

LIFE AS A Private

*Stories of Service from the Junior Ranks
of Today's Army*

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Preface

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *Life as a Private: The Army Value Proposition*, sponsored by the U.S. Army Recruiting Command. The purpose of the project was to characterize the attitudes, experiences, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators of soldiers assigned to their first unit to inform Army leadership how to attract and retain the best talent. The project's first report was *Life as a Private: A Study of the Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army*, by Todd C. Helmus, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Marek N. Posard, Jasmine L. Wheeler, Corday Ogletree, Quinton Stroud, and Margaret C. Harrell.

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Summary

Army enlisted service is an enduring American tradition. Men and women, often recent high school graduates, leave home to serve their country and experience the challenges of Basic Combat Training and the camaraderie of life on a military base. But there is much more to Army service than the outlines with which most Americans are familiar. A separate RAND Arroyo Center report details the service experiences of 81 junior enlisted soldiers across many similar topics.¹ The objective of this current report is to provide deep insight into the junior enlisted experience in a way that is accessible to policymakers and senior Army leaders, junior leaders, recruiters, and individuals considering an Army career.

This volume goes beyond the archetypes and bumper stickers to tell the stories of six soldiers in their own words. In these chapters, readers learn about their decisions to join the Army, the joys and frustrations of their jobs, and their considerations for the future. The narratives identify some leadership behaviors that support soldier success and others that make soldiers' lives more difficult. We edited the interviews for clarity and readability and changed details to protect soldiers' confidentiality; otherwise, these words are theirs alone, with our opening and concluding thoughts to capture key lessons.

¹ Todd C. Helmus, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Marek N. Posard, Jasmine L. Wheeler, Cordaye Ogletree, Quinton Stroud, and Margaret C. Harrell, *Life as a Private: A Study of the Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2252-A, 2018. The soldiers interviewed for this volume were also participants in the large sample interviews.

Nick (Chapter Two) is a mechanic who grew up around the military. He has a close group of friends and an active dating life. He loves being in the Army and, despite a disciplinary action that reduced his rank, is planning to make a career in military service.

Meg (Chapter Three) is 21 years old and struggling to balance being a single mom with the demands of her job. Having a child makes it hard for her to build a social support network, but that isolation makes it hard to find people to help when her job requires her to work extra hours. She has not decided whether she wants to stay in the Army long term; she wants to be an enlisted leader and give her daughter better opportunities but is feeling worn down.

Randy (Chapter Four) is from a suburban area, close to a lot of farms. He's an infantryman and has been in the Army long enough that he has already deployed once to Afghanistan. He loves the Army and plans to stay in it for a long time but is frustrated at what he believes is "too much BS going on and not enough training."

Michael (Chapter Five) comes from a sprawling, big city where he originally wanted to be a teacher. He joined the Army despite his family's objections and is a field artilleryman. He is married with a newborn child, but his wife decided to stay close to family in their hometown. He regrets joining the Army and is hoping to find a way to end his enlistment contract prematurely.

Cassandra (Chapter Six) joined the military after being inspired by her teachers in an Army program for high school students. She is a supply specialist and plans to become a senior noncommissioned officer. She is driven to succeed and believes the Army will help her on that path.

Jim (Chapter Seven) is from a small town near the Canadian border and joined the Army without really knowing anyone in the military. He did really well on his aptitude tests but the job he wanted, combat medic, was not available at the time. Rather than wait, he took a different job in the medical field. He is happy to be in the Army but hopes to change jobs soon to something he finds more interesting.

Each soldier's story is unique, though they share common bonds of experience. Some planned for years to join the Army; others joined on the spur of the moment. Some are thrilled with their careers and

hope to serve multiple contracts, while others are not sure they will stay in. Each soldier experienced a personal transformation as a result of the decision to join the military. Army service is a landmark experience for each of these soldiers and likely to change the trajectory of their lives.

Acknowledgments

We particularly acknowledge the contributions of Meg Harrell; to show our gratitude, we used her name for one of the soldiers in this report. Her persistence brought this study into being and gave it shape, and her previous work, *Invisible Women*, served as inspiration and guidepost for us throughout the study. We are especially indebted to the soldiers who agreed to be interviewed for this research. These individuals sat through hours of questions; they provided their candid insights and generously agreed to share their stories in hopes that others might learn from their experiences. Joseph A. Baird and Wendy Martin served as the project monitors, and their direction and insight helped shape the focus of this study. We are also especially grateful for the efforts of our peer reviewers, Mady Segal of the University of Maryland, and Sean Robson of RAND. Their insight made this report clearer and more useful for the reader, and we thank them. Any errors are the sole responsibility of the research authors.

Abbreviations

ACH	Advanced Combat Helmet
AIT	Advanced Individual Training
APFT	Army Physical Fitness Test
ASU	Army Service Uniform
ASVAB	Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery
BAH	Base Allowance for Housing
BAS	Basic Allowance for Subsistence
BCT	Basic Combat Training
BLC	Basic Leader Course
CMF	career management field
CO	commanding officer
CONOP	concept of operations
CQ	charge of quarters
DD	designated driver
DEP	Delayed Entry Program
DFAC	dining facility
FIFA	International Federation of Football Associations
FLIPL	Financial Liability Investigation of Property Loss
IED	improvised explosive device
JCLC	Junior Cadet Leadership Camp
JROTC	Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps

JRTC	Joint Readiness Training Center
JTAC	Joint Terminal Attack Controller
LPN	licensed practical nurse
MEPS	Military Entrance Processing Station
MOS	Military Occupational Specialty
MP	Military Police
MTOE	Modified Table of Organizations and Equipment
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NCOER	Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report
NFL	National Football League
NTC	National Training Center
OCS	Officer Candidate School
OIC	officer in charge
OPORD	Operations Order
PAC	Personnel Action Clerk
PFC	private first class
PL	platoon leader
PMCS	preventative maintenance checks and services
PMI	Preliminary Marksmanship Instruction
PT	physical training
PV2	private second class
PX	post exchange
ROTC	Reserve Officer Training Corps
SEAL	Sea, Air, and Land
SFAS	Special Forces Assessment and Selection
SSA	Supply Support Activity
TAC	Trainer, Advisor, Counselor
TDA	Table of Distribution Authorities
TRADOC	U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command
UFC	Ultimate Fighting Championship

VA	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
WIC	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children
XO	executive officer

Introduction: Serving in Today's Army

Why collect the stories of soldiers at the beginning of their careers? History tends to be written about the generals, not the privates. Popular portraits of the military focus on wartime valor and the combat arms. For most soldiers, though, the majority of Army life will be spent in garrison, juggling military service alongside home and family life. We captured rich narratives of soldiers at the beginning of their careers, asking why they were drawn to the Army, what their expectations of Army life were, and what the reality of service has been for them. As an oral history, this report tells the stories of soldiers in their own words. It is primarily descriptive, rather than analytic, making it an atypical RAND Corporation report.

There is an interesting tension to how the Army runs: On the one hand, warfare requires mass and redundancy. On the battlefield, if one infantry soldier is killed, another one with the same skills has to replace him or her. Each supply sergeant must be trained on the same sets of systems to efficiently resupply the battle. At the same time, building the personal commitment to the Army that enables a citizen to behave as a soldier requires a culture of fellowship and personal relationships between soldiers that embraces the unique qualities of the individual. This research reconciles these two perspectives of the management of soldiers, portraying both the unique individual and the uniform system into which he or she must fit.

By telling these stories, this narrative provides a glimpse into Army life that policymakers, senior officers, and senior noncommissioned officers rarely get to see, and one that can help them to make

better policy and better decisions for junior soldiers. It can help junior officers to better understand the soldiers under their command, and it can be useful to men and women contemplating a career in the Army.

Background of the Research

This document is the companion piece to a larger RAND Arroyo Center report, *Life as a Private: A Study of the Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army*, for which RAND researchers interviewed 81 soldiers at four installations to ascertain their motivations for serving, expectations of Army life, and experience within the Army.¹ In this narrative companion, the researchers contacted a subset of the soldiers interviewed in the first round and asked them to participate in a second, longer interview.

Selecting Soldiers

In the first round of interviews, we chose soldiers from six career management fields (CMFs) so as to provide insight into the both combat and noncombat occupations: Infantry (CMF 11), Field Artillery (CMF 13), Armor (CMF 19), Medical Specialist (CMF 68), Maintenance and Munitions (CMF 91), and Supply (CMF 92).² These are among the

¹ Todd C. Helmus, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Marek N. Posard, Jasmine L. Wheeler, Cordaye Ogletree, Quinton Stroud, and Margaret C. Harrell, *Life as a Private: A Study of Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel In the U.S. Army*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2252-A, 2018. Based on the interviews, we drew four key conclusions: (1) Soldiers in our sample appeared to give their Army experience extremely high marks and relatively few expressed serious discontent; (2) families played a critical role in soldiers' decisions to join the Army and in their later satisfaction with the Army; (3) soldiers often lacked accurate information about their occupational specialty and Army life in general when joining the Army; and (4) relationships between soldiers, both task and social bonds and with their leaders, represent a critical dimension of Army satisfaction. Based on these conclusions, we offered several recommendations to improve the recruitment of new soldiers and to improve the enlistment and retention of soldiers into the Army.

² Our categories are a useful simplification. In fact, the Army divides the branches into three categories: combat arms (tasked with closing with and destroying the enemy), combat support (providing other combat functions essential for victory), and combat service support (tasked with sustainment of Army forces).

Army's most populous career fields, and the intent was to represent typical soldier experiences. Interviews were conducted at Fort Bragg, Fort Drum, Fort Riley, and Fort Hood. We chose these installations because of the large number of soldiers in their first term of service at these bases, and because they were dispersed across the country, in North Carolina, New York, Kansas, and Texas, respectively.

At each location, we attempted to interview 21 soldiers in three of the six CMF categories. We requested that a certain number of women be included in each sample, according to the percentage of women in the CMF, and we requested that at least one person have some college experience, to approximate the educational experiences of first-term soldiers writ large. Given these criteria, we attempted to randomize the selection of interview candidates by asking units to select soldiers according to the last digit of their Social Security numbers. However, because we were not able to control selection directly, it is unclear how well this sampling strategy was followed.

We requested access to soldiers in their first Modified Table of Organizations and Equipment (MTOE) unit.³ However, it proved difficult to screen for soldiers in their *first* MTOE unit, as some soldiers were later found to have been previously assigned to other units for short periods. In practice, this does not appear to have altered the substance of the soldiers' experiences greatly. Similarly, the project sought to interview soldiers between the ranks of E-1 and E-3, who were in their first term—that is to say, they were still under their first enlistment contract with Army. While this was the vast majority of our interviewees, we did end up including in our sample several soldiers who had recently attained the rank of E-4, or who were otherwise within our sample criteria but early in their second term due to loss of rank in their first term. The small size of our sample made it impossible

³ The terminology here can be somewhat confusing. The Army has two types of unit, MTOE and Table of Distribution Authorities (TDA). The former type are what one typically thinks of as deployable or warfighting units; they have been *modified* to conduct a specific type of mission. By contrast, TDA units are more supervisory units with a generic set of capabilities and cannot be directly sent to perform wartime functions. Because MTOE units are the more common type of unit for a first-term soldier and this study sought to capture typical Army experiences, our research involved only MTOE units.

to gather a truly representative sample of soldiers, and these personnel met most of our selection criteria. Additional details of the initial selection process for this study can be found in the companion volume.⁴

To select the soldiers for this oral history, we followed a multistage process. First, at the conclusion of every first-round interview, we asked the soldier if he or she would be interested in being contacted for a follow-up interview. If the soldier said yes, the unique interview identification, initials, and contact information were recorded by hand in a notebook that was kept separate from the interview recordings, to ensure that contact information could not be matched to interview content. After the conclusion of the first round of interviews, we reviewed each of the interview transcripts across a range of factors, including CMF, installation, gender, intent to stay in the Army for a career, marital and family status, and level of satisfaction with the Army. In addition, we prepared a short statement including highlights of the interview and a subjective determination of whether a longer interview would be desired. In roundtable meetings, we prioritized second-round interview requests using the foregoing criteria.

Next, we went through the prioritized list, attempting to recruit those soldiers who had indicated their willingness to be contacted a second time. For those who still indicated willingness to conduct a second interview, we contacted their chains of command to request access to soldiers a second time. In some cases, this was not possible. Of the nine interviews we eventually conducted, we selected six for this volume. The selection process was subjective, and our goal was to provide as complete a glimpse of Army life as possible, knowing that six stories could never capture the full range of soldiers' experiences. We did not include all nine interviews for two reasons: First, we intended to preserve soldiers' privacy so that, even if the chain of command knew the soldier had participated in the long interview process, leaders could not be certain the soldier's story appeared. Second, the detail of these interviews was so great that including all nine soldiers' stories would make the volume unduly long.

⁴ Helmus et al., 2018, pp. 6–12.

Approach

In these pages, soldiers speak frankly about their expectations and their reality, about why they left home, when they first saw themselves as soldiers, and what it means to them to serve in today's Army. We edited soldiers' stories in three ways: for privacy, clarity, and readability. To preserve privacy, we altered soldiers' stories to protect their identities. We have changed soldiers' names and other identifying details, such as installation or hometown, and in several cases have excluded parts of their stories that cannot be told without risking identification. To enhance clarity, we have reordered pieces of the soldiers' narratives at the paragraph or sentence level. Our interviews with participants were far-ranging and lasted four to six hours per soldier. Participants often revisited favorite subjects or jumped abruptly from one topic to another in ways that would be confusing to the reader without these edits. In addition, we have added text where necessary to convey the soldiers' meaning. For example, if the interviewer asked, "Who was the biggest influence in your decision to join the Army?" and the participant replied, "my sister," we would edit the soldier's words to say, "my sister was the biggest influence in my decision to join the Army." In all cases, we have stayed as close as possible to the original conversation. Finally, we have edited soldiers' remarks for readability. In most cases, this meant reducing the length of soldiers' remarks from the full transcripts to a smaller subset of remarks. It also meant editing out things that readers may find distracting, such as excessive repetition of a single point, or verbal tics such as overuse of the words "like" and "yeah." We tried to retain each soldier's unique voice, without interference.

Organization of This Report

The following six chapters contain the stories of six junior enlisted soldiers in their own words. Each story follows a similar narrative arc, beginning with some background about the soldier and proceeding through the decision to join the Army and recruiting experience; Initial Entry Training, which includes Basic Combat Training (BCT) and Advanced Individual Training (AIT); daily life in the Army; personal

life, including health and finances; and finally, a concluding section on the soldiers' Army experience, including aspirations for the future and how the soldier has changed since joining the Army. Beyond that, each soldier's path is unique.

Nick (Chapter Two) is a mechanic who grew up around the military. He has a close group of friends and an active dating life. He loves being in the Army and, despite a disciplinary action that reduced his rank, is planning to make a career in military service.

Meg (Chapter Three) is 21 years old and struggling to balance being a single mom with the demands of her job. Having a child makes it hard for her to build a social support network, but that isolation makes it hard to find people to help when her job requires her to work extra hours. She hasn't decided whether she wants to stay in the Army long term; she wants to be an enlisted leader and give her daughter better opportunities but is feeling worn down.

Randy (Chapter Four) is from a suburban area, close to a lot of farms. He's an infantryman and has been in the Army long enough that he has already deployed once to Afghanistan. He loves the Army and plans to stay in it for a long time but is frustrated at what he believes is "too much BS going on and not enough training."

Michael (Chapter Five) comes from a sprawling, big city where he originally wanted to be a teacher. He joined the Army despite his family's objections and is a field artilleryman. He is married with a newborn child, but his wife decided to stay close to family in their hometown. He regrets joining the Army and is hoping to find a way to end his enlistment contract prematurely.

Cassandra (Chapter Six) joined the military after being inspired by her teachers in an Army program for high school students. She is a supply specialist and plans to become a senior noncommissioned officer (NCO). She is driven to succeed and believes the Army will help her on that path.

Jim (Chapter Seven) is from a small town near the Canadian border and joined the Army without really knowing anyone in the military. He did really well on his aptitude tests, but the job he wanted, combat medic, wasn't available at the time. Rather than wait, he took

a different job in the medical field. He is happy to be in the Army but hopes to change jobs soon to something he finds more interesting.

While readers should consult this report's analytic companion report for more-complete conclusions, this report concludes with a brief chapter that ties together the preceding stories into a larger picture of Army service.

Nick

Nick is a single soldier who serves as a mechanic in a base vehicle repair shop. He comes from a military family and loves the Army, especially the opportunity the Army gives him to develop friendships and hang out with a large group of friends. He has been stationed at Ft. Drum but is getting ready to leave for Germany. Nick faced adversity early on, dropping in rank after an incident. But he was able to turn it around and now looks forward to a career in the Army.

Background: I would follow him around in his old jump boots

I didn't really have a hometown. My family is also military. They're Navy, so I lived everywhere. But before the Army, a majority of my high school career was spent in Kings Bay, Georgia, and that was fun. Spring break, college kids come by, beaches—everybody has done spring break there. Especially, being young, all the pretty girls. I was like 18 and lived like 20 minutes away from the beach. That is where I spent most of my high school.

School was fun. I mean, it was a really rundown old school, but the teachers were great. I had a JROTC program there.¹ My senior year I ran cross-country. I worked two to three jobs since I was 16. Your standard, typical busboy, grocery bagger, pizza delivery guy. Whatever

¹ Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) is a high school achievement program sponsored by the Army.

I could get. I did a little yard work and I was a ranch hand for a little bit; I dug posts and helped fix tractors.

As a hobby, I built model airplanes. Little ones you glue, solder, and hang up. I built a couple of the big ones, but I got in trouble for flying them because I was, again, young and dumb. I'd like to fly them real low at people, especially on the beach. I had many girlfriends. So I was either single or with a girl for a few months and then we'd break up because 90 percent of the time I went for the really popular girls.

I've never wanted to do anything else besides be in the military

My family was Navy. They were hoping I would join the Navy. But they knew from me being a child and what I liked to do as a teenager that the Army would have been the best choice for me. When I was real little I just thought it was all about shoot 'em up, explosions, gnarly car rides, Humvees and all that. As I got older, I looked more into it and I learned somewhat about the Special Forces and what the Army does more on the ground force side: camping. I watched a lot of military movies. *Black Hawk Down*, *Saving Private Ryan*, just really any military movie. They were just cool movies to watch. I mean, you can't go wrong with *Top Gun*. As a kid I played Army. Me and my buddies would gather little toy guns around our front yard. It was fun.

Since I could remember, I've never wanted to do anything else besides be in the military. My dad says when I was a little kid I would follow him around in his old jump boots when he was in the Navy, with a bat and his hat and make him march around with me all day. So they were happy when I made the choice for Army and not Marine Corps.

About 90 percent of my friends enlisted in the military. I didn't have a very large group of friends, and we're all very like-minded. They joined every service. I have a few buddies in the Coast Guard, a few in the Marine Corps, and a few in the Navy. A few in the Air Force, and a few in the Army. . . . I've got to count; 13 to 14, around that area entered the military.

My dad retired at 20 years as a lieutenant commander; my mom retired at 20 years also as a lieutenant commander; my stepmom is still currently active duty in the Navy as a senior NCO. My parents have

been stationed all over to include Japan, California, Massachusetts, and Georgia. . . . I have two siblings. My brother just turned 18, and my sister is about to turn 19 next month.

My dad, he was the only one to join the military in that generation. The generation before, his father was the only one to join. And then my great-uncle was for that generation. And then you have me. So in both sides of my family there's always been one person in each generation that joined the military. I didn't pay no mind to this until I went to Basic. You get a lot of time to think in Basic training, and I kind of realized that ever since I can remember, of the people I've talked to, there's only one person that volunteers. There's some that got drafted. But only one person in each of the generations has volunteered. And this might be the one different generation because my second-youngest cousin on my dad's side, she wants to join the military. Just because I joined they have to respect it in their eyes.

Joining the Army: *They gave me a sticker*

I decided to enlist when I was 17. My parents weren't even surprised when I told them I wanted to enlist. They were just like, "Which branch?" I told them "Army," and they're like, "All right, well, let's go to the Army recruiter and sign off the paperwork." As soon as we got all the paperwork straight and all that, I just went there when I was 17 and did the Delayed Enlistment swear-in.² I went back and did the physicals and some of the other tests. I came back, got all my paperwork squared away, and then off to Basic training.

And I went to talk to the recruiters just to get some information about the branches my junior year. They gave me a sticker. Like one of those car stickers. I had a truck and my buddy goes, "You know you put that on your truck, you're going to join the Army." I put it on my truck and believe it or not, just being able to look in my rear-view mirror and see it kind of made me go a little more into depth on the Army. I started looking more into it on my phone, my laptop. I went to

² Delayed Entry Program (DEP).

the recruiters more often. I looked at Special Forces videos, mechanic videos. Just overall. I'd get on like chat sites and see what people were saying about different MOSs.³ Yeah, just like subconscious. I never realized it until I got into the Army and he called me one day—I was in the Army and I got to my base. My friend called me and goes, "I told you. Once you put that sticker in your car."

I did have one person try to dissuade me from joining the Army, an ex-girlfriend. She said, "Don't join the Army because I'm going in the Air Force Academy. When I graduate, you can marry me and I'll take care of you." She broke up with me Week 7 of Basic training. We were in love, but I did not want to be a homemaker.

In high school I was working with a couple vets. My dad worked with veterans from a number of different branches. When I started trying to make my decision my junior year, which service I was going to try and enlist to, he sat me down with a couple of those people like over FaceTime, or we'd go out and get some food with them, and I'd ask them questions about each military branch. The Army guys were just kind of like me. They were outgoing, they were funny, they had a sense of humor. Even if it was dark, it was a sense of humor. Nice dudes. The stories they tell it was like, god, that sounds awesome. Just from how they would talk about the branches, I felt like a lot more people that I knew that are kind of more similar to me were in the Army.

A lot of service members, they enjoy their desk. I mean, I work at a desk sometimes, too, but going to the field is fun. You're there with a tent with a bunch of dudes. You have your weapons. Just jokes flying, male bonding stuff. It can be a lot of fun.

It's going to be an uneven balance sometimes, but it's great

I went to all of the recruiters. I sat down and talked to all of them. Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy—I was still open in terms of my decision. My junior year I was still kind of deciding. I would sit down with all of them, and I made my decision on Army.

³ Military Occupational Specialty (MOS).

I didn't join the Marine Corps because some information I knew and just their mannerisms. The Marine guys are just really in your face like, "Yeah, Marine Corps, Marine Corps is the best!" And I'm like, "cool, but there's got to be some s****y things." Army guy was like, "Yeah, it f****g sucks but it's awesome." My recruiter, I'll never forget him. Dude was just funny. Everyone would say, "Oh, my recruiter lied to me." My recruiter didn't. He sat down and he was like, "It sucks. You're going to do so much dumb s**t. But guess what? You're going to make some best friends; you're going to work; you're going to have some of the greatest times. I mean, it's going to be an uneven balance sometimes, but it's great."

Yeah, I mean he talked to me like a human being. My recruiter was very helpful. He was a country dude. Great dude. Funny. He was just a straight shooter; you could just tell by how he talked and his mannerisms. He wasn't trying to beat around the bush. He never had this, "Uh, yeah, um, let me look into it." He just told you what he knew, and if he didn't know, he was like, "Hey, man, I'll look it up here in a minute." When I needed to come there he'd call me. If I couldn't make it because of work, he was like, "Just make it when you can." He was a really good recruiter. Some of the other recruiters in there I didn't really work with, but just talking to them for a brief minute I was like, all right, thank god I have the recruiter I have.

And again, I get in the Army, and I say now it sucks. But it's got its up days and it's got its down days like any other job. But Marine Corps, those guys were just like, "It's awesome. Everything we do, it's awesome!" The Navy crew sort of swayed me away because I'd go to talk to them, and it was like, "All right, dude; yeah, you're going to join anyways, your parents are Navy, so I'm not going to really talk to you."

Recruiters should be honest, god honest, like don't sugarcoat it. Don't be like, "The Army is wonderful and great and you're going to do all this fun stuff. Oh, you'll definitely get a slot for this and this." Because everything in the military, in the Army, is a competition. You've got to be top notch. You've got to work hard for it. If you're just a s****y person, and you want to do other stuff, you're not going to be able to.

I wish the recruiter told me about JRTC and NTC.⁴ Thirty-day field missions where it's a great time out there, but it just sucks. I was on a night shift and it rained on me every night. During the day, it was hot and steamy, and I slept during the day—or tried to sleep. Then we'd be awake all night, and it would just rain on us.

I also wish I knew about the Special Forces selection process. My recruiters really didn't know too much about the Special Forces process because none of them worked Special Forces. They were artillery and admin. I kind of got in, and I tried figuring it out. Nobody really knew until the Special Forces recruiter came and talked about it. I want to try to join Special Forces after I get back from my next duty station, when I get back to the States, to do Special Forces.

I wanted to be my own man

I joined for travel, education, and financial independence. My parents told me they would assist me in paying for school. I don't want that. I wanted to earn my education. I wanted to see the world while being able to serve this country. I want to see the world and everything the world has to offer. The Army is going to pay for me to travel. They're paying for me to go to Germany. Hopefully, when I get back, they'll pay for me to go to Hawaii and, after that, Japan, Italy. Just go everywhere.

Initial Entry Training: *You were there to be a warrior*

Basic training was fun. During it you're getting yelled at. It's a high-stress environment. But looking back on it, I mean, sitting in the barracks, cutting up, hanging out with buddies, cleaning weapons, and getting to know other people from around the country and around the world, even, it was fun. I mean, I have four or five people that I went to Basic training with here at my installation. So once in a blue moon we go out, and we get some drinks and hang out.

⁴ Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC); National Training Center (NTC).

Everything I expected to happen happened: get yelled at a lot; run around, push-ups, sit-ups, a lot of kicks. Shoot weapons, shoot, shoot and shoot and shoot and shoot until you get so tired of shooting. Basic training met all my expectations. It's going to suck. It's going to be hot. Oh yeah. I mean, I enjoyed it. It sucked while you're there, it's high stress—but when you get out of it you're just like, I want to go back.

I love playing the Army. Like I'm moving in the vehicle mechanic world, and we're not very infantry-like, but we like to try it sometimes, playing infantry.

The hardest part of Basic is that you're in a high-stress environment, and you're with a bunch of men with testosterone that is constantly building. So sometimes it gets a little aggressive, and getting in a fight can cause you to get kicked out, so you are trying to avoid fighting while everyone is mad and in each other's face. That was really the hardest part. And you always miss your family.

You get a Dear John letter

My hardest part was getting a letter from my now ex-girlfriend in Week 7. That was the hardest part. High-stress environment, and then you get a Dear John letter, as they called it—that sucked. We were dating for six months before I left. I guess that was my longest real relationship. It's high school. But I mean, I got through it. I don't like showing emotions like that, and I got mad. I just started ripping the letter. I threw it in the trash can and I threw all the letters she sent me away. I had a really good bunkmate who came over and talked to me and said, man don't throw it away. Let's get f*****g even. Oh yeah. That guy taught me; he doesn't get even, he gets ahead. We got all the letters back together; we got them all nice and neat. Put it in a bag and said, "Here's your bulls**t back," and we sent it all back to her. Yeah, she doesn't talk to me anymore. I love him for it. He's an evil genius. Yeah, we still talk to each other once in a while. He just had a kid a few months ago, him and his wife. So, great dude.

