

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Rachel Libert, Tony Hardmon, dirs. *Semper Fi: Always Faithful*. Oley: Bullfrog Films, 2011. 76 mins. \$295.00 (dvd), ISBN 978-1-937772-09-3.

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Published on H-War (March, 2015)

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Semper Fi: Always Faithful is a moving documentary film of Master Sergeant Jerry Ensminger's long-time struggle to have the Marine Corps acknowledge the cover-up of perhaps the largest chemical contamination of water, drinking water no less, in American history. The site is Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. During his struggle, Ensminger discovered that the US Department of Defense is the worst environmental contaminator in the United States, besting the worst corporation by a wide margin.

Ensminger was a drill sergeant stationed at Camp Lejeune. His nine-year-old daughter Janey died of a rare form of leukemia. She was on her deathbed in the military hospital at Camp Lejeune with her teary-eyed father at her side when a nurse walked into her room wanting to give her a shot of morphine. Janey refused, telling the nurse that her dad was in pain too and the nurse needed to give the shot to him to ease his pain. With those words she closed her eyes.

Ensminger wanted answers regarding his daughter's terrible death. He did not understand the reasons for her death, until, searching for answers, he visited several cemeteries on and near Camp Lejeune. The number of graves of children and infants startled him; the number was well out of proportion to the national death rate for that age group. The deeper he dug the faster the doors closed in front of him. The more this happened the more he wondered what it was that leaders of the Marine Corps and soon the hierarchy of the navy did not want anyone to know. This, of course, is not the way to treat a Marine Corps drill instructor as it only made him more determined to find answers to his most pressing question,

“Why did my dear little Janey have to die?”

When the film begins, viewers only see the legs of a man from the knees down carrying a black briefcase walking on a sidewalk. Then the camera starts to rise until the full image of the man is revealed from the back. Next he is walking down an empty street, save the parked cars on both sides. The building in front of him is the Capitol. He opens the door.

The film then turns to a series of microphones with glasses upside down. The setting is a hearing room, but viewers do not know yet if it is on the Senate or House side. What is obvious is that this will be a very important hearing. A tent card with the words “Mr. Ensminger” in bold letters on it comes into view for only a few brief seconds.

Next, the man is climbing stairs, he opens a door, and walks down a hallway. He passes an open door on the right and keeps on walking. Viewers will notice the papers that he holds in his left hand. He reaches the end of the hall, goes through a set of open doors, and turns left.

The scene then turns to two marines, one a full colonel, conferring with two civilians. The marines do not look happy. This is followed by legislators getting ready to take their seats. The man enters a much smaller room and talks with someone.

The screen goes dark, and in the center are the words “SEMPER FI.” It is the code of the US Marine Corps. Another line appears “Always Faithful.” In the background you hear marines counting cadence. They are obviously marching. Next a platoon of marines march in formation. With only their backs in view, they are carrying M-14 ri-

fles on their right shoulders. In perfect military fashion, they switch them to the left shoulder.

A voice states that I joined the Marine Corps in 1970 right out of high school. The voice continues to offer background, while images of a cute young girl appear. This scene closes on a somber note; viewers learn that she was diagnosed with leukemia and died.

If you watch this documentary, and you should, you will probably ask yourself why this happened. At some point you will realize that Janey, and all the other children, did not have to die. Their deaths could have been prevented! A large number of adults also died from contaminated water, including a spirited former marine who joined Ensminger's crusade. She was doing what many commissioned officers did not do—she covered the backs of other marines and their families.

To tell you more about Ensminger and those who helped in his struggle will only deprive you of the emotional traumas experienced during his crusade. Countless numbers of US military and civilian personnel from

all the services continue to suffer even today. Commissioned officers have a fiduciary responsibility to protect their personnel and their families. It would be hard to argue to the contrary after watching this DVD!

Finally, in April 2012, Congress passed and President Barack Obama signed HR 1742, the Janey Ensminger Act, which had been stalled for two years by Congressman Jeff Miller from Florida. The act amended Title 38, United States Code, to direct the secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to establish a presumption of service connection for illnesses associated with contaminants in the water supply at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and to provide health care to family members of veterans who lived at Camp Lejeune while the water was contaminated. Unfortunately Miller saw to it that the money given to the VA to provide benefits to those victims was diverted elsewhere. Miller did not cover their back either! This documentary is more than a documentary about an environmental disaster. It is also about senior Marine Corps leaders's gross violation of a sacred code—Semper Fi which as many of you may already know means "Always Faithful."

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Citation: Donald MacCuish. Review of Libert, Rachel; Hardmon, Tony, dirs., *Semper Fi: Always Faithful*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2015.

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