

THE SATURDAY POST



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AMERICAN SOLDIER

ARMY LIFE HITS CLOSE TO HOME



"FOUR-MAN STACK." Ian Fisher, right, and the rest of his team prepare to secure a room during a basic-training drill at Fort Benning, Ga., on Aug. 15, 2007. Fisher's transition to military life soon becomes complicated when he is stationed at Fort Carson and his high school friends an hour away vie for his attention.

Training for Iraq, Ian Fisher faces another war inside himself

Ian Fisher survived the sweaty gantlet of basic training, but he faced a steep learning curve when it came to everyday Army life. Assigned to Fort Carson, just an hour's drive from his teenage stomping grounds in Jefferson County, he found himself pulled in two directions. The Army sought to prepare him for the rigors of deployment in Iraq, where he itched to put his fighting instincts to work. But on the home front, his weekend visits with friends reminded him of the carefree, hard-partying life he'd left behind. The two worlds seemed destined to collide — with potentially disastrous consequences to the career Fisher hoped would redefine him as a soldier and an adult. » STORY, 21-25A

Friday» Earning "blood rifles"
Today» 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

OBITUARY



"MASH" writer dies. Comedy writer Larry Gelbart was famed for his work on "MASH" and "Tootsie." » 30A

HEALTH CARE

LAWMAKERS FOCUS ON IMMIGRANTS

As they work through divisive issues in the health reform bill, legislators want to be sure they don't give coverage to illegal immigrants. » 29A

Music to their molars. A free dental clinic in Adams County draws hundreds; by 6 a.m., organizers had all they could handle. The clinic continues today. » DENVER & THE WEST, 1B

SPORTS



J.D. Pooley, The Associated Press

OHIO NIGHTMARE FOR BUFFALOES

CU was hoping Game 2 would go better. Instead, almost everything went wrong. The Buffs lost 54-38 to the Toledo Rockets. » 1C

Prep Football

In the battle of the top two teams in Class 3A, No. 2 Mountain View upsets Fort Morgan 42-18.

POST PREPS PULLOUT » 1-4CC

Funds foil Gates plans

The rubber firm takes land back as financing falters for developers.

By Margaret Jackson
The Denver Post

The much-touted redevelopment of the old Gates Rubber factory south of downtown has become the latest victim of the financial meltdown plaguing the real estate industry.

The project, which would have been Denver's largest redevelopment since Stapleton, was expected to cost \$1 billion and take up to 15 years to complete. The city had pledged \$85 million in public financing toward cleaning up the site and rebuilding it into a residential and retail hub designed around access to public transportation.

Developers originally projected the city would gain 2,500 housing units and 5,000 permanent jobs from the project, boosting city tax revenues.

But with developer Cherokee Denver unable to get financing to continue environ-

GATES » 19A

9/11 ANNIVERSARY

Light shines on victims, volunteers

By Suzanne Ma
The Associated Press

NEW YORK» Volunteers marked the eighth anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks Friday by tilling gardens, writing letters to soldiers, setting out flags — and, at ground zero, joining the somber ritual of reading the names of the lost.

President Barack Obama, who observed his first Sept. 11 as president by declaring it a national day of service, laid a wreath at the Pentagon and, with wife Michelle, helped paint the living room of a Habitat for Humanity house in Washington.

"We honor all those who gave their lives so that others might live, and all the survivors who battled burns and wounds and helped each other rebuild their lives," Obama said. He said the

REMEMBRANCE » 17A

Potomac incident» Reports arising from Coast Guard drill create scare. » 17A

Tribute» Firefighters honor N.Y. brethren with stair climbs.

» DENVER & THE WEST, 2B



INSIDE

Business » 5-9B | Comics » 7-10D | Contact The Post » 2B | Lottery » 2B | Markets » 6B | Movies » 4-5D | Obituaries » 9B | Puzzles » 8D, 10-11D

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SMOKED OUT. A cigarette break became a push-up break when squad leader Sgt. Michael Kraft caught Ian Fisher leaning on his weapon Nov. 28, 2007, at Fort Carson, where Fisher was stationed after basic training. Watching Fisher's extra work is Pvt. Kory Hohn. Push-ups, Fisher could do. But the sit-ups and 2-mile run tripped him up on physical training tests.