I almost got in a few fist fights

The hardest part was just trying not to get in fights, staying out of people's face. At first everyone is buddy-buddy trying to get to know

everybody, and then you start building up, and you're in a high-stress environment. People are getting yelled at. I got in a lot of verbal fights. Everyone did. I almost got in a few fist fights. One was this dude—I don't know what the issue was. He just started trying to start a fight with me. I was in my locker and he comes up to me, "Hey, man, move." I was like, "This is my wall." He was like, "Just f*****g move." So he pushed me and I was like, "Dude, chill out." And he gets all up in my face and I was like, "Go away." And then he slammed me against my locker and he kept screaming—his nose touched me. It's just so dumb; I can't even explain. But he just kept yelling. And then I got yelled at for instigating a fight by someone who didn't even witness it. I was like, "all right, whatever."

Shoot weapons, shoot, shoot and shoot

The best part of Basic was shooting the weapons all the time. It sucked, but it was fun. You're issued your own 40, 249 light machine gun, Mark 19 and 302 Grenade Launcher. You go to the range; you shoot. The drill sergeant walks away, rack out for a little bit, wake up and return to shooting. You'd have your battle buddy teams, right?⁵ You just pull your ACH a little down and just keep your head straight and just close your eyes.⁶ Your battle buddy would sit there for 20 to 30 minutes awake. The drill sergeant would come by and hit you in the thigh. The drill sergeant walked away, and then you'd switch. That's why they say soldiers can sleep anywhere.

I know my battle buddy has got my back

There were great people. But we all hated each other towards the end. Because, again, you live with each other for ten weeks, and everyone is tired and annoyed with each other. But when you get—your last day everyone is like, "I'm going to miss you, man." It's like your high school senior graduation. You may not like people, but then they'll be like, "Hey, man, good knowing you. Take it easy." But yeah, I left, and some of the guys I don't talk to at all.

⁵ A battle buddy is a partner assigned to every enlisted soldier.

⁶ Advanced Combat Helmet (ACH).

Other guys I do keep up with. I mean there's relationships you—sometimes you instantly click with the person. Like you may get in fights with them—like your best friend, you may get in fights with them, but that's still your battle buddy. I know he's got my back. You just form a brotherhood. So that's like the greatest part about the military, in my opinion: that brotherhood.

Because I know if I get in trouble, I know my battle buddy has got my back. Bailing you out, all that fun stuff. Making friends, it's just kind of who you click with. Like sometimes you could be the complete opposite person in the world, and one dude could be country as could be and the other person could be as gangster as can be, but somehow they just find some common ground and become best friends.

Making friends is extremely important because it's that support channel. Like when you hit that wall mentally, and you're like, "I can't do it anymore," you know you've got your brothers to your left and right that are like, "Yo, you got this man. Don't worry about it. Keep trucking on." It's a support channel. Like here some people have their wives and their kids like readily available. They'll support them. You can vent to them. There, you don't have that. You just met a dude three weeks ago, and now you guys are best friends because you're in the same s**t together.

I started missing my family

There is no internet access, and you are only allowed to call home three times. No technology. No newspapers, no nothing. You were there to be a warrior and learn how to be a warrior. That was your job 24/7. So sometimes our platoon sergeant would come out and tell us what's happening in the world, like who won the FIFA Cup.⁷ I think it was Brazil or Ireland, I don't know. And then just random stuff that was happening in the news that may pertain to us or lift our spirits or just shut our spirits down.

It really didn't hit me until probably Week 5 or 6. We were so busy just constantly going from one thing to one thing, to doing this to

⁷ International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA).

doing that, and we started like slowing down a little bit. Then it started hitting me, like I kind of miss my family.

I got to make three phone calls during Basic training. One when we first got there, saying we made it safely. Second one was when we went from Red Phase to Blue Phase, which is like the cutback. That's right around the time I started missing my family. So I got to call them. And then you get another call Blue Phase to White Phase, which is like your last two weeks or last week there. And that's when I had my last phone call. Then I graduated and saw my family.

I would write letters constantly to my mom, my dad, and my stepmom. If I got a letter from my uncle, my great-great uncle, I'd write letters to him and my great-grandmother. I'd write letters to them as much as I possibly could. My great-great uncle was the last person in the Army, since the Army Air Corps. He was probably the Army Air Corps before the Air Force. He was a navigator bomber in World War II and Korea. So, he wanted to know how the Army was now, and he'd write me letters, and I'd tell him what I've gone through. And then my grandmother—I didn't get to see her very often, so she would just write me letters, and she's always ecstatic to get letters back from me because, I think, on my dad's side of the family, I am so far the only great-grandchild since my dad joined the military. So my dad was the grandchild and I was the great-grandchild that joined.

I realized I'm getting a lot of letters from a lot of people that really don't talk to me that much when I was home or a civilian. They say how proud they are of me and all that. It was awesome. It felt great to always get letters. But you're just kind of like, wow, I'm the only person—I mean I've got a lot of cousins who are my age now that are eligible to join but didn't.

"Skittles up"

I loved our drill sergeants. We had story time once a week, and drill sergeants would get up there and they would tell a story about deployment or something. And that was like after we made Blue Phase, when it was kind of more relaxed. When they can talk to us not like we're dirt bags, but like we were starting to become soldiers. But yeah, they'd tell us stories once a week, and you kind of got like a feel for the Army

and a feel for the people that are leading you right now. Besides that, you really don't see too many people besides your drill sergeants.

They were funny people. They'd tell you stories, and you just laugh. I will never forget my drill sergeant. The drill sergeant would always call us nasty. That became our platoon motto, "Quit being nasty." And apparently we would spontaneously sit color coordinated, like black people would sit with black people, Hispanic with Hispanic. But she would walk over and she would get mad. She'd be like, "Y'all better Skittles up." And someone's like, "What's skittles mean?" She's like, "Y'all color coordinated. Switch that s**t up like Skittles." It was just funny. And the other drill sergeant was an old infantry cat, and he's like, "You're my last f*****g platoon. Y'all better not f**k up." I mean, they're yelling at you and stuff; they're your boss.

I would never quit until I was told to quit

My dad and my stepmom attended my graduation ceremony. It was very hot. It was like 98 degrees, in ASUs.⁸ But I mean you honestly did not care. You were hot, and you were sweating, and you were gross, but when you march down that field and they recognized our company as the honor company, it was great.

We were the best company out of our battalion. We beat everybody else out. We still hold the record for most experts, most sharpshooters, most Hawkeyes and least number of marksmen. Marksmen are the lowest weapons qualification by unit; sharpshooter is the middle, and then expert is the highest, and Hawkeye is if you hit all your targets. Our drill sergeants were amazing. They knew how to shoot, and they taught us all how to shoot.

I went into it thinking, "I will succeed, and I will finish." I never had a doubt that I wasn't going to finish. I was going to push. I was going to give them 100 percent; I was going to try my best. I would never quit until I was told to quit.

⁸ Army Service Uniform (ASU).

It was all new freedom

AIT was fun.⁹ You go from Basic training, where you have all these rules, constantly being in uniform and no weekends, to a way more relaxed like, “Here’s your phone; you get Saturday, Sunday off; you can leave.” It was fun. It was all new freedom. Literally, it’s like being reborn. You’re seeing the world all new again.

Then like some weekends you wouldn’t want to go out because you didn’t want to spend money, or you were just tired. And you just had that freedom to sleep. In Basic training, your schedule is planned out from like 0600 or 0730, you’re going to be doing this. From 0735 to this, you will be showering. And you get there, and they’re like, “All right, your next class is at 1300. You go and you nap, watch movies, dick around out in the hallway. It was just fun. You kind of build a relationship—you build those cliques there, though. Like you had that battle buddy thing, but then you were allowed to go out on the weekends, so you’d find the guys who were more similar to you and liked to do the same things as you.

The training wasn’t challenging. I mean, some people had a hard time. I knew quite a bit about cars, not everything. But I did work on tractors, which are usually diesel. I got there, and I knew some of the engines and how they worked. I mean it was easy. They’d literally tell you, “This is a module. This is what we’re going to learn. We’re going to test you on this. Here’s the book; here’s the answers.”

We got to go out. There’s stuff to do, like the mall around the base. We found this area that had real go-carts. I can’t remember the place to save my life. I’ve tried finding it again because I have a buddy who’s about to go to AIT, and he hasn’t gotten to his Phase V yet.¹⁰ But I was like, this place is awesome. These go-carts go fast. So that was fun. But during military training—the social aspect was the best.

⁹ Advanced Individual Training (AIT).

¹⁰ Phase V training is the advanced phase during the final weeks of AIT and/or One Station Unit Training.

We had time to fight

I did get in fights in AIT. It's because we had a little more free time and space. They weren't like fist fights because we were mad; we wanted to fight because we had time to fight. Now, I did get in one fight, but it was like an organized event, and it was with my roommate. I don't know what his deal was, but he did not like me. Instantly, he did not like me. Like we got to the room, and I put my pack on the bottom bunk, and he was like, "I want bottom bunk." I moved myself to the top bunk. I was like, "All right, man, cool. I don't care. I slept on the top bunk in Basic training; I'll sleep on the top bunk in AIT." But he just did not like me. And one day I got out of the shower, and he had the door wide open, and he was talking to people, and I was like, "Yo, close that and f**k you." So I kicked the door, shut it closed. He opens the door up and he's like, "I'm going to f**k you up." And I was mad, and I was tired. I don't know why I was mad. It was just like one of those days where we all got the dog s**t smoked out of us because people were late. He's like, "I'm going to beat the dog s**t out of you—I'm going to f**k you up." And I was like, "Let's go man, let's do it." And he said, "Oh never mind; I don't want to lose my career." And I was like, "OK, that's the end of the conversation."

I put my uniform on for the night and went to stand outside for a little bit to talk to some buddies and wait for final call. I told one of my buddies what happened, and he called my roommate out in front of everybody. He was like, "No, I never said that." Then we went into one room, and everybody was calling out everybody. It was like, we had all agreed that if you got beef with someone, meet here, call them out. We got refs—we're doing no body blows, no punching; it was all grappling, wrestling on your knees, because we didn't want to seriously injure anybody. We put mouth guards in and everything. We didn't want to get in trouble by leaving marks. But we were just like, "All right." So we all—we were like 15, 20 guys in one room, and you'd be like, "You, let's go."

I remember just looking around, and you had people lined on the bottom bunk, lined on the top bunk, lined on the single bunk, on the desk. Sitting up against the walls and the little bathroom. We had a lookout outside the room just in case the platoon sergeant kicked the

door. Then we'd all like scramble. We even had like a laptop set up with speakers to make it look like we're all watching movies together.

It was like a "fight night." I mean, after Basic training you're all stressed out still, and then you get in AIT and it's still a little bit stressful, and you just got all that testosterone building up. We all needed one night. And guess what, after that night we felt good. We never had any s**t after that. It was really easy going.

Learning about my new installation

They told me before I came here. They said, "All right, this is y'all's duty stations. You're going here, you're going here, you're going here, you're going here, you're going here." Coming to Fort Drum wasn't on my wish list. We get a wish list; three places you want to go CONUS, two places you want to go OCONUS. OCONUS is overseas, and CONUS is stateside. I chose California, Hawaii, I think Korea was on there, Germany was on there. And the last place, I think it was Texas. I didn't want to come to this installation. I was like, I don't want to stay on this side of the States. I want to go somewhere different. And for OCONUS I was like, "oh, Korea, that sounds cool." And then Germany, I was like, I hear they have great beer. And they came down and told me I was coming here, to Ft. Drum. I was like, "OK."

I did not know much about the installation. So I got on their Facebook page and looked at them. Did a little bit of background about the division and the battalion, and so that's how I figured it out. I was like, this is going to be a cool place. . . . I was like, they got a lot of opportunities for advanced training, and they offer opportunities to sign up for Special Forces. They did all this swoopy, high-speed stuff. I was like, that's the place to be. I was like, all right, I'll be cool with that. But I also heard that this base is a black hole, and it sucks. I heard that a lot. Black hole, all happiness and joy get sucked out of you. The units here do so much more extra. There's not a lot to do around here. You have to drive two or three hours to go do anything fun.

Life in the Army: *We're going to get it done*

I had a decent score on my ASVAB.¹¹ When I joined, I was offered cryptolinguist, combat engineer, infantry of course, firefighter, and this one. And I didn't like firefighting, the hose and water and fire. . . . A lot of people think I should have become a firefighter. The recruiter was like, "Dude, you're lucky to get the firefighter. We only get like three slots every month, man." And I'm like, "No, I'm good. Cryptolinguist was a year-and-a-half school. I'm not dumb, I'm not smart. I'm pretty average, but I just chose this one. I mean, a combat engineer, I was like, "ah, it looks cool." But I don't see the purpose for that. And then I got into the AIT school, and one of our instructors was a combat engineer and became a 91 Bravo and he was like, "Oh yeah, you know those demolition guys that blow up buildings?"¹² Yeah, they get paid big money to do that." And he's like, "Those are combat engineers, usually." I was like, "Oh, well."

And you're an adult again

From being in boot camp and AIT and all the restrictions—and then you just get to your unit, and you're an adult again. I mean 90 percent of your life is not being planned. You get here and it's like, "All right, PT's at 6:20."¹³ This is the uniform, be there." Then they're like, "Bye." You go home. You go to PT. After PT they say, "Hey, 9:00 be at work." You come to work, you work, and no one's yelling at you like, "Shut up, you can't talk, sit straight!" You can bulls**t and cut it up and talk and listen to music, try and enjoy work. And then you get off and then you're free to do what you want.

PT and then work and then come home and you're off. But I thought it would be a little more warrior-y, like more warrior training. I didn't think it was going to be like that. I wanted to be constantly at the range. I wanted to be doing all that fun infantry stuff. I think I

¹¹ Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB).

¹² A 91B, or 91 Bravo, is the alphanumeric designation for the Wheeled Vehicle Mechanic specialty.

¹³ Physical training (PT).

really did join the wrong MOS. I should have gone combat arms, but I enjoy what I do.

I wake up at 5:30 in the morning. I square my uniform away for the day, get ready for PT, brush teeth, comb my gnarly hair, get ready to head outside. Stand tall, look good. At 6:30—or 6:20, ten minutes prior we're outside—6:30 flag goes off, PT starts; 6:30 to 7:30 or 7:45 PT run, push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups; 7:30 to 8:45 is your time to s**t, shower, shave, breakfast, nap, or whatever you want to do in the morning; 9:00 at work, working. So leave at 8:45, takes five to ten minutes to work. Got to change into coveralls and get coordinated with whatever you're doing for the day; 9:00 to roughly 1700 to 1900, turn wrenches, and then go home. Do whatever you want to do and then go back to work the next day. Every day. Sometimes on Wednesdays we'll do a ruck march and start a little earlier. We'll have PT formation at 5:00, and we'll start the ruck march depending on how far we're going. It takes a little bit of time to do a ruck march. So you just adjust fire. The rest is about the same.

We work together in a squad. It makes it easier. But I do the paperwork, I order the parts. I inspect and troubleshoot. Others in my squad do parts received/not installed and assist me in troubleshooting. A little more intellectual. Yeah, and we're all E-4s; we're the senior guys in the shop.¹⁴ So we're all getting ready to leave, in a minute; we're going to get some PFCs that are going to start working with us, and we're going to show them how to do everything.¹⁵

Usually on Mondays and Tuesdays I'm looking to paperwork, ordering parts, determining all what trucks need to be troubleshot. Depending on how many trucks, it could be just Wednesday I'm troubleshooting and ordering the part for that troubleshot project. Or it could be Monday, Thursday troubleshooting. And then, typically, Friday my team is usually either finishing up the last of their work

¹⁴ Military enlisted ranks have alphanumeric designations, from E-1 through E-9. The higher the number, the more senior the enlisted soldier. A rank of E-4 denotes a specialist or corporal.

¹⁵ Private first class (PFC).

for that week to get mission complete, or we're cleaning. So it's pretty predictable.

My hours can range from coming into work at 5:00 and working until 8:00. It depends on whatever we have to do. Say, like we're going to the field—all the trucks are rolling out on a big field mission. Then we'd come in, like we'd have to get like that last minute stuff, and we have to make sure all the vehicles are good to go.

Thursdays are the best part of my work week. It's the day before the weekend. It's Friday eve. The guys all come over, and we talk about what we're going to do this weekend and where we're going to hang out and what we're going to do. And it's a good bonding experience. Everyone comes down to my room, usually. It's six or eight guys that all live in the barracks. We all have our group text message. It's like this is basically just a giant frat house. It really is. It's just a cleaner frat house. We watch movies, have a few beers, and get hyped over the weekend just to get let down, but it's still fun. These guys are not in my company. They're in other companies from our battalion. But they're all in the barracks, and they're all single soldiers, and they like to have fun, I like to have fun, we all click. We hang out; we talk s**t on each other. So it's fun.

My squad is awesome

We get along; I mean you have to get along with everyone you work with. Ninety percent of the people I work with are awesome, and 10 percent of them are s**t bags. You don't have to like them, but you have to get along with them just enough to work to get the mission done. I hear a lot of the specialists are trying to get promoted right now, me as well. It's just another competition you have to do. But we've got a lot of PFCs and PV2s and fuzzies that are new to the Army, and they're part of this new generation.¹⁶

In my company, when we are behind closed doors, we can say pretty much what comes to our mind. If we have an issue with someone, we say it. If you have an issue with an NCO or someone, you have

¹⁶ Private second class (PV2); an unranked soldier is called a “fuzzy” because of the blank Velcro square where the rank insignia would normally go.

to be like, “Hey, Sergeant So-and-So.” I know a lot of the soldiers. If I’ve got a problem with someone, I’m like, “Hey, So-and-So, let me get you over here right quick. What you’re saying is f****d up.” You can tell them like that, or you can tell them in more professional way. We’re all pretty thick skinned.

There are cliques. We all may be tight, but there are cliques. Like you have your guys who are country who like to do the two-step and country music and chewing tobacco—gotta dip. And guys like me, I actually really don’t hang out with too many people outside of work that I work with because I’m not like most of the mechanics. They’re a lot more country than I am.

If I have an issue, like personal, I feel like I can go talk to just about any one of them and go, “Hey, can I sit down with you and talk to you for a minute about something in my head?” And we’ll both sit down, and they’ll give me their honest opinion. Like it could be some real—like, “I got a baby on the way man, what should I do?” And they’d be like do this, this, and this. This is what I think. Or if he may be married or something and go, “Hey, get that s**t checked.” Or it could be as simple as, “My goldfish died.” You can talk to them about anything. They’re good dudes.

I have a battle buddy who is from a different company. He’s one of my best friends. Every day he’s in my room. Every day we go outside to smoke at least four or five times. We hang out constantly. So if s**t hits the fan with me and I need a bailout, he’s got my back.

My squad is awesome. We’re all E-4s. We all work in the same section. I have had pretty s****y COs in my life, or in Army life.¹⁷ But the CO I have right now is phenomenal. If I have a personal issue I need to take care of, he just says, “When you’re done, come back to work.” My two battle buddies, I hang out with them sometimes on the weekends. But we’ve all been in convoys together. And we’re always in there blasting music, making fun of each other, having a good time.

The platoon is pretty good. We’ve got a few guys that are s**t bags that don’t like to work. Since the last time we talked, I had a platoon sergeant, and I just got my platoon leader, my lieutenant. But now

¹⁷ Commanding officer (CO).

we got a full staff. We got a warrant officer, we got a lieutenant, we got a motor sergeant, we got a platoon sergeant, and we got an actual shop foreman, and most of those guys—I want to say four to five of them—are phenomenal. Just great people overall. They're great leadership. Like the lieutenant puts out, "This is what needs to be done." The platoon leader is like, "All right, if that's what needs to be done, we're going to get it done, but we're going to do it this way. We're going to use common sense, and we're going to get it done quick, fast and in a hurry, so we can move to the next task."

On the maintenance side at work, our warrant officer and our motor sergeant work together really well to put out clear and concise information. They're on the floor with us. They'll turn wrenches. If they're not turning wrenches, they're giving us advice. They're mentoring us, which should be done. My higher-ups are awesome. Some of the E-5s and E-4s we have are below par.¹⁸ It makes me mad. Can't do too much about it. You can try correcting them, giving them like a slight bit of, "Hey, Sergeant, I think you should do it this way instead of that way, or this is how you should speak to someone instead of that way."

I like my chain of command. I don't really talk to my CO too often because it's not in my lane to. If I have an issue, I talk to my platoon or whatever. But if I have a major, major issue, I know I can go talk to my first sergeant. I can just walk in there and knock on his door and be, "Hey, First Sergeant, can I sit down and talk to you really quick?" And I know he'll listen to me, and he'll take my opinion into it.

I don't have too many interactions with my commanding officer, but the interactions I've had with him are phenomenal. I had a recent loss in my family, and he's from Ohio, so he talks to me about Ohio. He said if I needed anything in the world, I could just talk to him, and he'd help me, which is always comforting to know that your boss is willing to go out of his way to assist you, a specialist, lower enlisted, at his rank.

¹⁸ A rank of E-5 denotes a senior specialist.

I want to say I did something for this country

I have never deployed. I don't want to say I served 20 years in the Army and never deployed. I was supposed to go to Africa in this last rotation for deployment, but my name got cut from the list. So I didn't go. I want to say I served my country, that I protected it from someone trying to take our freedoms away. I want to say I did something for this country.

Not having deployed sucks. I want to deploy. But the Army is always deploying somewhere. There's going to be some conflict somewhere in the world, and we're going to be there. I just got to wait. This was a high-deploying unit. That's kind of why I was kind of excited. Because I heard this unit was like deployment after deployment.

I know a lot of people who have deployed. I mean, right now the people who have deployed still outweigh the people who haven't, but the people who haven't are slowly gaining. I think I'm trying to start going for promotion. And I feel like if you've deployed, you just have that little extra bit of knowledge that people kind of respect. Like "he's been there; he knows what he's talking about."

Training

Soldier training, we try once a week. We do not always succeed. It used to happen once a week, like regularly. Now, we'll be lucky to get it in once or twice a month, if that. Shooting's a whole different thing. We have PMIs where we sit down and they reteach us how to shoot.¹⁹ We go to the range every six months or whenever we need a weapons card. I enjoy the training.

At JRTC, I'm a forklift operator. So it's like a deployment in that situation. You don't have days off. It's just work. As a forklift operator, typically you'd wake up at 6:00 and go eat chow. By 7:00, I'm in the forklift, and I don't stop forklifting until like 9:30, 12:00 in the evening. And then you go to sleep for a little bit, wake up, and do it all over again. And it just drains you. The actual "box," which is like the actual s****y laid out combat zone, and then you have to dig foxholes,

¹⁹ Preliminary Marksmanship Instruction (PMI).

and then you sleep in them. I didn't sleep for the first 72 hours.²⁰ For the first three days, all day it was raining. I swear someone hated me. The Army gods hated me. I was by myself in a foxhole with a crew-served weapon. So if I were to go to sleep and, say, the enemy were to come through, they'd kill me, and now they would have a crew-served weapon, which carries 200 rounds at full auto; it just lays down a wall of lead.

I took my lickings. I lost my rank

I lost rank. I went from E-3 to E-1, and I kind of hit a little hard streak. Yeah, I got in a little altercation with another soldier. He was drunk, and he was mad, and he tried fighting me. I was like, "we were friends"; I didn't want to fight him, so I put him down and put him in a naked chokehold and told him, "Hey, man, calm down. You can either black out or tap out, but you're going to calm down. I'm not letting you up because you're going to try hitting me, and then we're going to both get in trouble." So I was pretty cut up the next day because the guy was just scratching on my neck. So my platoon sergeant called me out.

First off, he was drinking, and he got mad, and he drove home. I was supposed to be his DD.²¹ I was like 19. So I had to walk miles in the dark back to my barracks. Got back at like 3:00 in the morning. I fell asleep, overslept, came to formation. My platoon sergeant was like, "You're never late. What's up?" I was like, "I had a rough night." He's like, "What's that on your neck?" I was like, "I got in a small altercation, nothing to worry about," because nobody got hurt. He was like, "All right, cool beans." Well, apparently the next day—that day I showed up late, my friend went to his chain of command crying saying I had come out of nowhere and just hit him. That wasn't true. I think he was scared because he was going to get in trouble if they found out the truth. I told my side of the story and, in tears, he told his. They just believed him because he was quivering. So it's like, all right. I took my lickings. I lost my rank. I had actually just lost my grandmother, too, so I hit a slump. I kind of went through a little bit of a depression.

²⁰ This is likely an exaggeration.

²¹ Designated driver (DD).

So for like two or three months I was kind of really s****y. I think I didn't show up to work for like a month on time.²² Nobody was tracking me. I was the s**t bag of the unit. I'd show up kind of when I wanted to. I wouldn't show up to PT. It was like two or three days in a row I just didn't even show up to work. I just didn't feel like moving.

After a while, I was like, "f**k this." I don't want to be that guy. So I went to the motor pool one morning. I talked to one of the NCOs. I was like, "I want to learn how to drive a forklift. I want to have leadership experience." I want to do that, be an indispensable piece of equipment for the unit. And I became that. Nine months later I pinned on specialist, which is one rank higher than what I lost. I made ground quick. It sucked. It hurt. But I was like screw it, I want to be top dog again.

At the time, I also used counseling services to deal with the loss of my grandmother and losing rank. And on top of that, people calling you a s**t bag. You get sick of it mentally, so I talked to the chaplain, and he suggested I needed to call Army OneSource.²³ Army OneSource pointed me in the direction of a free therapist the Army paid for. I went there, and I sat down with him, and after about two-and-a-half months with this dude I was like, "Man, I'm not even going to bitch about it anymore. Everyone kind of left me alone. I've been taking your advice and applying it, and it made my life a lot easier, man." He said, "All right, man, you need any more therapy sessions?" "No, I'm good, thanks." Shook hands and haven't been back since. Yeah, it was helpful. He was kind of one of the persons I talked to about it. I was like, I don't know how to approach this, and he kind of gave me an approach route to do it.

²² While impossible to know for certain, this is likely somewhat exaggerated.

²³ Army OneSource is a former Army outreach initiative for family and social services. Soldiers are now referred to Military OneSource.

Personal Life: *I got great people to hang out with*

Making friends in the Army is pretty easy. When I first got here, I was kind of a loner because I didn't know too many people. The only person I knew at the time was my roommate, and that was it. We hung out and did stuff once in a while. I started meeting people in my company. I really didn't get along with too many of them because they already had their little groups, and they'd invite each other out. I was just the new guy. So I would just hang outside smoking and being myself. I was friendly. I said, "Hey, how you doing? My name is So-and-So," and we'd hang out. And I'd be like, "Hey, man, what are you doing?" "Nothing." "Want to go to the movies?" "Cool, let's go to the movies." And that's how you become friends. I've made a lot of friends doing details together or turning wrenches together. And just sitting outside the barracks smoking or sitting outside the barracks just chilling out.

I go home. I shower. Eat some chow, hang out with people

When I am not at work, I watch TV, learn German. It would be cool to go there and be able to speak the language, and it would be a lot easier to travel. I hear a lot of tourists, because they don't speak German, get ripped off. But if I can speak German, I might get some discounts. I might be able to find like the cool spots where they go.

On a typical weeknight, I go home. I shower. Eat some chow, hang out with people. If I go out on a weeknight, it's like to bars to get some food. I also hang out with a gang of eight to nine guys. We all either live in my barracks or another one.

Probably every other week we go out on the weekends, and then we take a weekend off. But on weeknights, I don't really go out. I went out last night for a buddy who's going away. He's going to another post, so he's on a plane right now. So we went out last night. But if it's not like a celebration of a good friend leaving or like a birthday or something, I don't go out. We have our favorite bar, which just closed for renovations, so we go to two other bars. We don't like going to the clubs too much.

