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AMERICAN SOLDIER

ARMY AND IAN FISHER: AN EVOLUTIONARY WAR

IN THE ARMY NOW. *Ian Fisher cradles his injured elbow during his processing into the Army in June 2007. Though he later had a change of heart after speaking with a commander, he saw a possibility to escape his enlistment only two days in. From his first day in fatigues through his days driving a Humvee in Iraq, military life often didn't mesh with his expectations. Sometimes the structure of the Army and the demands of training for war clashed with the freedom he shared with his outside friends, but over two years, he overcame injuries and obstacles from both the Army and himself.*

Adapting to the military pushes young recruit to his limits

His decision to join the Army grew out of many things. The opportunity to fight for his country. The desire to add to a family legacy. The need to point his young life in a productive direction. In the spring of 2007 and at the depths of the Iraq war's unpopularity, Ian Fisher graduated from Lakewood's Bear Creek High School and, two weeks later, shipped out to basic training. There, he began the challenging process of becoming an American soldier — and outgrowing the trappings of youth. Like many recruits, he would struggle, learn, make mistakes and rebound. His training prepared him for violent conflict in a foreign land. Nothing prepared him for the war within. »STORY, 20-24A

Today» Earning "blood rifles"
Saturday» From here to Iraq
Sunday» Aiming for a future

dp **Online exclusive»** In videos and photos, The Denver Post tells the story of Ian Fisher, from his Colorado high school graduation to war-torn Iraq. »denverpost.com/americansoldier

HEALTH CARE REFORM

Plan's costs to test Obama

Few specifics exist on funding the $900 billion proposal.

By Ceci Connolly
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON» One day after President Barack Obama pitched his plan for comprehensive health care reform in a joint session of Congress, administration officials struggled Thursday to detail how he would achieve his goal of extending coverage to millions of uninsured Americans without increasing the deficit.

In two public appearances and private meetings with a dozen lawmakers Thursday, Obama promised a "full-court press," saying, "We have talked this issue to death." He also argued that new Census Bureau figures showing a slight uptick in the number of uninsured Americans only underscores the urgency of enacting major legislation this year.

The 10-year, $900 billion proposal envisioned by Obama borrows heavily from concepts circulating on Capitol Hill, but there was little immediate evidence that the broad ideas were sufficient to break a logjam in Congress.

After refusing for months to identify himself with the details of emerging legislation, Obama for the first HEALTH » 13A

Federal role» Government-sponsored health insurance covers 29 percent of Americans. »27A

Hot issue» Reform bill bars illegal immigrants from receiving subsidized health coverage. »27A

ROCKIES CASH IN ON HOMESTAND

Thursday's 5-1 victory over the Reds completes a sweep and stretches Colorado's win streak to seven games. »SPORTS, 1C

Jose Contreras

Xcel's request for rate hike has holes in it

By Mark Jaffe *The Denver Post*

Company-provided noshes at Xcel Energy — coffee, tea, bottled water, bagels and doughnuts — came to about $173,000 last year.

The utility's Colorado unit included that sum, along with $307,000 for employee-recognition awards and parties, in its application to the state Public Utilities Commission for a $182 million rate increase.

Not so fast, said PUC officials.

In its rebuttal to the rate request from Public Service Company of Colorado, the PUC called for the $480,000 to be jettisoned.

The costs, PUC officials said, "are not appropriate to charge ratepayers and should be absorbed by PSCo's shareholders."

Knocking out the bagels and parties XCEL » 11A

LIFE-CHANGING DECISION, AT AGE 17. *Ian Fisher returns a phone call to his recruiting office June 1, 2007, to confirm he's on track for enlistment that month. On his 17th birthday the year before, Ian announced he would join the Army, and he soon did on the delayed-entry program, which prepares recruits for enlistment. He signed up as violence was spiking in Iraq, and he was a sought-after commodity: a physically fit kid with enthusiasm who was "in it for God and country," his recruiting commander said.*

ENLISTING IN THE ARMY
REDEFINING HIS LIFE

Written by Kevin Simpson with Michael Riley, Bruce Finley and Craig F. Walker *The Denver Post*

Ian Fisher was looking for a fight.

The search took him through countless scraps over girlfriends and teenage trash talk — he even boxed for a couple of years — before it transported him from suburban Denver to Diwaniyah, a volatile industrial and agricultural hub in south-central Iraq.

He'd landed here last fall, hopping from the belly of a Chinook helicopter beneath the *thwack-thwack-thwack* of its propellers, echoes of his father's service in Vietnam. Now he took a pull on his cigarette — downtime between missions — and reflected on the circumstances that had transformed his penchant for small-time scuffles into a call to military duty.

