



**Survivor Story: Michael Peel**  
**Administrative Battalion Chief Rialto, CA & EMT-1A EMS Department of Crafton Hills College, CA**  
**Diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia in 2018**

"I am not alone in fighting this disease and there are many Firefighters out there who have been through what I am currently experiencing."



I began my career as a paid professional Firefighter in 1975 with the City of Rialto in Southern California. In 1978, I became certified as a Firefighter/Paramedic with the same agency. As an FF/PM I responded to almost every call within the city while on duty, whether it was a fire, medical aid, traffic response, hazardous materials call, etc. On days off, (from 1980-1990) I worked in the EMS Department of Crafton Hills College in Yucaipa, Ca., as both an EMT-1A and Paramedic Instructor. In 2010, after retirement, I accepted employment at Serrano High School in Phelan, CA as a Regional Occupational Program (ROP) Instructor teaching three courses: Fire Technology, Wildland Firefighting Tactics, and Emergency Medical Services. Currently, I am fully retired from all aspects of the fire service.

Early on in my career, I was one of the few RFD Firefighters trained in Haz-Mat First Responder-Operational (FRO) and worked many Haz-Mat incidents for the department. In 1989, as a state-certified Haz-Mat Specialist, I

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joined the Rialto Fire Department's newly established Hazardous Materials Response Team and the San Bernardino County Haz-Mat Response Team, where I served as a member until my retirement in 2009. As a Haz-Mat Response team member, I responded to all hazardous material calls within the city limits and was on a rotating on-call response basis for all other hazardous material calls within the county.

In 1989, I promoted from FF/PM to Fire Captain and served as a shift Fire Captain until 1998, when I promoted to Battalion Chief. As a BC, I initially served on shift, then in 2003 I was placed in an administrative position as the department's Training Officer, as well as the Coordinator of the department's Hazardous Materials Response Team. I also served as president of the San Bernardino County Fire Training Officer's Association for four of those years. As a state-certified Master Fire Instructor, during my time as Rialto's Training Officer, I arranged and conducted live fire training burns in 25 structures throughout the city, as well as numerous wildland live fire exercises within the county.

As a Haz-Mat Specialist, I underwent complete physical exams on an annual basis in order to meet the requirements of the certification. Since 1989, my Complete Blood Cell (CBC) count had been recorded each year as part of those examinations. Prior to retirement, I had negotiated with the city for all retiring HM Team Members to undergo continued annual physical examinations, post-retirement, for an additional 5 years to ensure no abnormalities developed due to responses to hazardous materials incidents. Unknown to me and not flagged by any physicians who conducted the exams, my White Blood Cell (WBC) count was steadily increasing by a few points each year. It wasn't until late 2017, after suffering a severe nosebleed, that my family physician noticed my elevated WBCs and referred me to an oncologist. That oncologist confirmed in Jan 2018 that I had Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia (CLL).

Upon learning of my diagnosis, I immediately contacted a CSFA-recommended Worker's Comp attorney. During my initial consultation with him I was informed that my time limit for making a claim after retirement had lapsed by 3 months (CA FF retirees can file up to a period of 3 months for every year worked). I explained that I had numerous documents showing the steady progression of the disease for years, even prior to my retirement. Included in those documents were not only physical examinations but RFD exposure report forms (intradepartmental-developed forms used to document any exposure experience, regardless of the type incident responded to) from numerous fires, medical aids, and hazardous material incidents I had responded to throughout my career. The attorney asked me to forward all documents related to my case to him, and after reviewing those documents he stated that his firm would accept my case. After a deposition conducted by city attorneys and a QME by a city contracted doctor the City of Rialto accepted my claim for Worker's Compensation, in February 2019. I had always been told of the importance of documentation of my exposures, and it proved to

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be crucial in proving my case to the city. In July of the same year a Mandatory Settlement Hearing was held in Superior Court of San Bernardino County.

I continued with regular scheduled blood tests throughout 2019 and 2020, either every 2 weeks or 4 weeks, depending on my WBC count. In February 2020, my WBC count had risen to a point where my oncologist ordered a CT scan for me, which found enlarged lymph nodes causing considerable pain primarily below my diaphragm in my back area. Beginning in March 2020, all my oncologist contacts turned to phone visits due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

My WBCs continued to climb as my oncologist and I continued to monitor my CBC count throughout 2019. The oncologist set a trigger point of 60 for my WBC count before starting me on oral treatment. In March 2020, I started on Imbruvica 420 mg (a "targeted therapy" drug) to be taken once daily. The drug listed numerous side effects, and I experienced almost every one of them my first couple months on it. My WBCs continued to climb, as the oncologist had predicted. At 120, the WBCs reversed and began falling. After a couple months of taking the drug and seeing some relief in my WBC count, my oncologist reduced the dosage of Imbruvica to once every other day in hopes of relieving some of the adverse side effects I was experiencing. Currently, in January 2021, my WBC count is 15.1. The most significant adverse effects I am experiencing currently is long bone and joint pain spread throughout my body. I anticipate my WBC count to be within normal range (4-11) within the next month or two.

Prior to my CLL diagnosis, while still working, I was diagnosed with Atrial Fibrillation. In 2004 it was determined to be job-related and I have been treated under Worker's Comp for that condition since. One of the side effects of Imbruvica is worsening of Atrial Fibrillation and in October 2020, my cardiac condition worsened to the point I had to have a cardiac pacemaker implanted.

As I sort through the Firefighter Cancer Support Network's Toolbox, I have discovered numerous sources of valuable information which has answered a great many questions I had prior to contacting this group. The main comforts I take from this is that I am not alone in fighting this disease and there are many Firefighters out there who have been through what I am currently experiencing and are more than willing to offer their support and assistance to me and my family any way they can.

Of all the issues I am going through, I truly feel I have lived a blessed life. My support has largely been my wife, who just this past December celebrated 50 years of marriage with me. She has been my encouragement to get out and exercise, to eat right, and has been supportive of me throughout all my painful experiences with my

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medications. Our hobbies are camping trips with our two dogs in our RV and riding the deserts of the southwest in our side-by-side UTV. We have two sons, one a retired Police Officer from Lexington (KY) Police Department and the other a disabled US Army veteran of the Iraq War.

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