And about every other weekend, we go to the bar. If we are at home, we just hang out. Again, we're the same ten guys, but we plan little things. One year, we planned a pool party right outside the barracks. We went out and got one of those inflatable pools, some water cans, and filled up the whole pool. We did a pool party.

We did a costume party, like an '80s-theme costume party. We're trying to organize right now a drive-in movie theater right out here in the parking lot. We have this projector that one of our buddies bought. It's just right to do a movie night. I have a surround-sound system that we're going to take out there, and we're just going to pull up our cars and watch old movies on the side of the building. And we're going to do it outside of the barracks. We're going to sell like five bucks a ticket.

On all our group texts it says "The Gang"

I got great people to hang out with. It's never a dull moment. Everyone's cutting up, making fun of each other, making jokes. Just great people to be around. They're probably my best friends that—I won't forget them for sure. On all our group texts it says "The Gang."

The worst thing about my social life is that I can never just sit in my room by myself. There's always someone knocking on my door. Some nights you're just like, "ah, I'm home." I just want to get naked and lay in bed. And then someone knocks on the door—"Oh, s**t." Smoke break. So you grab your pack of cigarettes. "What's up, man, you want to go smoke?" "Yeah, let's go." Then you come back and you stay in your room and you hang out and you bulls**t.

If I were not in the Army, I would have the same buddies in the civilian world like my buddies from when I was a civilian; it would be the same thing. We'd all probably live real close to each other. We'd probably be planning dumb stuff like this too and just hanging out together all the time.

I didn't expect that I was going to be popular. Like I was not a very well-known kid in school. But I'm a very well-known person throughout this battalion and even brigade. I know people from just about everywhere. I did not expect that. My social life is not typical. I know a lot of soldiers in this barracks that just hang out in their rooms, and they enjoy it. They don't want to be social.

Weekends it's a different story. It's a binge

I smoke a lot, roughly a pack a day. I tried quitting, and it didn't work. I'm cutting down slowly to about ten cigarettes a day now, but it just varies on the day.

I cut caffeine out of my diet. For alcohol, if some of the guys come over I'll have two to three beers that night. If they come every night, it's two to three beers every night, and they have two to three beers with me, then we call it a night. Weekends, it's a different story. It's a binge. Binge by definition is consuming or doing something in excess. Like just nonstop continually. So if like we're on a weekend where we're binging on drinking, which is a terrible thing it sounds like, especially because the Army says they don't want you doing that. But yeah, some weekends it'll be like, "All right let's go! We're going hard this weekend. Why? Because we're celebrating. What? I don't know—we're doing it." And you and your buddies are like, "screw it, let's do it." We get home either by Uber or we find a minor and have him be the designated driver. Usually we don't like taking a minor and be, "Hey, minor, drive us around." No, we usually give them like 50 or 60 bucks.

I can go out and meet girls anywhere

The dating scene here, it's trash. Either someone is after your BAH, BAS, TRICARE, or they're so used to so many men in this area they start dating you, but as soon as someone else catches their eye, they'll dump you for someone better.²⁴ But if you go to some other towns beyond the base, where it is a little less of a military presence, it's a lot better. Even if you aren't military, it's just a better crowd of people.

Before my current relationship, I dated girls on and off. Either I'd stay single for a month or two, or I'd be in a relationship for a month or two. I can go out and meet girls anywhere. I've met some at the library and the mall. I'm forward with women. You don't know until you try. The worst thing they can say is "no" and Taser you and punch you in the face, but you'll recover eventually. No, you just talk to them. A lot of people don't understand that. You just, "Hi, my name is" whatever

²⁴ Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH); Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS); TRICARE is the health care program for Army servicemen and -women and their families.

and try calling. She says, "I have a boyfriend," it's like, "Rog, I'll see you when you're single." Or if she's like, "Oh, my name is and here's my number, call me and let's go out sometime." It's that easy.

Just because you say you're military, people will respect you just a little more. You go to a bar, and you may be talking to a girl, and some dude comes up, and you're like, "Man, I was talking to her first." Sometimes pulling the Army card kind of scares those guys away. Because sometimes those guys are just living in a studio apartment and working a bare-minimum job.

I have dated other soldiers, and I don't like to. With another soldier, you constantly talk about work. When I get off duty, I don't always want to talk about work. I just want to be able to sit down, maybe have a beer, watch TV, be able to talk about science, politics, comedians, something I saw on Facebook. You know, something that's not related to my work all the time.

With guys in the barracks, I always get, "Set me up, help me out," those kinds of guys. "Hey, man, where the other females at?"

It's like the Billy Joel song "Uptown Girl"

I have a girlfriend. It's still pretty brand new. We have been dating for about a month and a half now. Right now, we're trying the committed thing, even though I'm leaving for Germany. She's actually about to go to university, one of those Ivy League, smart-people schools. We met through a friend of a friend. She actually lives in Henderson Harbor, about 40 minutes away.

We just clicked. I'm considered a blue-collar guy, apparently, in the world because I work on mechanics. She's a white-collar girl. It's like the Billy Joel song "Uptown Girl." She hasn't even told her parents that she's dating me yet. I don't know her friends really well or where her family comes from, but I don't think they're very big on a military person. I don't think she thinks anything of my being in the Army. What matters is just me and her. She gets it sometimes that because of the uniform I wear, it takes me away from her. But she pays no mind to it really.

We do both like watching comedy movies. She just discovered running with me. Paddle boarding. I'm teaching her how to shoot.

She's enjoying that. Honestly, we can just sit and watch TV, watch movies and hang out, and that's fun. Sometimes we go out and get some food, or we go to a local bar.

Being in the Army, some days you're extremely stressed and tired and come home and you're angry, and just because you're angry, she's going to get angry. You may get into an argument over something dumb. It takes a lot of time away from you and a lot of energy. So I mean, when I was dating, I'd set up a date, and then all of a sudden I had to cancel. "But why?" "The Army says I got to stay late tonight." So it's hard sometimes, but you have to overcome. You signed up for it.

We're going to try the long-distance thing. I like her so far. We'll see. We're going to get on each other's nerves eventually, and we'll see if we can tough that out. But again, she's going to school, and I am going to Germany. So we'll literally be on opposite sides of the world. She will fly out and visit me, but yeah, meet a girl. And then move.

I do not see myself getting married. If I have an offspring, the world's going to implode. No, I don't know. I'm too young to decide. I got to see how the world goes right now. I was at a retirement center the other day and got to talk to some of the guys retiring, and there were spouses, and marriage and the Army apparently affects household life pretty strongly. Your spouse can leave for nine months to a year. You're home by yourself, and if you have kids, you're by yourself, or the spouse is with the kids by herself. And then she's got to take care of all the bills and all the housework. So stuff that two of you had to do, now one singular person is trying to do and trying to compensate. And then she's got to worry about her military spouse on range, or you go to the field for 30 days, and it's a month without your helper there. And then the kids, you're going to have a good period of time where a father figure or mother figure is not within that picture.

I've always said I was going to stay single. Being single is too fun. I'm 21. So I'm still young. So I've got a lot of time. But I don't know. Again, when I get there, and I find the right one. But if I get married, I get married. If I don't, I don't.

We're just crammed in here like sardines

I wish our living conditions were a lot better. Our living conditions suck. We have cockroaches, waterbugs. I mean, we're just crammed in here like sardines. They give us all of this gear, and they want us to try to shove it in these closets. Plus they don't want us—it's our choice to have civilian clothing, and you can't just have like pairs of civilian clothes. Yeah, I mean, and then you have your running shoes, all your boots, frickin' your civilian shoes. And you just have all this stuff, and then you come here typically with stuff from home, so you have all that stuff. And some of that stuff is like—I have a lot of like mementos from like buddies who've given it to me since I've been in the Army. Before the Army, family—I've got pictures all over the place of my family. I have a roommate. And then I have my stuff. And our stuff overflows into the common area, and everyone's like wow.

I save a ton of money now

I am pretty financially stable now. Now that I'm not a private. I can blow my money on stupid s**t. I have a lot of stuff I want. As a private, you get in, and you're just like, I have my own money; I can go buy what I want. I have no one to tell me what I can't buy, and then you buy dumb stuff. I bought a TV, a laptop, a couple of speakers, even though I had a sound system. I bought a drone. They were cool. I still have it. Just dumb stuff. Like I always spent money on food, and I was just like dumb. And now I eat at the DFAC like as much as I possibly can to save money.²⁵ I save a ton of money now. I learned that through trial and error. Like I'd blow through a paycheck in like ten days, and I had five more days until payday. That was a year and a half ago.

My major expenses are car parts, my insurance, phone bill, and internet bill. Those are the only expenses. Car parts can range anything from 50 bucks to 600 bucks. My insurance is at \$148. Internet is \$60. And my phone bill is \$129. I have a loan deduction of 100 bucks a paycheck, and that was for getting one of my cars operational. I had to go buy a new engine. I don't have a credit card.

²⁵ Dining facility (DFAC).

I typically don't pay for beer. People just show up with beer, and it just stays in my fridge. I make about \$1,600 a month. I try, with bills and extracurricular, not to go over \$1,000. I have savings, and that savings is my emergency savings. I do not have a retirement account. I haven't gotten that far in my life.

In the Army, I get a constant paycheck. I know what it's going to be each month. My health care is taken care of. I live in the barracks, so I'm not paying for rent or anything or all this extra-ness. I go to the DFAC for food. I go home, and I don't have to pay for any electric, water, heating. I just go to my room, shower, and I can set the temperature. It's cold outside, turn the heat all the way up. If it's hot outside, turn it all the way down. I do what I want. Retirement benefits are awesome. My dad's retired, my mom's retired, and my step-mom's about to retire. They're living life pretty nicely. So I can retire. I'm already in college for my associate's; I just started. It will take me eight years to finish. I'm doing one class at a time. My major is electrical engineer.

My Army Experience: *Be someone people can look up to*

I am glad I joined the Army. I would do it again without a second's doubt. I picked my MOS because I worked on cars before, and tractors, and it seems like a pretty cool MOS. People who like work with their hands and not afraid to get dirty. What I like most about my MOS is the camaraderie. Just we're all so tightly knit. People are dumb sometimes. That is the worst thing. Lack of knowledge and they only see what they see. But every day I get to do what I trained for. I thought it would be like ten transmissions and engines and body repair, and it's just like you're changing a rear light here and there.

Training didn't prepare me for this job. The one class I enjoyed was the engine class because they actually taught us. But a lot of the time they'd teach us how to use a computer.

I would join the same MOS again today if I could. Part of me wanted to change my MOS to combat arms, but it's not a big career field. Like if I don't want to open a bar, and I want to work as a

mechanic, I can. Infantry guys, what am I going to do? Private security and be a police officer? It would be fun to do it, but it's just not practical.

When I joined the Army, I thought I was going to travel more often. I thought like I got two years as a single soldier, and they'd just keep moving me around. But that hasn't happened. I had to reenlist just to get a new duty station.

I thought the biggest negative was the pay. Because both my parents were officers, so I saw how much they made. I was like, "aw, s**t." But I make a good amount of money. Both my parents were prior enlisted before they were officers. They didn't just go straight into officer candidate school. My dad was a commander, and I hung out with some of his enlisted guys. I just like how the enlisted hung out. Like officers can't really just hang out with enlisted. They have to hang out with officers. That's a small corps. Enlisted, we're just giant. We're everywhere, and we just know each other. Like even if you don't know the guy, you know him. Because you know a buddy of a buddy who's in that unit. And you guys are best friends after that. Like you can talk, and you can be real with enlisted people. Officers, I feel like there's too much politics. If I go officer, I'm going warrant officer, and I'm going to fly helicopters. I want to fly the UH-60. I'm thinking about dropping a warrant after a year of Japan. Go fly UH-60 Black Hawks.

I think I've become a lot more mature in the Army. As a civilian, I was very immature. It was dumb. The Army helped me through discipline. Basic training and AIT teach you discipline and responsibilities. Some people don't learn that, but I feel like I learned that.

Getting knocked down in grade was a learning experience for me because I went from up there to down to nothing again. I had to follow orders all over again. I was constantly the grunt. Constantly having to do all these other tasks that I didn't want to do. I saw how I got treated, and when I finally made it back to now, I see how I want to treat the soldiers in my charge more than anything.

I want to become a sergeant major or something. Have my face on a board somewhere and be someone people can look up to. When I get out, I really do want to open my own bar. I've always wanted my own bar. I feel like it would be cool. But I've gone to a few bars that

I've liked, and I'm like, I could totally open one of these and make it a good environment, just somewhere where people can hang out. I want to open my own bar.

Bars have a great atmosphere. I mean, people come in there, and sometimes they're sad, but if you've got a great bartender and someone comes in depressed, that bartender talks to them, they buck up a little bit.

The Army gives you a VA loan, one VA loan, which I'm trying to figure out how I'd use it to open a bar and where I'd open a bar.²⁶ Army allows you to travel, so if I can travel to different areas, I can see other bars, how they're run and how they're manufactured—or not manufactured, but putting their name out there. How the internals are. And I can make my own.

²⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Meg

Meg is a young mother who is struggling to succeed in the Army in a career field with few women. She makes friends easily and stays positive, despite those challenges. She is trying to decide whether to stay in the Army and is struggling to get back to work on an undergraduate degree.

Background: I wanted more

When someone asks me where I'm from, I say I'm from the Pittsburgh area because they don't know Beaver Falls; it's close to Pittsburgh, so I'll say I'm from Pittsburgh. But Beaver Falls is way different than Pittsburgh. Beaver Falls is on the river, Beaver River. And it's just a small town. But it's kind of like a bad town. It's not a rich neighborhood. It's like low-middle-class. I mean, I loved it. And Pittsburgh is a big city, so . . . there's a lot of drugs. It wasn't so much when I lived there. When I was like 15 or 16, I moved out of there. But it's gotten worse. My friends still live there, they tell me about it. And, yeah, drugs are bad there.

Then I moved like an hour away to the city, Johnstown. And my mom thought it'd be a little better for us because we were getting in trouble and doing bad things, too, me and my two brothers. So, we moved there, and that place was worse. Well, at that age 15, 16, you grew up with the same people, you have best friends and all that. And then you just move an hour away. I didn't have a car, so I couldn't have drove and seen them.

I have two brothers, and when we were younger, we would dress alike; my mom would dress us alike. But, of course, they can't wear a dress, so I was the one wearing boyish clothes. Yeah, I was a tomboy, for sure. We were all best friends, all three of us. It was pretty cool. Everyone thought it was weird that we all wanted to hang out with each other. They're like, "That's weird, I'd never want to hang out with my brother." Well, my brother's cool.

I went to three different high schools. So, the first high school was freshman, and in the middle of sophomore year is when I moved the hour away. And then I went to Johnstown for the rest of that year, and then I got accepted into a vocational school, for medical assisting. And me and my brother got to go that vocational school. He went for masonry; I went for medical assistant. And, so, then I finished junior and senior year. It was awesome. It was a great experience. Half the school day I was in scrubs and doing medical stuff. It was like one o'clock, we got out, and then we did our math and all that.

I was a bad kid. I mean, every day after school, until I had a job, I would just hang out with friends and listen to music. I mean, I wasn't one of those people who did sports. I didn't do chess club and band and all that, just an average person.

So, I graduated with a medical assisting certificate. I could've went and been a medical assistant, which I didn't do. I was working at KFC, and they made me a shift manager. So, I loved working there, and everyone loved me, and I just—I was enjoying my job there for now. And I was going to college, too, for nursing. Because medical assistant only makes minimum wage anyways. So, I was making the same amount at KFC, and I was already working there for two years. I liked the responsibility; it was just that I came home smelly. But, then again, in the Army you come home smelly, too. I just knew it wasn't my future, you know what I mean? I didn't want to be known as a manager at KFC for the rest of my life. Which is fine, you know? But that's not what I wanted. I wanted more. Moneywise, I feel like it's the same as the Army, but people look at me better, like not "she works at KFC," but "she's in the Army," you know? And I really did come home smelling bad. Greasy.

My older brother got expelled. He didn't end up finishing. My other brother, he's not so good. He's turned like the flip side. When I joined the Army, he was doing well. He was dating the same girl for three years. They broke up. And I guess he turned towards drugs. So, he's been on that ever since. And then my older brother, he started doing drugs, too. So, I said "come live with me," because he had just started. He wanted help, and I was like, come live with me. Come get a job down here. I love family, so, I was like, come live with me. He moved to Fayetteville and met a girl—they're dating, and now she's pregnant with his kid. So, they just moved back to Pennsylvania; they have a place in Pennsylvania now.

Joining the Army: *I wanted to get away from badness*

I was going to college for nursing, and at first they just put me in all the prerequisites. So, I did like chemistry and philosophy and psychology. I did all those classes. And right before the next semester, I was supposed to start the clinicals for nursing, and that's when I stopped going; I just didn't start a new semester. So, I didn't drop out of college; I took the finals, and I just ended it there. And then I joined the Army.

So, I was dating this guy for a while. I dated him junior and senior year of high school, and then the year before I joined the Army. And then we broke up, and that's when, you know, he was helping me with college because we would sit down together and do our homework and stuff like that. Then we broke up, and I was like, "You know what? I don't want to do this anymore." Because I couldn't focus—I don't know, I just couldn't focus. And then I was like, well, I have to do something with my life.

I had a friend who wanted to join the Army, and one day we were drunk, and we're like, "tomorrow we're going to go to the recruiting center, and we're going to join the Army." So, then we went the next morning, and we both said we want to join, and then it ended up we both go into MEPS together.¹ And then she ended up actually not

¹ Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS).

making it, so then I had to join alone. I couldn't back down. I sucked it up; I was like, I already started the process, why not? So, then, yeah, that's why I joined. My ex-boyfriend, the one I dated for a while, he wanted to join the Navy the whole time, and I kept saying no, you can't join the Navy because you're going to be gone forever. So, he was the one that wanted to—he ended up not joining any military service.

They're all proud of me

I wasn't taught anything about the Army as a kid. I really did not even think about the military. I mean, when I thought about the military, I didn't think much. I know recruiters always came in to our high school, and they would have a pull-up bar, and they would have people come by to see how many pull-ups you could do. And I was like, that's not me. I can't do a pull-up. So, I kind of just walked away. It wasn't my goal or dream to be in the military. I didn't see someone in uniform and be like, "oh my gosh, I want to be just like him." I didn't think about it. I really hated history class. My friend was the one who wanted to go because her family was in the military. Her brother was in the military, and she was like, dude, they're all driving brand new cars, and they all have money. And I'm like, I'm down, let's do it today. That's how it happened. I'm not the typical oh, my family's been in the military their whole life. I'm just—I wanted to get away from badness.

My family's not in the military. Well, my grandpa was in the Navy, I guess, but a long, long time ago. And he was only in for three years, I think. And then my cousins . . . one, she's in the Marines, and she just got out because she had a baby. Her husband's in the Marines, so she's fine. And then my other cousin, she went National Guard. So, she went to Basic training, AIT, came home. She ended up—she had a baby. Everyone's having babies. We all had a baby at the same time, too. Yeah. She had a baby, and now she's on National Guard. And I'm the only one that actually stayed in. I really am proud of that because everyone in the family is like, "you should have stayed in Pennsylvania." And I'm like, "yeah, I'm doing well." And she's not doing so well. And then she tells me she wishes she never got out, or she wishes she went active and didn't go National Guard. Because she didn't do anything in National Guard.

My mom was super proud I joined the military. She makes it a big deal. Every time I was in training she posted on Facebook every two days how proud she is. And then all her friends, they'll message me and say, "I'm proud of you." So, it makes me feel good. And I don't really talk to my dad, but I guess my mom had told him that I joined, and he was totally like "you're dumb for joining the military." I don't know; I don't talk to him. I don't know. He's no good. My friends were like, "you're dumb, you're going to be gone forever, and you're going to die." They didn't know anything about the military. Now they're all proud of me.

I'm glad I got out of my home environment. It was sad at first. I'd miss home. I still miss home from time to time. I love going home when I get the chance. I go out and have fun and hang out with friends. But family is a big thing on my part. And I have a very big family. So, yeah, it sucks; I see my family getting together, and it's on Facebook, and I'm always like, oh, I wish I could be there. Because if I wasn't in the Army, I would be there. Leaving them for the first time, that was pretty sad. But I'm over it now.

My recruiter sucked

I think the recruiter—my recruiter sucked, for real. I saw all these people coming in with like rank—I came in as a fuzzy, no rank. And there's people in Basic with rank, and I was like, oh, how did you get that? They go, oh, I did some college time, or I got someone else to join with me, or something. And I'm like, well, I didn't get that opportunity, you know what I mean? Because my recruiter was just like, oh, you did some college? Don't worry about that, it's not going to do anything if you put it on there, so just put down that you didn't go to college. When it says highest level of education, "some college" is an option, but he said don't worry about even putting that in. I think he just didn't want to go through the process. I think I probably could've came in as an E-2 instead of an E-1.² Which is not that big of a deal, but still. Because I do have college credits, and I think I have enough.

² A rank of E-1 denotes a private and E-2 a PV2.

I didn't know anything. So, what he told me is what I believed. He was friendly. And he was convincing, obviously. Looking back on it now, he's an a****e. I think he was just trying to do things the quick way, like hurry up, get you in. I don't know if they get a gold star or something every time they get someone to join. They could have put me in as an E-2, but that's just more paperwork for them. Or they could have said, "Hey, you got a 49 on your ASVAB, but you can retake it and you can get a 50; that's one more point—I know you can do it if you study for a week."³ And then I could've had a job I wanted. I think they're just all about hurry, hurry up, get you in, get you in, get you in, even though this is my life; this is my career. Now I'm a 19 Kilo, and if I want to get out of the Army, I can't do anything as a 19 Kilo outside of the Army.⁴ And that's a big thing. And, at the time, I was young, and I was like, sure. I'll take it.

I wanted to sign up fast, too, so it didn't help that I wasn't really asking questions. But, of course, I asked what my job was, and he kind of just read off the title. And I was like, oh, cool. He said they just opened this job up to females, and that's why I was like, cool. So, I think that got me right there. I didn't really pick my job—so, how it happened was I went to MEPS and, at that time, you take your ASVAB there, and then right after your ASVAB I went and picked my job. So, I had to pick it that day, on the spot, you know? So, it was, "here are your four options; here are four videos—which one do you like the most?" I didn't score very high on the ASVAB; I got like a 49 on the ASVAB, kind of low. But once you hit a 50, I guess, you have more options. I'm not very smart, I guess. I don't know. I didn't know what the ASVAB was going to be on. I thought it was just some simple math and English and stuff like that. But it was asking me questions about vehicles and mechanical stuff, and I'm just like, I don't know. How am I sup-

³ The ASVAB is a standard test given to all potential enlisted military recruits. Aggregate scores on various sections of the test are used to determine qualifications for specific MOSs. Meg is likely recalling only one component of her ASVAB score, as there are no jobs for which 49 or 50 constitutes a qualifying score. She may be remembering the portion of the test referred to as the Armed Forces Qualification Test, where a score of 50 places a recruit into a more desirable hiring category.

⁴ A 19 Kilo, or 19K, is the alphanumeric designation for the Armor Crewman specialty.

posed to know this? I think one of my other options was a cook; one was some like—I don't even really know. Chemical something. None of them sounded interesting. But the armor crewman did. There's not that many females in my job. Plus, I go to an armor unit, and all the females in the unit are usually like your S1 or your supply, people like that.⁵ So, then, when I tell the other females what my MOS is, they're like, oh, you're so cool. It's like, my job's not that cool, but thank you.

Initial Entry Training: *Now I have a lot more respect*

I didn't do much thinking about Basic Combat Training. In my head, I was just like, eh, it's going to be easy. I can take someone yelling at me. But when it actually is in your face, it's real. I'm not a little baby, but I probably felt like I wanted to cry at least five times. When I get angry, that's when I want to cry. When I'm like, I want to punch you but I can't, and I can't say anything back, I'll tear up. Why am I tearing up? I'm mad. That's how I got in Basic a lot. Someone's yelling at me, and it's like, why are you yelling at me? Stop.

I think I said I wanted to quit like ten times. But I didn't. I didn't want to look like a little punk. But I don't do well with people yelling at me. I'm very quiet. I don't have a command voice, and that's a big thing in the Army. So, you talk to a drill sergeant or anything, you have to be loud. And my voice does not go that loud. It really doesn't. Ask anyone. They would tell me to yell, and then I'd get embarrassed because—I don't know why, that's just how I am. So, Basic was stressful, but it was an accomplishment. I was very proud of myself.

I thought I was like a bad kid, so I came in thinking I was a badass, like, "you can't talk to me like that." Then the drill sergeant kind of shut me down. I got in trouble a lot for rolling my eyes. And I didn't even realize I rolled my eyes until they pointed it out. It wasn't fun. I had an attitude problem, and now I have a lot more respect, I think. When I got out of Basic, and my mom came down for family day to watch me graduate and stuff, we went out to dinner, and I was

⁵ S1 denotes the staff section responsible for personnel issues.

like, “yes, ma’am, no, ma’am.” I was so polite. My mom was like, “what the heck? That’s not you.”

The hardest thing was I would get yelled at, and then I would have to—so, when I talk, I say “yeah” and “nah,” I used to. But they don’t allow you to say “yeah” in Basic, it’s “yes.” So, this one time I said “yeah,” and then the drill sergeant made me, in a room full of people, say “yes” over and over and over for like ten minutes. So, I was literally yelling “yes, yes.” So, it’s embarrassing. But stuff like that is hard, being called out in a group of people. Or doing push-ups in a group of people. Or you being that one to make everyone do push-ups. That actually happened a lot. Well, not with me, but say someone got in trouble for the littlest thing, everyone in the whole platoon dropped to do push-ups, and they’d be like, “oh, I hate you.” Or something like that. It makes you want to be squared away at all times. You would make sure to wake up early just to make sure everything is perfect.

I went around, and if I was squared away, and we had five more minutes till we had to be outside, I’d go around and make sure everyone, like, hey, fix your flag. Zip your pocket up. Just make sure that you don’t get in trouble so we all don’t get in trouble. And there’s always that one person, though, that’s like always messed up. So, you got to help them out, too.

The best thing about boot camp was meeting people, I guess. And everyone from different areas. Because I’ve lived in Pennsylvania my whole life. I didn’t really take vacations or anything. So, just meeting everyone from different areas. And then, also, PT. I like PT. I never really worked out, but I like being in formation and counting the cadence out loud. And everyone’s doing it, and it’s loud, and it’s motivating. And when you run cadence, I used to love cadence. We don’t do that that much anymore, but it’s fun. PT came naturally to me. I’m not good at running, but I feel like I can do more push-ups than most females.

I wrote my mom and my grandpa

Letters, that was a big thing. Writing letters in Basic. My mom wrote me one like every single day. So, there’s some people not getting mail, and I’m like, “oh, here, you want to read my mom’s?” Everyone was

like 18, 19, all my friends at home—let's say my friend went off to Basic training, do I see myself writing a letter and sending it off? Probably not. Of course, they all said, I'm going to write you, I'm going to write you and send you pictures. I got a couple letters. I only had my one really good friend's address, and I wrote her. And then I wrote my mom, and I wrote my grandpa. My uncle wrote me one. But, yeah, that's basically it. I thought they'll take your phone and give it to you once a week. I got my phone once the whole time, and I shared it with someone, actually. Because they didn't have a phone. We had an hour, so I had like 30 minutes. And all I did was call my mom and talk to her the whole time.

Get over your freaking differences

I feel like I've never had a problem making friends. But my bunkmate and I had a really close friendship. Everyone's known by their last name, obviously, but we knew each other's first name, me and her. Every time, when we would form up, we would make sure we were next to each other so when we turned, we were actually front and behind each other. And that's who we would sit next to, like, breakfast chow or lunch chow.