SPONTANEOUS PROPOSAL. During a weekend back home, Ian walked through the mall with his girlfriend, Kayla Spitzlberger, on Dec. 15, 2007, and asked whether she wanted to go ring shopping. She was excited, but working out the financing made him nervous. They picked out the engagement ring in about five minutes, but Ian wouldn't officially propose until Christmas Day in front of her family.

ON AND OFF POST TRIALS IN PRIVATE LIFE

WRITTEN BY KEVIN SIMPSON WITH MICHAEL RILEY, BRUCE FINLEY AND CRAIG F. WALKER *The Denver Post*

Basic training didn't begin to prepare Ian Fisher for military life.

For that, the Army announced it was sending him home to Colorado to begin his duties as a soldier at Fort Carson with the Iraq-bound 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division.

Things didn't start well.

In mid-October of 2007, on his fifth day of processing, Fisher met the company commander, Capt. Walter Dunn. First, he made the mistake of entering the room without knocking. Ordered to try again, Fisher knocked but then failed to salute. Instructed to salute, he failed to hold his salute until the captain finished.

He tried again and got it right.

Some rules here were simple protocols. Some, like his platoon sergeant's creed — don't be late, don't lie, don't steal — were inviolable commandments clearly expressed on Day One. Others were unspoken, until broken.

One afternoon, Fisher wandered into his barracks and found several platoon veterans, most in their mid-20s, recounting previous deployments to Iraq. Jaymeson Wilcox, a sergeant who had received the Purple Heart, told how a roadside bomb in 2004 had sent shrapnel into his neck, burned his skin and left him unconscious.

"I want to know what it's like to be hit by an IED," blurted Fisher, 18 but still caught up in a neophyte's curiosity about combat. "I think it would be fun."

The veterans bristled.

"It's nothing you want to go through," Wilcox said.

Afterward, Sgt. Randy Armstrong called Fisher aside. Armstrong, who before joining the Army had served four years as a Marine and helped spearhead the 2003 Iraq invasion, instructed him on keeping his mouth shut and knowing his place.

He ordered the private first class to write the name of every U.S. soldier killed to that point in Iraq. When Fisher submitted a computer printout of the names, Armstrong ordered



10 DAYS, 40 WINKS. Fisher joins Spec. Andrew Smith, left, and Spec. Ryon Rich, center, in making the most of a crumpled car March 13, 2008, after a near-sleepless night and a successful mission during 10 days of training at Camp Red Devil at Fort Carson, where Fisher has joined the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division. He left basic training in September 2007 and would have 11 months on post before heading to Iraq.

him to write them by hand.

"I basically learned my place," Fisher said afterward. "I joined the Army not really knowing what the Army was. Basic training isn't Army life. Until I got to this unit, I didn't know what it was to actually live as a soldier."

Basic training had put some geographic and psychological distance between Fisher and the unfocused life he'd sought to put behind him.

And while he loved his family and friends, he took pride in the changes that had begun to shape him into something more than an aimless teen whose life revolved around buddies, parties and girlfriends.

Now he faced an internal struggle to forge a productive future, one he'd have to wage on a difficult battlefield — his home turf. With his old Jefferson County stomping ground only about an hour's drive up Interstate 25, the lure of civilian life, and its freedoms, distracted his development as a soldier.

Training at Fort Carson aimed at getting these soldiers to Iraq within months. In a large, darkened room, he engaged the enemy in what resembled a life-sized video game that provides the groundwork for later live-fire techniques. He took part in urban combat exercises. He attended classes called Combat Life Savers and Enemy Prisoner of War. He was lectured on alcohol awareness, cold-weather survival and suicide prevention.

He took physical training tests — and repeatedly failed to do the required 53 sit-ups in two minutes or complete a 2-mile run in the required 15:54. He drilled diligently on

the firing range, scoring high on his marksmanship.

Designated the SAW gunner, for Squad Automatic Weapon, he handled the M-249 light machine gun that he'd first encountered in basic. He learned to scan for IEDs and identify suicide bombers and ambushes while rolling through towns and along open roads.

