

TOXIC, from page 4

first month back in California. Her parents attributed it to depression – and she was depressed – her newfound physical limitations coupled with her sudden ejection from the military were taking its toll. But she told herself, “I’m Roll-with-it Roland, damn it!” And she carried on.

The years that followed were rocky. In 1987 she married and moved north to Portland with her husband and daughter from a previous relationship. In 1989 Roland gave birth to a second baby girl, but soon after divorced. Her marriage had only lasted two years.

As a single mother, she supported her daughters by working various administrative jobs around Portland. All the while her health was disintegrating further. She had a partial hysterectomy at 28 and another at 32, suffered from tinnitus, vision loss, insomnia, depression, stomach problems and other ailments that she says just weren’t explainable. She called in sick frequently, unable to get out of bed, making it difficult to hold on to steady employment. Temporary staffing agencies seemed to be the best solution. She liked that she could come in and work a job where she was needed and then move on to the next assignment before being told she was no longer needed.

After her daughters were grown, she continued working temporary jobs and her health continued its downward spiral.

“On Cinco de Mayo, 2009, I found myself in the hospital for an emergency gall bladder removal. The doctor said it was like pulling out a black pile of mush, and after that, the sicknesses just kept getting worse,” she says.

While temporary employment seemed ideal, it wasn’t a perfect solution. In 2010 she became homeless because she was unable to afford a place on her own, even though she was employed at the time.

Prior to that, she had been living with her youngest daughter who, then in her early 20s, had already moved out on her own.

Stories she’d heard from other women made her fearful of staying in homeless shelters alone, so Roland slept where she could for the next two and a half years. She bounced between couches, old trailers and garages, and often slept in her 2006 Toyota Tundra.

“The one place I never went was under the bridge,” she says.

Most mornings Roland would use gas station bathrooms to wash up, apply her makeup and get ready for her day at the office. Gas stations also served as a good place to park. She would get acquainted with the graveyard shift so they would watch her truck while she slept in it with her tabby cat, Missy, and her .38 revolver, which she kept loaded with hollow points. Throughout her bout with homelessness, her health made it nearly impossible to escape her situation.

“I would get really sick, and I didn’t understand why. I would have problems with my stomach and just attribute it to stress. It was really hard to keep a job because I was sick so much. I just couldn’t understand why my body was shutting down,” she says.

But regardless of her own situation, Roland maintained her lifelong position as the caretaker to her family. She took care of her sick brother and ran errands for her aging mother. Her parents had moved to Portland shortly before Roland’s father passed away in ’92. She watched over her daughters and two grandchildren and joined up with groups such as Soldiers’ Angels and



Laynie Roland (left) at age 20 in 1982 during basic training at Ft. McClellan in Anniston, Ala., and Roland today. Since training at Ft. McClellan, she’s been riddled with illnesses that she believes are the direct result of her exposure to toxic chemicals on the base.



No Soldier Left Behind, greeting veterans returning from deployment and volunteering where she could. Some days are better than others, and when she’s feeling well, she’s quite capable. She worked as an executive assistant, in payroll and as an office administrator. “I’m really good at what I do,” she says. She even started her own online business making “cube roofs” that filter the fluorescent lighting that hangs above cubicles. Last year she traveled to California to audition for a pitch on Shark Tank. But there are many days when she

feels groggy and confused, and when the stomach and body pains resurface, it’s difficult to get much done.

Roland was living in the cab of her truck, parked at a 76 gas station in Southeast Portland, when she sought the help of Rick Rutherford, a Veterans Service Officer at Clackamas County. Rutherford encouraged her to appeal her denied disability claim with the VA – after all, it

was an injury she got in training and it was still bothering her. As the two went through her extensive health history: two hysterectomies, a gallbladder removal, intestinal problems, tinnitus, vision loss, several miscarriages and an ectopic pregnancy, Rutherford suggested she file compensation claims with the VA for every single item on the list.

Roland recalls what he told her next as if he’d uttered the words only a moment ago. He said, “We’re going to file a claim for all of it, because – I hate to tell you this – but at Fort McClellan in Anniston, Ala., you were toxically, chemically poisoned – you are literally being eaten from the inside out.”

Built in 1917, Ft. McClellan sits adjacent to the small town of Anniston, nestled in the Appalachian Mountains of Alabama. Directly to its east, the Talladega National Forest, known for its picturesque scenic byways and mountain streams cascading into waterfalls, served as additional land for military training maneuvers. During World War II, the fort was expanded to become one of the largest training bases in the country at 40,000 acres. During the Vietnam War, it was used primarily for chemical weapons training. Throughout most of the 20th century, it was home to the U.S. Army’s Military Police Corps, Chemical Corps and Women’s Army Corps.

The fort closed in 1999 – nine years after the Environmental Protection Agency

declared the area a Superfund site (the agency’s designation for the country’s most toxic sites in need of cleanup). Chemicals employed during training exercises, such as depleted uranium, Agent Orange, Agent Blue, nerve gas and mustard gas, have contaminated the soil, groundwater and streams on the premises. The same waterways that soldiers like Roland bathed in and drank from while stationed at the fort.