There is not a lot of women in AIT, but there was a lot in Basic. There was like 60 females in one bay.⁶ So, there was a lot of fighting and disagreements. I was the one that was like, "hey, calm down, we're a family. Get over your freaking differences and move on."

I think there was kind of like cliques. There was a couple people that were kind of standoffish. I'm shy, but once I have friends, I open up. At first, I didn't talk to anyone. I was just on my own, scared. If you go through Basic with no friends, you're going to be depressed. It's like a tough time, and you need someone to talk to about it. You need someone to talk with about home instead of just thinking about home. Because some people had kids. They had to be away from their kids for nine weeks.

To be successful in Basic and AIT, just like keep your head on straight. Literally, you just have to be strong. You can't goof around

⁶ Open bay housing in BCT.

because once you goof around, you're in trouble. You just got to—I don't know. You just gotta be loud. You can't goof off. You gotta be strong. You can't cry about things. You just gotta kind of hold your pride back. There's a lot of people that are not used to someone yelling in their face. So, some people are big and bad; it's like, don't yell at me. And then they get in so much trouble. It's sad watching. In my head, I'm like, shut up. Just shut up, agree, say "yes, Drill Sergeant" and move on. Put your pride away.

There was this one drill sergeant who was like a dad. Not a dad, like a grandpa. And he was just super nice, but once he got mad, he snapped. You knew if he's mad, you guys are messing up. But, yeah, I looked up to him definitely. I know that he definitely has kids. You can tell. He looked at us like we were his kids. I think some of the drill sergeants just didn't care. They just wanted to give us a hard time. But he definitely, he cared. And he would voice it a lot, too.

They were very proud of me. I was very motivated

It felt amazing when I started to feel like a soldier. I used to love marching. I would get the chills if someone was watching. Definitely graduation was pretty cool because I was on the edge of the formation. So, when we were marching in, everyone could see me. So, I was like, "yeah, look at me!" They square you away in Basic. Definitely.

My mom and her boyfriend came to my graduation from Basic. I think she went through a lot just to get there. She's never been the type of person to have a lot of money and stuff. So, just to see her actually there, because it was in Ft. Benning and she was in Pennsylvania, so, I think they drove the whole time. I'm pretty sure it's like 12 to 18 hours. It's a pretty far drive. And then they paid for a rental car. And a hotel. And I had a lot of respect for that. But, yeah, they were very proud of me. I was very motivated. So, they got to stay the weekend because my AIT was at the same location as Basic, so, I had the whole weekend kind of. I had to sign in every night and leave in the morning, but we would go on runs. I'd be like, yeah, let's go on a run, guys. Let's do some PT. My mom's heavier set, so we ran like ten feet. We didn't run far. I was like, come on. I was like running backwards, I'm like, "come on, you can do it, don't give up." Now every time I go home, we

go to the gym together. Because of me, she got a gym membership. She doesn't use it every day, but when I'm there, she uses it.

Personal Life: *I miss the barracks*

I don't see the Army as a nine-to-five. I really don't. A lot of people will say it's like having a nine-to-five job. It's really not—because you're on call 24/7. And when you go to the field, it's not nine to five; it's the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed. And you're still in the field when you sleep. You're sleeping in a tent or in a vehicle or on the ground. And, then, you don't wake up at nine. You wake up at 5:30 to go to PT. I wake up earlier than 5:30 because I have a daughter to take care of. But, yeah, I don't see it as a nine-to-five. I thought it was going to be nine to five because that's what my recruiters told me. "It's just like a nine-to-five job after Basic and AIT, that's the hardest part; get it out of the way." Basic has not been the hardest. Well, Basic was pretty hard. But AIT was better than some of these field problems I've been to.⁷ JRTC was pretty bad. And it's probably the worst field exercise I've been to.

So, in Basic and AIT, you're not used to free time and going and hanging out and all that. I think people just go wild after AIT; that's how I see it. They go wild. I don't know how they could prepare you, though. You're an adult; you just got to learn. Life at the garrison has been a lot more relaxed, honestly. And when you come here, there's lots of families.

It's nothing I have to plan, it's just already there

I don't have any friends who are single moms. So, like I met moms when I was pregnant. I went to this mommy class. It was twice a month. I met all the other Ft. Bragg moms that were having babies in July. So, all of the babies are the same age. But they're all married. When we went to the class, they had their husbands with them, and I was the only one who was single. It was depressing.

⁷ A field problem is a training challenge set up for a unit to accomplish in outdoor training.

I used to go to activities for single soldiers. There would be like paintball. But that's something you can't bring your kid with you for. I mean, like a barracks soldier, your social life is a lot different, I think. I lived in the barracks, and it was awesome. I miss the barracks. I had a roommate, and we became really close, and we had suitemates, and we were all really close. And, you know, you walk down the hallway, boom, there's someone. So, when you live away from all the barracks soldiers, you see they have social media like Snapchat and stuff; you see Snapchat pictures of everyone in the hallways being social. And then I'm just home. I wish I were there. It looks fun.

In my unit, we have events where the whole company comes—you bring your family, you bring your kids, you get to be in civilian clothes, you get off early that day just to come, and everyone comes. There's food, and there was a playground, and they had a little bouncy house. Our company does those kind of things. I brought my daughter to two events. She wasn't able to do anything; she's too small. So, everyone has met my daughter. And I've met all the NCOs' kids, and now I know, like, you have a kid, that's cool. We have kids so we can talk about kids together or something.

You're with your section every day, all day. And when you go to a training event for 30 days, you're with those people the moment you wake up till the moment you sleep, so it's good to have a good relationship with everyone you work with, especially section level. Because, if you don't, you're going to be miserable. There's no point in being miserable every day because you don't like someone. Even if you don't like them, you're going to have to suck it up and just find something you like about them.

I feel like the Army sets that kind of bonding up, so if I wasn't in the military I probably would never end up going to like a bouncy house party or something with all these kids. But now, in the Army, I feel like that's something they do regularly, for families. So, it's nothing I have to plan, it's just already there. Till you get higher up in there.

The communities on post are amazing. I'm in the Anzio Acres community, and you're not going to have a sergeant first class in the same housing area as me. Unless it's a single sergeant first class, of course. So, all the two-bedroom places are by themselves, and then all

the bigger houses are by themselves. And then each community has community homes, and they have events. They each have a building with a gym in it, computers, and a little kitchen area for parties if you want to throw a party at the community home, like a birthday party. And they always have events and stuff. They have playgrounds everywhere in the communities and basketball hoops. So, it's nice.

I'm picky on who I want to date

I am happily single, actually. I like being single. I don't like dating. I honestly haven't dated someone since—I didn't really date my baby's father—sounds bad, but I haven't dated someone since that other relationship like three years ago. Like a real relationship. Because I'll date someone for like a week and then be like, "eh." The thing is, I think now that I have a kid, I feel like I'm picky on who I want to date. Really picky. And I think maybe that's an advantage because I'm not going to pick some random scumbag, you know? So, I'm very picky, so then when I finally find that one person, everything's going to be a check on my little checklist. They have to be good with kids, obviously. And not just "hey, let's hang out at your house, let's go out to dinner," and, like, you realize that my daughter's coming with me. Everything has to do with my daughter, basically, now.

I think I'd rather date someone outside the Army. Because the Army has a lot to come with it. The deployments and duties and training exercises for a month and—I don't know, I just don't like it. Plus, I don't even think the Army makes that much money as a career. I am kind of dating someone. Kind of—it's almost a relationship. He's in the Army, but he's getting out of the Army. So, that's a good thing. I think it's been easier to date in the military than outside the military.

I see myself getting married, but I told myself the next time I have a kid I'm going to be married for like five years. Would I have another baby while still in the Army? There's a lot of benefits to having a baby in the Army. Like all the hospital bills are paid for. And you get three months of leave, paid leave. That was very nice. I got paid for three months while I was taking care of my newborn child. It was nice. Of course, there's great benefits to the Army.

This guy keeps coming up to me and asking for my number, and I tell him no

It's very frustrating to get hit on all the time in the Army, obviously. Because I'll like one person, and I like the other person, but I can't like them both. So I've got to say "stop flirting with me." I don't know. It's been like that everywhere I go, too. AIT was just bad. I mean, it's annoying. So, I kind of sometimes wish I could be like, "I'm married." And having a kid doesn't stop anyone, honestly. I think that's their goal in their head is like "I'm going to get her number" or, you know what I mean? It's like, stop.

At work, I'll be walking with my one friend, she's the other female, and I'll be like, oh my gosh, he's walking this way, let's turn around, let's go this way so he doesn't stop and talk to us. There's this one guy. I swear to god, this guy keeps coming up to me and asking for my number, and I tell him no. And I'll tell him I'm in a relationship. He's like, I'm never going to give up trying. Dude, what? It doesn't bother me that much, but after a while I'm like, if I'm trying to avoid looking at you, then you should probably just stop. Give up. And he'll go up to his friends, and his friends will be like, so, this guy likes you, are you going to give him your number? I'm like, no. I told him I was in a relationship even though I'm not. Some guys are just annoying. I think it's just the maturity, though. I think he's like 19 or something.

I don't have a backup plan, really

As a single soldier, people might think I have an advantage, but really, no. I mean, of course there's advantages like—so, I'm not married, but I still get BAH and BAS. So, I don't live in the barracks, and I'm a single soldier, so, some people look at that like "screw you." They don't understand that it's because I have more responsibilities. They take it as you make more than me because you have a kid. It's like, but I spend that money on my kid. And daycare, being a single mother, daycare ends at 5:45 every day, so, even if everyone else is still at work at 5:45, I have to go. And there's nothing I can do about that.

The unit itself is okay with it. But there's a couple people in my leadership that I don't think agree with it. Because it's always something like "using your daughter as an excuse." And I'm really not. I'm sorry, I

cannot sit here for three more hours and clean a weapon. Before I had my daughter, of course I was there if someone said “hey, we need one soldier to pick up this CQ shift,” and I’d be the one to be like, “me,” just to look good.⁸ But now I can’t do that. They asked this weekend, who can come in for a couple hours? But I couldn’t because I don’t have a babysitter or anything. I have a lot of appointments because of my daughter. And then if daycare calls and says she has a fever, I have to pick her up within an hour. And then she’s not allowed back the next day, 24 hours afterwards. So, then I have to be like—well, this has only happened once, but still—then I have to tell them I can’t come to work tomorrow, and then it’s a big deal.

And especially because my next rank is E-5 sergeant. And I think that right now, being a single mother, I don’t think I have enough time to take on the responsibilities to an E-5. That’s what my leadership thinks. Because if I’m at appointments and I have to do this for my daughter, then how am I supposed to take care of five soldiers, too, on top of that? So, that’s where I’m at, that spot right now, on reenlisting or not reenlisting. It’s like up in the air. It’s different every day, honestly. My window is open to reenlist, so, I have like six more months to decide. So, one day it’s, “I don’t need this; I’m getting out—it’s too stressful.” And then on the other hand, it’s like, I need to stay in.

I don’t have a backup plan, really. I haven’t been to school since I’ve been in the Army. And that’s a big deal. So, I say it all the time: I need to start college again. I need to do at least one online class. And then I just haven’t got to it yet. I think I can do it if I make time, during lunch or something. But that’s my lunch.

I think they should be a little more considerate to every situation

I don’t know what to do for the short-term family care plan.⁹ My mom lives eight hours away, but it’s still eight hours. She would do it,

⁸ Charge of quarters (CQ) duty is an assigned shift where soldiers are responsible for monitoring the entrance to a barracks.

⁹ Single soldiers or dual military couples with dependent children are required to maintain a family care plan. It requires soldiers to certify that they have both long-term child care for deployments and short-term child care, for situations where care is required without prior notice, such as extended duty days. However, only the long-term guardians are specifically

though. She's amazing. I just came back from—I was actually gone the whole month of March at JRTC in Louisiana, and she had watched my daughter for the whole 30 days.

I'm very confident my family care plan will provide adequate care. My long-term is my mother, and my short-term is my mother right now. But—because my family care plan, I don't have short-term in there—I think if they actually looked through it and see that I don't have one, like over check it, then yeah, they'd probably be like, "you need one." But my platoon sergeant is tracking. I told him that I can't be put on 24-hour duties that often, and I need to know a couple weeks in advance because I don't have short-term anymore. And he told me that I have to try to find a babysitter. . . . I don't know; I guess people do babysitting services. I have never tried it or looked it up. But someone that could watch her for 24 hours.. . . I guess it'd be hard to find someone to watch overnight, you know?

The Army life is the Army life, and you can't really change the Army life. The only thing is maybe the Army life isn't meant for a single mother. And I don't think the Army should change their ways just because of a single mother. But I think they should be a little more considerate to every situation. Not everyone's going to have the typical married first, then have a kid, and stay-at-home spouse that can watch the kid and can take the kid to appointments. I think my first-line leadership should be more considerate, him specifically.¹⁰ I've only had problems with one NCO. He's the only one that's given me problems. And that's no, I cannot be here at six o'clock on the dot every morning. I'll be here at 6:05 or 6:10. And he's the only one that has a problem with that. Daycare opens at 5:45, and there's no way I can drop her off and be at work by six. I'm here at like 6:05, 6:10 every day, and there was a problem with that. Because I'm not here with everyone else. Even though we don't form up until 6:30.

named, as they require paperwork for power of attorney and official acceptance as a guardian. Failure to properly complete a family care plan can result in disciplinary action or separation from the Army.

¹⁰ "First line" of command.

She's in daycare all the time

I think if I wasn't in the military, I'd be spending a lot more time with my daughter because she's in daycare all the time. Like 12 hours a day. I drop her off at 5:45, and I pick her up at 5:45. In the beginning, I used to go during lunch and see her, but now it's just—she doesn't cry when I drop her off. She loves daycare.

When I get out of work early on Fridays, I pick up my daughter early. I tried to take a few hours to just have some peace and quiet, but instead, I would go to the grocery store and get shopping done.

I get WIC. I think WIC is stressful because of all the checks, and then they take forever in line, and it's better to do it without my daughter.¹¹ WIC is annoying. I hate WIC. And then we have WIC appointments, which is another appointment. And I think WIC checks are extremely annoying because they'll allow one can of food on one check and then the next check will be like three cans. It's like, "you get ten cans, why can't you just put all ten cans on one check?" So, then there's these people at Walmart, and they're just like taking forever. You're literally in line for like 15, 20 minutes, and there's people behind you. And I'm like, "I'm sorry." But you got to do what you got to do.

My daughter is nine months. It's not much time I get to spend with her. I was starting to go to the gym with her; they have a YMCA in Fayetteville, and it has daycare in the gym.¹² And that's from five to seven o'clock at night. But that left no time for me and her because we'd get home by 7:30, and she goes to bed at 8. So, I just stopped. So, basically, it's like the same routine every day. On the weekends we do something. Like this weekend we went to Cross Creek Mall. And she's very good. She won't cry once. It's amazing. She loves being in the stroller, too. So, I'll take her to the malls. It's been hot out, so I haven't been able to go outside or anything. Other than that, we just play with toys, and she gets into everything. She crawls. She loves remotes, cell

¹¹ Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a federal program to assist low-income pregnant women and mothers of children under age five.

¹² Because of the importance of physical fitness, particularly in the junior enlisted ranks of the Army, this is an area the soldier would be expected to work on to be seen as a high-performing soldier.

phones, and this little stuffed puppy dog, it's like a pit bull. I got her that because when she's at her grandma's house, she has two pit bulls. That little stuffed animal is her favorite.

The best thing about being a parent is having someone to come home to every day. Someone that depends on me. I think the most challenging, though, is doing everything on your own. You're trying to make a bottle and hold her at the same time; she's grabbing everything. Just sometimes you kind of need a hand. It has nothing to do with the Army, though. That's just being a single mother. It's stressful sometimes. I'm a great parent, but I see myself sometimes kind of yelling at her. And two minutes later, I'll be like, "oh my gosh, I didn't mean to yell at you." Yeah, sometimes you just need a minute. The military gives you a bunch of classes when you're pregnant. And a lot of them were just repetitive. So, they did a lot of shaken baby syndrome. And now I understand. I was like, why would someone shake their baby? Now I totally understand! I'm like, "oh, this is why I had to see this PowerPoint five times when I was pregnant!" There's no training about being a single parent in the Army because most people are not single parents in the military. I think the average is not. Because, usually, I mean, the stereotype, the male soldier's wife is pregnant. So, the wife would be in all the classes with me.

In my head, I feel like there isn't a lot of divorce in the Army. Well, it's a lot because people at like 18 are like "I want to get married to get BAH." I know there's a lot of that. And they break up and they're like, "oh, we have to stay married, though, because I can't move out and go back to the barracks. I've been in a house for two years." This is bad, but I know multiple people that still get BAH, and them and their wife are separated. And they just haven't got divorced because that means you have to throw away all your furniture because it doesn't fit in the barracks.

My really good friend actually does that. He's like, "I can't wait to make E-6 so I can get a divorce." She can live wherever. It's kind of like lying to the Army though. They're not actually divorced; they're just separated. They don't live together. They both have to be OK with it, obviously. And if you meet someone else, I mean, you've got to be like, "oh, I'm married still."

When I came back and I saw her again, she didn't forget me

I was gone the whole month of October in a training exercise, but I had my cell phone. So, I FaceTimed my daughter a lot, which, even though she didn't talk or anything, she still got to see me. And then in March, we left for another month. So, that was like a couple months and then a month again. So, I mean, the good part, like when I came back and I saw her again, she didn't forget me. So, that was good. But, yeah, she started crawling in that month. When I came back she was crawling. And she has teeth now. I missed her first tooth coming in and her crawling in just a month. And then, like, if it was deployment, that's nine months. And I can deploy right now. Because that's why we went to JRTC; it certifies you to deploy. So, I can deploy in the next year on a 48-hour notice.

They say Ft. Bragg is the highest-deployment station. So, just being certified and saying that we're on like a 48-hour notice, it's the most time they can give you.¹³ Yeah, it's kind of scary. Because I'm like, "well, can you tell me sooner than that?" Because I have a kid.

If I do reenlist, I'm reenlisting for a different duty station so I don't have to get deployed. I'd love to take my daughter to Germany. Visit a bunch of places. It'd be cool. It'd be like, "oh, you know where you were at the first two years of your life? Germany. You were a cool kid." But, yeah, if I go to Germany then I won't be deployed, obviously, because I'll be in Germany. It all depends on if that spot is open for my MOS at my level in that duty station. So, obviously I have options. Like, I wouldn't just say Germany and that's it. I mean, there's Germany, there's Hawaii. Hawaii would be nice. Those are the only two I think I'd want to go to. But, I mean, I would choose like New York, because that's still six hours away from home. And that's still an option. I've always wanted to go to Colorado. Yeah, my baby's father actually lives there. So, at first, he wanted me to go there. But then we weren't on good terms, so I was like, "F you, I'm going to do the opposite of what you say," and I came here. But now that I think about it, I've always wanted to go there. I have so many friends there. I heard

¹³ In fact, most deployments occur with far more than 48 hours' notice. However, for rapidly deployable units, that may be the amount of time they are required to provide to soldiers.

great things about it. On weekends, she can go see her dad. It's an option. I'm still on the iffy side. I don't want to go and reenlist and then change my mind two months later, because I can't change my mind two months later.

I always have friends over

When I'm not at work, I turn off the Army. Probably the wrong answer, but I turn off the Army—I get in civilian clothes, put my hair down. I mean, personally, what I do, I cook dinner. I like cooking. And hanging out with friends, but not the same people I work with. I'm cool with everyone I work with on an everyday basis, but I don't hang out with them. I mean, I hang out with a couple of them sometimes, but no, I don't say hey, let's go out to dinner or let's all hang out together. I'm tired of seeing them every day when I come home.

I've met people through other people. And that's who I hang out with. I used to hang out with my brother a lot when he moved down here. And then I have friends that come down from Pennsylvania and stay with me for a weekend. I hang out with the same three people.

I feel like I don't get a lot accomplished on a weeknight. I literally cook dinner and take care of my daughter because she's a handful. And I watch TV for a little bit and go to bed. I don't go out a lot. I used to, though. I used to a lot. I was the type of person that would have to be somewhere doing something. Let's go play basketball or let's go to the gym and goof around for a while. Or let's go to the PX and just walk around and windowshop.¹⁴ I used to be that person. Now I'm just like, no, I'd have to take my daughter with me, and then I'd have to pack her up and pack her diaper bag. So, I kind of just stay home.

But I always have friends over. On weeknights, too, yeah. I have friends over. But certain friends. There's friends that I bring around my daughter, and there's friends I don't, because I don't know how they would act. One friend that I hang out with a lot, he has kids. Him and his wife got a divorce. But he's really good with kids, so, he likes coming over and hanging out with my daughter and stuff. We just watch TV and cook. I love cooking.

¹⁴ Post exchange (PX), the base store.

And on a weekend, if I go out, I'm 21: Let's put that out there. So, you know, I get a babysitter, usually my brother and stuff. On a Saturday, I would like to go out and do something. I went paintballing—anything, really. Just going to the mall. And then, of course, at night going out to a bar or something. And then spend the next day sleeping in. I get a babysitter. I don't do that all the time.

When I stay home on a weekend, I play card games a lot. I'm a card game person. And movies, TV series. I'm all about the TV series. Right now I'm watching *Prison Break*. It's good. It's all about being in prison. *Grey's Anatomy*. That's a good one. My favorite. There's like 13 seasons.

There's always this guy that's in my section who's throwing a party because he has a big house, and it's just him, so he just throws parties. And he always invites me. So, you know, he'll invite the whole section. I'll be like, oh, I guess I got to go. So, I go. And it's fun. Everyone's around 21, so, everyone has different things going on. Usually I get invited to something. I kind of just go with the flow on the weekend. I never make plans. I'll just look at my phone and be like, huh, this person invited me here, and this person invited me here. I should probably do something.

I feel like being in the military, you have a lot of friends. And there's a lot of people that have kids, actually, surprisingly. And a lot of people that are married. I like my social life. I'm always doing something. I'm never just like, oh, man, I don't have friends. The worst thing about my social life is everyone's in the military. It'd be cool to have some friends outside the military. Everyone's either in the military or back in Pennsylvania, and they come down. So, maybe meet like civilian friends somehow. But that's really hard. I don't know how to do that. All I do is go to work on a military base, then I come home.

I like to shop healthy

Before the Army, in civilian life, I didn't eat three meals a day. When I was in high school, it was because I had like free lunches, I guess. They gave us free lunch and in order to get free breakfast, you'd have to show up early, and I just didn't. I was in high school; I was like, I'm not coming early to eat. I'll just pass up eating.

I went to Basic, and there was breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and it was like, to me, it was big portions. So, yeah, I gained weight in basic training. Now that I have BAS, I have to go buy my own food. So, now that I buy my own food, I like to shop healthy. I try to shop healthy. I eat salad a lot. But I put meat in it. I drink coffee. If I don't have coffee, I end up drinking Mountain Dew. I don't do Monsters, Red Bulls—I don't like the taste of them.¹⁵ A lot of military does though. I see everyone with Monsters.

Before I was pregnant—and it doesn't matter what age I was—but I used to drink a lot, honestly. I think every weekend was dedicated to drinking. Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday during the day. And then occasionally on the weekdays. But I stopped drinking that much. I drink on the weekends still, but if I have my daughter, I'll drink some wine, and obviously I'm not going to get super wasted on wine. But if I have a babysitter, I will go out and drink. So, I still drink occasionally every weekend, sometimes not.

I don't go off a budget, I just end up having enough money

With my baby's father, our situation's messed up. I haven't got child support yet. We're going through court. I actually have court on Wednesday again. We've been to court multiple times, and he's supposed to be paying, he just hasn't paid yet. So, it's adding up. Basically, this court date is for him to prove that he can't afford child support. Which he's not going to be able to prove. But the child support is still adding up, though.

So, I have a car payment, I have insurance, I have cable, I have daycare and my phone bill. And the gym membership that I don't go to anymore. That's about it. My allotment for my rent comes out. That's automatic. I don't see that money. I have a student loan repayment thing, but I forget to do that. I don't have credit card debt. The only debt I'm in is the student loans and the car payment, because I took that out on a loan.

I don't go off a budget, I just end up having enough money. I'm smart with my money. I'm never like, oh my gosh, I can't wait to get

¹⁵ Energy drinks popular with the military.

paid. I have a savings account, so, if I do run out of money in my checking, I just go to my savings and transfer it. I just kind of go with the flow. I pay my bills on the first and the 15th so, even if my bill is on the 18th, I'll pay it on the 15th. So, it's always paid on the first and 15th, so I get the bills out of the way, and then I can focus on what I have left after that.

If I had a financial emergency, I have a savings account. That would suck, though. So, I still have last year's tax return in my savings. So, I guess that's what I would do. But if I needed like a new car or something, I probably wouldn't be able to afford a new car. Hopefully that never happens. I don't know when I would need a new car. That's what I have insurance for. I don't know much about Army retirement benefits. I'm pretty sure when you retire after 20 years you get like 50 percent of what you made. I think. I don't really think about retirement.

I haven't really thought about college for my daughter. But I have a savings account. I mean, that would probably go along with college. I mean, or she could pay for her own college—that sounds rude. Maybe that's something I should probably think about. But usually you pay for your own college, right? I don't know. But, yeah, I'll save money my whole life and, of course, for her first car, yeah. I'll get there. BAH is amazing. Because, if you think about it, without BAH, I would have to take my paycheck of let's say, \$1,000 every two weeks, and somehow come up with rent. And rent's \$1,000, \$1,200. It's around \$1,000 to \$1,200 here. How am I supposed to pay that and still buy everything I need to buy? So, BAH is a really big benefit. And BAS, our money for food. Yeah, those are the biggest benefits right there.

Life in the Army: *Deep down, our job is not easy*

What I like about my MOS is you don't have to be that smart. I'll admit it, I'm not a genius. And I'm not good at studying, and I'm not good at retaining stuff. But, as a 19 Kilo, you don't have to be smart-smart. It's more like a hands-on thing. So, everything you learn as a 19 Kilo, you have to do hands on. It's not like reading something

and then you know it. It's a hands-on job, and I'm good at hands-on things. Plus, it's a combat MOS, so, it's pretty cool to tell people. And then being that there's not that many females, because I really don't get along with females as much as I get along with males. I was a tomboy growing up. That has something to do with it, I think. I've just always had guy friends. A lot of guy friends. I mean, I have female friends, just not as much. And I hung out with my brothers every day of my life. I was like one of the guys.

The biggest negative about my MOS is that everyone thinks our job is easy. But deep down, our job is not easy, it's just not, you know—I'm not infantry, you know what I mean? So, I'm not going to be doing infantry things. So, our MOS, they look at us like you guys don't do anything; your job's easy. It's really not.

I do spend a lot of time on useless things like mopping and sweeping and raking and mowing grass. I hate that. That's one thing I hate about my job, or the Army in general. It's like it's all these details, dumb things. I understand that stuff needs to be done, like mowing grass and raking leaves, but there should probably be an MOS for that. We're not janitors. I think every day I do a janitor task. Every day. I'm sweeping floors or mopping or cleaning windows.

I think training is very good. But the monthlong training in JRTC sucked. But if you get deployed and the worst-case scenario comes, you're going to know what to do. And I think that's the whole purpose for JRTC. But, in the beginning, while going through JRTC, I'm like, this will never happen. This will never happen to us. We're not going to get attacked every single night by small arms and stuff like that. But I guess they train you for the worst-case scenario. Or like, sometimes sleeping outside in the rain, I think that's a little too extreme. I don't like that kind of training because I know that'll never happen to me.