By mid-December, Ian was looking forward to a weekend off. After helping his dad move from his Lakewood house to a new home near Morrison, he and his new girlfriend, Kayla, headed off to do some Christmas shopping at a Littleton mall.

Passing through the food court, the couple bumped into Ashley, Ian's previous romantic interest. They shared an awkward hug and some small talk.

Ian and Kayla clasped hands and continued through the mall. As they approached a jewelry store, Ian turned to her.

"Hey, you want to go ring shopping?" he asked.

Kayla smiled and nodded.

They had met in freshman math class but never really dated. She wrote to him during basic training, and once they reconnected when

Ian returned, she decided to give the relationship a chance while he served at Fort Carson.

Soon after, they talked marriage, although Ian had yet to officially propose.

They decided on a ring in about five minutes: a princess-cut diamond set in white gold. Ian filled out a credit application. The store clerk helped them crunch numbers until they figured out how he would pay for it.

On Christmas Day, Ian gathered with Kayla's family and fidgeted while presents were opened. It took him the better part of an hour to muster the courage to ask for her hand while relatives looked on.

He explained that he and Kayla had been best of friends for four years and wanted to take the relationship to the next level. He talked about wanting to be part of her family, about still having a lot of learning to do but hoping to prove that they can "take on something this heavy."

He glided to one knee before Kayla.

"But at this time, I would love to ask you ... if you will marry me."

"Oh, Ian," she answered, giggling.

The engagement ended before Valentine's Day. »

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

The Denver Post



DOING WHAT HE CAN. During war-games training at the National Training Center in the Mojave Desert of California, Fisher limps through his tent on his way to secure the entrance May 5, 2008. He had been taken off duty since an ankle injury earlier in the week. While his platoon reacted to a nighttime "attack," Ian had to stay back but still took part in the training exercise. "I'm beginning to think I'm made of glass," Fisher said of his latest injury. Earlier in the year, he injured his foot in a training exercise and strained his back while weightlifting.

On Super Tuesday, the early February day in 2008 when the national political landscape was being reshaped, Fisher spent his day monitoring communications from an armored personnel carrier and guarding an ammunition tent — on crutches — while his unit performed training exercises on the Fort Carson grounds.

Outside the tent, Fisher smoked a cigarette and explained his injury to Brent Nixon, a 20-year-old private from California. He had been most of the way through a 3-mile run when he'd stepped into a pothole and rolled his ankle.

"Honestly," Fisher said, "the first thing that went through my head was, 'Yes! I don't have to go out into the field.' And look where I am now."

"In the field," Nixon laughed.

Nixon already had served one tour in Iraq and wasn't sure he would be deployed again. He told Fisher that during his first tour, he had survived 10 IEDs and expected to get a medical discharge from the Army because of post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, which affected his short-term memory.

"You say your name," Nixon said, "and five minutes later I'll forget. It's a real problem when I go on dates."

Fisher's relatively minor training injuries had resulted in prescriptions for pain medications and muscle relaxants. The bottles accumulated in a drawer in his room.

During a visit home, Ian sat at the dining room table showing his dad a new tattoo. Beside him on the table sat his weekend necessities — cellphone, energy drink, cigarettes and a bottle of Vicodin.

He rationalized his reliance: He didn't want the Army to profile him as a faker. He had seen others scorned as malingerers for using physical issues to dodge duty. He had already been allowed to slide on his running during physical training. Better to just take the painkillers and soldier on as best he could.

"I'm concerned," Eric Fisher said.

"About my Vicodin?" Ian asked.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? Because I think you're abusing them," Eric said. "You keep taking those as recreational and you're going to end up immune to them. They're not going to do you any good. Look at you — you're shaking a mile a minute."

"I'm not shaking," Ian insisted, holding up his hand. It trembled visibly.

"No," Eric said, "you're just twitching like crazy. So be truthful with me. Are you taking those things 24/7?"

"No."

"How often are you taking them?"

"As needed."

"What do you mean, 'as needed'?"



