

The Few, The Proud ...

Four days at a South Carolina boot camp

By Emily Witt

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Shortly after 9:00 p.m. November 29, a busload of 25 recruits arrives for the first time at the gate of the U.S. Marine Corps Recruit Depot on Parris Island, South Carolina. Before the vehicle enters the two-lane causeway, a military policeman stops it, ascends the narrow steps, and orders the passengers to look at the floor.



Emily Witt

On the first night in camp, recruits get new shoes, a haircut, and the opportunity to chat on the phone. Girls' day out? Not exactly.



Emily Witt

Scripts taped next to telephones instruct recruits what to say to their parents the first night at boot camp



Emily Witt

Recruits line up to quickly phone home

The bus accelerates into darkness while the passengers wait in silence, heads down, until it stops a short distance from a nondescript brick building. The driver opens the door. Next to the vehicle, painted on the asphalt, are four long columns of yellow footprints, silhouettes of feet positioned at the 45-degree angle of attention. The marks form a rectangle the precise size and shape of a platoon. Then the yelling begins:

"Get off the bus! Run! Get off the bus! Get on the yellow footprints! Do we understand?"

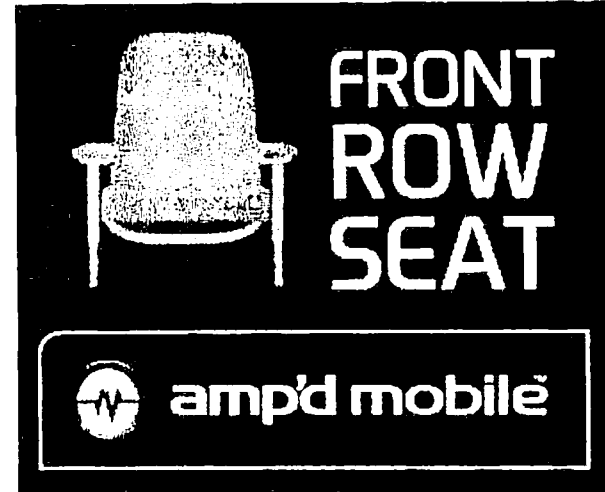
"Sir, yes, sir!" shouts a gaggle of terrified voices. The first recruit, a slouchy large-eyed teenage girl in jeans, scrambles off at the bidding of Staff Sgt. Tony Kimmanee, a small but ferocious drill sergeant who serves as late-night welcome committee. "You should be standing in a position of attention! Your heels are touching! Your mouth is shut! Do we understand?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" all the recruits yell.

Kimmanee hustles the group through steel doors into a sterile room with a wall of telephones. "You receive one phone call home to inform Mommy and Daddy that you have safely arrived at Parris Island. If they aren't at home, call their cell phones. If you get voicemail on their cell phones, call your grandmother. I don't care."

The recruits line up at the phones and dial furiously, their faces red, their hands shaking. No "Hi, Mom"s or "Miss you"s. No conversation, just a script taped next to the phone, which the recruits speed through:

1. This is recruit (last name).
2. I have arrived safely at Parris Island.
3. Please do not send any food or bulky items to me in the mail.
4. I will contact you in three to five days by postcard with my new address.
5. Thank you for your support. Goodbye for now.





Emily Witt
Another line — this one for haircuts



Emily Witt
Kevin Simon gets off the bus



Emily Witt
Educators on the yellow footprints



Emily Witt
Training for combat



Emily Witt
Joseph Martinez of South Miami must earn his dress blues — and college money



Emily Witt
Eggy Rickman obeys orders

The same words rise and fall in a chorus, some shouted, some read deliberately and softly.

For the next 24 hours the recruits will not sleep. Every personal possession that might distinguish an individual — shaving cream, flip-flops, bug spray, soap — will be replaced with identical brands. Recruits are advised to limit reading material to the Bible and address books. Feet are measured for boots. Contact lenses and eyeglasses are exchanged for the clunky brown plastic-framed spectacles known as BCs (which stands for birth control). Heads are shorn. First names are officially changed to recruit, and the first person is eliminated from spoken conversation.

The following morning, in the pale dawn, the scene repeats. Another drill instructor, veins popping, bellows at a white school bus. From its doors pour 37 eager recruits. They race to align themselves on the yellow footprints, faces deadly serious. But something is wrong.