But soldiers at Ft. McClellan were exposed to much more than just the toxins found in chemical weapons and pesticides employed by the Army – in the neighboring town of Anniston, Monsanto had been poisoning the environment for decades.

In its 2002 segment, “Toxic Secret,” 60 Minutes called Anniston the most toxic city in America. PCBs were not only invented in Anniston, Monsanto produced them there for decades. According to CBS News, Monsanto dumped tons of raw PCBs directly into a creek that ran by its facility and buried another 5,000 tons nearby. Fumes from the buried poison continued to seep into the air for years. In 2003, Monsanto settled with the citizens of Anniston for \$700 million, but veterans of Ft. McClellan were excluded.

In addition to the area’s PCB contamination from Monsanto and the toxic chemical leakage on the base, nearby Pelham Range, which many Ft. McClellan veterans trained on, was radioactive.

According to the Army’s own assessment of Pelham Range in 1999, the level of radioactive cesium and cobalt found present indicated radiological health hazards. The level of cesium – a byproduct of nuclear fission – was 7 million times the acceptable limit. Veterans who trained at Ft. McClellan up until 1999 were literally slopping around in chemical soup during their training. Drinking it, bathing in it, washing their clothes in it, cooking with it and breathing it in. The long list of toxins they were exposed to comes with an equally long list of physical ailments and disorders that studies have linked to those same toxins.

While the VA acknowledges that Ft. McClellan is a poisonous wasteland, it does not extend medical coverage to what are likely to be exposure-related illnesses brought on from training on the base. Nor has it reached out to let the veterans who trained there know they were training in a toxic environment. Because of this, many military personnel and civilians who worked and lived on the base are still unaware of the potential health risks associated with their time spent at Ft. McClellan.

Roland found similarities between her health problems and the health problems of other Ft. McClellan veterans when she joined a Facebook page whose following comprises thousands of Ft. McClellan veterans calling themselves “toxic soldiers.” It was through this online group that Roland discovered she wasn’t the only Ft. McClellan veteran whose gall bladder had turned to “black mush,” she says. Many others also told of multiple miscarriages,

A toxic legacy

In 2012, veterans of Camp Lejeune were awarded compensation for contracting cancer after drinking contaminated tap water at the North Carolina base. The decision was the result of a long battle fought by the affected veterans and came more than 30 years after the first evidence of harmful chemicals in the base’s drinking water was discovered. The big chemical culprits at Camp Lejeune were TCE, PCE, PCBs and DDT – many of the same chemicals Ft. McClellan soldiers were exposed to during their training in Alabama.

Ft. McClellan and Camp Lejeune are not isolated situations. More than 140 military-owned properties in the U.S. are so contaminated they’ve been placed on the Environmental Protection Agency’s list of high-priority Superfund sites, making them eligible for federal grant money to assist with much needed cleanup. It’s estimated that it would cost taxpayers nearly \$27 billion to clean up all of the Department of Defense’s pollution.

Oregon hosts only one of the DoD Superfund sites: Umatilla Army Depot in Hermiston. The depot was placed on the list in the mid 1980s, and cleanup was completed earlier this year. It will be removed from the list once paperwork is completed. According to Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, the process of destroying chemical agents and closing the depot took decades due to the massive size of the cleanup, which was one of the largest in Oregon’s history.

ectopic pregnancies and other health disorders similar to Roland’s.

Lisa Jo Sarro was stationed at Ft. McClellan for training in 1984, and her medical history is strikingly similar to Roland’s with a hysterectomy in her 20s, depression, a gall bladder removal, vision and memory loss and insomnia. She says she also suffers from liver problems, chronic fatigue, heart arrhythmias, rheumatoid arthritis, skin conditions and many other health problems including a thyroid removal. Her younger brother was also a Ft. McClellan soldier and suffered from many of the same illnesses.

In 1989, at the age of 18, Ted Methvin Jr. was sent from Redding, Calif., to train at Ft. McClellan. Like so many others, he too drank from the toxic streams frequently during training.

“We used it for our coffee every morning,” he says.

It wasn’t until February of this year when he searched online for some old Army buddies and stumbled upon the Facebook group that he became aware of his own exposure to toxic chemicals.

Now a filmmaker and screenplay writer, Methvin Jr. and his business partner, Jason Loring, were determined to make a film about the toxic soldiers. They dropped what they were working on and within weeks were in production of a documentary called “Toxic Service: The Soldier’s Story,” which is slated for release by the end of this year.

Methvin Jr. and Loring went to Washington D.C. in July to meet with five members of Congress who had agreed to be interviewed for their film. In all five cases, the filmmakers were met by staff members instead of the representatives they had traveled from California to speak with. Additionally, they were told that no part of their conversations with staff members

See TOXIC, page 7