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'Invisible BULLETS'

The dangerous duty of Enewetak Atoll cleanup veterans

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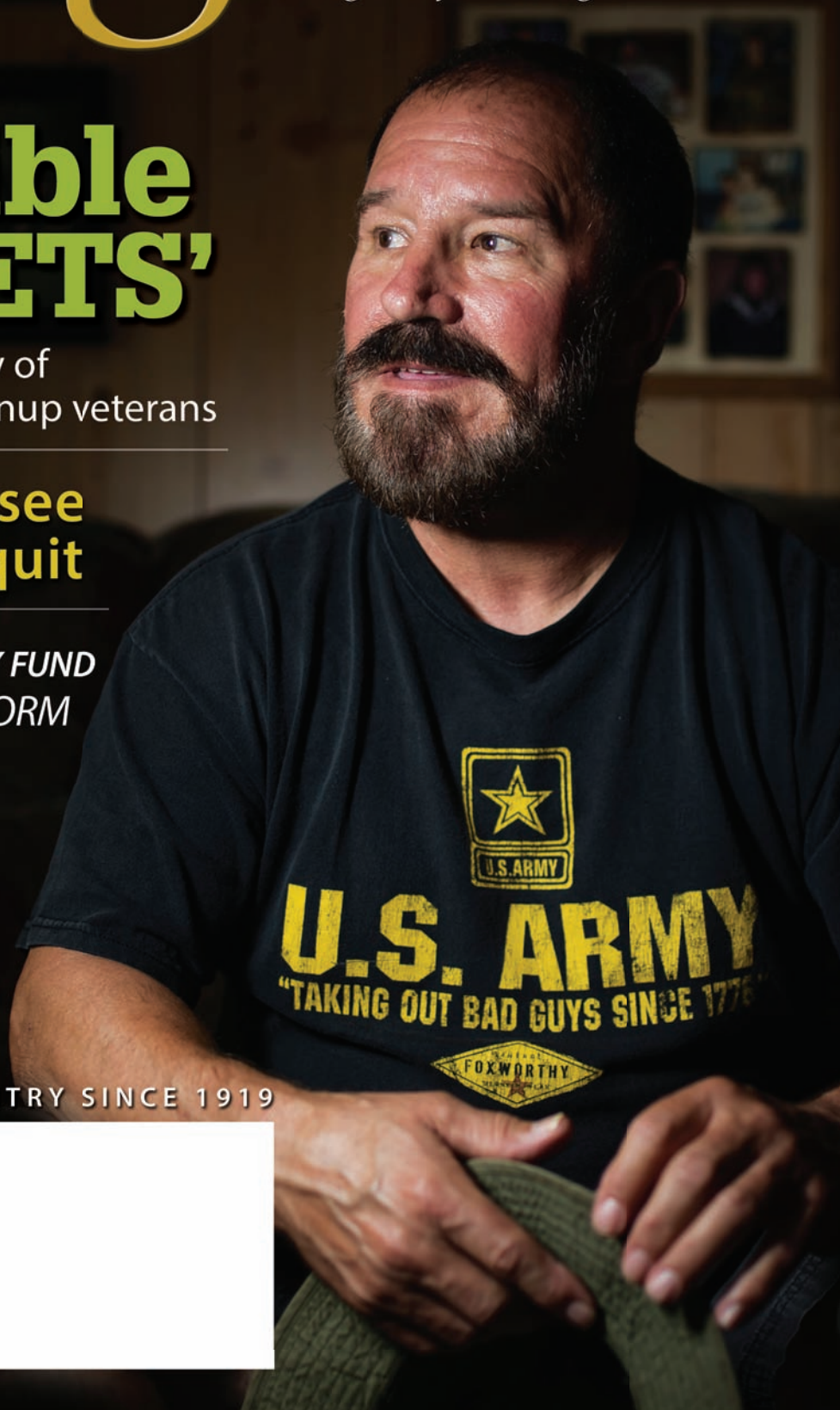