"What can be better than this?" Fisher said. "I want to fight. That's why I joined."

As his days at Bear Creek High School in Lakewood wound down, he'd reveled in his emerging reputation as a stand-up guy who would throw down for his buddies. Once, he came home with blood spattered across his T-shirt. He remembered the look from his father, the clipped conversation that followed.

"Is that your blood?"

"No."

CLOSING ONE CHAPTER. *Ian studies his transcript and diploma as he departs commencement ceremonies for Lakewood's Bear Creek High School at Red Rocks Amphitheatre on May 31, 2007. He dismisses the importance of the ceremony but not of the diploma. "If I didn't get my diploma, I couldn't join the Army, I couldn't do anything like that — and where would I be?"*

"As a parent, I should probably tell you not to fight ..."

And they left it at that.

On the cusp of adolescence when the Sept. 11 attacks jolted the nation, Fisher eventually felt his combative teenage instincts coalesce with patriotic fervor into something that resembled a career track. On the day he turned 17, he announced he would join the Army — and soon afterward, he did, on a delayed-entry program that promised him to the infantry immediately after graduation.

He'd never been outside the United States. He knew nothing about Iraq.

Nevertheless, he enlisted during wartime, just as the increasingly unpopular conflict turned its bloodiest and recruiting lagged. He envisioned an elite military career that would train him for the Airborne, where his father served, or even the Rangers. He imagined himself the fearless protector, a patriot who wouldn't back down.

Over more than two years, the journey from suburban turf to combat zone broke him down and rebuilt him in the hothouse of a boot camp in Georgia. It tested him in California's Mojave Desert and exposed him to the subtle dangers of an assignment too close to home. And it sent him to a country where his fighting instincts met frustration and complex political reality.

His transformation from local tough to Army grunt also revealed inner conflict as substance abuse, lapses in judgment and clashes with authority threatened to derail his career. Outside forces competed for his allegiance. He felt torn between family's unconditional love and the pull of old friends, between ephemeral romance and uncompromising duty.

He inspired promise, stumbled and then moved forward.

Fisher's personal journey paralleled the slow evolution of the U.S. military as a 21st-century fighting force. Engaged in one of the longest wars in its history, the Army struggled to replenish the recruiting pipeline that would supply soldiers for a tactical "surge."

It also underwent a major retooling, from its core officer ranks down to its infantry, to address a changing combat landscape. In the throes of an unconventional war against a faceless insurgency and sectarian strife, the Army now sought to train its soldiers to operate in more sophisticated ways that exploited local political, religious and social conditions.

But its raw material — recruits in this all-volunteer force — had in some ways become less sophisticated and more problematic. The Army relaxed its standards in order to accept more "waivers," whose past personal troubles, such as criminal or drug histories, once would have rendered them unfit for duty.

In contrast to the waivers, Fisher — fit, eager and intelligent — looked like a promising prospect.

Newly arrived in Iraq, anticipating his baptism into combat, he faced a future that would take confounding turns. But he could look back over months of pain and trial and see one thing clearly: Before he could truly call himself an American soldier, he first had to wage a battle with himself.

This is how an American soldier is made.
For 27 months, Ian Fisher, his parents and friends, and the U.S. Army allowed Denver Post reporters and a photographer to watch and chronicle his recruitment, induction, training, deployment and, finally, his return from combat. The story was written by Kevin Simpson with Michael Riley and Bruce Finley. It was reported by Riley in Colorado and at Fort Benning, Ga., Finley at Fort Carson and in Iraq, and photographer Craig F. Walker throughout.

Photography by Craig F. Walker *The Denver Post*

LEARNING THE BASICS. *With just over a week left before leaving home, Ian visits the Army recruiting office in Lakewood to talk with Staff Sgt. Joseph Camarillo, who has already served in Iraq, about what to expect at basic training.*

TWO PARTIES, TWO WAYS OF SAYING GOODBYE. *Hours after Ian's family threw a goodbye bash for him with cake and ice cream, his friends gave him a party of a different type, with beer pong and kisses from girlfriend Ashley Hibbs.*

NEW COMRADES. *Fisher, right, waits for a medical exam with other recruits at the Denver Military Entrance Processing Station on June 18, 2007, his first morning of post-civilian life. They took the oath of enlistment later in the day.*

With the all-night party in honor of his enlistment fading into memory, fatigue followed 18-year-old Ian Fisher home along with his best friend, Nick "Buddha" Nelson. The two of them stretched out on Ian's bed.

