

OPINION



Photograph courtesy of Corporal Andrew L. Davis, DND and Combat Camera

Leadership: Chief of Defence Staff Walter Natynczyk and Defence Minister Peter MacKay. Today, Valcartier is home to approximately 3,500 soldiers, as well as approximately 500 military families plus another 500 scientists and hundreds of civilian employees.

Cry me river: compassion, commitment and leadership by government essential in Valcartier's tainted water

The issue here is not being one of legal liability but of a moral obligation to look after these Canadians and their families who may have or could yet suffer as a result of this environmental disaster.



BY MICHEL W. DRAPEAU

Living in the shadows of a military complex

In February 2004, the CBC's *Fifth Estate* aired a story about Shannon, an Irish-Canadian village of approximately 4,000 people situated 30 kilometres north of Québec City; it is the birthplace of the late Mary O'Shea, the mother of Brian Mulroney. Until recently, Shannon's water supply came from an underground source that flowed from the abutting defence complex housing Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Valcartier and the Defence Research Establishment—Valcartier (DREV). It turns out that, for close to a century, the aquifer water which services the adjoining military and civilian community has been laced with carcinogenic chemicals, particularly the industrial solvent called trichloroethylene. TCE, a clear, colourless, volatile liquid, is used principally to remove oil and grease from metal parts. Traces of this solvent were found at 200 times the safe level for humans.

The Valcartier garrison

Just as war was breaking out in Europe, on Aug. 27, 1914, Cabinet authorized the expropriation of 125 farm lands at a cost of \$428,131. These 10,102 acres were turned

into a training camp for the 25,000 strong Canadian Expeditionary Force. Soon after, the then Department of Munitions and Supply built a plant next door to Camp Valcartier to manufacture munitions. In 1945, this plant was brought under the control of Canadian Arsenals Limited, a Crown corporation reporting to the then Department of Supply and Services.

By the end of the Second World War, various army units and the Arsenal became permanent features of what is now the Valcartier garrison. They were joined in by the Canadian Armament Research and Development Establishment (CARDE), whose purpose was to preserve the main elements of the military technological complex which was developed during the Second World War. Staffed by military and civilian scientific staffs, a few years later CARDE became known as DREV which was designed as the centre of excellence for the development of rockets and missiles, munitions and weapons systems for the Canadian Forces.

Today, Valcartier is home to approximately 5,000 soldiers, most of whom are serving in the R22eR, as well as approximately 600 military families plus another 500 scientists and hundreds of civilian employees.

A growing number of non-combat casualties

First the good news. Over the past several decades, many of those who were posted to Valcartier or were employed by CARDE/DREV, lived off-base thus minimizing their exposure to the effect of TCE,

a chemical which has been linked to cancer and birth defects. By the same token, their families would also not have been exposed to these water-borne toxins. Moreover, for many others, Valcartier was only one of several postings in their military careers and their ingestion of contaminated water would have therefore been limited to a period of two to five years reducing the probability of them developing serious health problems.

Now, the bad news. Those who lived on-base and, in particular, those who served a good portion of their careers in Valcartier were not so lucky. Day in day out, they unknowingly ingested contaminated water until 1997 when, DND says it found out about the contamination and took remedial action. However, even today, it is not known how many of these service personnel and their families, many of whom having now settled outside Valcartier or Shannon, might have been diagnosed with various forms of cancer. If DND hasn't contacted those people who worked at the Valcartier, they should.

There is worse news for the good people of Shannon. Unknowingly, for decades they were exposed to the toxic effects of TCE through the ingestion of contaminated water and through exposure based on the inhalation and/or dermal absorption of TCE agents or, worse, the potential degradation product of TCE, vinyl chloride, which may be even more toxic than TCE. Astoundingly, it was not until 2001 that Shannon was alerted to these dangers. Although the military switched to another water source, Shannon learned about the TCE contamination of its wells, not through its neighbour, Base Valcartier, but through a Communiqué by the Direction de la santé publique du Québec. Go figure. The upshot is that as of June 2009, no less than

341 residents and former residents have been diagnosed with various forms of cancer and the fear is that this list is incomplete. Some have already perished.