A FATHER'S CONCERN. While at his dad's new home near Morrison on March 8, 2008, Ian sits at the table with his essentials: cellphone, energy drink, cigarettes and a bottle of Vicodin. After a series of training injuries, Ian is taking pain medications and muscle relaxants. Ian's dad, Eric, expresses concern about the drugs, but Ian dismisses it: "At least it's not coke, Ecstasy, weed ... I've got like six, seven different medications now. They give it to you for a reason. I'm not going to just let them sit there." He says his breakup with Kayla doesn't have anything to do with his drug use. Then he adds, "But it helps."

Eric pressed. "Needed for what?"

"Pain."

"Pain my ass," Eric continued.

"What pain do you have on weekends?"

They dropped the subject, but the issue festered. Eric already had begun to realize that his son's assignment to Fort Carson had become a problem. Too close to home. Too much girl trouble. Too many week-

ends spent partying with old friends. Too many temptations.

He worried that his son had charted a dangerous course.

Only days later, though, Ian Fisher appeared upbeat as his company prepared to head into the field for training at Fort Carson's Camp Red Devil. He and the rest of his unit piled into their Bradleys and began a two-hour trip that, owing to mechanical break-

downs, ended up taking nine.

Inside the Bradley, the constant rumble of the engine mixed with the thick odor of diesel fuel. As the vehicle crawled along, the soldiers' heads bobbed. Fisher zoned out and let his mind go blank.

When they arrived at their simulated forward operating base the next morning, the door to the vehicle swung open to reveal a surreal scene of Bradleys and tanks spread across the starkly beautiful landscape of rolling hills colored by tall, dry grass, red dirt and cactuses stretching to the mountains.

Squad leader Armstrong marked off an imaginary "glass house" by using soldiers' helmets to signify the building's corners and entryways. Fisher and three others created a formation called a "four-man stack" and practiced entering and clearing a room. One soldier, a recent arrival from boot camp, repeatedly failed to

execute the maneuver properly.

In a later drill, Fisher played the role of an insurgent and lay on the ground while, one by one, the others took turns searching him. Then Armstrong led them through individual and team "bounding" techniques — the maneuver a soldier uses to advance on an enemy without making himself an easy target.

They finished the morning session with a march to the top of a mountain spur before heading back. Then they sat quietly, resting against the side of their Bradley, and cleaned their weapons. Armstrong advised them to take care of personal hygiene.

Nobody moved.

"Look," the sergeant finally said, raising his voice in a parental crescendo, "if you didn't brush your teeth this morning ... brush your teeth!"

One soldier pointed to the toothbrush Fisher was using — to clean his SAW.



GOOD EYES, FISHER. Fisher escorts Cpl. Luis Maciel, playing the role of a local villager, to a truck at the National Training Center on May 4, 2008. Fisher had spotted Maciel behind a bush while patrolling the mountains, yelling, "How do you say, 'Hands up?'" as he sought the Arabic translation. Maciel turned out to be a "high-value target" in the exercise.



FRUSTRATION ALL AROUND. Ian isn't where he's supposed to be — Fort Carson. Instead, he and Pvt. 2 Jonathan Duenez are on Ian's bed back home in Morrison on March 31, 2008. Eric Fisher worries they may be AWOL and that Ian's assignment at Fort Carson, so close to home, is impeding his military career. "You really don't realize you're in the military yet, by coming home every weekend," Eric says. "Maybe you need to stay down there." The two soldiers returned to base the next day.

duty, a \$300 fine.

It could have been much worse, including loss of rank and pay, or even discharge. But Weisensel wanted to put this hiccup behind them. He hoped Fisher would be resilient.

"You give them a little bit of punishment, and if he sucks it up — drives on, continues to soldier — then lesson learned," Weisensel explained. "I think he'll be all right. It'll be over with before we go to Iraq. Case closed."

Personal problems receded as Fisher and his unit entered their final war-games training for Iraq in the Mojave Desert.

The National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., covers 1,200 square miles of arid flats and jagged mountains between Los Angeles and Las Vegas where each year 50,000 U.S. soldiers go through a series of carefully designed scenarios. Military contractors have constructed replicas of Iraqi villages inhabited by role-playing Iraqi-Americans.

