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FEATURED

WE SHALL NOT FORGET

From McFarland to Guatemala, Armstrong served 26 years in Army

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As part of a mission to help impoverished residents of Guatemala, U.S. Army Officer Jodie Armstrong helped lead a humanitarian mission with other armed services members. She served a total 26 years in active duty and the first class.

When Jodie Armstrong joined the Army in 1979, her two brothers believed she had little chance of surviving, especially when it came to basic training.

“I was a twiggy; a very skinny girl,” she said. “I was lucky if I weighed 110 pounds soaking wet. My brothers felt I couldn’t cut it, and I proved them wrong.”

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Armstrong ended up spending 26 years in the Army, the majority in McFarland while participating in the reserves. One of her jobs was payroll and making sure the soldiers were compensated and provided with the equipment needed to do their work. Periodically, she would be deployed for active duty but for the most part, she was able to remain in McFarland and raise her two children.



“Sometimes, I feel like people don’t respect my service because I wasn’t in combat,” said Armstrong, who has served with the McFarland American Legion Post 534 since 1995. “Those people in combat or overseas can’t properly do their job if they are not being supported stateside by hundreds of people.”

Starting in the army

Armstrong was born in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., a proud “Yoopers,” as she calls herself.

Her father worked for Great Lakes Dredge and Dock, and her early childhood years were spent following the dredging jobs around the Great Lakes. When she was five years old, Armstrong’s family settled in Lakeside, Mich.

In 1977, she graduated from high school in Three Oaks, Mich. and earned an associate’s degree in accounting and computer programming from the Michiana College of Commerce in 1979.

Before earning her degree, Armstrong enlisted in the army and began basic training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Later, she learned to be a finance specialist at Indiana's Fort Benjamin Harrison.

The Iran hostage crisis, in which 52 American diplomats were held captive for 444 straight days at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, was in its beginning stages when Armstrong was assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas in 1980 to work as a military pay specialist.

In 1981, she was transferred to Bremerhaven, Germany, working as a finance services specialist. It was there she met her first husband and gave birth to her first child.

While in Germany, Armstrong was part of family readiness training in case there was a military invasion. By this time, she had a second child and decided it was best to fulfill her remaining service obligations in the United States.

In 1982, she moved to McFarland with her two children and joined the Individual Ready Reserves (IRR).

"I still had a contract to fulfill. It can be four years active, four inactive, meaning IRR," Armstrong said. "You don't go to drills, you don't go to meetings, but you are still on the books. If anything happened, they can call you up."

Summer camps

While in the IRR, she participated in two-week summertime training exercises at different U.S. bases. She was quickly promoted to sergeant first class and took responsibility for the logistics of each event, such as the amount of food and gasoline needed, and how many cooks and meals needed to be prepared.

She was also stationed in Guatemala with other branches of the service on a humanitarian mission to help improve living conditions for the country's underserved residents. Armstrong said her eyes were opened to a lot of the challenges the Guatemalans faced.

“The people in the United States take so much for granted. You can open a refrigerator and find a beverage and food,” she said. “People in Guatemala had to carry their water three or four miles just to cook. They wore the same shirt and pants forever until they fell off and needed new clothes. Compared to some of these third world countries, we are a pampered society.”

Armstrong and her colleagues dug wells and built clinics, schools and walk-over bridges throughout Guatemala.

In 1991, just as the Desert Storm conflict was beginning to brew, Armstrong was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, remaining on active duty for eight months. Direct deposit of wages into bank accounts was just starting, and she had to clear up a major backlog in payroll.

“The soldiers overseas had three months of back pay coming,” she said. “It was our job to straighten out all these glitches and find out why the checks were not going where they were supposed to be going.”

Armstrong worked 10 hour days for three months before the problem was solved.

Earning an award

After the start of the Iraq War in 2003, Armstrong served at Fort Snelling in Minnesota, where she took charge of providing equipment and supplies to the soldiers overseas. Her work earned her a Meritorious Service Medal.

“I had no idea I was getting it. I just felt I was doing my job,” Armstrong said. “I liked working with Excel spreadsheets, and it was right up my alley.”

Armstrong retired from the Army in 2005. While serving on reserves, she worked for the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF) as an accounting technician and record document manager. She retired from WARF after a 30-year run.

Today, Armstrong enjoys spending time with her three grandchildren, going camping and sitting around a campfire.

In the American Legion, Armstrong has served a number of positions, including finance officer, vice commander, scholarship chair and color guard coordinator. She is grateful for the opportunities that the army provided her.

“I enjoyed the military,” Armstrong said. “I learned a lot, and I grew up a lot.”

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