If you ask, because I've asked multiple people in 19 Kilo why they're a 19 Kilo, I think just the term armor kind of just pops out, you know? It's kind of exciting. That's why. Armor. Boom. That's one of the reasons. Another reason is it was just one of the options from multiple crappy options and that sounded the best. But most people who are 19 Kilos are not like, before they even went to MEPS were like, "I want to be a 19 Kilo." It's easier to succeed in this MOS, rank-

wise. Because they go off points, and our requirements for points are very low.¹⁶ So, it's easier for us to become an E-5; all you have to do is go to promotion board, get your P status and then go to BLC, which is a 30-day training.¹⁷ And, automatically, you're E-5 if you get picked up. And other MOSs, it's way harder to make E-5 because your points requirements are so high, and you have to do more things to get points. You have to do volunteer time and online classes and stuff like that. We don't have to do that.

The company, in general, has good vibes

I think I'm just ready to be an NCO. Because once you're an NCO, it's a lot easier, to me. The social environment is positive and happy. And if two people are arguing, I'm the one that's like, hey, stop arguing, we're family. And it happens a lot. There's people that argue. And I just try to put on a positive note. It's not always positive, though.

At the company level, it's actually pretty cool. We have a basketball hoop, as soon as you walk in—like the little gray area, like a little company area. And during the middle of the day you can pick up the basketball and just start shooting it around. Obviously, if you're there all day, you're going to get in trouble. But the first sergeant will walk by, or the commander will walk by, and he'll be like, oh, pass me the ball. It's cool. The company, in general, has good vibes. And then, of course, there's promotion ceremonies. So, every time you get a rank, even if you go from E-2 to E-3, there's a ceremony. And our company does this thing where you get promoted, your NCO says something good about you, and then you give a little speech even though you're only becoming a private, a PV2 to a private first class; you still have to give a speech, and then everyone goes and shakes your hands in the whole company. They line up.

¹⁶ After meeting other requirements for promotion, advancement to sergeant or staff sergeant relies on accumulation of points. The cutoff of points for promotion varies by specialty according to Army needs. A low cutoff for promotion points would mean the Army is trying to promote more people in this specialty.

¹⁷ Promotable status (P status); Basic Leader Course (BLC).

One NCO, I think, has a problem with me and my daughter and that I'm always gone. So, I don't know. I don't get along with my first line, which is a problem because he's my first line, so, he's the first person you're supposed to go to. Then the next step is your E-7, which is platoon sergeant. And he's cool. But if you have an appointment, you don't go to him, you go to your first line. Everything is your first line. And the only time you're supposed to go to your platoon sergeant is when your first line's not there, or you feel like he can't help you, so you go to your platoon sergeant. And I like my platoon sergeant way more, for some reason. And then there's the officer—he's really cool. He's a cool guy.

The company commander doesn't really talk to us much. Obviously, he talks to the company as a whole. He does not know us each individually, which would be hard to do, anyway. That's not his job. It's mainly the first sergeant that we see more than the company commander. The company commander you see when you're in trouble. The first sergeant is who talks to us every day. Our first sergeant's cool. He individually comes up to us and asks us how our day's doing. And he knows that I have a family. And when I had my daughter, he sent up a certificate saying welcome to the family baby Muller, even though my daughter's last name's not Muller. But, yeah, it was pretty nice of him.

I don't really know anything about the division level. I don't work with upper division. The only time I'm there is if I have staff duty, which is at that desk, and then if I need to go to S1 to turn in a paper or something. I probably would never get the chance to talk to division leadership face to face. Why would I need to? I'm a 19 Kilo. Unless I do something extra extraordinary. But that's hard to do.

He just wants every specialist to be a leader

Say someone asked a question during the work day. And then, at the end of the day, you're going to give a class for everyone and answer the question. So, that motivated you to go and learn, and you're also leading, telling everyone what you learned. And then you're teaching someone everything. So, yeah, that's the type of leadership the best NCO I know does. And then he also came here to Ft. Bragg, and I came like

three months later to Bragg. And him and his wife took me out to dinner when I got here. That just proves that the Army, a lot of it's like you build a family within your platoon and section. He was an older guy, so he was like a grandpa. He was the grandpa of the family. There was a problem soldier, and she ended up getting out of the Army, and he was the only person that she could go to. Because even though she was a problem soldier, he still helped her on every step that she needed to get out and be successful outside of the Army. So, he dealt with the problem soldiers just as well as the successful soldiers.

My officer—he's amazing. Me and him, we're kind of similar. Kind of, not really. But we're similar at this moment because he's kind of like a single father right now. His wife is an officer, as well, but she just got deployed. So, he's been taking care of his daughter on his own. And he'll come up to me and ask me—he'll be like, "how do you do this? It's so stressful." And then he understands; he's like, now I understand how you have to leave early because now I have to leave early to pick my daughter up from daycare.

He's good because the officers do the planning, basically, the OPORDS and all that.¹⁸ And he's good because he'll do the OPORD, and then he'll bring in all the specialists, and he'll tell us to read it. He'll give us a copy and be like, read this. And when I read it, I'm like, "what? What does this mean?" But it's still like he's giving us an idea instead of just us not even knowing what an Op Order is. We have no reason to see one. He just wants every specialist to be a leader.

I think NCOs influence a lot. If you want to go to the board, they have to be there to help you, to prepare you, to give you practice boards, to do all that.¹⁹ If you don't have an NCO that's willing to help you, then you're going to look like crap going to the board. You're not going to know what it's like; you're not going to have practice; your uniform's not going to be squared away. It's all about NCOs helping you. That's why I say being an NCO is probably a lot of responsibility.

¹⁸ Operations Order (Op Order or OPORD)

¹⁹ Promotion boards.

I just wish I could bring my kid with me

Not having deployed to war sucks. I feel bad for the NCOs that don't have a deployment patch. Which, I mean, my next step is NCO, so I might be an NCO without a deployment. And I think people look at you like "oh, you've never been deployed," when you have privates walking around with a deployment patch.²⁰ I think it does affect your career. If you're an E-6 and you haven't been deployed, they say you'll probably just get talked down on. Like, you haven't even been deployed yet, you don't know what it's like down range, and all that. Because training is all about training for deployment. So, how are you going to teach me something about combat if you've never been in combat?

Everyone in my section just came back from deployment last year, so they all have the patch. It's depressing. I want a patch, but I don't want to do nine months. I don't look at people differently without a deployment patch. I feel like it would make me—it makes you look bigger and better. They'll be like, "oh, you're looking a little weak today." I'll be like, "what do you mean?" He's like, "where's your patch at?" I'm like, "F you." He's like, "here, you can borrow mine," and he would like put it on, "Oh, yeah, it looks so much better now."

I'd like to deploy just to know how it is, what it's like. I like new environments. Just with my daughter, though, now I have a different mindset about deployment. I always wanted to be like, I can't wait to deploy; I can't wait to get the patch, the money. Now I'm like, do I want to leave my daughter? No, I don't. I'd still want to deploy, though. I just wish I could bring my kid with me. Another reason I wouldn't mind deploying: I've heard people come back with like, they say like \$10,000 or something like that. I don't know exactly how much, but I've heard people come back, it's like, "oh, I came back from deployment with like 18,000 or 10,000 or 8,000." It's very likely I will deploy. Especially my MOS. That's why it's like, reenlist or not reenlist?

²⁰ Soldiers who have deployed wear a patch on their right shoulder with the insignia of the unit they deployed with.

It's going to take me a little longer, but I'll still end up being E-5

I'm still on the point if I want to do 20 years or not. I'm not like, "oh yeah, I'm doing 20 years." Of course my family is all in my head, "I want you to do 20 years." But I don't think it's that easy. I don't know if I can actually do it for 20 years. If I had a degree right now, I wouldn't be in the Army. But it's all about being successful, so, I'm not going to get out of the Army right now knowing that I'm not going to be successful.

To be a better soldier, I need to run better, and I need to be louder. I'm not loud. I get nervous, too. When I speak loud, my face will get red and stuff. That's one huge thing that I need to work on. There's nothing really that can fix that. But I keep telling them, what am I supposed to do? Yell at the mirror? How am I supposed to practice? It's just not me. I guess to be more successful I could try to be better than somebody, the one that's in charge. Try to be better. But I don't know how I would do that. I guess I would have to study every day. Study Army stuff, do Army stuff outside of work. And I don't really have time for that. Or the effort or the motivation for that. I mean, obviously, to be more successful, I would have to work out every day after work, study for the boards, prep for the boards. I would just have to put a lot into the Army. And the Army would be my whole life, and my whole life is not the Army. My whole life right now is my daughter and the Army.

You just got to know the right people. And I know the right people, but in the Army, I think promotions are about your schooling—the schooling you do, extra things you do to get points. It's going to take me a little longer, but I'll still end up being E-5, I know I will. It's just going to take longer.

Everyone's like, oh, when are you going to get your stripes? When are you going to get your stripes? Well, right now my focus is not getting E-5. My main focus right now is my daughter's nine months old. That means her first birthday's coming soon, you know? So, that's what my main focus is. And I'm OK with being this rank for a little longer in order to be a good mom. And then, when I get that father figure in her life, that's when I can take a step back from that and start studying. I'm going to the board next month, and I'm still going to see how I do, but

I'm not going to spend two hours a night studying and stressing over it when I can be playing with my daughter for two hours.

I want to go back to college now. Online, for a couple more years. And then finish; I don't know. In my hopes and dreams in my head, I would love if I could get out right now, go to college on a campus, and get a degree that way. But it's not going to happen because I have a daughter now. So, I think I'm just going to settle down with the whole online, as much as I could online. And then, yeah, go from there.

My Army Experience: *I'm not ending up like my brothers*

Well, I mean, I'm a lot more responsible. And I'm not doing bad things. And I'm not getting in trouble. And I'm not ending up like my brothers. So, I think I'm doing pretty good. The Army is good for people who want to change and be different. So, someone who wants to change and wants to be better, I think the Army is the right step to go. It is for someone that wants something different or wants to be not an average Joe. Because we're all average, we think, right now, because we do the same thing. But someone back at home looks at you like you're different; you're like that 1 percent or something.

With the rest of my time in the Army, I want to go to college. I want to be able to go to college at the same time as being a leader and raising my daughter. Is it possible? Yes, it's very possible. Just got to be highly motivated. And when I get out of the Army, I never want to do Army stuff. I want to stay as far away from the Army as possible. I'm not the one who would want to go to National Guard. I'll pass on that. I want to do something in the medical field. Being a 19 Kilo is not helping me in my future outside the Army; there's no way possible.

There's still another three years on my contract. So, in my perfect little world, I want to do three more years and then get out after three years and have a degree and start with that. That's what I want. You never know what could happen. I could become an NCO and really like being an NCO and want to do 20 years after that. The only problem with staying in is my daughter would be moving quite frequently, and that's probably something I wouldn't like. But, then again, staying

in, she's always going to live in a good neighborhood. My family all want me to stay in for 20 years because I've turned around from how I was before the Army. It's a big switch for the good, so they want me to keep it up.

If they just say, yeah, you can reenlist for three years, but you have to stay here, I wouldn't reenlist. When I reenlist I want to go somewhere else. And they'll give me that. I'm like 90-percent sure they'll give me that. Definitely a new duty station and a bonus would be nice. But you never know.

There's a lot of my leadership that want me to go to the board because I'm a good leader; I'm just quiet. When you go to a board, it's all higher-ups, like some are majors and first sergeants and all that, and you have to go in front of them and be loud and confident. And the only way to get more loud and confident is practice. My leadership told me that staying in with a kid is a good idea, and that it'll only get easier. Nobody's told me to get out except for me, myself, and I. And friends that are already out. Obviously, if I end up meeting the love of my life, getting married, and he's in the Army, and I have another kid, then I would get out. But that's like a scenario that would never happen.

When I enlisted, I thought it was going to be a career, the rest of my life kind of thing. And then when I went to Basic and AIT, I was like, yep, I'm getting out after my first contract. And now I'm in between. And I'm at that point where I need to decide now; my window's open. And I told my chain of command I'm staying in. But, you know, sometimes I go home, I'm like, I'm getting out.

Randy

Randy is an infantryman who went to a military school for high school and just knew he wanted to be in the military. After trying unsuccessfully to join the Marine Corps, he is happy in the Army but is frustrated at the lack of a Spartan, warrior mentality. He has a quiet social life with a girlfriend in the Army and many things he still wants to experience in his military career.

Background: *I asked my parents if I could go to a military "academy"*

I'm from Nebraska. About 30, 35 minutes south of the biggest city in Nebraska. It's like a suburb kind of on the edge of a rural area. If you go north from where I'm from, it turns like urban. And then if you go south, it gets pretty rural, pretty country. It's a family community, not many—there's no like young people renting houses or anything in that area. The University of Nebraska is like 25, 30 minutes. There's a lot of big ranches. We've got the Nebraska State Fair.

Growing up, I wrestled. I really enjoyed it. I was never the best. I think I was a little too tall and lanky to be a really successful wrestler in high school. I was a lot skinnier. But I really liked being on the team; I liked the guys I was on the team with. I swam too. I think I liked wrestling better. I think I may have been physically better fit for swimming.

I went two years at a public school. Public school was about 1,200 students total, so about 300 to 400 a grade. I always felt like it was pretty big. There's tons of kids from my class I don't remember, didn't

really know. And then I asked my parents if I could go to a military “academy,” a little bit west of where I’m from. I didn’t have the best grades as a freshman, sophomore. Got into a little bit of trouble, and they had a good wrestling team. When I was a little kid, I went to a summer camp there, and I thought it was really cool. I just liked it. The military academy was much smaller; my graduating class was like 55 or 60 kids graduating class.

I joined the Army two years after I graduated from high school, on my 20th birthday. In between I, along with a friend, ran a kind of a small landscaping company after high school. We did some planting and more aesthetic side of landscaping, but we also did landscape maintenance, tree removal, built patios, plowed snow in the winter. So, kind of everything from landscape maintenance to landscape construction, drainage for people’s houses, stuff like that.

I was living with my parents at that time, being a bum. I was working a ton. I worked like probably 60 hours a week, if not more, but I was still living at home with my parents. I have a younger brother, and I have an older sister.

School, academics were never really my thing. School wasn’t hard for me—I wasn’t challenged by the material; I think it was just a lack of interest. So yeah, I intentionally chose not to go to college. I applied to school and got accepted, but I never went. I think I always intended on joining the military, but I couldn’t decide for a while what branch to join. All my buddies were freshmen, sophomores in college and went to some local colleges in the area, so I maybe delayed my joining the military with some partying after high school. Chasing girls, things like that.

Joining the Army: *My dad . . . had the biggest influence*

I knew growing up, my dad’s always had a big interest in the Army, and I’ve always been interested in the history. I’ve always known a lot about the history of the conflicts our country’s been in. But as far as details about, I guess, the Army in specific, not a lot.

I started talking to a Marine recruiter when I was in high school. My uncle was in the Reserves. My grandfather and my great-grandfather both served. Actually, my grandfathers on both sides served, great-grandfathers on both sides served, and then there's others kind of in there, great-uncles and stuff like that who served. So, it's in my family history, but not the generation right before me. My great-grandfather fought in World War I, and he fought in a lot of the major campaigns, like Belleau Wood, Chateau-Thierry, Meuse-Argonne. He fought a lot, and he was wounded twice in World War I. My dad's grandfather was an artilleryman in World War I as well, and fought in some of the same battles as an artilleryman. I had one grandpa in the Navy and one grandpa in the Marine Corps. And then my high school wrestling coach was a Marine. So I was probably more interested in the Marines. But then I was also very interested in the Army because my great-grandfather was in the Army and did a lot in the Army in WWI. So I don't know if I feel one way or the other. I thought Navy SEALs were pretty cool when I was a kid too, but whatever.¹

As a kid I watched a lot of history and war movies in general. I think my favorite movie when I was a little kid was *The Battle of the Bulge*, which is about the Army. Occasionally at friends' houses I'd play *Call of Duty*. I think me and my brother had a PlayStation and one of the *Call of Dutys* for a little bit. But I've never been big in video games. I played a lot of Army outside when I was a little kid, but not big into video games. Me and my brother had BB guns, and we had airsoft guns, and then real guns and paintball guns, and so we always played some kind of shoot-'em games outside.

I had a friend—or more like a teacher/friend, now a friend—at the military high school who was in the Army; I think he had an influence. But no, honestly, I think the biggest influence in me joining the military probably at the end of the day was my dad. My dad's always reading a new war book about something, or Vietnam or one of the World Wars, or whatever. My dad's always been very interested in history, and my dad's very patriotic. I think probably inadvertently—I

¹ Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL), denotes Navy Special Warfare Sailors and Officers.

don't think it was intentional—but I think my dad probably had the biggest influence in me joining the Army.

My family support my enlistment. Obviously, it bothers my mom at times. I think it can be stressful for her at times, but they're supportive of it, yeah. My mom certainly wouldn't be upset if I got out, but she's also not—it's not that she pushes me, "Oh, you really need to get out. You should get out." I think that's the way naturally moms would be about it.

The Marine recruiter was like, "It's not going to happen, man"

I had a long, drawn-out process trying to join the Marine Corps, but I have tattoos that precluded it from me. And then I have some minor stuff on my record from encounters with the police. I had an underage drinking offense, and then I got in trouble for a fight I got in during high school. But I don't know if it was the timing or the Marine Corps or just being the way the Marine Corps is with their recruiting program, but I had a really difficult and long, drawn-out battle trying to get in the Marine Corps that I fought probably the better part of six to eight months, maybe a little more. I started engaging with the Marine Corps recruiter at the end of my senior year, maybe even a little earlier than that. I got in a fight my senior year, and it took forever to have that whole process finalized because I had to wait for the outcome of the court case and finishing community service. It wasn't anything super serious. So it just kind of dragged it all out. Then eventually the Marine recruiter was like, "It's not going to happen, man."

I started talking to Army recruiters almost immediately after that. If I remember correctly, there was a wait for an 11 Bravo slot.² I kind of walked in to the recruiter and I was like, "I'm not going to do anything but infantry." They're like, "OK, well this is available right now. What about this?" "Naw." Zero interest, don't want any other job but infantry. So there was a process waiting for that, waiting for an 11 Bravo slot. Then the whole MEPS thing. The whole process just takes time. I've never known anyone to make the process real quick, so that took some time too.

² 11B is the alphanumeric designation for infantryman.

When you talk to a recruiter, it's a sales pitch

I'm sure I Googled some stuff before I joined. After I told my dad I was going to join the military, my dad has a friend who's a retired Navy SEAL. I talked to him for a while about the military in general, not specifically the Army.

A lot of times, when you talk to a recruiter, it's a sales pitch. Like here's the benefits. You get free college, you can get this, you can get that, you can get "blah, blah, blah." I don't know. You might attract more people, but you might attract different people if you sold the point that it's more of a patriotic approach to it. You can really do some cool s**t. It also depends on what job in the Army you're recruiting for. I knew it was going to be a little less glamorous than the recruiters tried to make it sound, but they're salesmen. I guess if you don't realize that, I don't know.

I would have liked to know more about different schools and opportunities in the Army. But doesn't really matter because I'd figure those stuff out when I got in anyways. And with internet, you can find just about anything you want nowadays. I think my recruiters did a good job. I knew everything I needed to know. Is there more I could have known? Yeah, absolutely. Is there more I would have been interested to know? Yeah, absolutely. But I didn't know what to ask because you just don't know.

Initial Entry Training: *I was smart enough to see past the mind games*

I left for Basic training in August. I went to Sand Hill, Fort Benning, the same wherever 11 Bravo and 11 Charlie goes.³ Leaving home didn't bother me; it felt good. I was 20; I was ready to f****n' go.

We flew in, and then the bus ride to Fort Benning is like an hour and a half, so not too long a bus ride. I think I was excited. I wasn't really too nervous or anxious. Basic training is anticlimactic in the beginning because you take the bus to Fort Benning—it's your

³ 11C is the alphanumeric designation for indirect fire infantryman.

first military experience. Then you go to this place called 30th AG, which is like a holding area where you do all your in-processing, get issued your crap, so you don't do anything like all day.⁴ You don't have much engagement with drill sergeants or anybody; you're not getting yelled at, nothing like that. You just get issued your stuff, medical in-processing. Then you take another bus ride from there—short bus ride, maybe 15 minutes—to where your Basic training barracks are, and then that's where you meet your drill sergeants and all that.

I think, fortunately, I was smart enough to see past the mind games. A lot of guys got really hung up on it. You can tell me I'm a piece of s**t; I know I'm not a piece of s**t. Stuff like that. I understand the necessity behind treating people like that when they first get in, but I think I saw past the mind games that were trying to be played.

Nothing there is that hard, nor is it that stressful or challenging. There are some seriously out-of-shape dudes who made it through, unfortunately. So no, if anything, you get bored at times. It gets mundane. I was pretty hungry and tired sometimes. Other than that, I remember it not being very challenging or very difficult. The wrestling season is 9,000 times worse than Basic training ever was. Swimming was worse. Yeah, and then I worked manual labor before the military, so.

The hardest part of boot camp was during down time—not falling asleep, stuff like that. I really didn't struggle with Basic training at all. It was a lot easier than I expected it. I did not have a hard time adjusting to the military. I think right away I saw myself as a soldier. Obviously I've gotten better; I wasn't in the best of shape, but pushing myself and working hard physically wasn't new to me. I hadn't done a lot of distance running before the military. So that was an adjustment, but a welcome one. I wasn't miserable about it; it's just a new skill to learn. That's what I joined the Army to do.

⁴ 30th Adjutant General Battalion, the reception battalion for infantry BCT.

People's characters come out, for sure

The best thing about boot camp was probably some of the friends I met. I think my best friend in Basic training was a dude from Philadelphia. He's in the 75th Ranger regiment. I ran into him in Afghanistan.

The guys you make friends with at Basic training are the ones in your platoon because they're the ones you're with every day. So every task you do in Basic training, you do with them. There was a couple of guys from my Basic training that came to Fort Campbell, but none of them ended up in the same battalion as me, so we didn't stay in touch.

Having people to talk to, share hardship, talk to about it, hang out with, definitely makes stuff better. But I don't think Basic training is so demanding where you needed to have a really close friend in order to make it through.

There were dirtbags for sure. If you're smart, you're going to stay away from dudes who are dirtbags. You know who the s**tbags are. It comes out. You spend 12 weeks under those conditions, people's characters come out, for sure. Dudes who lie. Dudes who don't do what they're told. They kind of screw their buddies and peers over, yeah. Stuff like that. Dudes who don't put forth effort. They're looking for the easy way out, thinking about themselves. Definitely not everybody graduated, and you get those dudes who break down and would make bulls**t claims and get sent home out of the Army.

Outside society has seeped its way into the military . . . and influenced Basic training

Basic training reinforced to me not to get stressed out. I don't know if I really got that quality from Basic training. I kind of always had that. Basic training gets people in shape, but I think they could do a better job of getting people in shape. I think they could do more training, but you can only get to a certain level because you've got to train at a pace that the slowest or weakest or least intelligent or least motivated guy in the group can keep up with, is what they've been forced into doing.

I think they should cut more people from Basic training. It's almost like a guarantee if you go to Basic training, you'll graduate. I think that it should be a harder process. Basic training does not prepare you for deployment; it just doesn't do it. And, obviously, it's supposed

to train you and stuff, but Basic training is not turning dudes off the street into warriors. It's just not doing it.

I don't know if this is, again, that kind of old saying, "Back in my day it was harder; I had to walk to school uphill" mentality. But people that have been in the Army longer than me, eight, nine, ten years, or even six, seven years, their experiences from Basic training seem harder than mine, and mine seemed even exponentially harder than what brand-new privates come into the unit have gone through.⁵ Political correctness or the outside society has seeped its way into the military too much and influenced Basic training.

The fact that you even get a phone call, I think, is stupid. I think the fact that people are connected at all is wrong. I think you should be able to write letters. That's it. Because here's what happens, is the second a dude gets on the phone with his damn girlfriend or his parents, and he gets all upset and emotional. And the dude's losing training value that day or that whole week or the entire rest of the Basic training because he's worried about something back home. It's very hard for an 18-year-old guy to see that what his high school girlfriend is up to is irrelevant at that point in his life—just let it go, man. I think it's distracting. I wrote my parents letters, but I was focused on learning and becoming a soldier. Getting ready to fight a war. Forget what my high school girlfriend's doing because it's not important anymore. It's irrelevant. You let that stuff go.

The drill sergeants were awesome. I liked the drill sergeants a lot, yeah. I feel like they were maybe a little—I think there's too much restrictions on the drill sergeants, and they should be allowed to make it a little harder. The amount of physical work they can make you do. My squad leader was more intense on me than my drill sergeants because I think he didn't have those same restrictions. He doesn't work

⁵ This is not an uncommon attitude among soldiers, but it should be noted this view is not supported by the data. In fact, in a survey of graduating recruits, 10 percent of men and 12 percent of women felt that Army Basic training was too easy. However, another survey for the same study found that, among soldiers with eight years or less of service, the vast majority felt Basic training had prepared them well for advanced training (Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues, *Final Report Volume I: Findings and Recommendations*, Washington, D.C., July 1999a, pp. 74–76).

for TRADOC.⁶ TRADOC is a pretty strict organization, as far as the limitations they put on what those guys are allowed to do.⁷

From my understanding and what new guys to the unit tell me, Basic training is just getting easier and easier, and it's more restrictive. The mentality, discipline, physical fitness of new guys to the unit isn't the same.

Everybody says it's the most deployed unit

I found out where I was going to be stationed in the last couple of weeks of Basic training. They just passed out a letter saying—a piece of paper with where you're going on it and your travel orders. Towards the very end some of the drill sergeants would say something about it, like I had drill sergeants who were from the 101st Airborne Division, and I think I had a conversation with one about what the 101st Airborne Division's like, at maybe the last week of Basic training after they already gave us our orders as to what unit we were going to. I didn't know about Fort Campbell.⁸

I talked to a drill sergeant who was in the 101st Airborne, and he had nothing but good things to say. I think I was excited about it, thought it was a prestigious unit. It's the most deployed unit. Well, I don't know this as a fact, but everybody says it's the most deployed unit in the global war on terror. Most deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, 101st Airborne. I thought it was cool.

⁶ U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), one of the major commands of the U.S. Army.

⁷ This is another commonly expressed view, but not a new one. In fact, in a 1999 study, some recruit trainers commented "that they could not raise their voices or curse to motivate recruits verbally; and that they had no recourse when recruits 'talked back' or refused to do what they were supposed to do." These resources were seen to be necessary because of a perceived decline in recruit quality (Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues, *Final Report Volume III: Research Projects, Reports, and Studies*, Washington, D.C., July 1999b, p. 389).

⁸ Fort Campbell is the home of the 101st Airborne Division.

Life in the Army: *Being an infantryman is not a job*

I flew from Fort Benning, so straight away after Basic training, I was here at Fort Campbell. It's a little slow at first because you're in-processing here. Those little in-processing duties kind of take up the majority of your day. So you don't have a lot of contact with your new unit and the leadership when you're just kind of occupied. So the first week's kind of slow. Then once you're done with in-processing is when you really start kind of falling under your new leadership and into your new team. That was good-ish for a little bit because I had a good squad leader and team leader when I first got here. They were about training. You can't slip stuff past them.

There were days the first month or two I was here that I was like "oh s**t, work again today." Like "I'm going to get smoked all day and yelled at." But it was a good thing because, I don't know, it's just adversity. You're better for it. It was horrible, but the first month was tough here, tougher than Basic training. Which is good. I learned a lot right away.

