

The Nation

Army's drill sergeants ready to show soft side

Recruiters want to dispel fears of potential soldiers

By Dave Moniz
USA TODAY

In an effort to soften the image of its legendary tough drill sergeants, the Army will soon ship some of them out from training bases to Main Street America.

Army Recruiting Command is planning to send dozens of drill sergeants to storefront recruiting offices this summer to mingle with prospective soldiers. The first-of-its-kind program is designed to boost enlistments by challenging longstanding stereotypes about the soldiers responsible for molding new recruits.

One problem, Army commanders say, is a perception among teenagers that drill sergeants are shrieking, spit-spewing terrorists. Based largely on movie portrayals in such films as *Full Metal Jacket* and old-timers' war stories, the images are deeply ingrained, military commanders say.

Lt. Col. Mat Moten, a speechwriter for the Army chief of staff, produced a surprising study of basic training three years ago. Among his discoveries, Moten says, was that "everybody expects their drill sergeant will be a monster."

In recent years, Army commanders have used focus groups and informal interviews to gauge recruits' attitudes. One constant message is that many prospective recruits have exaggerated fears based on popular culture.

"The Army is trying to reach out to young people. One of the key things is that kids are not so afraid of coming into the Army as they are of the basic training experience," says Lt. Col. Mark Bounds, acting chief of staff at Fort Jackson in South Carolina.

For generations, basic training has been closely associated with the square-jawed, hulking drill sergeant. Responsible for teaching civilians the rudiments of military life, drill sergeants historically have been charged with weeding out — not nurturing — trainees. Today, with recruits becoming a precious commodity, drill sergeants have

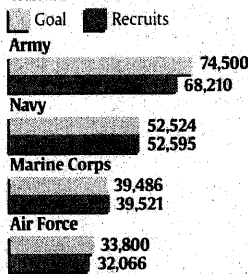


By Jud McCrehin, Army Times Publishing Co.

Basic training: A drill instructor helps a recruit with his gas mask at Fort Jackson, S.C. Instructors are part disciplinarian, part helper.

Navy, Marines meet '99 recruiting goals

Recruiting goals and actual number of enlistments into the U.S. military branches in 1999:



become equal parts disciplinarian and enabler.

Bounds, a former basic training battalion commander, just helped complete a short video that features drill sergeants and recruits talking about the Army. The 12-minute film "puts a human face" on drill sergeants, Bounds says, and will show prospective recruits that soldiers come in "all shapes and sizes."

Like all the services, the Army sees that selling the military to young adults is a daunting challenge. The Army missed its recruiting goal by nearly 7,000 in 1999 and is struggling to make its goal of 80,000 recruits this year.

A recent Defense Department

survey showed that in the past five years, the average military recruiter has had to work about 10 more hours per week to woo uninterested civilians into uniform.

Frank Shaffery, an Army recruiting official at Fort Knox, Ky., says to help counter negative stereotypes, drill sergeants will spend a few weeks in recruiting offices talking about what they do.

Most soldiers serve their two- or three-year hitch as drill sergeants with few problems, but the Army has been stung by several scandals. Four years ago, a group of drill sergeants and other soldiers were charged with rape and sexual misconduct at an Army base in Aberdeen, Md. Those charges led to others against drill sergeants after the Army set up a toll-free, nationwide hotline.

The plan to send Army drill sergeants out to civilian America makes sense to Lt. Col. Mike Reagor, a West Point graduate and recruiting commander in North and South Carolina. Reagor says young men and women considering the Army will see that the people who'll train them "don't have two heads and fangs."

The drill sergeants assigned to recruiting stations will be required to wear their round-brimmed drill sergeant hats and will have their biographies and pictures posted in local high schools.

"We want to dispel fears," Reagor says. "A lot of these kids are scared and anxious."

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