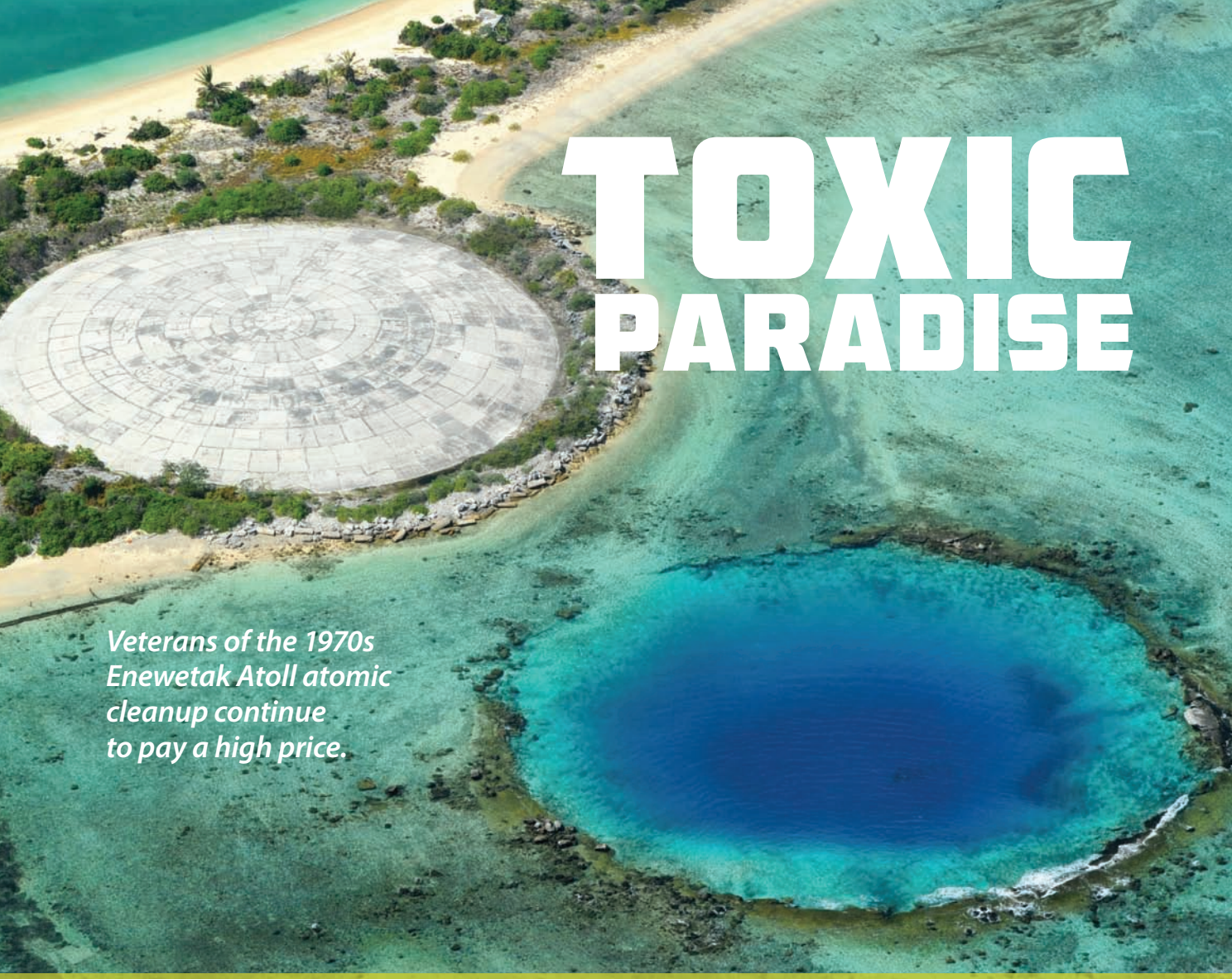
CALM AFTER THE STORM



FOR GOD AND COUNTRY SINCE 1919



TOXIC PARADISE

Veterans of the 1970s Enewetak Atoll atomic cleanup continue to pay a high price.