I was like the one new guy at the time. I didn't really talk to anybody much at first; kept to myself. Just worked. Stayed in my room after work or went to the gym, went to the DFAC. Yeah, it sounds lonely. But that's the military. You haven't done anything and you cannot—it's very detrimental to have a brand new guy who hasn't accomplished anything or done anything. You can't just be like buddy-buddy with him right away. This isn't that type of organization where it's just like, "hey, we're best friends now." Same thing in high school when I joined the wrestling team. You don't walk onto the team and all of a sudden you're best friends with everybody. You're the new guy. You're going to prove yourself before people are going to want to be engaged with you and associate with you. They don't know what kind of dude you are. They don't know how hard you're going to work. They don't know if you're going to quit. That's the way it goes. I think any good organization or team, you have to earn your keep first. That's the way it goes. Besides Basic training, you haven't done anything. That's a problem; you shouldn't come out of Basic training trying to rest on your accolades, thinking you've accomplished a lot. That's the first step in a long

walk to becoming a proficient warfighter. You really shouldn't show up cocky. You have nothing to be cocky about, bragging about Basic training. The title of the thing is "Basic."

I thought I was going to be . . . living in a Spartan community

I think I had this idea in my head that Monday through Friday I was going to be out in the woods living in a tent, training and shooting all the time. Then I get here, and some days we're off work at 1400, which isn't a bad thing if there's nothing to be done. But there was not a lot of training. I thought I was going to be like a f*****g—living in a Spartan community. Where you took the weapons out every day and trained nonstop. But you come in to work and it's like everybody's just tied up with administrative stuff.

I did not have expectations before coming in. And that will serve you well in the Army—don't build up expectations about stuff like that. I said going into Basic training, "this is going to be hard; I'm going to work hard." There's my expectation. Same thing coming to garrison: "It's going to be hard being the new guy in a unit," especially a unit full of dudes who've probably deployed; you've got no experience. It's going to be hard, but I'm going to work hard. You know what I mean? Stay loose, that's all there is to it.

The change in expectation I've had with the Army is if I told you I played in the NBA, you would expect that I dribble a basketball every day. That I practiced every day. I shot layups, free throws, whatever, every day, right? That would be your expectation. And then if you were to come to find out that I only dribbled a basketball like once a month, you'd be really confused, right? That is what's happening. That is the expectation change I've had in the military. The amount of training we do, not ample. The difficulty of training is not ample. That's way above me, like resources, time. There's too much BS going on and not enough training.

For example, the Army's marksmanship program sucks. It sucks. The Army does a terrible job teaching people how to shoot. It's important to every infantryman. The Army doesn't place enough emphasis

on marksmanship. Just all that stuff. The PT test's garbage.⁹ It does a terrible job of gearing someone's fitness in terms of combat fitness, combat-oriented tasks.

I'd go back to Afghanistan. . . . I'd go back right away for sure

I joined the Army wanting to deploy. I joined the Army to go to Afghanistan. That's what I wanted to do. I wouldn't say I have no fear of dying. That's a factor, but it wasn't enough to deter me. I thought I was going to deploy first term. That was the vision in my head, I guess; the vision was Basic training, go to unit, and we'd go to Afghanistan. That was the game plan. Iraq was over when I joined, so.

I was here for about two-and-a-half years before I deployed. I got back from Afghanistan a year ago. The rumors started flying: "1st Brigade's going to Afghanistan. This many people are going. Parts of this unit are going. Parts of that unit are going." The rumors started flying, and then we went and drew our deployment gear and got orders and all that. That's when I guess I found out officially. I was excited.

I stayed on Kandahar Airfield for the duration of the deployment. We took a 17-man platoon because that is the MTOE requirement. But the whole battalion went. We were just on call 24 hours a day. Some days we're nothing but hanging out, going to the gym, eating, doing some training, that kind of stuff. And then some days we would get called out to do something. So we'd be gone on a mission. Day to day varied, depending on if we had a tasking for that day or not. But we did a lot of training. We'd go to the range once a week, which was great. Just go to the gym every day, that kind of stuff. It was good.

The best thing about deployment was living and working with good dudes. The worst thing was the boredom, probably. Get pretty bored sometimes. Yeah. But we did a good job of staying occupied. Watching somebody die is probably the worst thing, but I don't have glaring like, "Oh, that f*****g sucked," so horrible moments. If it had

⁹ The Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) is often referred to as a PT test. The Army is in the process of rolling out a new fitness exam, the Army Combat Fitness Test, which will become the exam of record in late 2020. The interviews in this study predated the rollout of this new test and refer only to the APFT.

been someone in our platoon, that would be starkly in my mind as the worst thing.

The biggest sacrifice was just time. It's nine months of your life. I don't know. Time, I guess. But I'd go back to Afghanistan. Yeah, I'd go back right away for sure. I wouldn't tell the Army this but I might—yeah, I'd probably do it for free. This is what I love to do. I think I would go on deployment for free as long as—not free, but you got to pay my car payment and phone.

I probably improved my relationship with my family

I think my dad's proud of it. My mom was nervous. I'm sure my whole family was at times nervous or apprehensive, worrying. But they dealt with it well. I think they dealt with it well. We had internet connectivity on Kandahar. So yeah, I talked to them pretty frequently. Deployment is a good experience. I think I got more mature. I probably improved my relationship with my family. I think I just put more effort into communicating with my mom especially, spending more time talking to my mom, hanging out with my mom when I'm home, stuff like that.

I got closer with the guys on deployment. We had a guy get sent to medevac to Germany, so we got a replacement guy.¹⁰ He's still in the platoon now. He's a good dude. I'm good friends with him. It does have a positive effect on the rest of my life. It's like a football player who's only ever practiced. Playing in a game is good. It's a good experience. It makes me want to stay in the Army more so I can deploy again.

I definitely need less guidance now than I did earlier in my career. And just know more, and so the more you know, the more you can do on your own. Yeah, I suppose you could probably say that I have less to prove now than I used to. But I don't look at it that way. You shouldn't rest on your accolades. I could probably get away with a little more than someone else could who's brand new, never deployed, didn't deploy with us. But that's not the right thing to do. That's kind of the wrong answer, but that's human nature. Your best friend—you're going to be more lenient on someone you've lived with, worked with for a long time than someone you barely know. That's just human nature.

¹⁰ Medical evacuation (medevac).

I was pretty prepared

I think I got lucky and had some really good leadership leading up to the deployment who knew what they were doing. It all depends on your definition of prepared. I wasn't anywhere near as prepared as I could have been, not even close. But within the restrictions and parameters of the Army, yeah, I was pretty prepared.

We do some form of training almost every day. But it's not the level of training or the quality of training that I would prefer it to be. We only get so much ammo. We only get so much time on the range. We only get so much time down at JRTC at Fort Polk. We only get so much time in the field because there's all this—you got to write a 75-paragraph CONOP to go to the range.¹¹ There's too much—for lack of a better term—bureaucratic red tape, I think, that constrains training time and ability and resources. There are so many pieces that come together on a modern battlefield. Before I went to Afghanistan, I rarely talked to a helicopter pilot—things like that—on the radio. We had theater-provided equipment that none of us had ever used before. There is so much red tape in planning these training events.

My platoon leadership has an appetite for training. I don't know where the buck stops. For all I know, the battalion commander could be pushing to the brigade commander like, "Hey, sir, I want my guys to go out in the field these f*****g six times to do this, this, and this." And he might be like, "Well, actually, I need your brigade to do this, this, this." I know that my platoon sergeant, my squad leader, my PL are always trying to plan training, and a lot of it gets shot down.¹² At what level, I don't know. Just because I'm the guy saying no to you doesn't mean there's not a guy saying no to me that's making me say no to you. Where it's coming from, I don't know. It's hard to identify where the buck stops.

¹¹ Concept of operations (CONOP).

¹² Platoon leader (PL).

We're warriors, and . . . the problem is I think we're getting away from that

I love the guys I work with. It's a good work environment. It probably wouldn't be widely accepted in the corporate world. It lends itself to efficiency; people are more blunt, more direct. All the guys in the platoon I know I'm going to see every day. I get along very well with all my peers. I get along with other Type A dudes. We have a really solid core of guys who've been here for a while, and then we just got a ton of new guys who are kind of yet to be seen. Some of them I would send packing right now if I could, but it don't work like that. For sure, one right now. He's weak. He's lied. Tried to take a shortcut not long ago and lied about it, and there's just no room for that. I just don't like lazy dudes. I don't like dudes who aren't motivated. We're warriors, and that's the problem is I think we're getting away from that. They're kind of soft. Beyond that, some people have the huge task of teaching a dude how to be a soldier and an adult, how to be mature and not act like an ass, and how to fight a war. I suppose sometimes one kind of teaches the other, but it's hard if your dudes are immature.

The way I look at it is if you work in S1 and your job is to manage personnel files from whatever, 8:00 in the morning until 5:00 at night, then fine.¹³ Being an infantryman is not a job. It's not like a career either. It's a lifestyle. A lot of guys are just collecting a paycheck, trying to get off as early as possible. It's not tangible to them. They don't realize what they're here for. They lose sight of the fact that the entire reason the Army exists is to fight wars. That's why you're here. That's what this is all about. It's not like, "Hey, I didn't know what else to do after high school, so I just got a job in the Army, and a paycheck." That's really detrimental, being nine-to-five soldiers. Eighty percent of infantrymen I just don't think take it seriously enough.

The worst part is the administrative stuff

We do PT every morning from 6:30 till 8:00. And then we come in and do administrative stuff. The lieutenant and a couple of the guys are handling a monthly inventory where they're laying out equipment.

¹³ S1 denotes the staff section responsible for personnel issues.

Making sure we haven't lost anything. We got some guys on CQ duty up at the desk right now where they got to sit there for 24 hours. They're in charge of quarters, so they maintain a presence in the building. It's like a desk secretary type.

We get training in when we can. Stuff we can go over in the classroom. We go out in the woods here, do some quick what we call hip-pocket training. But yeah, this is pretty typical. We're efficient, but the manner in which taskings come down is super inefficient. We get stuff done fast, but it'll be halfway through the day, and last minute they'll be, "hey, do this." "You could have told me in the morning." You're like, "how are you now just figuring this out?" It's whatever.

The best part of the week is morning PT. The worst part is the administrative stuff. The worst part of the week is probably that we can never get everybody together and do effective training. Like I might have a dental appointment today, so it's in the middle of the damn day, so interrupts anything I'm trying to do with my guys.

The day is usually pretty predictable. Sometimes there's unpredictable taskings that come down, but it's never like I show up in the morning and they're like, "hey, we're going to the field for a month, oh my god." It's not like that. It's usually pretty predictable that I'll come in, do PT, and usually at the latest be off by 1700.

Worst garrison soldier I'll ever meet

A good garrison soldier is, a lot of times, especially good garrison leaders, are really on point with their administrative stuff. They counsel their dudes on paper every month. They are always on the computer. One of the biggest studs I've ever known—and now he's going to the Green Beret qualification course, already passed selection, all that. This dude, sergeant in my platoon on deployment—worst garrison soldier I'll ever meet. Uniform always looked like s**t. He never did any paperwork or administrative stuff; he was straight garbage. But he's a super stud. He's a great shooter. He's in incredible shape; that dude never gets stressed out, never freaks out, never loses his cool. Everybody trusts him. Great dude. I love him. If I had to go on a horrible deployment, combat every day, I would take him for sure. But he was like a garbage garrison soldier. What are you going to teach dudes, like "be a

warrior but don't swear," "make sure you type these really long reports all the time"? We're not secretaries.

The best soldier I know just turned 25. He's a warrior. He's geared for it. He's in really good shape. No doubt he's going to be able to keep up and do his job. He's aggressive, motivated. "Motivation" meaning he comes every day ready. He has long-term goals that he works towards every day. He's going to make it a career out of the Army. He takes it more seriously. He's more passionate about it. He's more motivated; people just see it. He's in the best shape out of everybody. He accomplishes his goals. He's rated No. 1 on his NCOER, so.¹⁴ He just works harder than most people. It's not like—good leadership like that, that's more of a complicated question. But being a good soldier—it's not a complicated recipe. He just works harder. He just works harder. He's in better shape. He's accomplished more.

If you're motivated and you care about your dudes, you're going to be a good leader

Seeing people work hard motivates you to work hard. If everyone around you is a bum, it's kind of hard to be motivated. I've had bad leaders, and they didn't dissuade me from the Army. I just thought, how do I get away from being this dude's—under this guy? Or, all right: The clock's still ticking, eventually he's leaving. The best NCO I know? I trust him. If I had to pick one thing, trust. I trust him. He's personable and down to earth. He doesn't just say "you suck, that's the end of it, I'm not dealing with you." No, he'll continue to train that person and try to develop them and make them better. He's got the knowledge to help people improve, so through teaching and then through just showing the right example.

He cares. He genuinely cares about the organization and the platoon and guys. If you're motivated and you care about your dudes, you're going to be a good leader. You're going to, I'm sure, have some flaws and stuff you need to learn from. Sometimes he gets overly angry or might place blame too quick, but at the end of the day, if he does do that and he realizes he's wrong, he cares enough to f*****g do some-

¹⁴ Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER).

thing about it. Again, I think not the most complicated recipe; you just have to care. There's a lot of good NCOs in my platoon, but yeah, he really stands out.

It's on you in the Army to be successful

There were fundamental lifestyle changes that I've made that I think made me a much better soldier. Since I was a private I'm probably easily in 20 times better shape, which is a massive, massive part of an infantryman. I'm healthier. One of the biggest changes: I don't drink anymore. Well, I drink occasionally. But when I was a private, I went out every Friday and Saturday night drinking with my friends. I don't know. I don't think that's very helpful. I think stopping that's made a big change for me. I go to sleep earlier. There's some really easy lifestyle changes. A lot of lower enlisted soldiers would be better soldiers if they stopped drinking so much, they stopped eating like s**t, they worked out more, they slept more. Fundamental lifestyle things like a coach would tell an athlete. If they just took better care of themselves they would be way better soldiers.

I think the Army overlooks that s**t too. I think the Army massively overlooks that. And it's a culture. There's a big drinking culture in the infantry too. It's like you're going out partying every Friday and Saturday. What are you celebrating? You made it to Friday? Come on, dude. You're blowing all your money. You're destroying your health. You're showing up Monday not rested, less motivated. You guys are concerned about the wrong stuff. If you'd asked me what, as a private, what could I do to become—maybe I wouldn't have known it. I don't know. But that would be what new soldiers in the Army should do to become better soldiers, I think: lifestyle changes. You can't drink four Monsters in a day. It's just like there's a lot you can do to improve a racecar, but the first step is put some good gas and oil in the thing and take care of it. Then you can fine-tune the suspension and all that.

There's always those things you can't control, but yeah, it's on you in the Army to be successful. I think the largest hurdle to having a successful career is staying motivated and staying disciplined.

I get paid to work out every day

I'm big into guns, big into shooting. I get paid to work out every day, so that's pretty cool. I'm a fan of that. I would say those are the biggest positives. Biggest negative about my MOS is sometimes we get caught up in doing—tasked out to do dumb stuff. The S1 personnel who are in charge of personnel records and finance and crap like that, they have a Monday through Friday 9:00 to 5:00 job. But me, if I'm not training or deployed, then I don't technically have a daily job. So sometimes like, all right, these guys aren't doing anything; make them go shovel the snow out of the motor pool or some crap.

I think on average, infantrymen are more physically fit. I would count on infantry more than cav scouts, that's for sure.¹⁵ At least in my experience. But it just varies from unit to unit, from platoon to platoon, from soldier to soldier. It's really, really hard to make generalizations about that kind of stuff.

I think I'm going to go to . . . Green Beret selection

I struggled with getting security clearance when I first joined the Army. Had I had one right away, I might have tried to go 18X, which is like the Special Forces Candidate.¹⁶ Or Option 40, the Ranger Regiment.¹⁷ Or I might have tried to do something in the Air Force with JTAC.¹⁸ If I could rewind, I might have just done that from the first place. They're both kind of on the more technical end of the combat arms job fields.

I love what I'm doing right now. I love being a sniper. I love long-range shooting. The problem is the Army only lets you do it for so long. Eventually, they're going to say I have to leave the sniper section and go be a line company squad leader or team leader, or I have to go be a drill sergeant or recruiter, or move around and broaden my whatever.

¹⁵ Cavalry Scouts, another of the larger combat MOSs in the Army.

¹⁶ 18X is the MOS designation for a Special Forces Candidate. It is not a permanent job category in the Army but rather denotes someone who has come into the Army under a program that allows him or her to try out for Special Forces earlier than is normally done.

¹⁷ Option 40 is an enlistment contract option guaranteeing a soldier a slot in the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program.

¹⁸ Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC).

But what I think the Army should do is make being a sniper and reconnaissance an MOS, but that's a whole other tangent. Once you become sniper qualified it could change that that's your MOS, and that's what you get to do for the rest of your career. But other than that, no, I have no interest really in moving.

Now that I have security clearance—I've had one for a little while now, got it a little bit after I came back after deployment—I think I'm going to go to SFAS, which is the Green Beret selection.¹⁹ So I can avoid the bulls**t and maybe some of my training gripes, and not training enough, and stuff like that, will change on that side of the house. I think they're a little better funded, better managed, better training, more motivated.

Personal life: I . . . slowly started going and hanging out less and less

When I'm not at work, it's gym and hang out with my girlfriend. That's about the extent of it. I work on my car sometimes, and that's about it. I bought that car completely stock, and I've done a lot of work to it. I've done the motor and suspension, that sort of crap. I used to work on it a lot more than I do now. It's kind of a project. I kind of built it and then pretty much finished now.

I don't go out. I go out to eat sometimes, to a restaurant, but I don't drink. Typically, I get off work, I eat, I go to the gym, I come back, I eat again and hang out with my girlfriend. Whatever, I watch Netflix, watch sports. I watch usually all the UFC fights; I watch college football and NFL, go to sleep.²⁰

Not even on a weekend, I really don't go out. On occasion we'll have guys, someone on the platoon's birthday—I'll come out for a while for that. Or if a guy's moving to a different duty station or getting out of the Army or something like a going away party, I'll go to that. But those are few and far between. So typically, no, I don't go out. Sundays,

¹⁹ Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS).

²⁰ Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), National Football League (NFL).

I go shopping and cooking for the week. Saturday, I relax. Now it's getting warmer out, I'll probably start doing more stuff like weekend trips up to Kentucky Lake and Barkley Lake, go hiking up there, stuff like that. Get some fishing in.

Most of the time, I spend most of my free time with my girlfriend. My girlfriend's a soldier, so I hang out with a soldier on base every day. But aside from that, yeah. All the guys live in the barracks, so we run into each other, so every day. I go to the gym with other guys. My platoon sometimes. But yeah, other than that, sometimes we'll go out to eat. I'll go out to eat with other guys in the platoon.

I don't think I had any expectations of what Army social life would be like. I expected to make some good friends, which I have. And have some cool experiences, do some traveling, things like that. But yeah, I didn't really build up expectations about social life in the Army. I think the average infantryman, especially junior enlisted, spends more time going out and drinking on the weekends, trying to party, hang out, stuff like that, and video games. I just kind of slowly started going and hanging out less and less.

She's not reenlisting, so not sure what kind of change that's going to bring about for us

I've been with my girlfriend almost two years, I would say. You'd have to ask her. Being with a person on base probably makes some things easier and some things more difficult. Obviously, it's easier because Army's like a whole culture unto itself. Yeah. It's much easier to explain stuff to her, and if I'm like, "Hey, I'm going to be gone a week in the field," she understands that I won't be able to talk, and she understands why because she goes through those things herself. She's much more understanding. It's way easier to talk about work because I don't have to explain what things are. Whereas, if I try to explain to my mom what we've been doing or what's going on at work, it's much more difficult because there's that, it's almost like a language barrier. So it's easier in that way. She's not reenlisting, so not sure what kind of change that's going to bring about for us yet.

Well, a relationship, in general, I would say it could be an advantage or a disadvantage. Just depends on if your significant other sup-

ports things you're trying to do in the military or supports your career, because having someone there can be helpful. They can help you with stuff, help manage stuff—you know what I mean—help you with your goals. But I have seen spouses who don't want their significant other to go do things that are going to take them away for periods of time, stuff like that, so they're less supportive and can kind of keep guys from pursuing things because of the time commitment and separation involved in it. So it could go either way. There's always that battle between adventure and relationship; not so much promotion, but more like schools or stuff like that. Just anything that's going to geographically separate them for periods of time.

A lot of dudes are into the Tinder

The dating scene is garbage, if I had to describe it. Yeah. I would wager a guess it's pretty similar to any military town. That's the thing. It's like a lot of guys go to Clarkesville, but I think—I don't know, I just think that girls up here, they have too much prior association or understanding of the military, and it just gets weird. It's not that they've dated too many military guys, but they have preconceived notions of what dudes in the military are like.

It's easy to meet women. I don't drink anymore, really, but I used to. That's how guys meet girls up here. And then a lot of dudes are into the Tinder and other forms, like meeting through social media and stuff like that. Which is weird to me, but whatever. To each to its own. I don't have a smartphone or anything, so I just have talk and text, so I got a like knockoff-looking Blackberry. I have no internet though. Even if I tried, I could not use Tinder. But I don't know a lot of people who have had lasting relationships with girls they've met up here. Short, physical ones. And that's how it goes for most guys, I think.

In my platoon, fitness is extremely important

My health is good. Yeah, better than most people, I'd say. In my platoon, fitness is extremely important. Your raw PT score isn't that important; just doing two minutes of push-ups, two minutes of sit-ups, and a two-mile run is not a good way to judge someone's fitness. Especially as fitness applies to our job. But being in good shape and doing

well every day at PT and trying hard every day at PT is very important in my platoon. But if you have a 270 and someone else has a 280, that doesn't really give you any stature above them.²¹ Especially if there's guys with raw PT scores better than mine, but every morning at PT I outperform them because we're doing more functional fitness events or stuff with body armor on, or a rucksack. The Army's PT test is terrible at gauging overall fitness.

I've been to the doctor before—I broke some ribs. I hurt my knee once, but nothing chronic that I haven't gotten over, or reoccurring. Just usual life stuff. I don't think it will affect my reputation. But I think that some people do abuse going to the doctor, and that affects your reputation. I work hard every day at PT, so if I show up one day and say "I feel like crap; this hurts" or "I think I'm sick—I need to go see the doctor this morning"—because sick call is in the morning during PT hours—my leadership is going to have no problem with me going to do that. They know I'm not trying to get out of PT. But when a guy doesn't work hard during PT and is making excuses during PT, looking for excuses, and then he starts saying, "I got to go to sick call, I got to go to sick call," yeah, it'll negatively affect their reputation. But it doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to determine if a guy's legit, needs to go to the doctor, or if he's abusing it.

I go to bed usually between 8:00 and 9:00, and I get up at 5:00, so I'll sleep eight or nine hours. Last night I didn't get to bed until 10:00, but that was unusually late for me. I get up at 5:00 every morning. Almost every night I go to bed between 8:00 and 9:00. I'm usually done at the gym between 7:45 and 8:00, and then I eat and go to sleep.

I started to eat a lot worse out of convenience

My diet got worse for a while after I joined the Army. I grew up eating all organic food, no garbage or anything. Growing up, I ate really well. And then when I came in the Army I started to eat a lot worse out of convenience for a while, and then I started every Sunday cooking all my food for the week, so I started eating better again. It's really simple,

²¹ The maximum score on the APFT is 300.

just protein, vegetables, carbs, some carbs, no sugar, and a little starch. That's the secret to it, I think.

I smoked for a little bit, and then I dipped for a long time. I dipped for the first three years I was in the Army, maybe more, three and a half. I quit dipping a while ago now because it causes cancer. I picked it up initially on my high school wrestling team. Well, not everybody, but a lot of people in the Army dip.

I'm financially more responsible now

It's gotten better. I'm financially more responsible now. I have a car payment, car insurance payment, and a cell phone bill. That is it. I invest automatically into some different savings, mutual funds and stuff like that every month. So yeah, I have that stuff comes out every month. I don't have any credit card debt. I suppose I have a loose budget. I have my bills every month. But my car and insurance are all split, half on the first, half on the 15th. So I pay those out of each paycheck and then my deductions for savings, and then the rest of it, whatever I save from that month, whatever is left over, I just add that to savings as well. It's a really loose budget going. Some paychecks, I have nothing left to put into savings, and some I have three-quarters of the paycheck left, so.

Most people in the Army have low bills. Health care is a huge financial benefit, free health care. Rent is usually covered, food available. Sometimes guys get reenlistment or enlistment bonuses. That's a benefit. You make a lot of money on deployment—it's tax free. The pension's pretty good; 50-percent pension's not bad at all. And then if you retire with full benefits, you got medical the rest of your life. But don't quote me on that. I'm not super knowledgeable on the retirement benefits. That's 16 years from now for me, if I make it that far.

If I got in a financial emergency, I would use my savings account to do it. If I, for some reason, needed an exorbitant amount of money that I couldn't cover myself, my father would be the next person I'd ask for help.

My Army Experience: *I'm more mature; I work harder*

Eventually, I will get a degree. Absolutely. Whether I do that in the Army or get out of the Army and then go do it, I'm not sure. But yeah, I'm going to get a degree. I like learning. I'm going to find something I'm interested in and that makes sense and get a degree in that so I can learn more about it. Degree opens doors, without a doubt.

I think that I have some good stuff to put on a résumé, and I think if people have an understanding of—at least a minimal base of understanding, at least, they will see that I've served in leadership positions. Served in leadership positions in combat deployment, things like that. So I think that demonstrates motivation, leadership abilities, crap like that. I can get a contracting job as a designated marksman for security somewhere, but other than that, I think I have résumé boosters, but not a lot of direct translating skills. People always say law enforcement, but what we do is so different than law enforcement. We train to fight wars. Law enforcement are trained to police and protect the American people. There's probably a big difference. I feel like sometimes maybe infantrymen wouldn't make the best police officers, honestly. I'm trained to use violent action and mass amounts of force to destroy the enemy. I'm not sure that's the right mentality for police. Certainly, in some situations—if a ton of gunmen are shooting up the mall. But I'm not sure that's the best translation of skills to a police officer either.

Me and my brother have talked about, and my dad, getting a ranch somewhere out West. And I think when I get out eventually, I might just help around the ranch. I like the outdoors, I like shooting, I like animals. I'm not trying to find myself in a cubicle ever, really. Just a good, simple life. I'm not interested in the complexities of modern society, I guess is a way to put it.

I'll stay in at least a couple more years. Outside of that, I'm not sure. Probably more than that, but I don't know. I went into it with the mindset that I'm going to do my first contract and then decide. So I didn't have a timeline laid out when I first joined. I don't have a rank goal, but there's certain schools and skills I want to ensure that I get before I get out. Those would be my goals. I don't have a specific, "Oh,

I want to be a sergeant first class” or “I want to be a first sergeant.” I don’t really ever think about that. I definitely want to go to Ranger School.

If I had to guess right now, I’d say I’ll probably make it to eight or ten years, and then that will be the big decision point for me, because that’s kind of when you got to decide to go and definitely make it a career or not. I’ll probably be in another couple of years.

Leadership has said I’ve been successful so far; I have good potential. If it’s what I want to do I should stay in the Army—could be successful at it. I haven’t had anyone be like, “yeah, you suck, get out.” Just positive. I would like to think if I really felt it was time for me to get out, if I was seriously injured and I couldn’t do the things I wanted to do in the military, I wouldn’t stay in the Army—I know guys who’ve gotten injured and had to reclass to other jobs to stay in.²² I wouldn’t. I don’t think I would do that. I think if I could no longer physically perform my duties, I would want to get out.

