

Toxic soldiers

A Portland woman is among thousands of Army vets who say they were poisoned by chemicals at Ft. McClellan, and they want the military to answer for it

BY EMILY GREEN
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It was the 1970s in Southern California, and a teenage Laynie Roland could be seen most days surfing and boogie boarding along Newport Beach, about 40 miles west of her home in Ontario. With her long, feathered, bleached-blonde hair and wave-riding ways, Roland embodied the typical image of the Southern California girl.

She was active in high school — a member of several academic clubs including the yearbook committee and newspaper, and she worked in the school's snack shop during the week when she wasn't ditching school to go to the beach with her short board and a pack of friends. In those days, before bumper-to-bumper traffic became the norm in the arteries of the greater Los Angeles area, it was only a 45-minute drive to "the usual breaks," says Roland, now a Portland resident.

Shortly after graduating from high school, Roland left her family behind and headed south to attend Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, where she would often watch people surfing along a beach that could be seen from her dorm room window. Her future seemed ripe with possibilities, and she felt a drive to do something of great magnitude. A psychology major at the time, she was only one year into her studies when she decided the path she was on wasn't the one she was meant for. "I knew there was something bigger calling me," she recalls.

As the daughter of a rough-around-the-edges Navy gunner, she was naturally curious about the possibility of a career in the military. Almost immediately, the service seemed to hold all the answers, she recalls.

"I knew that was where I wanted to be. That it was my calling," she says. There was just one minor detail standing in the way — she would have to cut her long hair if she was going to join the Navy or her second choice, the Marines. To the 19-year-old self-proclaimed "beach babe" with waist-length locks, getting a short military haircut was simply not an option.

This is how Roland came to join the U.S. Army — it was the only branch of service that would allow her to keep her long hair. When she spoke with recruitment officers on that fateful day in 1981, it was apparent: The military wanted her. And she was hooked.



In January of 1982 she landed in Alabama, and at Ft. McClellan, temperatures were dipping below 20 degrees. The cold was a shock to Roland's system. Almost immediately, she caught an upper respiratory infection and spent her first few days in the infirmary. She hadn't fully recovered when she began training. One month in, she slipped off the side of Baines Road while marching up a 45-degree incline known as "Baby Baines." Her leg twisted halfway around at the knee, resulting in a lasting knee injury. But she continued to train on it for two more months despite the pain, earning her the nickname "Roll-with-it Roland."

A portion of her training that winter included bivouac, which was "like camping, only you wear war paint and carry a gun," says Roland. They set up tents and lived outdoors, relying on streams running through the encampment for bathing, cooking and filling up canteens with water for drinking. She isn't sure if it was because she started off with a weakened immune system due to the respiratory infection, or if it was because she was training on a hurt knee, but Roland's health suffered throughout training.

Just two weeks before she was set to graduate and step into her role as a military police officer, Roland's superiors summoned

her. "We noticed you're having trouble, and it's too late to recycle you," she remembers them saying. "We're sending you home."

Her discharge was "honorable with erroneous enlistment," because she says they had misclassified her when she was recruited. It was a small error, according to Roland, and she technically still qualified for military police training. "I've never been able to fully understand why they pulled me," she says.

The discharge left Roland hurt and confused. Back home again, living with her parents, she attempted to pick up where she left off, and eventually returned to the waves and the short board of her youth.

But this time she couldn't push up to a standing position, she couldn't balance — she couldn't surf. Even walking on the sand was painful.

After her failed attempt at surfing, she went to the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital to have her knee examined. She says doctors there told her that her days of physical activity were over and that she would never be able to surf again. She soon filed a disability claim with the VA, but it was denied — which is common for someone with an erroneous enlistment discharge.

In the weeks that followed, Roland's health faded. She lost 30 pounds during her

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