This group looks, well, old.

Some of its portly members are carrying purses; others discreetly snap photos with digital cameras. Well-padded in borrowed camouflage Gore-Tex raincoats, the 37 educators from South Florida are treated more gently than the recruits of the previous evening. For one thing, they are asked politely if anybody would like to exit the bus before the yelling begins. And they are invited to dine that evening at the officers' club, which has been decorated for Christmas.

Each year since 1997 the South Florida U.S.M.C. Recruiting Station has sent 30 to 40 guidance counselors, assistant principals, Boy Scout leaders, and teachers to Parris Island for an all-expenses-paid immersion into Marine basic training.

For four days in late November, the 37-member group — which joined 36 guests from Central Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands — shot M-16s, attempted pullups on monkey bars, wielded bayonets, and dined to jazz standards played by the Marine Corps Band.

The trip cost the U.S.M.C. as much as \$1150 per person (including airfare from Fort Lauderdale to Savannah; the price of three nights' lodging at the Country Inn of Beaufort, South Carolina; food; and promotional T-shirts.)

Parris Island hosts twelve such workshops a year. At \$55,000 to \$60,000 a pop, they are considered an investment in the Marine Corps' future, a courtship of those dispensing career advice to the young and unsure at a time when the recruitment effort is hindered by war. Since the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001, 2429 (as of December 31, 2005) soldiers have lost their lives in the global war on terrorism. Marines, who comprise an average of 13 percent of the force, have made up 27 percent of the war's casualties. Most of those killed have been under the age of 24.

Nonetheless the Marines have recently achieved their recruiting goals, and the re-enlistment rate has exceeded expectations. The reserves, the National Guard, and the army have all had more trouble.



Emily Witt

Mindy Mathos shoots an M-16 with help from Marine Cprl. Ryan Rice



Emily Witt

The fog of war

"Bob and weave, bob and weave!" In the stands the fans are getting rowdy. "That was a sucker punch! That don't count. Hey, ref!"

In a woodchip-filled ring of tires, wearing a codpiece over her boot-cut jeans, Peggy Rickman, a 23-year-old special ed teacher and cheerleading coach from Fort Pierce, locks foam-covered barbells with a female Marine Corps martial arts instructor. Rickman's effort is valiant and punctuated with fierce grunts.

"Aaaaargh!"

Rickman executes a light blow to the Marine's shoulder.

"Umph!"

A cheer erupts from the bleachers.

"Drop it like it's hot!" the spectators holler.

The exercise, known as pugil sticks, is intended to simulate combat with rifles. "We try to teach recruits that this is not a game," says Lt. Col. Joe Shusto. "We try not to cheer anybody on."

The teachers ignore him. Despite her fans, the plump, blond Ohio native gets pummeled. When the match is over, she throws off her helmet and walks to the sideline. "You kicked my ass!" she yells over her shoulder to the vanquisher.

At Parris Island, the military's power is at its most inspiring and untarnished. The reality of armed conflicts abroad seems far-off, and equal opportunity exists regardless of socioeconomic status.

The closest the teachers get to witnessing combat is on an obstacle course where clips from the soundtrack of D-day landings in *Saving Private Ryan* blast over loudspeakers, and a soldier pushes around a smoke machine on wheels.

The organizers of the educators' workshop say they aim to target those wary of military service. "We invite people who have shown some resistance," says Maj. Guillermo Canedo, director of public affairs at Parris Island. "Often they walk away with a 180-degree difference in opinion about Marine training and Marine life."

But in this group, few are anti-military from the beginning. Some, like Peggy Rickman, have family members in the Marines. Others are simply enamored of all things soldierly.

Sadiq Abdullahi, a tall, bespectacled, Nigerian-born educator who teaches government at Homestead Senior High School, would like to see more people schooled in defense. "The school system should look at it as an alternative and encourage students to look at the military," he explains. "We're in a time of war. The world as a whole is becoming unsafe. People need to be ready to defend their country."

Kevin Simon, a history teacher at Miami Beach Senior High School, wears a U.S. Marine Corps lanyard around his neck. Attached is a large "God Bless America" pin, replete with undulating flag. The diminutive Simon was himself a recruit at Parris Island in 1975 but spent the bulk of his four-year stint playing drums in

Washington, D.C. He has attended an educators' workshop before, in 1999. He returned to take more video and photos for his students.