A HUG FAREWELL. *As Ian's father, Eric Fisher, waits at his Lakewood home with the recruiter who's about to take Ian away to 14 weeks of basic training, Ian embraces friends Nick "Buddha" Nelson, left, and Shane "Pineapple" Doiel. Between hugs, Ian's eyes welled with tears.*

It had been a time of emotional goodbyes among friends as Ian prepared to refine his high school persona of the rough-and-tumble teen fumbling for a grip on his future.

His life had no focus. His last years at Bear Creek saw him marking time, just getting by in the classroom, falling into a routine of hanging out, picking or finishing fights, bouncing from one girlfriend to another.

He'd even abandoned baseball, his childhood passion. Ian threw with a powerful right arm, a gift that guided him to play behind the plate, where his toughness also proved an asset. When a childhood fall from the slippery bed of a pickup shattered his left elbow, doctors thought Ian might need reconstructive surgery. But the injury left the joint slightly misshapen and his baseball career intact.

And then, junior year, he quit his high school team.

Outside of baseball, he found camaraderie in a circle of buddies so tight that they got identical tattoos to symbolize their bond. They partied and hung out with friends who had rented an apartment. Once, a cop stopped Ian for driving too fast for snowy conditions with some friends. The deputy spotted signs of alcohol and drug paraphernalia in the car.

Ian got off with a fine.

But the future bore down on him. Graduation was looming. His parents wanted him to think about college. Ian didn't see it as a good fit. And though his dad gave him the money for the SAT exam, Ian didn't take the test. He thought about getting married. The current young woman in his life was named Ashley, but she was still a year away from graduation.

And then there was the Army.

Few of his classmates considered this route. In fact, as public opinion of the Iraq war plummeted, the presence of recruiters at his high school sometimes prompted angry calls from parents. Yet Ian toyed with the idea of becoming a cop — and what better training than the military?

His father, too, had served. Ian's enlistment would add to their bond.

Now he lit a cigarette and turned on the TV — but paid little attention. Buddha seemed to be mulling his friend's impending departure. When he spoke, it was to consider Ian's future in the context of a popular children's movie.

"Find your Nemo, man," Buddha said. "Maybe this is your Nemo. Maybe you'll marry Ashley and have kids. Maybe the Army is your Nemo."

Ian smiled.

"We should hang out with my dad," he said.

Ian headed for the living room, where he flopped on the couch next to his father and draped an arm around him.

"You OK?" he asked.

"Yeah," Eric Fisher said quietly. "I'm OK."

Eric, 57, had been making his way through an unusual Father's Day. Earlier, he'd flicked on the TV news: Personal items belonging to two missing soldiers in Iraq had been found in a terrorist lair — with no sign whether the soldiers were dead or alive.

He watched the account with new interest.

He and Teri Mercill had divorced when Ian was 4, and Eric ultimately assumed primary responsibility for both Ian and his older brother. The breakup wasn't easy on any of them. Andy, then 12, eventually ran away, dropped out of school and bounced in and out of trouble before starting to get his life together. But Ian quickly grew to regard his father as a best friend.

Eric tried to be strict but forgiving. He'd missed the latter quality from his own father, an Army veteran who died before they could reconnect as adults. Eric felt fortunate that he and Ian had developed such a strong bond — one that would serve as a lifeline to his son in the months ahead.

Although Eric and Teri weren't built to last as a couple, they remained on good terms after their split. Now, they were about to see their younger son navigate a military culture that had touched them both.

Teri, a 50-year-old legal secretary in Denver, has a brother who served in the first Gulf War, an uncle who served as a military intelligence officer in Saigon, South Vietnam, and great-uncles who served in the Pacific during World War II. She remembers being pregnant with Ian when the family visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where she watched Eric scan the engraved names. It was the only time she saw him cry.

Teri signed her son's recruitment papers with a shaky hand — but intense pride.

Eric, who runs a soil analysis lab for the U.S. Geological Survey, returned from Vietnam with the Combat Infantryman Badge and emotional scars. His father had been awarded the Bronze Star for combat service in World War II.

Eric didn't care for the way the U.S. was pursuing the Iraq war. Too many similarities to Vietnam. But the fact that Ian chose the military life — the Army life, in his footsteps — gave him great satisfaction.

At the recruiting office, they hammered out the details: a six-year hitch that would keep Ian in the service through 2013; the delayed-entry program that would let him begin as a private first class at a higher pay grade; a $17,000 bonus; and the promise of Airborne and Ranger training.

Ian appeared to be a motivated kid with one particularly attractive attribute: His popularity meant he could refer several prospects to the recruiter.

But now, on a sultry June day in 2007, Ian's last hours at home wound down with a trickle of well-wishing friends.

