning, Georgia, ceased all communication with Reuters last January as part of the settlement of their lawsuit against contractor Villages of Benning. His wife Darlena redacted all references to Villages of Benning from a Facebook post and retitled it “Darlena’s Story (the silenced version).”

Other soldiers’ families are, from the beginning, reluctant to come forward to either the public or base command with safety concerns. State tenant protection laws are often impossible to enforce on military bases as civilian inspectors have no authority to go on base, and laws that allow tenants to withhold rent payments for unsafe housing are dead letters as the federal government directly deposits soldiers’ housing stipends into contractors’ coffers. Military medical staff cannot order mold or lead testing on property under private management. Many of the agreements drawn up between the property management companies and the military leave all but the highest echelons of base command powerless to intervene. Military housing liaison staff don’t “have enforcement powers over the business agreement,” explained Camp Pendleton spokesman Carl B. Redding Jr.

“Something became obvious to me as I worked there,” retired EPA inspector William Spain told Reuters. “You and your family cannot make trouble for base command.” Thirty of the over one hundred families interviewed by Reuters expressed the fear that publicly identifying themselves would incur retaliation against soldiers’ careers.

Hidden as they may be, the conditions of filth and disrepair endured by these families are rife throughout bases in the US. Military records obtained by Reuters under the Freedom of Information Act showed more than 1,100 soldiers’ children throughout the country tested high blood-lead levels; two of the Army bases which sourced the records have violated state law by not reporting the results to their respective states. Lincoln acknowledged that it responded to 3,000 mold complaints in 2017 alone, equivalent to 1 for every 12 homes it runs. One Facebook group for members in unsafe military housing has garnered over 1,700 members at the time of writing.

The Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI), signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996, was the culmination of decades of bipartisan austerity policies which left so many of the 300,000 on-base homes in disrepair that the Department of Defense (DoD) warned Congress that further neglect would “run the risk of collapsing the force.” Clinton also signed legislation that same year ending guaranteed federal welfare assistance to the poor, imposing a five-year lifetime limits on benefits through the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

Dilapidated housing persisted through both the Bush and Obama administrations: a 2005 Army environmental study reported that 75 percent of its 90,000 homes failed to meet quality and safety standards. In 2016, the DoD Inspector General found “pervasive” health and safety deficiencies in military housing, including electrical and fire hazards, lead-based paint, and “unmitigated mold growth.” The Pentagon’s official response to that report was that that federal intervention would “unnecessarily increase costs” and “impose more government intrusion into a private business enterprise.”

These latest revelations, as with the fearfully suppressed report on perfluoroalkyl contamination of military bases, referred to as a “public relations nightmare” by one White House aide in a leaked email and finally published by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry in June, are cause for zero concern within the Trump administration and the American political establishment as a whole. The property developers indicted by Reuters’s investigations and the bases themselves have been compelled to exercise a bare minimum of damage control by dismissing tenant’s complaints.

“This looks like any sort of housing that you would find in any major city,” Fort Bragg spokesman Tom McCollum told WRAL, a local news station in North Carolina.

“Everyone has their own perception of expectations and perfection,” Corvias spokesperson

Mary Humphries told the Louisiana newspaper the *Leesville Daily Leader*.

As with the lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan, the mainstream press is eager to ignore this latest exposure of criminal and systematic poisoning by the financial elite for as long as possible. In the two weeks since Reuters released their latest report on the crisis of US military housing on December 27, not one article on the subject has appeared in the major capitalist media outlets: not in CNN, the *Los Angeles Times*, MSNBC, the *Washington Post*, ABC News, Fox News. The only exception was the *New York Times* which reposted the article on their Reuters section on website on December 27.

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