Production crews gave battle scenes authenticity, right down to simulated bomb blasts and bloody amputations. It marked the closest to reality that an untested soldier could experience before shipping out.

In one early exercise, Fisher's unit, led by Armstrong, rumbled along in four Humvees toward a mountain objective. They traversed a steep slope in search of potential enemy mortar pits.

Armstrong, who had grown up poor in rural Arkansas, already had seen combat in Iraq. Now, he looked at the soldiers under his command and saw kids who seemed sheltered and soft.

He needed to change that in order to bring them home alive from Iraq.

On a landscape strewn with boulders, scrub oak and cactus, where black lizards intermittently scurried across the terrain, Armstrong ordered his men to fan out and climb toward a ridgeline, searching for evidence of mortar launch sites.

They trudged along, laden with equipment and battle armor, up a 1,000-foot vertical rise. Some soldiers gulped their entire water supplies within a half-hour. Fisher paced himself.

But about halfway up, Pvt. Robert Bonner collapsed.

Bonner, fresh out of basic training, gathered himself and wobbled along for another 20 yards up the ravine — and then buckled again. Ashen-faced, he lay on his back, glasses fogging, searching for something — anything — to get him up the hill.

Getting no sympathy from Armstrong, Bonner rose to his feet and tried again. He collapsed. Other members of the platoon hurried »



REDEMPTION. Full of laughter and energy after returning from a mission at the National Training Center, platoon members compete in ground fighting techniques May 4, 2008. Fisher celebrates with Pvt. Robert Bonner of Wheat Ridge after Bonner's victory, a day after he struggled on a climb up a steep ridge.

home, partying with friends.

He snapped.

He and a platoon buddy, 17-year-old Jonathan Duenez, were due back at the post by 2 p.m. It didn't look as if they would make it — or that they intended to.

"My mom's scared," Ian said. "I can't even tell my dad because he's the one that's so proud of me, so proud of who I've become. I can't bring myself to tell my dad that I've become so weak and I'm doing so many stupid things in my life."

Late that afternoon, though, Ian did call his father — half-crying, saying he just couldn't take this anymore, that he was coming home, that he was going AWOL. For about a half-hour, Eric tried to calm him down. But when they hung up, he still worried.

Finally, about 8 p.m., Ian stood at his front door, along with Duenez. "What are you doing here?"

Eric asked.

"Well," Ian said, "you've been in the Army. We're here to talk to you."

Eric took stock of the situation. Duenez simply looked like a homesick kid, not long out of basic, missing his family and girlfriend back home. He followed Ian's lead, and then their mutual unhappiness spiraled into something like desperation.

And the driving force in Ian's emotional meltdown, Eric figured, was his proximity to home. At the start, it had seemed that the posting to Fort Carson was a blessing. Not any-

more. He offered simple counsel.

"Maybe you need to quit coming home so often — get into this military thing," Eric told his son. "You really don't realize you're in the military yet, by coming home every weekend. Maybe you need to stay down there."

The two soldiers returned the next day. They marked time with menial duty as they awaited their punishment for taking an unauthorized long weekend. Their platoon sergeant, Joshua Weisensel, pronounced sentence: 14 days of extra



SWEPT CLEAN. Fisher looks to see whether any superiors are around before sweeping trash under a locker at Fort Carson on May 29, 2008. He is pulling extra duty as punishment for not reporting back to post on time back in March. "You give them a little bit of punishment, and if he sucks it up ... then lesson learned," his platoon sergeant said.



TAKING PRIDE. At the end of the national anthem, Ian offers an animated salute while attending a Colorado Rockies game June 7, 2008, with his mother, Teri Mercill. It was one of his many weekends spent away from Fort Carson.



BREAKING DOWN. Ian is comforted by friend Charles Gilmore as Ian struggles with his problems with the Army and with his latest girlfriend, Kirsten, during a party at Gilmore's apartment Aug. 1, 2008. With one foot in the Army and one foot back home with friends, he's beginning to feel as if he's not fitting in either place. "I'd just like to have a new beginning or a new life," Ian says.

mocking epithets as motivation. Armstrong conferred with other sergeants about whether to evacuate the struggling private from the drill or push him harder.