Simon is fond of sharing the many nuances of the Marine Drum and Bugle Corps, but he boasts it was infantry training that "saved my life on the mean streets of Miami." In 1997 he fended off a mugger who approached him with a .357 Taurus at the 1700 Biscayne Blvd. Burger King. "I disarmed him, then shot him to disable with his own weapon," he says proudly.

More than one educator complains students no longer stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, and of widespread disrespect for authority.

Gwen James, a career specialist at North Miami Senior High, laments her students' lack of discipline. "This gets them in shape," she marvels, as the bus drives past knots of recruits jogging and doing pushups. "Put them in boot camp at eighth grade; put them through training.... They would take pride in uniforms. They would have respect for their elders."

Many of the other teachers agree with her, but the show doesn't impress everyone. "There's no way you can counsel a person by simply going to boot camp," says Camilo Mejia, an infamous South Florida National Guard deserter who recently spent nine months in jail before remaking himself as an antiwar activist. "In terms of the reality people are going to face, boot camp has nothing to do with it. They don't tell them anything about what it does to a human being when you put a bullet through its flesh, about what that does to your conscience.

"If they really want to counsel," he concludes, "they should bring teachers to Walter Reed [Army Medical Center]. Go meet people who have no legs."

Parris Island, in the South Carolina low country, alternates between open vistas of marshland and wooded areas adorned with palmettos and Spanish moss. On the rifle range, the visitor is greeted with an expanse of natural beauty and light, marred only by targets in the distance that rise and fall when they are popped with bullets from M-16 rifles.

Warrant Ofcr. Fred Keeney, the rifle range supervisor, looks like Smokey Bear with fluorescent orange earplugs. A career Marine with a tour in Iraq behind him, Keeney admires the liberal gun laws of other countries. ("I want to go to Switzerland so bad and hunt Alpine Ibex," he says at one point, gazing toward the horizon.) Keeney is of the opinion that "Most Americans are used to being rewarded for mediocrity." Of the Marines he takes pride that "Here, just trying isn't good enough."

Keeney likes order.

"Get those weapons off the deck!" he roars suddenly at a hapless recruit. "Deck" is Marinese for "ground." Many of the teachers pick up some new lingo before they leave the workshop. "Gotta take a head call!" more than one begins announcing before using the bathroom.

Keeney is combing through the ranks of soldiers-in-training to find recruits for media appearances.

A doe-eyed television anchor from Telemundo wants Spanish-speakers; a reporter from the *Palm Beach Post* wants recruits from Martin, Palm Beach, or St. Lucie counties; and Miami *New Times* wants Miami-Dade soldiers.

(Disclosure: *New Times* accepted the Marines' offer to pay for the trip. The *Palm Beach Post* reimbursed the Marines for the cost of the workshop. Lt. Staci Reidinger, a public affairs officer, says her records show only two media outlets have reimbursed the Marines for the cost of attending the workshop.)

Soon Keeney turns up with recruit Michael Janzen, who looks like a small tank, if a tank could have apple cheeks and freckles. The nineteen-year-old from Cutler Bay stands in the bright sunlight of the rifle range, unsure whether talking to a civilian means talking *like* a civilian. Even his stance is official: legs apart, back straight. He places his hands behind his back, and his arms, in their desert fatigues, form two isosceles triangles. When asked at what age he decided to join the Marines, Janzen is succinct:

"In fourth grade this recruit had a haircut and this recruit was called a Marine and this recruit knew what he was going to do."

And how do this recruit's parents feel about the prospect of his getting deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan? (Janzen's specialty is motor transport, not a stay-at-home job.)

"This recruit knew what he was getting into and his family knew what he was getting into," is his blunt reply.

Joseph Martinez, an eighteen-year-old from South Miami, is more informal. Skinny and quick to grin, he has no problem switching into civilian conversation. Martinez was inspired to join more because of college money than dreams of warrior glory. He even switched his specialty after learning of the dangers facing military police in the "post-combat" phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

After graduating from South Miami Senior High, he says, "I was working at a fast-food place, living at home.... My sister moved to Tallahassee to go to college and we've never been apart. I realized I had to do my own thing. If I wasn't here, I'd be doing the same exact thing I was doing, which was nothing."