The United States conducted 67 tests of nuclear weapons in the Marshall Islands, the site of the U.S. Pacific Proving Grounds, from 1946 to 1958. Radioactive strontium-90 exceeding U.S. environmental standards was detected in well water in 1977. U.S. troops who participated in the resulting cleanup have experienced a number of health abnormalities. Getty

BY JOHN RAUGHTER

Crystal white sand, clear blue water and coconut palm trees. Add tropical weather, and you have an atmosphere more suited for a cruise-liner destination than a carcinogen. Yet for thousands of veterans who participated in atomic cleanup operations in the late 1970s, Enewetak Atoll was no Fantasy Island.

"Invisible bullets entered our bodies, and we carry them with us daily," says Paul Laird, a three-time cancer survivor from Otisfield, Maine. The 58-year-old Army veteran operated a bulldozer on Enewetak for the 84th Engineer Battalion in 1977. "We were told to do a job. You either did the job or you faced Leavenworth (federal prison)."

Enewetak was the site of 43 U.S. nuclear tests from 1948 to 1958. Nearly 20 years after the last test, soldiers like Laird returned to the chain of islands with a different mission: to clean up and contain the debris.

"We didn't worry much about it," says Gary Pulis, a cleanup veteran who lives in Auburn, Ind. "Nothing was ever going to harm us. We were young. We were invincible."

Time has shown that to be untrue. Even for men in their late 50s and 60s, veterans of the Enewetak cleanup suffer from an alarmingly high rate of cancer and face other serious health issues. Laird estimates that two-thirds of the members of the

"We have found only 323 survivors … the government doesn't want to tell us how many are still here."

– Paul Griego

Paul Griego, center, checks in at a hot zone after working all day on Runit Island in 1978. Shorts were his typical working uniform.

Photo courtesy Paul Griego

Enewetak Atoll Cleanup Project Facebook group have had sicknesses that could be related to radiation exposure. One of the group's founders, Richard Masculine, died of cancer in 2013.

U.S. Rep. Mark Takai, D-Hawaii, estimates that the cancer rate among the cleanup workers is about 35 percent. In November, he introduced the Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act, H.R. 3870, which would provide for the treatment and service-connection presumption of certain disabilities for Enewetak cleanup veterans.

"These men and women risked their lives in answering the call of duty to serve their country and are suffering as a consequence," Takai said. "We as a nation need to take care of our veterans, and I hope my colleagues will join me in supporting them and thanking them for their service. Let us honor the past generations and remember that once a soldier, always a soldier."

Although Takai's bill has picked up several sponsors from both parties, it is still awaiting companion legislation in the Senate. The website GovTrack.us only gives the bill a 3 percent chance of being enacted into law.

Paul Griego, who worked at Enewetak as a civilian contractor in 1978, says he believes that a large number of the approximately 6,000 personnel who participated in the cleanup are dead.

"After four years of searching on the Internet, we have found only 323 survivors," he says. "The government has Social Security numbers for every one of us who served there. Under normal mortality rates, there should be about 5,300 of us still alive. But the government doesn't want to tell us how many are still here."

Unlike veterans who participated in actual nuclear testing that occurred at sites throughout the Pacific and in remote areas of the United States, Enewetak Atoll cleanup veterans are not designated "atomic veterans," even though plutonium has a half-life of 24,000 years. Veterans who apply for benefits related to illnesses possibly connected to radioactive exposure during the cleanup are routinely denied.

"At 43, I was diagnosed with testicular cancer," says Jeff Dean of Belfast, Maine. "My cancer was military-related, but they will not recognize any of us as atomic veterans. I can feel it. My cancer treatment was $250,000, and after insurance I had to pay 20 percent. VA says we were adequately protected, but I feel like we were lab rats."