In the company of Buddha and buddy Shane "Pineapple" Doiel, Ian packed a few items he thought might help him through basic. A pad of paper, pens, Ashley's rings, an angel pendant, a harmonica, an address book, two journals and a Bible.

As the sky turned dusky, Ian joined his father on the driveway to await the recruiter's arrival. They smoked. They strained their necks at the sound of every oncoming car. Just as Ian snuffed out his cigarette and headed inside, another vehicle approached.

"She's here," Eric called.

Ian threw his bag into the front seat. He walked Buddha and Shane to their car, where the three of them hugged, eyes closed. When Ian opened his, they were wet with tears. They embraced again.

Ian approached his father, waiting by the recruiter's vehicle.

"You got everything?" Eric whispered.

"Yeah."

The car pulled out. Eric and Shane flashed peace signs. Buddha placed his hand over his heart.

Then Ian was gone.

Late the next day, Ian Fisher rode a charter bus from the Atlanta airport to Fort Benning, where his processing into the U.S. Army began with a welcome from a barking drill sergeant shortly after midnight.

The three-day prelude to boot camp continued as the recruits were hustled into a basement at the reception station. Supply clerks issued the immediate necessities: socks, underwear, towels, shirts and shorts. The recruits were shown their barracks and bunks and told to get some sleep.

Forty-five minutes later, reveille blared over loudspeakers. »

A BARK HELLO. *After three days of endless lines, little rest and second thoughts at processing, Fisher arrives June 22, 2007, at basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., and is introduced to his place in the military chain by drill sergeant David Vance. The roughly 200 recruits are then given two minutes to sort through a pile of duffel bags to find their own. It's an impossible task that's repeated over and over. "We see who's going to quit in that first hour," says drill sergeant John Eldridge, who is going through his last cycle of basic training and warned recruits, "Don't piss me off."*

»

OVERWHELMED. *On the second full day of processing at Fort Benning, Fisher nurses an elbow he injured the night before, aggravating a childhood injury that he had not disclosed to the Army. The injury might disqualify him from military service, and at first, he was open to the prospect. But after talking with a commander, Fisher was ready to move on to basic training. "This scared me more than anything ever has," Fisher said. "... I'm already feeling like a different person."*

Intense physical training and high-decibel harassment still lay ahead. But processing, after a 22-hour day and little sleep, offered the first suggestions that the recruits had entered a new and different culture.

Fisher, assigned to Bravo Company, gave blood samples that could provide DNA identification if he were killed. He learned his pay — $1,587 a month — and received a debit card to use at the PX. All but a bristly nub of his hair hit the floor. He received two sets of combat uniforms.

He filled out forms. He stood in formation. He joined the others in constant repetition of the Soldier's Creed: "... I will always place the mission first; I will never accept defeat; I will never quit; I will never leave a fallen comrade. ..."

He had barely settled in, but already Fisher looked worn.

On the evening of the first full day at Fort Benning, he complained that he'd injured his left elbow when he slipped and fell on a stairway, aggravating his childhood injury. He went to the infirmary for an X-ray.

The next morning, he was told that doctors would need to see his records and do more tests. He also learned that the childhood injury, which he'd never mentioned in an exhaustive medical questionnaire, might disqualify him from service.

But the Army had questions. Fisher wouldn't be the first recruit with second thoughts to fake an injury in hope of heading home. For six hours, he and the Army waged a battle of wills.

"I'm tired of being treated like (expletive)," he said. "It's all I want — just to leave. I'm scared. I'm sad. And I'm angry."

But after Fisher met with a commander and talked things through, the world looked different. He wanted to stay.

"This scared me more than anything ever has," he said of the jolting arrival at Fort Benning.

Within a span of 48 hours, his entire frame of reference had shifted. He'd joined the Army to make a different life. Now that life was upon him.

"I just keep telling myself to be happy," Fisher said. "I'm already feeling like a different person."

Fisher and the rest of his new unit marched along a quiet, pleasantly wooded road from the processing center on their way to begin 14 weeks of basic training. The drill sergeants coaxed them along with benign smiles, thank-yous and gosh-darns, until the recruits stood in a field before a 20-foot-high mound of duffel bags.

That's when everything changed.

"When I give you the command of 'Go!,' you are going to have two minutes to secure your bag and get back in your position," bellowed 1st Sgt. Brian Clarke to roughly 200 recruits standing before him. "Is that understood?"

At his command, piped-in sound effects of an artillery barrage pierced the quiet. Air-raid sirens blared. Babies cried — at a deafening decibel level. Drill sergeants swarmed and screamed.

It was a rigged game. The recruits frantically but futilely tossed aside bags in search of their own. They paid for their ineptitude with push-ups to a cadence that crackled over a bullhorn. Faces clenched in the Georgia heat. Sweat dripped.