When asked what inspired him to enlist, he shrugs. "My recruiter was a nice guy, but that's how he's supposed to act. I never really thought anything of the military, but then I was sitting in class one day and one of my old friends came back to high school in his dress blues." In the middle of computer class, the sight of his friend, his posture, his sheer *adulthood*, inspired Martinez to consider the Marines. Of course, his grandmother wanted him to join the navy — "safer right now," he explains. And Grandma was right: as of early December, 42 sailors had been killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom, versus 620 Marines.

It is in the case of soldiers like Martinez that an encouraging teacher can make a big difference, says Jay Tansy, who was South Florida Recruiter of the Year last year. Tansy, an easygoing 25-year-old with a voice like honey, grew up in Hialeah. When he joined the Marines, he says, he weighed 260 pounds and had no self-confidence. "I didn't have a girlfriend until I was eighteen," he laments. But he didn't enlist for lack of other options. "I had a 3.2 GPA in high school," he says. "I got 1180 on my SAT. I could have done other things."

These days he is fastidious about his appearance. He says he gets a haircut (the traditional Marine "high and tight") every week. His eyebrows are neatly waxed. And the students Tansy has recruited range from the valedictorian of American Senior High in Miami Lakes to some who barely managed to secure a diploma.

"What I look for," he says, "is someone who wants to be different. I want people to break out of the opinion that this is a last resort, to see it as an option like college or like joining the workforce."

For groups like Iraq Veterans Against the War, the recruitment process presents to young people a bundle of false hopes. Mejia calls it a "socioeconomic draft."

"You have a lot of recruiters going into the poorest neighborhoods in the country, recruiting people with no other options," he says. "They go to places where people dream of a better future, and take advantage of that. They'll talk about the steady paychecks, the benefits, the training, but there's no mention of war."

Sergeant Tansy resents the insinuation that recruitment is targeted at the poor. "I recruit upper-class students," he insists.

The military does not keep statistics on recruits' economic backgrounds. Studies by both liberals and conservatives, though, have found that in the army, navy, and air force, zip code areas with median household incomes of \$25,000 to \$54,999 are overrepresented. Wealthier zip codes are underrepresented, as are areas with median incomes under \$25,000. But that might be changing. A recent RAND Corporation report shows that on average, family income among recruits has increased every year since 1999.

Peggy Rickman, the Fort Pierce teacher everyone qualifies with the adjective "bubbly" and the one who could probably strike up a conversation with a corpse, is stumped by a certain nineteen-year-old in camouflage, holding his lunch tray parallel to his upright body, staring formally at nobody.

In the throes of military indoctrination, Biko Harvey is small and serious. He has traveled far from Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where he signed four years of his life over to the Marines.

Something catches his eye. "Recruit, your cover!" he hisses at a skinny kid with crooked teeth behind him in the line for Swiss steak and boiled carrots. "Recruit!"

His platoon-mate starts and removes his cap. Harvey again looks forward.

Rickman appears upset. "It's okay," she tries. "You can smile."

He considers this, stony-faced. "Bad habits, ma'am."

Rickman's eyebrows ascend. She picks up a chocolate chip cookie and advances toward the salad bar, striking up a conversation with another teacher about her losing encounter with the instructor wielding the foam-covered barbells.

Biko Harvey interrupts. "This recruit hates pugil sticks, ma'am."

"What's that?" asks Rickman, startled.

"This recruit can't stand pugil sticks," Harvey says curtly, adorning his salad with croutons. "This recruit might say that pugil sticks are his most hated activity in boot camp."

Tickled that her lunch partner has opened up, Rickman responds, "What do you love about boot camp?"

The recruit considers this. "Nothing."

They walk to one of the cafeteria's orange tables, sit down, and are joined by an educator from Naples engaged in deep conversation with a recruit who seems not at all worried about the use of personal pronouns.

Rickman looks on longingly and then tries again with Harvey. "When do you graduate?" she asks.

"Two weeks, ma'am."

"Is your family going to come?"

"No, ma'am."

"Why not?"

"This recruit asked his family not to come, ma'am."

"But why?"

"This recruit feels his family would hold him back. This recruit's father and girl were not happy he joined the Marines."

Rickman seizes on this conversational nugget.

"Are you still together with your girlfriend?"

"This recruit was looking for a way out of the relationship, ma'am."