The passing of a good friend and Army buddy prompted Dean to speak out.

"I lived with him for three years," he says. "His name was Tod Lentini. He said, 'I feel lucky, no side effects.' Two months later he was dead. I walked right down to the *Bangor Daily News* and then gave

A TROUBLED HISTORY

The story of Enewetak Atoll is fascinating, if ultimately tragic. In February 1944, the battle to liberate "Eniwetok" – a group of 40 islands in the Marshall Islands chain held by Imperial Japan – cost 348 American lives and nearly 3,400 Japanese.

After World War II, the atoll became a U.S. territory, and in 1974 changed its official spelling to Enewetak to more closely resemble islanders' pronunciation.

In U.S. nuclear tests between 1948 and 1958, approximately 31.8 megatons of power blasted the area – the equivalent of 2,120 Hiroshima-sized explosions. With code names such as Operation Castle, Redwing and Hardtack I, Enewetak was home to nearly 6 percent of the total nuclear test yield worldwide.

A three-year cleanup operation began in 1977 and involved a U.S. military task force moving more than 111,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil and debris. The waste was placed in a 30-foot crater left by the Cactus nuclear test and capped with a concrete dome on Runit Island on the eastern side of the atoll.

During testing and cleanup, the native population was relocated throughout the Marshall Islands. Enewetak gained independence in 1986, after the United States established a fund to cover economic losses, environmental restoration and residents' personal claims. The total cost was $239 million.

Today, an estimated 850 Marshallese people live in the atoll's southern and western islands.

Getty

A member of the 84th Engineer Battalion prepares to head to the hot side of Runit Island. Veterans claim that hazardous material suits were in short supply and impractical for cleanup workers laboring in high temperatures. Photo courtesy Alan Leeman

interviews to *Stars and Stripes* and the local NBC channel."

Old military photos are as compelling as the narratives. In them, the men are as likely to be wearing shorts and sandals as hazmat suits.

"If we stayed in those suits, there is no way we could have met their deadlines," says retired Maj. Harold Rumzek, who served as the Air Force element commander on the atoll in 1977. "We didn't have enough suits to use anyway."

Even the official DoD publication *The Airman* acknowledged the impracticality of the gear.

"Under the stifling tropical sun, the temperatures inside the anticontamination can reach 185 degrees," the magazine reported in its July 1978 issue.

"We had guys passing out within 20 minutes," Senior Master Sgt. Bobby Baird told *The Airman*.

Even so, the advice given in a 1980 report by "60 Minutes" correspondent Morley Safer – "wear rubber boots and surgical masks" – seems quaint by today's safety standards.

With a doctorate in health psychology from the University of North Texas under his belt, Rumzek,

"I feel like we were lab rats."

– Jeff Dean

Jeff Dean of Belfast, Maine, spent four months working with the Enewetak Radiological Support Project in 1979. At 43, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer, and says that others who served at the nuclear testing ground have suffered similar health problems. Dean hopes VA will designate them "atomic veterans." Photo by Lucas Carter

77, is far more cynical today about the cleanup mission than he was 38 years ago. "I took the radiation seriously," Rumzek says. "Like everyone else, I was stupid enough to believe they would take care of us. We trusted them (the government). I wouldn't send anybody to any place I wouldn't go."

Like other Enewetak veterans, Rumzek says he has no faith that the dosimetry badges they used provided accurate readings of radiation levels.

"If there's no radiation, then why did we spend two and a half years pouring concrete into a mountain?" he asks. "They said the highest radiation found was equal to a dental X-ray. That was all BS. What about the water we drank and the water we swam in?"

If Takai's legislation passes in its current form, Griego wouldn't reap any benefits; the bill concerns only military veterans, not civilian contractors.

"I was hired because I worked in a health physics lab in Albuquerque for two years," he says. "I had no college degree but suddenly, at 21, I'm an environmental sampling operations supervisor at Enewetak. Why didn't they hire someone wiser, more educated and experienced? They wouldn't have gone there."