They decided to push. Fisher felt for the newcomer — but only a little.

"If I was in Iraq," he said, crouching on one knee in the ravine, "I'd beat his ass myself.... You gotta make yourself capable."

Fisher rose and turned to power his way up the mountain. Bonner struggled to his feet and eventually made it to the ridgeline. The Army designed the desert exercise to push soldiers to their limits, past pain and discomfort.

The next day, the troops prepared for a night mission searching a stretch of mountain range for the enemy and possible mortar activity. The company medic offered a small plastic bottle to Bonner.

"Take four of these," he said.

"What is this?" Bonner asked.

"It's Motrin — let me see that," Fisher interrupted.

Bonner tossed him the bottle. He crammed six pills into his mouth and gulped some water from his camelback.

"That's how you take pills," Fisher said, smiling.

The troops loaded into their vehicles and moved toward a steep mountainside, where they found a white truck abandoned at the base. Inside the vehicle, they discovered two shovels, a GPS device and ammunition.

Armstrong gathered Fisher and the rest of his squad and began the climb up the slope. Soon, they came across a mortar pit and continued their search along the ridgeline. In fading light, Fisher hailed the others in his unit.

"How do you say, 'Hands up?'" he hollered, looking for the Arabic translation. Then he repeated the question and pointed to a spot on the mountainside. "Right there — behind that bush!"

A bearded man emerged.

The play-actor in this scenario identified himself as a resident of the nearby village. He explained that he had been helping a friend, who had been discovered nearby, recover a delivery truck stolen by insurgents. The two men tried — unsuccessfully — to talk the soldiers into releasing them.

The squad scrambled down the mountain in darkness, using night-vision goggles that illuminated their path but distorted their depth perception. Almost to the bottom, Fisher stumbled and fell hard, twisting his right ankle — the same one he had hurt on the training run at Fort Carson.

He limped back to his vehicle.

By the time the prisoners had been transported and processed, it was 4 a.m. on May 4, 2008 — Fisher's 19th birthday. After two hours of sleep, he sat on his bed wrapping his foot and ankle with a bandage.

"I'm beginning to think I'm made of glass," he said.



A MOTHER'S WISH. The Rev. John H. Bell Jr. lays his hand on Ian during a baptism at Wellshire Presbyterian Church in Denver on July 13, 2008, Ian's mother's birthday. Teri Mercill said the greatest gift she could ask for was to see her son baptized before he deploys to Iraq. "I just feel like he has that little extra in his pocket to watch over him," she said.

Later, he came across Weisensel complimenting Armstrong for the job the unit had done the night before. Both men they had taken into custody turned out to be "high-value targets" in the exercise.

Weisensel turned toward him.

"Good eyes, Fisher," he said.

But the boost for his good work in the field later gave way to disappointment. The company medic wanted Fisher to get another opinion on his injured ankle. Now, Fisher returned with crutches and another prescription for Vicodin.

"What a great birthday present," he moaned.

In mid-June, on leave after the war games, Ian sat on the bed at his father's house with his fiancée and talked about marriage.

Her name was Kirsten.

The breakup with Kayla had gone badly. She'd found someone new, he'd fired off an angry message through MySpace, and there followed a flurry of recriminations over a restraining order. Meanwhile,

Kirsten saw Ian's name on MySpace and wondered whether it was the same person she had dated briefly in high school. She sent a message that triggered further communication via phone and text.

Next thing she knew, Ian asked her to marry him. Kirsten thought he was joking. But the two of them talked about it, and she figured, why not? When he showed up at her house the following weekend, it was the first time she had seen him in two or three years.

He wanted to get married before heading to Iraq. Kirsten felt that while they could still be engaged, maybe they should just consider themselves boyfriend and girlfriend — though she'd still wear the ring.

As they sat on his bed discussing the possibilities, conversation only seemed to confuse the issue.

Kirsten wasn't sure she was ready to get married and hadn't broadcast news of her engagement. Ian wanted to get legally married soon — July 4, only two weeks away, would be patriotic and an easy anniversary.

date to remember.

They quarreled without resolution.

Meanwhile, Ian prepared to do something special for another woman — his mom.