Then they tried again and failed. And again — this time, one recruit hunched over and vomited. The scene became a morass of stress, disorientation and exhaustion.

In other words, an unqualified success.

For about 40 years, the exercise known as the "shark attack" or "bag drill" has provided Army recruits with a shocking introduction to basic training. It sets the tone for the first three weeks of boot camp — "red phase," in military parlance — when anxiety, physical exertion, sleep deprivation and isolation open the door to a recruit's psyche.

"There is some science to this," said Col. Casey P. Haskins, the brigade commander who oversaw training of 20,000 infantry recruits a year at Fort Benning. "An adult fundamentally won't change his values through a logical discussion. It requires a significant emotional event. That provides us an opening, a very brief opening. In that time, we have to pour through and cause them to be open to the possibility of accepting what we're telling them."

It's a period in which the recruits have little freedom of movement and virtually no independent decision-making ability. Exacting rules work hand in hand with punishing consequences.

In some ways, the isolation proved most onerous. For many of the young privates, the Army chaperoned their first trip away from home. A couple of the men in Fisher's platoon had left behind pregnant wives or girlfriends, whose own struggles with the separation created additional stress for the recruits.

The drill sergeants' advice: Suck it up, soldier.

In Fisher's 2nd Platoon, John Eldridge, a bullish munitions expert weathered beyond his 46 years, represented the Old School, right out of Hollywood's central casting, grounded in physical training and discipline. He led recruits in exercises with names like Mountain Man, Crocodile and Iron Mike and extolled the virtues of an Army that had allowed him to see the world.

Along the way, he'd also lost a marriage. He offered relationship wisdom: *If you get a Dear John letter, don't let it affect your training; there are more and better fish in the sea.* The advice easily could be translated to MySpace or Facebook — where, in the modern military, long-distance relationships lived and died.

"This is my last cycle," Eldridge warned 2nd Platoon. "So don't piss me off."

Tommy Beauchamp, the chief drill sergeant, represented the "new" Army, focused on skills and efficiency. A Special Forces sniper who had seen duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, Beauchamp refused to pin the infantry's crossed rifles on the chest of any man he wouldn't serve alongside.

Natural attrition alone proved a potent screen: One-fifth of Fisher's 40-man platoon would be gone within eight weeks. Half of those would succumb to physical injury. Half would simply quit, go AWOL in the middle of the night.

"Just so you understand," Eldridge barked early in basic training, "this is our little (expletive) world. You cannot beat us."

Fisher struggled with the physical demands. He focused on surviving this ordeal, and even two days into basic, he already had scaled back his expectations of joining the Rangers. But emotionally, he seemed to adapt well.

"For some reason, I'm a lot happier," Fisher said near the end of the first week. "I've pretty much given up on the life that I had, honestly."

Even the hard-bitten Eldridge could see the young recruit's upside.

"He's starting to come out of his shell," the drill sergeant said. "Fisher has potential to be a leader. He just needs someone to put a foot in his ass to get him to do it."

Others failed to adjust to the regimented life. Fisher's bunkmate, an 18-year-old who had been in and out of jail in his hometown of Syracuse, N.Y., joined the Army as a last resort — unlike Fisher, he was a "waiver" who'd been accepted in spite of his personal troubles. He said he "wanted to straighten up and turn into a hero or something."

It wasn't happening. Meanwhile, his behavior repeatedly triggered the drill sergeants' wrath and earned punishment for the whole unit. Fisher began to worry for the kid. A certain amount of self-policing takes place within a platoon, and the 2nd seemed on the verge of meting out its own physical punishment.

"I'm not going to take part in it because I'm not that kind of person," Fisher said. "But he's going to get hurt. The kid just makes stupid mistakes over and over — and it hurts us. I told him I'd be there for him.

"But he just doesn't seem to care."

Early in basic training, hundreds of weary recruits filed into an auditorium with a giant video screen for a lecture on "Army values."

Lt. Col. Donald Okura, the training battalion commander, thanked the young men for joining in a time of war, and then proceeded to explain the moral precepts designed to guide American soldiers.

His talk came at a moment when the Army still grappled with some fundamental problems of fighting an insurgency in a politically charged landscape. It faced a daunting task: Train soldiers to kill; then teach them where to draw the line.