History of the site

The History of the Department of Munitions and Supply, published in 1950, indicates that during the Second World War alone, Canada manufactured 9,548 tons of TCE at two plants in nearby Shawinigan. These were closed in 1985 due to decreasing demand. There is also clear evidence, much of it obtained through the Access to Information legislation that, almost from the beginnings of Valcartier as a military base, the persistent TCE chemical was regularly used. While the federal government might deny it, it is alleged that after its military usage, TCE was dumped, spilled or lagooned and it eventually migrated to the aquifer which yielded ground water for wells serving the housing sectors of Valcartier and Shannon.

When did DND know?

While the federal government claims that the discovery of the contamination of the water table dates back to 1997, several documents, obtained through the Access to Information Act, bearing dates in the late '50s and early '60s disclosed that the federal government was often cautioned by the Québec's Department of Public Health that the CARDE industrial waste waters, for instance, were 'heavily colored and turbid'. Also, that these waste waters were flowing 'without treatment' in an 'open channel' where they were either absorbed by the sandy ground or lagooned on the bank of the Jacques-Cartier river.

Other studies conducted in the beginning of the 1990s by environmental engineering firms also revealed the presence of various toxic products in the water table, although it is not known whether DND knew about the studies. These chemicals were found at abnormally high concentrations. In the case of TCE this was up to 71,000 microgram per litre (µg/L). Of note, today, the criteria for safe drinking water is 50 µg/L according to the Regulation respecting the quality of drinking water but a federal-provincial recommendation calls for reducing that to 5 µg/L.

Legal action

Meanwhile in 2003, Marie-Paule Spieser launched a class action suit in the Québec Superior Court on behalf of the residents of Shannon. Meanwhile the residents of Shannon have since been hooked up to a new water system, this system still draws from the aquifer. The water is periodically tested and though TCE is present, it is said to be within acceptable levels. The legal suit claims damages and, amongst other things, a large scale clean-up of the contaminated water table which still flows beneath their homes. However, this action is languishing. The underground water is still heavily contaminated.

In the context of a possible settlement of a separate lawsuit, in April 2004, the municipality of Shannon obtained the sum of \$19-million. Following another broadcast by Société Radio-Canada in 2009, the federal government made an additional grant of \$13.5-million.

These settlement monies are earmarked for the construction of a municipal water supply

Conclusion

Born in nearby Sillery into a French-Irish Canadian family and having served in Valcartier on two separate occasions, I have a manifest interest in this matter. I want to find out what will happen to the known victims and, more significantly, encourage the federal government to do all it can to, first and foremost, alert the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who over the past century have served at Valcartier, particularly those who did for a prolonged period and who may unknowingly have inhaled or ingested traces of the TCE. The issue here is not being one of legal liability but of a moral obligation to look after these Canadians and their families who may have or could yet suffer as a result of this environmental disaster.

Charity starts at home

I am conscious of the fact that Canada is currently at war, and that many of its sons and daughters, some from Valcartier, have died for their country in defending our values in Afghanistan. I am also mindful that, since 2001, Canada has invested approximately \$17-billion to render humanitarian, reconstruction and military assistance to the Afghan people. However, both the residents of Shannon and the Canadian soldiers or veterans and their families have to know that their government also stands ready to make good on those who are affected by the long-term exposure to TCE. Surely, we can all agree that although humans are faced with risks and dangers everyday, no one should be at risk from living in his or her home. As the 1978 Love Canal disaster in the USA has taught us, compassion, commitment and leadership by government is essential, from the onset, to prevent a toxic waste catastrophe to turn into a national movement for environmental justice.

A legacy of generosity towards those who are victims

In the pursuit of its mandate to inform Canadians, the CBC, has done a magnificent job in reporting on this environmental disaster which actually dwarfs the affliction and misery experienced by the people of Walkerton a few years back. What is significant, however, is that their broadcasts, on both the English and French networks, have not achieved the resonance expected of Parliamentarians. Neither did the 23,000 name petition tabled in the House of Commons earlier this year. Yet, this issue is very real with, each month, the roster of cancer victims growing in numbers and severity.

This situation requires an urgent public inquiry or, at the bare minimum, a special committee of the House of Commons: (a) to examine what can best be done to alert Canadians of the risks associated with service in Valcartier prior to 1997; and, (b) to compensate victims accordingly. Surely, the last thing Canadians want is to oblige these victims to have to rely on a prolonged court battle to seek the truth and to obtain justice. Their reduced and diminishing energies should be used instead to care for their health so as to prolong, to the largest degree possible, their life in as much comfort and safety as possible.

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