Though Griego lived on the main Enewetak island – often called the "clean island" – he worked on others in the atoll that were considered more risky. "I worked on 15 to 20 contaminated islands and never saw a scientist or health physicist on any one of them," he says.

When most of the task force members asked for their dosimetry readings, the news was almost too good to be true, he adds. "We would get reports back that the reading were 0.00, which is about as likely as getting 777 on a slot machine."

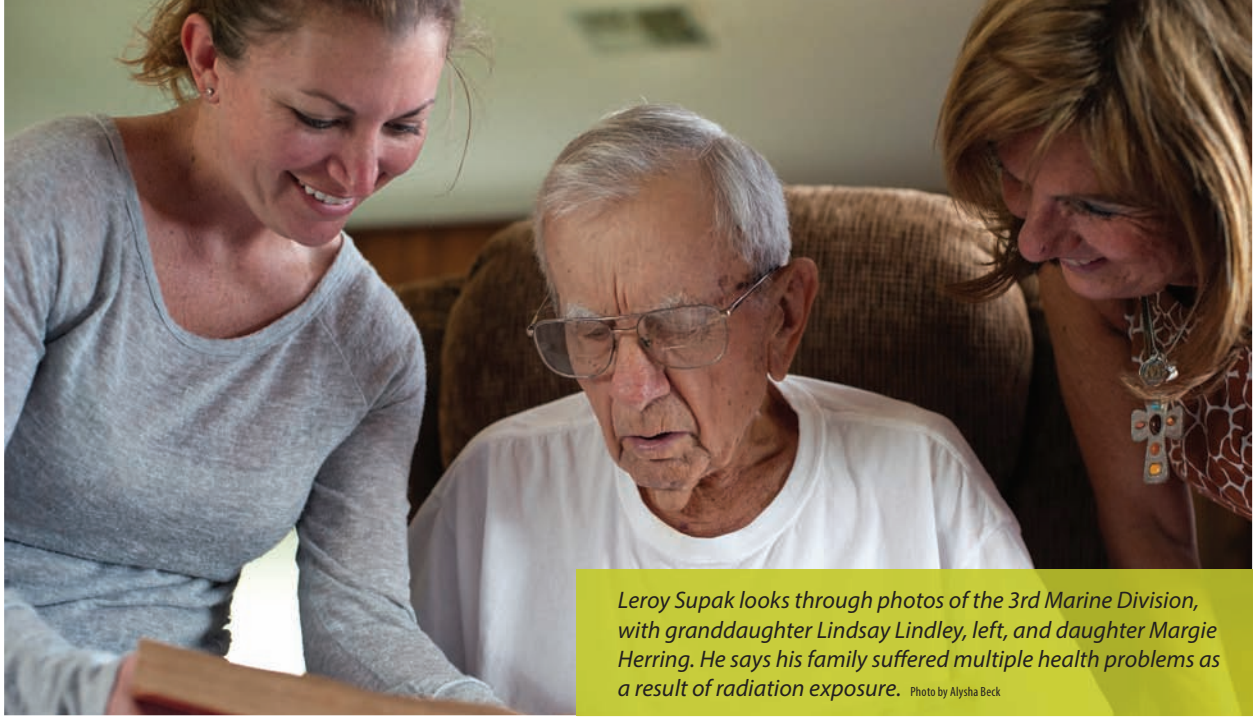
Dean says it's impossible to believe they weren't exposed to dangerous levels of radiation. "How could we not have been?" he asks. "Our pores were open because of the heat. We kicked up dust, and we were breathing it in."

Kenneth Brownell, a cancer survivor and cleanup veteran living in Albany, N.Y., says he worries about the negative health effects he may have passed on to his children.

"We have insurance through my job, but what if his cancer comes back?" wonders Brownell's wife, Kathi. "Even if I knew he'd be covered by VA, it would be a relief. The medical bills alone can be catastrophic. I'm blessed to have insurance, but if, God forbid, something happens to me, what does he do? It's not easy."