SELF-DISCIPLINE. *From left, Rob-drick Robinson, Fisher and Christopher Wegner talk with Fisher's bunkmate about his behavior. He had been consistently causing problems at basic training, and the rest of the platoon was paying the price. Because of the culture of basic training, where all suffer for the faults of one, recruits often police their own ranks. Fisher said he worried that the pep talks for his bunkmate might not be enough but he wouldn't be part of any physical confrontation. "I told him I'd be there for him," Fisher said. "But he just doesn't seem to care."*

BEGINNING TO FEEL LIKE A SOLDIER. *Early in basic training, the recruits are issued M-16s. For Fisher, it was his first time holding such a weapon, and he became playful — after the drill sergeant passed — quietly making machine-gun noises as he pretended to fire.*

ATTENTION TO DETAIL. *Fisher checks his stance and the position of his hand as his platoon at basic training learns how to salute properly. The first weeks of boot camp — "red phase," the military calls it — are intended to break the recruits down to nothing — an intense period of sleep deprivation, physical training and psychological harassment — so they can be built back up over time in the Army mold. "There is some science to this," the brigade commander says.*

TRAINING UNDER FIRE. *Eight weeks into basic training, on Aug. 16, 2007, Fisher and his squad are hit by a simulated improvised explosive device during a raid on a mock insurgent village. A drill sergeant rules that the IED would have killed half the squad; Ian and four others are allowed to continue. For the company's first big exercise, it didn't go well.*

Incidents in Iraq like the mistreatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison, and the way that fiasco hindered U.S. ability to counter the insurgency, provided the impetus for this training. Okura flashed onto the screen some of the now-infamous photographs that ignited anger against the U.S. presence.

"What's the worst thing about this?" Okura asked. "It damaged the reputation of the Army. In your training here, you will never be taught to take prisoners of war and punch them in the back of the neck. You will never be taught to tie them up to electrical wires. You will never be taught that, because that's not the behavior of soldiers."

Following his lecture, the recruits — some of whom nodded off and were culled from the crowd by drill sergeants for punitive push-ups — watched scenes from "Saving Private Ryan."

Afterward, Fisher and others wrestled with the concept of a clear line of moral behavior. They wrestled with it again about eight weeks into basic, when an ambulance siren jolted Echo Company from sleep.

Four members of 4th Platoon had jumped one of their own as he returned to the barracks late one night. His transgression: He had violated rules by sneaking out and using the phone. The beating shattered his jaw and required reconstructive surgery.

They had crossed that line.

The occasional fight after lights-out wasn't the issue — that was almost expected in boot camp as the recruits sought to bring wayward comrades into line and enforce lessons of shared responsibility.

But each platoon developed its own personality, and 4th Platoon had a disturbing edge. One of its drill sergeants, a 24-year-old veteran of two Iraq tours, felt an urgency to impart the realities of combat to his new recruits. To that end, he'd shown them his own battlefield videos.

Technically, it was a violation of regulations. Practically, it hammered home the stark and brutal truth about what could lie ahead. And unquestionably, it fostered a less disciplined atmosphere.

A clique of privates, including the platoon leader, had made a habit out of pursuing and punishing the unit's weaker links for even minor infractions. In late-night beatings, they'd keep their blows to the body to minimize physical evidence.

But even the occasional black eye would be dismissed by the shamed victim as an accident, a fall down the stairs. One 4th Platoon private had been nicknamed "Spot" in deference to his constant shiner.

Shadraq McBride, a member of 4th Platoon who later transferred to 2nd, described the culture of fear that the clique of violent leaders enforced.

"The group up there was just more jumpy," he explained. "If you did what you were supposed to do, were squared away, you'd be fine. If you didn't, it was tough."

In the wake of the shattered jaw, even the sergeants took notice. The four privates responsible for the beating were isolated from the rest of the company, with their bunks and gear moved to the common area. And 1st Sgt. Clarke spoke firmly to Echo Company's drill sergeants.

"The assaults — all this 'I fell down the stairs' crap — that needs to end now," he told them.

Within hours after the ambulance sped the injured soldier away, Echo Company's commander, 24-year-old West Point graduate Capt. Tom Koh, paced before the soldiers in his unit. He knew he had to prepare them to get the job done on the battlefield. Yet he also needed to emphasize the moral parameters.

Koh scolded the recruits for the beating incident. Then he told the story of the 1968 My Lai massacre — that dark chapter from Vietnam in which American soldiers slaughtered more than 300 unarmed civilians.

He explained how a young helicopter pilot, Hugh Thompson Jr., had mitigated the carnage by landing and putting himself between other Americans and the Vietnamese to stop the killing — an act that exposed him to virulent criticism at first but later was recognized as heroic.

"That soldier had the values of personal courage and the discipline to stop what he knew was wrong," Koh said. "My overall goal is that you guys understand values and discipline.

"And we need to get some."

The first eight weeks had been difficult in many ways — but perhaps none so much as understanding how values and discipline played out in 21st-century combat.