You’re just going to make yourself a better person

The people who I guess it clicks for them, like “Hey, the American taxpayers are paying my pay, I’m going to do my job.” Those people do their job. It’s not about what I want to get out of this. It’s more like, what can I do for the team? How can I be a better asset? And in turn you’re just going to make yourself a better person. That is a bonus. You’re going to end up a better person. But it’s like I’m not here just thinking, “What do I want to get out of this?” Be part of a team—those are the ones who have a good experience. If you do your job, you’re not going to have a bad experience. It’s when you have huge problems adapting, and you’re causing problems, and you’re not doing your job, and you’re taking—you’re just wasting resources, and those are the people who usually have a negative experience in the military. And the ones who can’t follow the damn rules.

I’m more mature; I work harder. I’m more disciplined, more mature, more motivated. I don’t think I was thinking about a whole lot of anything before the Army, honestly. Back then my mindset was

²² Reclass is slang for reclassify to another MOS.

just having a good time with my buddies, and then I was like, all right, I can't just party with my friends forever. And I always wanted to join the military, so now it's time to do it. That was my mindset. I've learned about more schools and the opportunities in the Army that I didn't previously know about. Those became goals of mine that I hadn't known about. But I always knew coming into the military I wanted to do some cool s**t; I just didn't know what the cool s**t was yet.

Michael

Michael left college and enlisted in the Army. He is married with a daughter and is extremely homesick because his family does not live with him. He video chats with his family every night. Michael desperately wants to leave the Army to return home.

Background: I wanted to teach ever since I was in high school

I was born in Ohio and then raised in Florida. I loved it. It was fun. A lot of people say they don't like it, that people are rude and there's a lot of aggressive people, but I like it a lot. I went to the beach a lot, and some skateboarding for a while. I didn't play sports. I was going to try out for a couple of sports, like basketball. I always loved to play, but I didn't end up doing it because I was more focused on school because I wanted to go to college. I went from preschool to, I want to say, eighth grade—I went to a private school, and it was unaccredited. I was kind of behind in credits when I went to public school. So, I was kind of different than a lot of other my peers. I was behind on a lot of credits, so I had to do a lot of catching up in summer school. I wanted to go to community college, and I wanted to go to Florida State.

I wanted to teach ever since I was in high school and eleventh and twelfth grade. I still want to do it, but in eleventh and twelfth grade, my teacher Ms. Smith—she was a child development teacher—she really helped me. She hooked me up because she's the one that helped me make it to college. She got me in contact with the right people, and

if it wasn't for her, I never would have gotten in a program where part of that is they let us work at a middle school. I was working at a middle school. Palm Springs Middle School is down the street from my house, and we got to work there for like a summer teaching kids about science.

Joining the Army: *Don't go. Please don't go.*

I was on campus for other reasons when I saw a recruiter. I just had a question. I don't know, I just wanted to see what it was about because I'm kind of like you know, this college thing's not working. Maybe I'll try the military out and see how I like it. There was one recruiter and, literally, I was at college and I went up to him and asked him, "What do I got to do to join the Army?" And he was like "Meet me at my office today." So, I took the bus down there to his office, and he told me, "This is what you got to do," and he talked to me a little bit, and literally within two or three months after that they already had me in Oklahoma. My dad told me not to join; he didn't want me to join. He almost even got into a confrontation with my recruiter. He went to the recruiter station and got mad at him and said, "Why are you telling my son all this stuff? What are you telling him to join?" I know that recruiters lie a lot about a lot of things. He made the Army seem like it was so fun, like it was going to be all this stuff, and he made Basic seem like it was going to be a cakewalk and everything. But it was wrong. Honestly, I would have liked to know how it was, what I was going to expect with the separation, what to expect at a unit, what to expect at Basic. I don't know. If I could do it over again, it would probably be a different story.

I know my grandpa was in and everything, but it was kind of my own thing, I was kind of focused on my own lane. My grandfather went to Vietnam. He was stationed in Germany for a while. He went to Vietnam, and then I think he went to Korea for a while. But I don't know for how long ago. It was a long time ago. I believe he was either a staff sergeant or a sergeant first class. He was an engineer, the ones that blow up bridges and stuff.

At first, my wife told me before I went, “Don’t go. Please don’t go.” And I was like, “I’m just going to go to try it out.” So, then I went, and now she kind of tells me, “Well, I told you not to go.” And she still wants me home. We weren’t even together at the time of my enlistment, but I could tell that she was always like that. Even though we were kind of doing our own thing for a while, she always wanted something more with me. I could always tell. So I guess maybe that’s why. She was afraid, maybe. We were still friends. I don’t think I would have left if we were together. I would have stayed home.

Initial Entry Training: *I shouldn’t give up on this*

I was expecting the yelling and everything in boot camp. I probably expected it to be maybe a little harder. It was tough, but they seemed like they got lenient on us toward the end pretty quick. I actually did probably the best at boot camp. People told me it would be really tough, and I was expecting no sleep, a lot of yelling. But I handled it pretty well. It helped because I had friends there that went through the same thing, and we tried to make each other happy. I actually had a best friend that came with me, and he’s here on base. I met him there, and we always make each other laugh about things and make things go by better.

I left for MEPS, and they probably took us to a hotel, and they flew us over here and then flew us to Oklahoma. We went to the airport, and then I remember we got on buses, and the buses took us over there. As soon as we got off the bus—yelling. It was at nighttime, too. It was the worst time. We got out around midnight, and they had us outside digging through bags, getting all our stuff, and I was like, “What? This is crazy.” And then we had to get up a couple of hours later. I was like, man. It was long, doing all the paperwork for medical entry. We got shots and stuff. It was hot over there, too. Oklahoma got hot. It was like heat category five.¹

¹ The Army has five categories to describe risk of heat casualty. Category five is the most severe.

I'm not going to be sad

I started actual camp around—I don't remember the days, but it was the beginning of July, somewhere around there. When I first got to boot camp, I had in-processing, so it was a little bit confusing. They're still strict; they had the drill sergeants there. He was just a sergeant, and they would be yelling at us, "Stay in line," whatever. It was kind of like the holding area until you actually get to boot camp. And then after that I finally got shipped out to my actual Basic training, where I was going to train at. From the first day, they had us out in the field, holding our bags over our head, getting yelled at.

To be honest with you, I didn't want to be at boot camp. I was like, you know what? This sucks. I'd rather be home, and I want to go home. But what kept me motivated was I thought about all the people who gave up and would want to give up, and I said, I'm not going to give up now because it's the hardest part. Maybe later in the Army, if I don't want to be there, I can leave. But this is the hardest part; I shouldn't give up on this. That's what I kind of held on to.

I was missing home, but I thought everyone went through it, so I just kept an open mind and I was like, you know what? I'm not going to be sad. My family is always going to be there. It's kind of weird, but sometimes when I'll be going through a bad time, I'll just think about someone else back home who's having a good time—make me feel kind of better. It sounds weird, but I'll think about someone going to work early in the morning in Florida, and it will make me feel better. I don't know; it's kind of weird.

Boot camp was split up so that each week they would have different training things, and they would have a set time for them to be done. But every morning was around the same thing. We'd get up around like 6 or something like that, 5:30—I don't remember. And then we would go load up the trucks for PT. We go out to the field and do PT and then come back, take a shower or whatever. Get ready to go down for breakfast and then go for breakfast. Come back, go to our training, and usually breakfast would depend on our training. So, if we were going out somewhere for a day, we wouldn't get to go to breakfast; we'd go downstairs to eat. But we'd go for training, and we'd always come back for chow at night.

The hardest part of boot camp are all the exercises we had to do. All these obstacle courses we had to do. There was one where you had to rappel down a tower, and I do not like heights. The drill sergeants were threatening to throw people over, and I was like, oh man. We had to go across this obstacle course where you were way up in the sky walking on a tightrope kind of thing, and I was like, no way. I don't like heights. I knew there was no way of backing out of it. I was like, I don't like this, but it's either get kicked off or jump off myself. They probably wouldn't have kicked me off, but they probably would have forced me to go. I saw them yelling at some people, and I was like, that's not going to be me. I said to myself, "Hey, if I hurt myself, at least I can say I was pressured into doing it, and I hurt myself."

We had our graduation from boot camp, and this was kind of where it scared me for a second, because after we had graduation, we had to go upstairs and change from our dress blues into our uniform. Our stuff was already packed because we had been packing like the last week. We brought them downstairs, and, see, I did not have a garment bag. I didn't have one, so literally my dress blues were like closed on my duffel. You know the green duffel bags? It was laid on there, and I had it closed, and it was just right there hanging off. I was in a hurry, and I had nowhere to put it, and I didn't want to wrinkle it up, so I just put it like that.

They called our names, and as soon as they called our name we had to cram our stuff on the bus. This is so weird how they did it. There was one bus about medium size. We had to put all of our bags towards the back; all of our bags had to fit there. And all the people on the bus had only the space from the middle of the bus to the front where they had to sit. So, all of us were crammed right there. Literally there was people sitting on top of each other, standing up. It was bad. It was really, really bad.

We just started laughing, and from then on we've just been super cool friends

A lot of people were rude and mean. There was a lot of weird, kind of aggressive people. But I really kept to myself. I didn't try to go make too many friends. But we had our fun, laughed at times. It was just sort

of like we lived together so might as well, “What’s up man—how you doing?” kind of thing. But I know the one I was closest to, he was a couple of bunks down, and he’d always be reading something at night. I remember one day I was sad because I didn’t get no mail, and I was sitting down on the wall, and I was like, man I wish I had mail. And he came by, and he’s like, “Hey, what’s up man? You OK?” and I was like, “Yeah, I’m good.” He’s like, “Hey, what’s wrong?” I was like, “Man, I wish I had some mail,” and we just started laughing, and from then on we’ve just been super cool friends.

I know people who were from Florida would more stick with people from Florida. I noticed there was cliques going on. I am connected with friends from Basic on Snapchat, but the main one I’m in touch with is my friend in another brigade. During Basic, I slept in his bay because there wasn’t enough room in my bay. Then we actually went to AIT together. We shared rooms in AIT, so we always had the best room because we’d always clean it up and stuff.

Once we got to AIT, it was like me and him would talk and everything. We’d always connect super good. He’s Hispanic, and my stepmother is Hispanic, and that’s how I was raised, so me and him went through a lot of the same things growing up. We’re from Florida, so we know a lot of the same things. It was funny because there was a guy that was actually moving out, graduating. And we paid him like six bucks or something like that. “Hey, let me claim this room.” Because everybody was trying to claim rooms. So we had to move all our stuff to that room, and he was like, “Yeah, I got you guys.” So literally we just moved in there, and then I cleaned it for us, and then it was cool. It made AIT a lot easier.

I was blown away by all these freedoms I got

AIT wasn’t down the street, but it was on a bus, and we drove for a while. It was across the railroad tracks. There’s a training area, and we drove across over there. It was a nice area. I was blown away by all these freedoms I got. On the weekends, we got to go walk places, and I was like, “What?” We’re like, “We got to go buy a Monster,” and I was like, no way. We get to go to the PX. And I was like, “What?” It was weird.

As soon as we got to AIT, I felt like, “ah man, this is going to be strict again” because there was already a sergeant yelling. We had to lay out our bags in a big field, and all of us got our stuff situated in where we were. We all left our bags there, went over to—they had this line going under a tent, and then we just basically signed our names, and they gave us little cards. They’re like, “Yeah, just carry these cards on you for whenever you guys go places and stuff.” And I was like, “Go places?” It felt weird for me to hear that word to go somewhere. I was like, “What? I get to go somewhere?” And they were like, “Yeah, whenever you guys are traveling or whatever.”

I remember, I think it was the day before I went there, the phone I had was a 5s iPhone. You couldn’t have it during the day, but after you got off work at five, you could have it for the rest of the night. I believe it was at nine or ten you had to put it away. But a lot of people just kept it on them. But see, NCOs would come in the rooms, and they would check for phones. They would look in the doors to make sure, and if you were on your phone, they would take it. But that depends on the sergeant on duty. Some sergeants wouldn’t care. But a lot of them, they would look, and if you had it—so I would never listen to music at night. I would just keep my phone on all day; that’s it. But I liked it because at the same time, it gave me freedom to feel like, man, I don’t got to worry about anything because I can’t do nothing about it so why worry about it? So, it kind of gave me my own time to focus on myself. I’m glad I didn’t have a relationship at the time either, because that would have been difficult, and I wouldn’t even want to. My wife always tells me, “I wish we would have got together before,” and I was like, “Well, I was still trying to fix things with my ex, and you were doing your own thing too, so things happen for a reason.”

AIT was kind of difficult because they taught me on a different gun than they have here. I learned the 119—over here, they have a 777, which is a bigger howitzer. I knew different things, so I had to kind of restart everything. In boot camp, we just shot our M4s, but in AIT, I got a chance to shoot. That was fun—the 119 and the 777. There’s the small cannon and the big one. The one up there, that’s the 777. When you’re top of that thing, I think that’s a dangerous position, unless you

hit an IED.² But if you're up there on top of thing, bullets can just hit you right in the head—sniper.

A lot of people in my MOS are very boisterous and loud, and very high-strung, because they feel like their job is very crucial. I know 11 Bravos are worse—infantry, they're worse, but artillery and infantry, they're both around the same.³ They're both cocky—you'll notice that all about Bravos; they're very cocky, they're very disciplined, and they're very high strung on getting the mission done. So that's something you always notice from other MOSs, no matter what unit you're part of.

Life in the Army: *It's not as strict as I thought it would be*

I didn't know where they were going to send me. *I didn't know where they were going to send me.* I thought maybe I probably would have been sent to Oklahoma. I didn't even think about it. I heard about Fort Hood. Oh yeah, yeah, if you're asking about Fort Hood, I heard about Fort Hood. But other bases I really didn't hear too much. But this place, I literally had an NCO tell me, "Good luck." He told me, "Yeah, good luck." Yeah, kind of like, "I hope you stay in" kind of thing. And he even told his buddies, his other NCOs; he was like, "Hey, this guy is going to Fort Hood," and they were like, "Ah-ha-ha," laughing also. He was like a staff sergeant, and he had been at Fort Hood, and he's like, "Good luck, man. That's all I'm going to tell you."

And a bunch of people told me, like, "Oh, you got Fort Hood? That sucks, man. They really got you guys." And I was like, "What?" I didn't hear anything positive. Nothing positive. I think they were right about the heat. I don't like it at all. Other than that, I don't know. I really don't know anything else other than that. But I just know the heat, man. The heat, despite whatever good things come, the heat just crushes all that. I don't want to be anywhere where there's a lot of heat. I really want to go to somewhere cool. Yeah, it kind of makes you like,

² Improvised explosive device (IED).

³ 11B or 11 Bravo is the alphanumeric designation for infantry.

this is going to be bad, kind of thing. Because I had everyone tell me, “Where you going?” “Fort Hood.” Like, “Oh, man.” Everyone said the same thing.

Never take the Army literally

They let us have a normal life in garrison. It’s not as strict as I thought it would be. Because I thought even in the normal Army, life would be always tough. That’s the good thing I noticed about our unit. That’s one thing I notice about our unit is that it’s always like, if you apply yourself, you can get noticed, and you get promoted. But I feel like if you start lacking or slacking in certain areas, people probably look down or notice it. I feel like that’s something common.

I wake up at 5:30 every morning. My sleep schedule is crazy here because I stay up talking to my wife, so I usually go to bed about two, and I just wake up at five. It’s weird. I have this weird accustom to it. It doesn’t bother me that much.

Normally, Monday is always Motor Pool Monday, so basically, we go out to the motor pool. Each battery has their own section of vehicles. We just crank the vehicle, turn it on. Turn it on—check if it turns on, if it cranks. It maybe needs a battery charge or check the batteries. PMCS the vehicle.⁴ Check the tires, check the headlights, check the mirrors, check the windows, stuff like that. And sometimes organizing stuff inside. And then Tuesdays, it’s probably a normal day. We might have some classes, and Wednesday, same thing. Thursday same thing, and then Friday is usually motor pool closeout, where we go clean up our motor pool, make sure it’s clean. We have our first sergeant and company commander come check on it and make sure it’s clean, and usually—if it’s clean—we might get out early, we might not.

Motor pool closeout is on Fridays. You’re cleaning out the motor pools, sweep and everything. It can get stupid. Mondays are the worst because usually we’re in the motor pool all day. We have inspections. Every day it’s something there. There’s never a set schedule. I learned that in the Army. Never take the Army literally. If they say something, it’s probably going to change once or twice. They’ll tell you OK, today

⁴ Preventative maintenance checks and services (PMCS).

we're getting off at 1400—we'll get off at 1500. They'll say all right, we're going to get off at 1600, and we'll get off at 1700. So, things are always up in the air in the Army. Our hours are totally different. Some days we're late. We're there until seven. Some days we're there until six. Some days 5:30. There's a lot of standing around in the Army.

My peers are pretty cool. There's little cliques, friends, whatever. The NCOs are usually right to the point. They tell us what to do, and it's usually not too harsh. I feel like you've got to be careful what you do, and at the same time, it's pretty comfortable. There's a couple of trouble-makers, but you'll find them everywhere. I know that this unit is really hard-working. I really don't go looking for too many friends. But it's pretty good. I'm pretty cool with everyone. I want to say that when it comes time, like off-time, they're there for you. If you need to talk about something, they're good support. Some of them are too motivated about work, and I'm not as motivated, so it kind of gets on my nerves because they want to talk down on me when I'm not trying to hear it. I mean, some of them I would consider just someone to interact with. I have one or two or three friends, maybe. Most of them are people I just come face-to-face with on a normal day.

I could say I did something a lot of people would never have done

I heard that they deploy a lot here. I didn't mind; I wanted to because it would be something different and I could say I did something a lot of people would never have done. I thought coming here would mean most definitely it would be deploying—even now. It's not a possibility anymore because I'm almost out, but I mean, you know. I feel kind of sad. But at the same time, I feel like I'm making my wife happy because she didn't want me to go get deployed. You know? But I still think it's something I would have went and done. From my unit, I want to say probably about 60 percent or 70 percent have deployed.

A lot of people would say, "then what did you join the Army for? That's your main objective when you join is to deploy." I guess some people could say certain things about somebody, but it depends on the MOS. They don't always deploy everybody. Sometimes the MOS is either lacking in deployment or they're not on any contract to deploy.

My MOS, in general, I probably would have picked another MOS. Because I never knew about what it was like. Especially on deployment. There's so much sleepless days and nights. Just literally, fire mission, fire mission. Just sitting there firing the howitzer all day.

I would like to get deployed for the pay. If I did get deployed, that would be the one thing I would hold onto. I would just think about pay. So yeah, it's important to me, but if I want to get deployed for the pay, I'm not looking for that. If you deploy me, then that's cool.

They really don't talk about family as much

I'm in headquarters now. They moved me to another platoon, like another section, and so most of the time it's all up to the battery because the commander is the one that says when we're going to get released. Most of my battle buddies are motivated, and they get the job done. But I have one or two of the people that complain, and they don't want to do anything. A majority of them are motivated and want to get the job done. I kind of have a section, but headquarters is kind of like a place you go if you're injured. It's more just paperwork. My COs get things done. They really help me and support me. There's like four of us in my team, so we're all cool. Everybody got moved around last week, so there's still two people in there that I'm getting used to. But they seem pretty cool and to themselves.

My battery is disciplined. They used to be very family-oriented, but now I see them as kind of different. They're all about the mission now. They used to care about if you wanted to go see family or if you wanted to do something with your family, it would come first. But I feel like now all they care about is the mission now, and they really don't talk about family as much. I want to say a couple of months ago it changed. I noticed when the first sergeant's family had went away, he kind of changed his mind to it. I think it's because of his immediate family. I don't know.

They made it easy for me to work with them

We bump heads sometimes, but a majority of them—I really don't go looking for their approval or looking for them to get along with me. But I talk to my NCO; I do what he asks me to do, but I'm mostly just

trying to stay out of sight. I try to duck out of the picture, get the day over with, and I do my thing, they do their kind of thing. If I need them for a question, I'll ask. But other than that, I don't go looking for friends like that. I feel like leadership gave me the tools to keep in contact with my family, and they've helped me personally as a person—personal needs that I needed help with, they've met them.

It's kind of like an "if you work with me, I'll want to work with you" kind of thing, so they made it easy for me to work with them. I feel like, at the end of the day, if they act like they care, it's just because they care about numbers. Because they say they're there for us, but, really, it's because they're babysitting us. Because we're there, how do you say, their job depends on how we are. If we're good, and we're trained, then they get paid, and they get to keep their job and not get kicked out from their position. So it's not that they care and they want to know how we're doing, it's because they want to keep tabs on us because they know if we leave, that's their jobs.

Campbell was my previous officer from my platoon. He would override some of the NCOs that would get on my case. He would override some of them and help me out and tell them, "All right, well, he's helping me doing this." He had my back a couple of times, and also he cared what I said. I would sit down and talk to him. See, because I didn't have my driver's license when I got here, and I really needed help getting it. He set it up where I could go take my driver's license test, and I got my license. And if it wasn't for the officer, I would never have got it. Because there was one NCO who didn't want me to go take it because he was very strict, and he actually made it happen where I still was able to take it.

He didn't interact with too many soldiers that I've seen, but whenever he interacted with me he was very kind to me, and he would always ask me every morning, "Can you come to my office and talk to me?" and he would be like, "Hey, what's up, man? How are you doing today?" And I was like, "Good, sir. I'm good; everything's good." He says, "Is your family OK?" I was like, "Yeah, they're good, sir." You know? I would say that there's a lot of good officers, but to me, he stood out personally because of what he's done for me, I think.

Diaz is a very motivated NCO. He gets you excited. Just the way his aura is, it makes you happy to be around him. Because it's not all depressed, and the way he is he always gives you that talk. You could be in a bad situation and, "Yeah, it's bad, but we're almost out of here, man. Don't worry about it." It makes you feel like, yeah, we are almost out of here, you know? If they're wrong, and they're doing wrong, they get dealt with. But he doesn't really deal with them, like smoking them—wise.⁵

Diaz more deals with and talks to them on a personal level. Like, "Look, the way you're doing this right now isn't good. And not because I'm saying it's not good; it's because look at who you are as a person." It kind of lays out the blueprints for you of why you're doing this faulty. He'll sit down with you and tell you what you're doing wrong. See, he'll kind of relate what you're going through to something he's been through before and what he's done to better it. Because he's been deployed three or four times already. And he should be a higher rank than he is. He's very cool. He invited me over to his house. He really stands out to me personally because he's done a lot for me, but I know there's a lot of good NCOs. There's also very bad NCOs, too, but there's always good and bad people.

My idea of an NCO isn't one that barks at everybody. It's one that, when they talk to you, they reason with you, and they tell you why. See, growing up I would get in trouble for no reason. I would get yelled at and everything for no reason. I would never get told why I got in trouble. I was always told never to ask. But see, an NCO that tells you what you're doing wrong and why you did it, that's my ideal NCO, because if you constantly keep getting yelled at for something and you're never told what you did wrong or why you did it, you're going to keep doing the same thing. That's why. He's not like that and he sits there and he explains to you why you got in trouble and explains to you what you could do better to fix it and gives you a guideline, kind of like a little crosswalk.

⁵ "Smoking" in this context refers to the practice of punishing soldiers through physical exercise to exhaustion.

Personal Life: *Why don't you just come home? It's where you belong*

Well, right now my wife hasn't worked but she used to work at a funeral home, and then I believe she worked at—I forget what she had told me. I don't know if it was Target or one of them, but she had worked at something like that. She lives in Florida with my family right now. She's still taking care of our daughter. She visits her mom and her stepdad. She'll visit them, but the majority of the time she's just with my parents.

Oh, me and my wife—it's crazy. We talk all the time. Like literally every time I get to my room I turn FaceTime on. I got internet just so me and her could FaceTime, and it's like we even FaceTime through the night. I'll put the phone by where I sleep and we'll just sleep together on there—on FaceTime. It's serious. Whatever I do she's always on the phone. Honestly, it blows my mind still because I know a lot of females that they would have left a long time ago. It's very difficult, especially with a kid too, to stay attached to somebody being so far away. It's crazy, like whenever I wake up, she'll wake up, and my daughter is the same way.

I know my marriage would be stronger definitely if I was home. I don't think that the Army has made it stronger. I think I just made do with what I had, and I actually turned something that could be negative into something positive. Because I mean, a lot of people could say, "Well, I'm far from my wife, oh well." Like I know people here that have girls back home, but they still go party and stuff like that. So I wasn't like that.

Whenever I am home, and I do get to see her, we like going to the beach. She likes going to the beach; we'll go get in the water. We did that one night; it was fun—we got in the water. We're like best friends. We just go to, like to the movies. We want to go to a theme park, so, I don't know which theme park we're going to go to, but—yeah, there's Disney World, there's Universal Studios, they've got SeaWorld. We went to the SeaWorld together, and we went to go touch the sharks.

Well, to tell you the truth, the military impacts my marriage a lot because it's a stressor on her because she's at home with the baby, and

she really needs my help, but I can't be there because I'm here. And it's just made her hate the Army. She's like, "You know what? I need you home. I hate it there," and everything. Well, she would come out here, but since I'm getting out, she's just kind of like—she always wanted me home. After everything she was like, "Why don't you just come home? It's where you belong," and I was like, "Yeah, you're right."

I feel like she wouldn't want me going out

My daughter will be five months this month. It's crazy; she's a handful already. I see her on FaceTime and everything. She's crazy now. I think a lot of what's affected me is being married and having my daughter. That's actually changed my expectations and my outlook on the Army. But my expectations were kind of there; like I said it's going to be disciplined, it's going to help me, and it has helped me. It's changed me as a person. It's turned me into someone more confident. I always had a square head on my shoulders, but it's kind of like it gives me more experience. Being apart, not being able to have physical touch or for me being able to hold my daughter or telling her it's going to be OK kind of thing.

I rarely go out. Because I live in the barracks with single soldiers, so technically, I live like a single soldier, but I'm married, so I got them like, "Hey, let's go party, let's go this," and I'm like, "No man, I can't." I got a daughter, and I got a wife. I FaceTime my wife. That's about it. A majority of the time just talk to her. I go to the DFAC real quick. I usually go to my room, get changed into civilian clothes. Tell my wife I'm going to the DFAC. Come back and just talk to her. We probably stay up talking for a long time. And then I might go to sleep; I might not. I feel like it's good because sometimes talking—my wife is everything to me, but just like her, we need other friends to help us.

I have neighbors. People that are next door to me, I talk to them and stuff. Every day I try to talk to fellow soldiers, a little bit every day. More on the weekends, I guess. I think it was yesterday, my friend, I went to his room. He made smoothies; we were listening to some music and played *Mortal Kombat*. That was actually pretty cool. My friends want to go to a lot of places, but I choose not to go because I have my wife, and I feel like she wouldn't want me going out with them and

stuff. Go drink, go to bars. Stuff like that. Go to parties, go hang out with friends, go to the movies, go eat, go play sports, go play basketball in the gym. That's all stuff that I don't really do, though, because I want to make time for my wife. Like I really don't go out with other units and stuff like that. I would go out with my friend. I went out with him twice. I ended up at a club while I was married, and that didn't end good.

I'm just mainly always talking to my wife. I don't know what it is, but I just don't get tired of talking to her. I kind of feed off her energy that she gives me, so it kind of like keeps me going. Me and her can talk about things for hours and just sit there, and then we'll go to sleep together; we'll talk, I'll see my daughter, talk to her for a while. We just lay there and talk about everything, you know?