Rickman bursts out laughing.

Harvey stares straight ahead impassively. "This recruit wants to take back what he said before, ma'am."

"About what?" asks Rickman.

"About not loving anything about boot camp. When this recruit arrived at boot camp, this recruit did not know how to swim, and he was afraid of heights. Now this recruit can swim, and he is no longer afraid of heights."

Rickman looks down at the cubes of reconstituted turkey breast adorning her tetrazzini and smiles.

"The military is not held in such high regard in this recruit's state [of New York] as it is in other states," he says. "People where this recruit is from hold other things in high regard. They are more impressed by getting a degree. Most recruits here go home and everybody will love them because they are Marines."

Finally he switches to the first person. "When I go home," he says, "nothing will be different for me."

For many, escaping home life is part of the advantage — indeed the allure — of joining the military. But for some, the lack of identity is oppressive (the attrition rate is ten percent for men, eighteen percent for women).

Michael Ruiz, a Vietnam vet who works with severely emotionally disturbed students at Homestead Senior High School, says the military provides ideal conditions for young people to transform themselves: "They need to get out of the environment they are in to learn how to be adults."

Does that mean he encourages his students to join the Marines?

He snorts in reply. "My students don't know the difference between the army, the navy, and the Boy Scouts.... I had two students who were thinking about the Marines: One got pregnant, the other dropped out."

Ruiz is the only teacher from Miami-Dade County on the trip who can claim combat experience. He has returned to Parris Island for the first time since completing boot camp in 1966. During this trip, his physical appearance has earned him the nickname "Billy Crystal" from the teachers who flock nightly to Bonkers, a bar near the Country Inn.

Ruiz is not the type to immerse himself in war memories or glorify his combat experience. "Ask anybody who's ever been in Vietnam," is all he says of his experience in the war. "You never come back."

On lunch breaks, when the educators mingle with recruits over Meals Ready to Eat (which by the way aren't bad if you like hydrogenated vegetable oil flavored, apparently, with children's aspirin and called pineapple pound cake), Ruiz makes little effort to depart from his group of friends.

He describes watching recruits eating MREs with a Vietnam vet from Orlando. They asked about his combat experience, but as Ruiz sees it, "They were waiting for an answer that doesn't exist." Yet the veteran/teacher is pragmatic about military recruiting: "Why not let these men and women — if they enjoy what they do — go ahead and do it?"

The next day, the educators have their own afternoon at the rifle range. Mindy Mathos, a guidance counselor at Miami Lakes Education Center, hits her target, a rectangular, black-and-white bull's eye, with the black, 39-inch-long M-16, which weighs about nine pounds and can fire 800 rounds a minute.

"I got the white one!" cheers Mathos to the young Marine helping her shoot. A motherly figure in black jeans, white sneakers, and a polar fleece jacket, Mathos thought she was going to dislike this particular activity. "I don't like guns. I'm totally against guns. I thought I was going to hate it. But it wasn't so bad," she says afterward.

Mathos is a Democrat and against the war. "We have no business being in Iraq," she declares while riding on the activity bus. "Not only did the presidential administration lie to the public, but they're wasting valuable resources, wasting men and women ... it's terrible."

But for her students, the valuable resources in question, she says, "Let's be honest. I'm a college advisor, but not every kid is college-bound. The best way is to be straight up: The military is a great option for confidence, for building your self-esteem, for getting vocational skills, but on the other hand it can be dangerous."

The rifle range where Mathos and other teachers learn to shoot M-16s consists of small, submerged bunkers. It is named for Khe Sanh, the notorious Vietnam combat base where a mostly Marine force was surrounded by the North Vietnamese Army in 1968. "If all of the barbed wire and all of the sandbags were taken away," wrote journalist Michael Herr in *Dispatches*, "Khe Sanh would have looked like one of those Colombian valley slums whose meanness is the abiding factor, whose despair is so palpable that for days after you leave you are filled with a vicarious shame for the misery you have just tripped through."

But on Parris Island, Khe Sanh, for today at least, consists merely of trigger-happy high school teachers playing with semiautomatic weapons.

Vietnam is a subject that arises frequently. Many of the teachers grew up during that war, and worry this one

will come to a similar end. Renae White, administrative dean of Dr. Phillips High School in Orlando, is one of them.