Fisher had watched graphic videos. He saw an Iraqi man being shot several times for refusing to obey a command. He saw a tank crush a man. He learned how to search the dead body of an enemy.

"I almost feel like I'm going crazy," he said. "Like I don't have feelings anymore. It's like, I'm this soldier, I'm being trained to go to Iraq, to kill people and possibly be killed.

"I mean, what's left?"

Haskins, regarded as one of the Army's rising stars, had been charged with instituting a top-down review of the way things were done at Fort Benning. His goal: produce "thinking soldiers led by thinking leaders."

Part of that equation involved understanding situations in a way that would lead to the most judicious use of force — a factor that was lacking at the start of the Iraq war, in his view.

The new wave of recruits was being taught largely by soldiers who had experienced the lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, where the battlefield loomed more nuanced and complex than in previous wars.

Koh hoped to pound home how isolated mistakes and miscalculations could sabotage a larger military strategy — that was the lesson that had to be learned from the 4th Platoon private's unconscionable beating.

"Any one of these privates, within a few months, could be the gunner on a gun truck," he said. "Within seconds, he has to make a moral, tactical decision about a car speeding up to a checkpoint.

"Do I engage? Do I engage to kill?"

Nearly five years into the Iraq war, recruiting had become more difficult, especially for the more dangerous slots like infantry. Not only had incentives like signing bonuses spiked to lure more young men into the ranks, but recruiters also had lowered the bar to entry.

The Army issued more waivers to overlook shortcomings that previously would have kept an individual out of the service: a criminal record, medical issues, low academic achievement.

Unknown even to the sergeants before the beating incident, Echo Company had an unusually high number of waivers in its ranks — nearly 80 recruits, or about 40 percent of the company. »

PUSHED AT EVERY STEP. *Drill sergeant John Eldridge uses his walking stick to encourage Fisher during field training exercises on Sept. 16, 2007, 13 weeks into basic training. "Yeah, I get attached to some of them," Eldridge says. "I even got attached to Fisher. I don't know why. He's a good kid; he's come a long way. ... They were young boys when they got here; now they're a well-oiled machine."*

DOWN AND DIRTY. *Following a long day — on top of a long week — and suffering from heat rash on his back, chest and neck, Fisher finds himself at his tent, bowing his head in prayer. He explains later: "I've been praying that God takes this stuff off my back."*

PRIM AND PROPER. *With the rigors of basic training in the past, Fisher and Bradford Taylor use a mirror in the barracks Sept. 27, 2007, to prepare for the Turning Blue ceremony, when they will be pinned with their blue cord signifying the completion of their training and their qualification as infantrymen. Afterward, they will get their assignments.*

STARTING TO FIT IN. *Fisher takes cover in the woods with his weapon during the week-long field training exercises that closed out basic training. The recruits put all their newly learned skills to the test, with raids on mock Iraqi villages, "attacks" on their base and round-the-clock security details, all performed in the Georgia summer heat. It culminates in a 10-mile march, with each recruit carrying 65 pounds of gear while facing various battle drills.*

It was the highest concentration of waivers the instructors had ever trained — a test case whose performance the Army wanted to track. (It experienced no higher attrition than the approximate 10 percent average, Haskins would later learn.)

But in the midst of basic, pressures in camp and at home moved several of the young soldiers to go AWOL.

At least seven recruits from 2nd Platoon would try to run. The AWOL rate surprised even the experienced drill sergeants. And 4th Platoon's beating incident exposed a troubling discipline problem.

In the end, two of the offending 4th Platoon privates were tossed out of the Army. Two others had to restart basic training. The platoon was disbanded, with its remaining members dispersed among the other three.

Slowly, life returned to a routine in Georgia's stifling August heat.

Fisher learned to operate the "SAW," or Squad Automatic Weapon — the M-249, a 17-pound light machine gun that can provide firepower approximating a larger weapon but with greater accuracy and mobility. He wrote letters to his dad, his mom and a friend named Kayla he knew from Lakewood. He hadn't heard from his girlfriend, Ashley, but he was surprised when he received a letter from Kayla.

He hung her picture in his locker. And he thought about his buddies back home.

"Every morning, I wake up and I wonder what Buddha's doing," he said. "I know he's either drinking or sleeping."

The trials of boot camp also served to sharpen Fisher's sense of why he had joined the Army. He watched the others go AWOL and figured, *It would be easy. I could sleep in my own bed.* But then he'd recalibrate his purpose.

"Everyone said, 'Don't change who you are,' " Fisher said. "But I really have. That's why I'm a little scared to go home. This place is kind of becoming home."

Meanwhile, the sergeants sought to refocus Echo Company.