On the last day of his leave, a Sunday, Ian gave Teri Mercill what she had described as the greatest gift she could ask for. He accompanied her to Wellshire Presbyterian Church in Denver, where he was baptized on her birthday.

Ian pronounced it a "pretty interesting experience." He attracted the attention and admiration of a welcoming congregation, whose members would seek to maintain their connection by sending him prayers and "care packages" during his Iraq deployment.

Ian considered himself a religious person but said that baptism meant nothing to him spiritually. Still, he felt pleased that even going through the motions made such a difference to his mother.

"It has given me a lot stronger sense of peace letting him go on deployment," Teri said. "I just feel like he has that little extra in his pocket to watch over him.... He might have



ON THE BRINK OF DISMISSAL. Fisher shows his frustration during a counseling session with Sgt. 1st Class Weisensel, left, and Sgt. David Donoso on July 24, 2008. Fisher returned late from the weekend again, then turned himself in for having a drug problem, which lets him avoid any penalty for previous drug use. In the days to follow, Fisher's continued failure to cooperate put him in danger of getting kicked out. Instead, after a conference call with Fisher's dad, the battalion commander gave him another chance, assigning him to a new platoon and dropping him in rank.



TIME AT HOME. On a visit to his mom's apartment in Denver in July 2008, Ian leafs through a magazine aside his girlfriend, Kirsten Oliver. He points out a photograph of a billboard that's part of a photo essay on patriotism: "Yes, right there: God, Guns and Guts Made America Free. We Support Our Troops."



NEW OUTLOOK. Feeling good about his new platoon, Ian joins his buddies Aug. 31, 2008, for a party celebrating his and Pfc. Randy Stuker's, right, last weekend with friends before deploying to Iraq.

started out doing it for me, but I think he ended up doing it for himself."

After church, they had brunch at a nearby restaurant, where the celebration offered no hint of the trouble to come. Little more than a week later, Ian set in motion a sequence of events that, powered by anger, uncertainty and what he would later admit was his own immaturity, would threaten to destroy his military career.

While home for a weekend in July, partying with friends, Fisher discovered on Sunday night that his car wouldn't start. He telephoned his superiors and got clearance to return once he had gotten it repaired Monday morning.

The car was fixed by 9 a.m. But Fisher didn't immediately head back to Fort Carson — an issue that came to light when a suspicious squad leader called the mechanic to check. When Fisher finally did return, he had a confession to make: He had a drug problem.

As far as platoon sergeant Weisensel was concerned, Fisher had officially become a "problem child." There'd been the weekend hiccup with Duenez. He'd failed three straight physical training tests. Injuries seemed to find him in field training. He'd misled them about his car.

And now, Fisher admitted that he had abused cocaine.

Weisensel wasn't surprised. The frequent weekends at home and the constant hanging out with friends had made it clear that Fisher was a soldier who still had a foot in two worlds.

But Weisensel also saw an ulterior motive. By self-reporting a drug issue, Fisher guaranteed that he would be admitted to the Army Substance Abuse Program — and, most significantly, dodge any penalty for his past abuse.

"It's basically a one-time 'get out of jail free card' for everybody that does drugs," Weisensel said. "If it was up to me, he'd be gone."

Fisher's frustration mounted. He wanted out of 3rd Platoon — too much friction with superiors — but he wanted to stay in the Army. He admitted his trouble was mostly his own fault. Some of it stemmed from recreational drug use, some of it from simmering anger. Kirsten told him he scared her when he got mad and wanted her old Ian back.

But the Army didn't figure to be so forgiving.

At the end of July, Fisher left his platoon, telling a superior in a text message that he needed time to think. His career seemed headed for an abrupt end, even though he had shown flashes of potential. Capt. William "David" Whaley, the new company commander, noted that when he applied himself, Fisher could be an "average to above-average soldier." In fact, the captain noted, he had done well at the National Training Center and fell into trouble only with "off-post" actions.

Weisensel saw an internal conflict.

"I have seen him perform," the sergeant said. "He's not a bad kid — a young man — but he definitely has some issues he needs to resolve within himself to be successful in the military."