She is an imposing presence with spiky hair and a Bluetooth device permanently affixed to her ear, leaving one with the impression of a character from *Star Trek*. The other teachers grumble at her outspoken opinions and confrontational questions, particularly a small fuss she made during a speech by the base's general regarding the Marines' neglect of Hurricane Katrina victims. ("Totally irrelevant," said at least one of the teachers.)

But her opinion about sharing the experience with students is firm: "I'll tell them what I saw and what I learned, what I see as the advantages and the disadvantages. I would lay the facts down, but I would not encourage a student to join. Coming up in the Seventies, I had quite a few classmates who were drafted. When you go to Washington, D.C., you see that wall with all those names. Now they're going to be putting up another one?" She shakes her head.

In the Country Inn on the Friday morning before a battalion is due to finish boot camp, emotions run high. One recruit's stocky mother yells at a hotel attendant when the bagels are gone before 7:00 a.m. "Don't you know there is a Marine graduation? Don't you plan ahead for these things?" she squawks.

"There's a graduation every week, ma'am," says the hotel employee dryly.

Before catching their flight back to Fort Lauderdale, the educators attend the weekly event. In 2004, 16,906 Marines graduated from Parris Island. Today's ceremony alone will be attended by about 1000 spectators and will send 511 new soldiers out into the world, most of whom can expect deployment overseas within a year.

Trumpets trill, flag-bearers prance like ponies, and the Marine mascot, a bulldog named Mac, is waddled out for display. It's a time for brass-band renditions of "You're a Grand Ole Flag" and "Stars and Stripes Forever," followed by the swish of many hands saluting and heads snapping to and fro — a celebration of synchrony, pomp, and applause.

The event is so planned that the most exciting moments end up being the grave mistakes: One of the band members drops his cymbal to awkward silence, and then, topping the show, one of the few, the proud — a blond guy in the third row — faints after he locks his knees. He has to be led outside. There he is condemned for the rest of the ceremony to the certain consternation of visiting relatives and woe of his drill sergeant.

The educators are slightly bruised and exhausted. One, a teacher from Ocoee, had to be taken to the infirmary after a possible pugil-stick-induced concussion left him nauseated.

The rest, alternately hung over or simply sleepy from waking up at 5:30 a.m. every day, seem ready to return to sunny Florida, laden with their U.S.M.C. T-shirts, ties, and mugs purchased at the depot's gift shop.

At 10:00 a.m. the drill instructors dismiss their green-clad hordes, who reply with a hearty "Ay, sir! Ooh-rah!" The families swarm. The teachers leave.

Only Kevin Simon, the Beach High history teacher who served his Marine years in the Drum and Bugle Corps, seems still full of energy. Brass bands are, after all, his area of expertise. "Did you see?" he asks excitedly. "The drummer dropped his stick! He was playing 'Troop March #1' with one hand!"

In the end, the irony of both the educators' workshop and Parris Island itself is best displayed at the depot's Marine Corps Exchange, or MCX, a convenience store where military personnel receive discounts. The store's motto is "Core brands, Corps value," a play on the U.S.M.C.'s "core values" of courage, honor, and commitment.

At the MCX, a wide variety of magazines is available, both the mainstream (*Sports Illustrated*, *Maxim*, *Wired*) and the niche market (*Truckin'*, *Military Spouse*, *Muscular Development*, *Car Audio*, *Gun*, *Soldier of Fortune*). Notably absent, however, are *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Economist*, and almost any other periodical that discusses the politics of combat. The information spoon-fed to soldiers, like that given to the teachers during the workshop, is carefully strained so that the negative and uncertain are excluded. Those who might die aren't given the information most critical to them.

But that's to be expected. Simon scoffs at the notion that things might be otherwise. "Of course it's completely one-sided. They're not going to say anything bad about the place."

One recruit, a twenty-year-old Miami Beach High School grad from North Miami named Louis Lopez, gushes over the life-changing experience of basic training. "I enlisted because I was doing stupid things, hanging out with the wrong people. I tried community college for a while, then dropped out of that, then became a security guard."

Lopez is thin and enthusiastic, wolfing down his MRE before he's forced to jog back to the rifle range. "The first week I signed up I was like, 'Oh, man. What did I do?' but it's already changed my life.

"There's no 'I can't' here," he adds. "Everything we do here is for a reason."