A simulated raid on an insurgent village demanded that the platoons put into practice much of what they'd learned. Koh briefed the men on their objective: Assault a mock-up cluster of buildings and observation platforms guarded by insurgents wielding AK-47s. Expect booby traps, IEDs and other surprises.

In the morning, 2nd Platoon's "fire squads" made their way uphill through low brush and prepared to storm the buildings and clear them, room by room. Then they heard their signal: A bank of machine guns opened up on their left.

Fisher's squad was still 15 yards from the first doorway when it was taken out by an IED, although Beauchamp ruled that the bomb would have killed only half the squad and allowed Fisher and four others to continue.

Another squad entered an already secured building and failed to shout the prearranged signal: "War eagle! War eagle! Coming in!" The soldiers who had secured the building opened fire — and "killed" five members of their own platoon.

All told, 18 members of 2nd Platoon died in the drill.

It was Echo Company's first big exercise — and a fiasco. As the disappointed instructors took stock afterward, they lamented the lack of leadership and could take solace only in the fact that there were still weeks of training to go.

Time to fix mistakes. Time to improve.

Ultimately, 13 weeks of basic training led Ian Fisher to this — a 10-mile march in the thick, damp Georgia heat through a series of combat tests that would end, for those who endured, at a place called Honor Hill.

It had been a time of struggle and transformation.

Fisher's initial fears subsided as the disciplined military culture supplanted his free-flowing suburban upbringing. The Army had poured through the cracks in his identity produced by those early days of shocking mental stress and challenged him, toughened him and given him a glimpse of his potential.

It also had given him a cold, hard appraisal of his limitations. His ambitions of moving on to Airborne and Ranger training had dissolved amid repeated and futile efforts to pass his physical training. Injuries, including a possible stress fracture in his pelvis, had hindered his performance, yet he was reluctant to report them for fear of being set back in his training.

Fisher did a reality check: Instead of excellence, he would settle for survival.

"Right now," he said, "it's just about completing the next step. It's about moving to the next level."

A week of field training exercises had plunged Fisher and the rest of Echo Company into a sweaty, stinking gantlet of maneuvers in the Georgia woods. Heat rash covered his back, his chest, his neck — "like a thousand needles." Temperatures hit 100 degrees. Humidity coaxed even more sweat from their bodies, soaked their uniforms and fermented into a sour stench.

Now, basic training had wound down to one final maneuver, which would culminate with a brutal uphill slog to the elaborate, ceremonial pinning of the crossed rifles on the chest of each private.

"Blood rifles," they call it, because the drill sergeants drive the pins through the uniform and into flesh.

Members of the 2nd Platoon bushwhacked through forest with 65 pounds of gear strapped to their backs. They fended off two IED attacks and enemy fire. They crossed a river and executed three missions, including the simulated rescue of a downed pilot. Two miles farther, they reached a village and secured a two-story building held by the enemy. They battled fatigue and dehydration.

Then they marched into the night.

"Once again, it's the theory of the mind," Beauchamp told them during a canteen break. "All your weak minds telling you that you can't do it."

When they reached the last, long climb, the sounds of groaning and panting hung in the humid darkness. Blisters burned and bled. When one recruit fell behind, others propped him up.

At the top of the rise, heavy-metal music blared from mammoth speakers behind a wooden enclosure. As the privates filed inside, they saw huge bonfires illuminating a stage at one end. At the other, wisps of dry-ice steam spilled from a giant cauldron. Seven torches represented famous American infantry battles through history.

The glow from two others signified, as one sergeant announced, "battles we are currently fighting and winning."

"The World Trade Center, the USS Cole, the embassies in Tanzania and Kenya were the first strikes of a new war, a global war on terror, a war which will be fought on many fronts the world over by the infantrymen of today and tomorrow," the sergeant continued. "You are now the guardian of freedom and the American way of life!

"A warrior!"

The scene was one part patriotic pep rally, one part Hollywood stagecraft. But for those who had survived basic training — about one-third of 2nd Platoon did not — and endured the final march to this moment, the atmosphere seemed an appropriate touch.

What happened next would seal them into a brotherhood.

Stepping through the semi-darkness, the drill sergeants approached each private and presented him the crossed rifles. Drill sergeant John Eldridge hammered the two-pronged pin into Fisher's chest with his fist, drawing blood.

NO GLORY WITHOUT PAIN. *Fisher braces for his crossed-rifles pin at Honor Hill. Drill sergeant John Eldridge holds the pin in place and prepares to secure it with a fist. "I hit him square on the chest," Eldridge said. "He had two holes, and blood dripping down from each — 'blood rifles.' "*