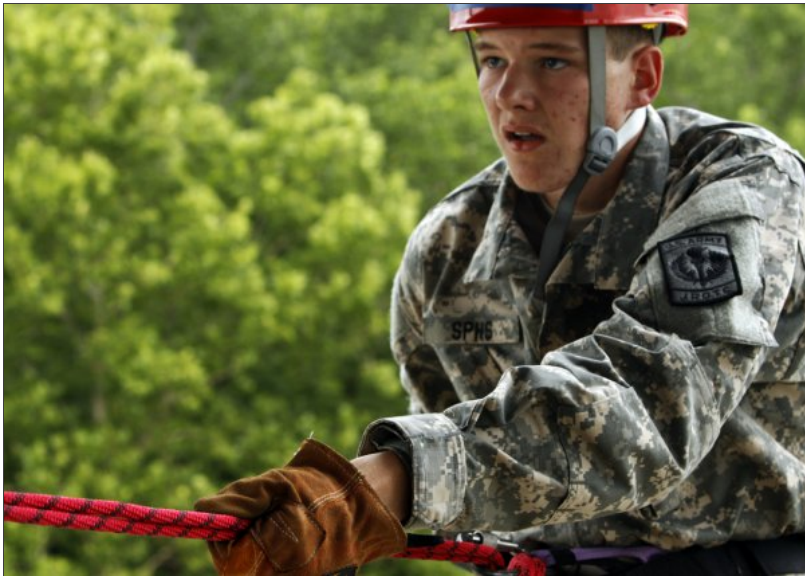


Ga. JROTC Cadets display courage in Knox exercises

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By **Aaron Hagstrom**, **Leader's Training Course**



Mackenzie Stewart, South Paulding High School in Georgia, overcomes his fear of heights as he prepares to take a second trip down the rappel tower Monday at Fort Knox, Ky. Photo by Jacob Hill/Leader's Training Course public affairs

FORT KNOX, Ky. -- Junior ROTC Cadets from Fulton County, Ga. -- which comprises 12 high schools -- spent part of their summer vacation this week training at Fort Knox.

Junior ROTC's purpose of JROTC is to build quality citizens who can lead by example. The 186 students who trained for five days at various post sites were challenged physically and mentally.

Many left with newfound courage.

On Monday, MacKenzie Stewart, of South Paulding High School, toppled upside down on his first go down the 51-foot high wall of the rappel tower. But gritting his teeth and heeding the direction of an instructor, he managed to right himself and propel safely to the ground.

"This situation makes you realize the great responsibility of an Army officer," Stewart said. "Your men look up to you to make the right decision and keep you safe."

Retired 1st Sgt. Jose Ortiz, JROTC chief at Roswell High School, greeted relieved cadets at the bottom, throwing his arm over their shoulders and offering high-fives.

"How does that feel? You did well. Now get back in line and give me another one," Ortiz said, chuckling.

Fulton County's training was part of annual exercises JROTC programs participate in each summer at locations across the country. The aim is to keep students active while they're away from the classroom and to foster teamwork and camaraderie among them.

At Fort Knox, the Georgia Cadets rappelled as many as three times from the tower in both helicopter (descending the tower's platform with no wall to lean against) and cliff style (using the wall).

"It's good to see these cadets improve in personal courage -- whether they are already brave or have to fight through it," said Lt. Col. Ken Weiland, the officer in charge of the rappelling site and a professor of military science at Penn State University.

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First-year cadet David Ackerman, of North Paulding High School, kicked confidently out from the wall, his first time down, as though he were an expert.

"We should make him one of the drill team," a member of the rappelling committee team said.

However cadets confronted their fears, they came away feeling they had succeeded.

"It was challenging and I was afraid of the heights, but all this training has inspired me to lead with confidence," said Cadet Maritza Acosta, of Roswell High School.

The high performance of Fulton County cadets was not surprising to their cadre, considering their programs rank in the top 25 percent of all Army JROTC schools.

"This group is the 'up kids,' " said retired Chief Warrant Officer Kenneth Flournoy, a JROTC instructor at North Springs High School. "They are definitely more focused than a lot of other groups, and most of them enter upon very successful careers."

Another exercise that again challenged cadets' fear of heights was the Forest Hills Climbing Complex, which consists of three high ropes courses.

"I know myself," squad leader Malik Johnson of Banneker High School shouted from the peak of the 30-foot-high course as he faced a rickety, lengthy bridge missing several sections, "I know I can't do this."

But with the encouragement of JROTC cadre and cadets below, he leaped across, breathing hard.

Marine Corps Cadet Aaron Johnson, of North Forsythe High School, learned the meaning of overcoming fear on the high ropes course when he plummeted nearly 30 feet to the protective soft rubber surface below after his belay man lost grip of the rope.

"Medic! Get the medic and tell him to bring a stretcher," Ortiz shouted.

Ortiz turned to Johnson and winked, "You're a Marine; you can take it."

And he did. An uninjured Johnson rose to applause.

"I just have a slight headache, but I had it going up," Johnson said, grinning.

In waterborne operations Sunday, cadets practiced capsizing a Zodiac raft and building improvised rafts. Both exercises encouraged cadets to face their fear of water through teamwork. Additionally, at the Team Development Course, groups of seven cadets were timed as they navigated simulated mine fields.

"Through teamwork, each cadet learns to conquer their fear and they become influential members of the group," said retired Sgt. Maj. Major Washington, deputy director of Army Instruction for Fulton County Schools.

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