Earlier, he had described young men like Fisher as "not uncommon" in today's Army. Recruits usually signed up for a handful of reasons, he said: for the money, for lack of options, or because they'd just become "sick of being nothing at home."

Most were kids trying to do a grown man's job. They did juvenile things and, in the military culture, suffered the consequences. They



ADVICE FROM DAD, A VIETNAM VET. Ian and his dad share some time at the PX at Fort Carson on Sept. 1, 2008, when his family dropped him off for deployment to Iraq. Eric Fisher tells his son he loves him and will miss him, and offers him advice only a soldier could give for if things go wrong — to not go down without a fight. "At that point he squeezed me, like, 'I understand,' you know," Eric said. "And we didn't say anything else."

needed to grow up and "find their path" — both in life and in the Army, he figured.

That hadn't happened yet for Ian Fisher.

He refused to train with his platoon, missing out on some of the key preparations for the upcoming deployment to Iraq. The paperwork on his transgressions piled up as he marched — inexorably, it seemed — toward sanctions that, among other things, would bust him in rank and pay.

He felt certain his platoon leaders wanted him out of the Army.

But he had sunk so low he didn't think he cared anymore, despite what friends and family told him about the devastating impact of such a discharge on his future.

Finally, Lt. Col. Doug Cardinale, commander of the battalion, called Fisher into his office, where, with other officers present, he began to officially impose sanctions.

When he asked Fisher why he had behaved this way, the private nearly broke down — but insisted that he wanted out of the military. Cardinale wasn't so sure.

While Fisher waited outside, Cardinale called his father and discussed solutions.

The commander agreed to transfer Fisher to a new platoon — but the move came at a price. Punishment included 45 days of extra duty, 45 days of restriction and a loss of pay. He also got busted in rank from an E3, where he had entered the Army from high school, to an E1.

But it was a fresh start.

Soon afterward, Fisher took his physical training test. Within min-

utes of learning his score, he phoned his dad to tell him he had passed for the first time in months.

"Right now," he said, "I'm getting a new start in a different platoon and I am basically getting to show them who I really can be."

Still, he had to hop on the fast track to ready himself for deployment in September. His new unit embraced him as he moved through an accelerated preparation process. He worked around his extra-duty punishment.

Eric Fisher and Teri Mercill drove down to Fort Carson with their son

to say goodbye before the troops flew out two days later. They spent a good part of the day on the base, having lunch and shopping, anticipating a difficult farewell.

In an odd way, Eric felt more comfortable with Ian's deployment to Iraq than he did having him home. The last flurry of problems reminded him that as long as his son clung to his past, he would have trouble moving forward.

Teri wrestled with every mother's concerns — the well-being of a son heading into harm's way. But on one

level, she also saw how Ian had struggled to shake free of a teen culture in which many of his friends floated, directionless, in a kind of limbo. She saw him as accepting of the Army's discipline, yet wistful about the freedoms of civilian life.

At the end of the day, Teri got into Ian's car and prepared to drive it back home for storage. She beeped the horn, looked back and waved in time to see one of Ian's buddies throw a consoling arm around her son.

"Oh, he's crying," she sighed — and then began crying herself.

Two days later, Ian Fisher awoke in the wee hours. He checked out his SAW, whose serial number he now knew by heart. He jiggled belongings from his duffel bag to his carry-on. With the rest of the unit, he shuttled from point to point on the base until finally boarding a bus to the airport.

He was stoic now, focused on the airplane that would take him toward his first combat deployment — and add another generation to the family's military legacy.

There had come a moment two days earlier when he and his father had finally been alone, walking through the PX. They had draped an arm around each other. Eric told Ian how much he loved him, how much he would miss him. He reminded his son to be alert, take care of himself and make him proud. Then he told Ian what to do if he ever found himself in a situation where it looked like all was lost.

"Keep pulling that trigger," Eric had said, "until you can't pull it any more. Go out in a blaze of glory."



READY FOR IRAQ. Fisher makes his way to the plane and, ultimately, Iraq, as the troops of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team depart for their year-long deployment on Sept. 3, 2008. He calls his mom that night. The next morning, she says: "When I spoke with Ian last night, he sounded excited and happy to be finally doing something. It lifted my heart."