Laird has questions, too. "I love my country, and I'd fight for it," he says. "But why do they just use us and forget about us?"

John Raughter is media manager for the national commander of The American Legion.



Leroy Supak looks through photos of the 3rd Marine Division, with granddaughter Lindsay Lindley, left, and daughter Margie Herring. He says his family suffered multiple health problems as a result of radiation exposure. Photo by Alysha Beck

FAITH, FAMILY AND THE BOMB

"Scorched wool" is how Marine Corps veteran Leroy Supak describes a herd of sheep that had the misfortune of grazing near an atomic blast at Yucca Flat, Nev., on April 18, 1953. Unfortunately, Supak and 221 other Marines weren't much further away from the radiation cloud.

"The sheep were about 3,000 yards from ground zero," Supak says. "They were all dead except for one. We were about 4,000 yards away in a trench. I was told there was no way we could survive being that close to the blast, but we did. I was OK, but I think my family paid a price."

Supak, 88, has watched cancer ravage his wife and daughter in the decades following his participation in the Operation Upshot-Knothole Badger test exercise.

"We stayed in the same clothes we wore during the test. I took those clothes home and Mama washed them clothes," he says of his wife, Annie, who was pregnant at the time. Supak continued to wear the same field jacket for years after it was exposed to radiation.

Annie and their daughter, Lorrie Gander, survived multiple bouts of breast cancer. Their older daughter, Margie, also had breast cancer. Their son, Mark, was recently diagnosed with a blood disorder. Annie strongly believes that a tumor Leroy had in the 1960s was cancerous.

"I think the radiation had a big effect on us," Annie says. "They didn't really talk about it back then. When you're in the service, you have to do what they tell you to do. Leroy had breast cancer. Margie had breast cancer. Lorrie had it twice, and I had it. The Atomic Energy Commission sent Leroy a letter years ago saying he was eligible for benefits, but we had our minds more on our family and never did anything about it."

The American Legion wants to help right this wrong. During a visit to the Supak family farm in El Campo, Texas, Steve Henry of the Legion's National Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division started the benefit application process for Supak.

"He is qualified for health-care benefits based on the fact that he was exposed to radiation through atomic testing," Henry explained to Leroy's family. "He served his country. He applied for those benefits, and I will do everything I can to see that he gets those benefits."

Gander says she is grateful for the assistance.

"When I was diagnosed with cancer in 2004, it was very aggressive, and we treated it with six rounds of chemotherapy and radiation," she says. "The doctor told me that it was a very weird form or type of cancer. It returned in 2011."

In 1994, Mark attempted to track down the Marines of Easy Company who participated in the Badger test. Of 222, only 32 were still alive. "There was one young boy from Indiana who had a blood disease and wanted to know if I knew anybody who was still living, and that's when we started looking," Supak says. "What bothers me is what happened to my family. They did not just use me. They used my whole family. Deadly radiation is not something that is found in the genes."

Thousands of veterans are believed to have been exposed to harmful radiation during above-ground nuclear testing common in U.S. deserts between 1945 and 1962. Other "atomic veterans" earned their designation while serving at Hiroshima and Nagasaki following World War II and other testing in the Pacific.

The atomic test at Yucca is etched in Supak's memory. "It was 4:35 a.m., but everything was so bright," he says. "They told us to close our eyes, but I cracked them open a bit. I could see the bones through my hands. To my left was everything the bomb destroyed, and to my right everything was still green."

Supak, who served in the 25th Infantry Division during World War II before joining the Marine Corps, is a member of American Legion Post 151 in El Campo. After his discharge in 1954, he raised seven children while working mostly as a farmer.

"I served my country and I served for freedom," he says. "That is something I will always be proud of. I believe that my Lord Jesus Christ has taken care of me."

– John Raughter

See a video about Leroy Supak and his family.
www.legion.org/legiontv