It gets me so depressed not to be with my family that I just say "I don't care"

For Fourth of July, I was going to take leave, but they told me I didn't have enough days because I had taken paternity leave to see my daughter born. So, they all left for leave, and I was stuck back here pulling duty. My company commander, first sergeant, all of them: They tried to tell me "there's so many benefits for my family" and they all tried to keep me in. And I just tried to tell them I don't want to stay. Then they finally realized there wasn't much more to say. They knew from a long time ago that I just didn't want to be there. They could tell that I didn't want to be in the Army. Just the way I was. And I was trying to go home. I had asked them, "can I go home?" So I tried to leave without telling anybody, but one of my NCOs found out because they seen my bags packed or something like that. Someone told. The week before, I didn't get to put in leave because of something that happened, so I wasn't able to go on leave. But the cool thing was literally a week or two later, my company commander gave me a four-day leave. So, I came up to Florida. I just wanted to see my family. That was cool with me.

Ever since I've been on a profile, I haven't trained in about five or six months.⁶ I do PT but not even that. I haven't done that in two

⁶ A medical profile is a special training regimen for an injured or sick soldier.

months because they went JRTC, and I didn't go. So, I really haven't done anything. I've just been at headquarters.

Most people have a good PT, yeah. Mine are always pretty bad. The fastest time I got was in Basic, and that was a 14 flat.⁷ Here and another battery, we actually have the highest PT score of the unit, so everyone is pressured to always do PT, and we're trying to win this PT award. I'm making them look bad.

They could say all they want about me. I've gotten to the point now in the Army where I'm at, where I don't have any problem telling somebody like it is, no matter their rank. If they tell me, oh, you need to do this because "the Army," if I'm sick, I'm going to go handle it. I've gotten to the point where I don't care if they're yelling at me or whatever because it doesn't matter. They're not going to exist to me in a couple months when I separate.

On the weekends I sleep a lot, so I catch up on sleep on the weekends, but I mean during the week, it's whatever; I'm used to it. My body is used to staying up, but on the weekend, I sleep a lot. I'll literally go to sleep on a Friday, I'll wake up Saturday around 2 p.m., and then I might go back to sleep, and sometimes I stay asleep the whole day.

I don't know why, but I'm used to it; I can sleep that long—it's cool with me. Like three, four hours on a typical night. Four hours on a good night, or sometimes I will go to bed earlier; it will be like 12:30 a.m., and I'll say, "Hey, babe, I'm going to go to sleep." But the thing is, most of time, I try not to because, sometimes, lately, my wife has been telling me, "You don't spend enough time with me anymore," and it kind of makes me feel bad, so actually I stay up and talk to her, because I understand how she feels; she has the baby, and so, I try to make sure. I do tend to try to sleep whenever I can, so she says, "You're always asleep and everything."

I used to do six meals a day, like the little small meals. When I was in college and when I was in high school I used to work out a lot, and I would make my meals; I would cook chicken breast—I would weigh it out, I would make sweet potato. I used to know all about that, but really, here, I don't care, because it gets me so depressed not to be

⁷ The soldier is referring to his time on the two-mile run.

with my family that I just say "I don't care." I used to buy my own stuff for a while, because I had a little bit of money on my own. I used to get chicken breast, chicken tenderloins, and I always look for my fish, like tilapia or whatever.

My check is always leaving me

I've never really been able to save a lot of money because I always have to buy plane tickets, and I have bills. I send my parents money sometimes. I send my wife money. So my check is always leaving me. But before I go home, I'm probably going to be able to have a good amount saved. I've got my taxes, and then I'm going to save other checks that I get.

That's one of the biggest expenses, when I buy a plane ticket. Other than that, my phone bill is like 130. I have my internet bill, too. I try to manage them on my own. I really don't have a budget, too much. But I'm always trying to put money in my savings. But it seems like it's always getting out. I have like 900 in there, about a week or two ago, and then now it's like 50 bucks in there because I had to buy a plane ticket, and then I had to pay for the room. But I'm getting my taxes, though, so I'm probably about to get two grand, or something like that. I'm probably about to put all that in my savings, and when I get my check again, put the other amount in my savings. For however long they keep me here, I'm going to keep putting it in my savings.

If my dad needs help, I'll send like a hundred or 200, and I always send my wife a hundred. It depends on the situation; if my wife needs something extra, then I'll help her out. She maybe gets a little bit from her mom or something, but most of the time it's me helping her out.

Right now, I would not be able to do anything for a financial emergency. But I get paid in two days; then I'll be able to do something. Until I get my taxes, I wouldn't be able to do nothing. If not for the plane ticket I just bought, I would not be living paycheck to paycheck. I'm usually set because I always got savings going on, and I always have my checking that has some money in it. It's just right now I had to clean it all out because I bought this thing.

I think the Army has a retirement account for me; I don't know. I feel like it's good; I feel like they do people good. I was thinking of put-

ting money into that Gerber thing. Either that, or start saving on my own because my daughter is going to college. My daughter is not going to mess up like I did. Her mom really didn't even get to go to college, so I still want my wife to go to college for a little bit. I'm going to see if I can make a way where she could go. She kind of graduated late too, but she always wanted to go for beauty and stuff like that, so, why not?

I felt trapped

I'm stressed about why are they keeping me here. It feels like they're leaving me in the dark. I know my wife's not going to leave me, but I'm stressed because I just want to give her everything she needs. I'm always pressured to be a better husband and a better father.

Occasionally, I'll smoke cigarettes to deal with the stress. I got introduced to it in AIT. Then I got hooked. It gives you kind of like a head spin, you feel kind of light-headed at the same time. It kind of calms my nerves. I always do it when I'm stressed out. I'm going to quit before I get home because I know my wife doesn't like me doing it. She smoked cigarettes before when she was stressed, but I'm not going to do any of that when I'm home. I don't want to.

We had an old chaplain that I used to visit. I've tried to go to anger management. I've looked at stuff online about how to cope with certain things. Sometimes I find it useful. I read the Bible sometimes, too, just to slip something positive. I used to, a long time ago, consider myself a spiritual person before I joined the Army. I would go to church with my parents and stuff. My wife tries to get me to pray and stuff. But sometimes I feel like—I don't know. My life sucks, because I'm not with my wife.

I could take the discipline from my experience here. I feel like it's helped me. But, other than that, I used to think "Man, I let the Army get me this bad." For a while I tried to go to Behavioral Health to see if I could get out for depression, but they said that will take another eight months, so I was like, I got to try something quicker.⁸ I wanted

⁸ Throughout this chapter, Michael discusses depression and symptoms indicative of depression. Michael was referred for counseling, which he calls Behavioral Health, by his unit. We have not included details of his treatment here to protect his privacy.

to go home, and I was mad that they wouldn't let me go home, and I felt trapped. I was in my room, and I was like, "You know what, man? This feels like prison." I was looking at my wall, and I just got mad and lost my s**t. I started doing s**t. I started throwing things.

My Army Experience: *It's not for me*

I told my NCO "I just don't want to be here anymore. I just don't." He was like, "Oh, well, we can't really do anything." I told my first sergeant; I told my company commander. They said, "Oh, well, sorry, we can't do nothing for you." I wanted to better myself, and I felt like I couldn't be scared anymore. I had to go home. I got to a point where I didn't care what they said; I wanted to go home.

A first sergeant came up to me and he told me, "I heard you really want to get out of the Army." I was like, "Yep." He's like, "Well, why don't you just fail a PT test; you'll get out in a couple of months." And I was like, "All right." You are supposed to fail three PT tests. But they saw how bad I wanted to get out, so they just did two. Yes, I'm not doing well on PT tests on purpose; I'll be honest with you. I have bigger priorities. I did this one on purpose because I got to get home to my wife because I cannot see her left alone like that. Going through all the things she's going through—I got to go home. They always say it's "family first," so this is something that's out of my hands. I feel like being here in this unit, I'm not really doing anything positive for my life. Then I can be at home helping my wife. I've got a couple of jobs I can look at after separating, and I know they have health care benefits so I'll be straight.

I was a cool person. I was way better. My wife liked me before the Army. My whole demeanor's changed. My original plan was a tryout on the Army to see if I like it. The plan didn't go through; I didn't like the Army. You know, I have a family now, so I have to plan with them. But I feel like what I could take from my experience here is the discipline. I feel like it's helped me. I can take things I learned out on the field, the things I learned as for survival, stuff like that. But, you know, I feel like it's not for me. Whatever happened, it's not for me.

Cassandra

Cassandra is a 19-year-old supply specialist from New Orleans. She has a difficult family situation back home but is determined to give herself a more stable future. In high school, she joined the JROTC, and her mentors from that program played a big role in her decision to join the Army, as well as her preparation for Army life. She plans to become a senior NCO and to get her degree in math or neuroscience.

Background: Sometimes we couldn't find a place to live

When I was growing up in New Orleans, we basically moved around from house to house and moved every couple of years, and it was just me, my mom, my two sisters, and my one brother. It was usually just us the whole time. Sometimes a family member would come and stay with us just to watch us while Mom went to work before she got sick, and after that we just moved again and again and again. But it wasn't as bad growing up because I didn't know much of what else was going on. So growing up was pretty easygoing. I got into petty arguments with my mom, then my sisters and brother, but it wasn't too bad. It was kind of hard because sometimes we couldn't find a place to live and had to live with family members for a while. We're going through a few more problems, but mom's doing all right so far. She hurts every once in a while, but then it goes away when she gets medication, so she's OK.

But back then, New Orleans was OK. Now they're destroying all the abandoned houses, thankfully, and there's a lot on each street.

Yeah, they're renewing the schools, shutting down some of them, but they're painting, renewing everything, and that's really good.

I went to high school near Broadmoor. My mom wanted us to have a different environment, so she moved us from Broadmoor to New Orleans East, a few miles away, and then that's when things started to get a little hard for me. When I first got to the school, I was kind of a loner. I only knew like two, three people, at the most four. And then as time went on, I'm friends with almost everybody. People that I don't even know are like, "Hey, Cassandra!" and I'm like, "Hey, how's it going?" I don't even know you, but hi. My best friend, we've been best friends for seven years now, and there's so many people that know me, and they absolutely love me. I went back to my high school in uniform. I told my sister I wasn't coming. I said I couldn't make it. So when she actually saw me walking down the hallway, the whole group of JROTC students came up and ran and hugged me. There was a big group, like, "Oh, we missed you so much"—one of them started crying, and I'm like, "Ah, that's so sweet."

At my old high school, the first high school I went to, I was ranked second out of the whole school because I did all my work, because, being in New Orleans, they focus on trying to bring everybody up. But there's only so much you can do for those students, and then they're not interested half the time. So I was one of the students who was like, "OK, I've got to get my work done; I'm good for the day." And sometimes they wouldn't even give me work because "You already have an A," or the test would be so easy for me. But when I moved to the new school, everything got a lot harder because they actually moved on instead of staying on the same subject for two or three weeks. So, it got harder and harder, and then after that year I could keep up, but as time went on, senioritis kicked in hard. And then, I'm just like, "Oh my god, I don't even want to go to school today." And then my sergeant from JROTC, she says, "OK, you need to get your butt in gear so you can graduate, or you lose your position in JROTC." And then I did, and I graduated.

I was in track, cross-country for all four years of high school. Honestly, I rarely did stuff for fun because I really didn't have any money. I usually just played video games. If I had the money, I'd go

out with my friends, go to the movies. Sometimes go over to another family member's house just to relax and chill out because there was so much going on at home, and that's it, basically. I was just really a chill person, sometimes read a book or two and sleep the rest of the day.

Joining the Army: *To give myself a better lifestyle*

I didn't know anything about the Army. I didn't know anything about JROTC either. They just gave me the class and "Oh, what's this?" I went down there, and I was just doing the lessons, and I'm like OK, I might stay here. A lot of people got out of it, but it was like OK, I might as well go with it, and I actually loved it. Yep. That's what they do. They randomly assign it. Or, for my high school that I graduated with, if you wanted a class you had to just ask for it.

Well, when I joined JROTC, we watched a lot of Army movies. I think everyone's favorite is "Major Payne." That movie was so good, we watched it over and over. And "Full Metal Jacket," I think. I joined the Army just to give myself a better lifestyle. Because, back home, not doing anything, I did not like it at all. My sergeant from JROTC back home basically told me, "Oh, the Army is this and that. You can always get this paid for you; you get pay on top of it. When I was in compared to when you're going in, your pay is going to be a lot higher." So, yeah, she told me all about it. She was the most influential one.

My experience in JROTC was absolutely amazing. I loved my instructors so much

So when I came in to JROTC, my first initial teacher in the ninth grade was a sergeant. So far I had a sergeant, sergeant first class, chief warrant officer 3. Then I moved, and there was a colonel, sergeant first class, first sergeant, and a major. So, all together at all high schools, I had seven instructors. So JROTC was somewhat organized; it's kind of like the actual Army but on a small level. Back in JROTC, I was S-4, so I was still basically doing this job in JROTC.¹ I'd be like, in high

¹ S-4 is the staff code that designates the supply officer in JROTC.

school, “Oh my god, this job is stressful.” And then when I enlisted, I ended up getting this job and then coming here. I’m just like, “Oh my god, why did I choose this?” I had a warning, and I did not listen! But it was just my experience in JROTC was absolutely amazing. I loved my instructors so much.

I loved how, for the major, he was so understanding. They were both so understanding with everyone. They were like parents to me; like, OK, growing up, there were some days where I’m just like, “Oh god, I’m starving,” and he would just keep like, “OK, here’s some food for you,” right after school, “because I know you’re hungry.” He was just really sweet. We would sit down with the rest of the students and just talk and just watch movies. And then our sergeant, she was like our mom. She basically laid down the ground rules, and then she would talk to me about her experiences and what I needed to do, and then I actually followed those footsteps. So they were both like absolute parents to me; I absolutely loved them.

The major didn’t really talk to me about the Army. He just mentioned a few things, “Oh, I’m so proud of you,” and stuff like that. But the sergeant, she says, “OK, you’re going to get angry, know that, because I know you; you get angry a lot.” OK, yes I do. “There’s many things you’re going to deal with that you don’t want to deal with, but, guess what, you’re going to deal with it. Why? It’s your job.”

My recruiters came up to the school regularly, and then my sergeant, knowing my situation, she was like, “You know what? You can either go to college, or you can go into the Army. But you have to do something.” Because I don’t want to be stuck at home. So she helped me by saying, “OK, you go to the Army, then.” And I’m like, “Well, yeah, I’ll go into the Army.” And she says, “You can talk to the recruiters next time they come.” So I ended up talking to them, they got me started and everything, and it all just went from there, up until I raised my hand.

I want the whole truth and nothing but the truth

My recruiters lied. They lied. OK, so my recruiter—there were times when we’d go over simple stuff that I was going to learn in Basic training, but when I got to Basic training and I asked about it, they were like,

“No, that’s completely wrong. Those recruiters lied to you.” During recruiting, we learned how to clear a room and how to clear somebody, and we actually did PT with them.² They already told me everything’s paid for, college and all of that stuff. I would’ve liked to know, what is Basic training like? I want the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I thought he was being completely accurate when that was not the case. Actually, whenever I’d go in, they’d all joke around, and they were really nice people and really patient with us. I actually saw one of them here. He walked past and I was like, that’s my recruiter, and he made E-7—oh my god.³

JROTC helped me navigate recruitment. The sergeant told me what I needed to do and how it would happen, and she didn’t back up what my recruiter said. She told me what’s going to happen and that it would be like this. I feel like I knew enough before I joined. It really didn’t take me that long to decide to join because I knew I wanted to do something productive with my life, not just sit at home all day. I’ll say a month at the very latest. I was going to go to college; I got my acceptance letter and everything, but I wouldn’t have had the money. And I know there’s a lot of people who are broke. This is a better choice for me because I get paid every two weeks, and I just knew what I had to do. I actually have money to do what I need to do. My friends from home are stuck back home, not really going anywhere. But others are going out to college, taking classes. It’s just we all went our separate ways after high school.

Oh, you lost the slot

So, at first, I wasn’t supposed to have this job working in supply. I was supposed to be a mechanic. Small arms artillery repair and weapon repair, with the option of going airborne. I was kind of excited because I had the option to go airborne, but it was just, I’m going to learn how to fix weapons, and I’m going to jump out of planes. That’s pretty cool to me. But they said, “If you want to go airborne, you have to get your

² To “clear a room” means to make sure there are no enemy fighters in the room; to clear somebody means to ensure they are not carrying weapons.

³ E-7 denotes the rank of sergeant first class, a senior NCO.

ears cleaned out.” The only thing I know about cleaning my ears is just taking a cotton swab—so I got them flushed, completely different from what I expected—completely. Apparently, I scheduled that too late, and then I went back; I said, “OK, I got them cleaned.” They said, “Oh, you lost the slot.” All that pain for nothing. So they gave me a bunch of other jobs, like cook, water specialist, fueler. I’m just like, I’ll pick supply, because I’m already good at that as it is.

I’m far away, but at least my mom’s OK

So the pros to the Army would be, OK, I get to see the world. Everything is paid for me. School, I can go to school on top of that. I would be doing a lot of cool stuff. And then the cons would be, I’ll be away from home, I won’t see my mom as much, and I’ll worry a lot. I worry about my mom a lot. I think that was my biggest thing because joining the Army was the longest time I’ve ever been away from home. That was my only con. But really, it’s the same. Things haven’t changed when I went home for Christmas. Now it’s just like, OK. I mean, hey, I’m far away, but at least my mom’s OK, my family’s OK; I’m good.

I have a few friends from high school that joined. One’s an infantryman. Another, he went to the Marines, another went to the Navy, and another went to—well, Marines, infantryman here, and Air Force. Our JROTC instructor calls us her kids. But there were people who were not in JROTC who actually joined. I think there was this one guy who was, oh my goodness—he went to the recruiting station as a joke, and then he actually ended up joining. It was like, “Oh, I might as well.” So I guess he likes it. How do you go there as a joke? You can stop at the last minute, but then again, that’s a whole process; that’s a long process. Yeah, there’s a few other people that joined that were outside the JROTC class, but most of us are in JROTC. The guys who actually joined outside JROTC, they were complete goofballs, like clowns throughout our whole senior class. So when I heard that they joined the Marines, I’m like, “Really? Wow!”

My sister followed in my footsteps

My grandmother came with me to the recruiting office. I was staying with her at the time. But my recruiters went up to my mom’s house—

well, the people she was staying with at the time—and they knocked on the door, and my mom answered, and like, “Hi, we’re looking for Cassandra White’s parents, her mom.” My mom was sort of OK with it, because my mom is really laid back: “As long as this is what you want to do, I hope you stay safe, I love you,” and all that good stuff. And then, my grandmother, she’s with me at the recruiting office saying that, “I don’t want her to deploy.” And I’m just thinking like, “Everyone deploys. What are you talking about?” She didn’t want me to have the weapon repair job and then me going airborne. She’s like, “Oh, that’s too dangerous.” So I’m like, “I’m going to choose it. Why? Because I want to do it.” She was overprotective.

The only people who had actually been in the military is both of my great-granddads. One was a paratrooper, and I think the other was infantry. Then my cousin who was in the Air Force, and then there’s me, so only four of us. I guess when I was going to JROTC, my little sister, she heard me talk so much about it, and whenever my mom asked me, “Where have you been?” And I’m like, “I told you I was at JROTC,” and she heard me talk so much about JROTC, I guess, she joined. And she has my old teacher too, and she acts just like when I was in JROTC. Every single dot to the *i* and cross to the *t*.

My siblings really didn’t say much about it. They were like, “Oh, we’re going to miss you so much.” I guess they were proud of me. My sister followed in my footsteps. My little brother said he wanted to join the Air Force, though. One of my sisters is 16; she’ll be 17 this year. My little sister is 14. My little brother is 11. When I came home to visit, my little brother and sister were happy to see me, of course. Everybody was so happy to see me. I still didn’t get to see family members, so I’m going back in a couple months. But they think it’s like so cool, and they asked me all these questions, and it was like, “It’s not really what you think it is.”

A pretty good career, not just a job

Also, when I went up to the high school and my sergeant was so happy to see me. She was like, “OK, since I don’t have anything for you to do, they can ask you questions.” They’re asking me questions like, “So how is it?” I’m like, “I like this job; it’s actually pretty good. It pays well;

everything's paid for. It's not as strict as you think; that's only training. But once you get out into the real Army, you're basically free to do what you want as long as you don't do anything stupid." But yeah, I told them, "It's really good. If you want a good, steady paycheck." I told them how much I make; they're like "What?" I'm like, "Yeah, every two weeks, that's how much I make." And they're just like, "What? Wow." And I'm like, "It's really good. It's also a career, a pretty good career, not just a job." Yeah, I told them it was really nice.

My sister probably will join the Army because she likes it so much. And then, my little brother, I don't know about him yet. I don't know. I feel like my sister won't go active duty; she'll go reserves, becoming an officer. I just get that vibe from her. Me and my sister are complete opposites. I'm more blunt and straight to the point. She beats around the bush a little too much, and she's a little soft spoken. I'm just like, just get it done; I don't care. She's really a sweetheart. I absolutely love her.

Initial Entry Training: *They broke us down and then built us right back up*

Well, I finished school and then, of course, that year I was going to be gone. What I did, they have this thing called JCLC, and OCS, but for high school.⁴ So I went to JCLC. Basically, the students get a taste of what Basic training is like. I was one of the people who ran the courses that they go through, because they went whitewater rafting, went through little obstacles courses. Me and my sergeant went through the obstacle course, and they don't call them drill sergeants, they call them TAC sergeants.⁵ So when the TAC sergeant was gone, there was me and my sergeant, two other sergeants who were running the full course. I was at one of them, and then the students were all scared. They were all calling me—because I was a captain at the time—and they were calling me Captain White, and I'm just like,

⁴ Junior Cadet Leadership Camp (JCLC) and Officer Candidate School (OCS).

⁵ Trainer, Advisor, Counselor (TAC).

“Just relax.” I made sure no one was around me, and I was like, “You can call me Cassandra—I don’t care!” I’m about to leave; I don’t care. So, just to give them like a break from all the strictness and being so stiff. “You can just relax with me; I don’t care at all.” So we just sat there and talked. There were people who were going to enlist that year, too, but it’s basically like they get a taste of what training is like for the actual Army, and some of them hated it; some of them loved it. OCS is somewhat like the same thing. They do drill, learn how to do their jobs, all that stuff.

It prepared me somewhat for Army life, because I was told, and I knew I was going to get up early and sometimes have some late nights. But nothing in this world could have prepared me for Basic training. I literally cried my first night there. All of us were running on two hours of sleep, and we didn’t understand what was going on. I was three days in reception, then went to Basic training, got there; the drill sergeant’s yelling at us.⁶ I’m like, “Oh my god, I didn’t even do anything wrong. Why am I being yelled at?” But over time, I got used to it.

It was kind of sad leaving home, but, then again, I was excited just to see what was around the corner. I’d never seen an actual Army base before. It was different than, I think, what I expected, but I didn’t expect anything. Like we were on the bus, and we were just riding in and see these tall buildings, big buildings, and I’m like “Where are we? We’re in Fort Jackson?” I went, “Oh, geez. This is what an actual Army base looks like.” It was interesting. I was excited yet scared at the same time.

I flew there. We flew there and then had my bags and whatnot. Then these sergeants picked us up from the airport, had us sit there for a couple of hours, and then we rode to Fort Jackson. And that’s when everything began. As soon as we got off the bus and got to the actual reception, we got yelled at. Oh my god, that’s high speed. I definitely had a leg up about it. And then, where most people didn’t know the Manual of Arms drill, I can also do that drill.⁷ You deal with the weap-

⁶ Reception is the initial processing into BCT.

⁷ Manual of Arms Drill refers to formal drilling movements done while carrying a rifle.

ons, just regular drills, and color guard—I know all of them, so I did have a leg up on everybody.

Drill sergeants don't care. Well, they sometimes they use people as examples: "Hey, look at this person—they're doing it right; you all need to get like them." Their whole goal was just to teach, that's it. They didn't have any favorites. Definitely not.

It was just the hardest thing pleasing the drill sergeants

At first, I was pretty optimistic, but at the same time I was just like, "OK, get this done." I was motivated. And then, as time went on, it went away. It was all gone, and then I started getting grouchy and crabby every single day because someone would mess up, and then we got smoked every day and it was the absolute worst. It's like we couldn't do anything right. They broke us down and then built us right back up. Halfway through it, they started being a little bit nicer to us, and I was like, "Oh, thank god." I don't know. They started being a little nicer to us, giving us time and having patience with us instead of just being, "Oh, you've got to get this done; do this, do this, and do that."

It was just the hardest thing pleasing the drill sergeants. That was the whole thing. We tried to do what we had to do the fastest and just do everything right all the time. There was always that one person just messed up everybody, and we had to get smoked because of them. For me, that was the biggest thing in boot camp. Okay, people mess up every once in a while. It wasn't like everybody else but me; it was just like the people who messed up the most. People who still couldn't get it into their head—OK remember, you can't do this. It was just that same group, I believe. The rest of us tried to do right, but it was always that one person who just couldn't get it through their head. I remember we came back from the field for like a week or two. We left our bay clean. Then when we came back it was trashed, absolutely trashed. It was like they hit us for no reason. We didn't do anything wrong. We tried to do everything right. They hit us for no reason.

What is the best thing about Basic training? I don't know. I don't know. Every minute was terrible. Every minute. I had to wake up early. Sometimes I had to sleep in, sleep late—I couldn't do it. Because we had to go to bed at eight or nine every night, and I'm pretty sure, all

the females, we weren't used to that. It was on the weekends when they said, "OK, 22:00, 23:00, lights out." Oh, thank god. Or there's no PT tomorrow for the weekend, or we just stay in PTs all day.⁸ That was our break. That was the absolute break; that was the best thing.

I got a letter from her and it smelled like perfume

We rarely got our smart phones. We only got them like two or three times during the whole two months, while some other companies got theirs every Sunday. The only means of connection we had with the outside was letters. We got to write to our families, and that's just it. We only got like ten minutes for each person to call on the phone, talk to our family and say, "Yeah, we're alive, we're not dead, and we're doing OK, sort of, but we're OK."

For Basic training, there's no smells. It's just plain everything from body wash to shampoo, just plain everything. Either you smell like soap or you smell like dirt or sweat. So my grandmother, one day, I got a letter from her and it smelled like perfume. So I was smelling it the whole time. This is what perfume smells like. Thank god, I feel like I can smell again. Then I told my grandmother to make sure my mom is OK. Then I talked to my aunt, told her everything that was going on, what it's like. And then I talked to my sergeant; I told her everything.⁹ "Oh my god, I hate this place; I hate all these females, all these females are dirty, I don't like it." Oh, yeah, she wrote me back. It was just, "You'll get over it. You'll get over it. It will be fine. Just a few more weeks and you'll be done." OK, I can deal with that. But I told her a lot about some of my friends there, some of the people there, all the good and bad; I told her everything.

I had a boyfriend during boot camp, and then I couldn't write him. We just started dating; I didn't even have his address. And I told my grandmother to call him and tell him that I missed him, just to let him know I was thinking about him. And then, my grandmother, I told her about everything that was going on.

⁸ In this context, *PTs* refers to the uniform worn by soldiers while conducting physical training.

⁹ Her sergeant from JROTC.

It felt it was like so long since I'd seen a dog. And then when the first sergeant brought his dog, I was like, oh my god, is that an actual dog? I almost forgot what they look like. Was that really a squirrel? It's been so long since I've actually seen what animals are.

Most of all, don't get caught sleeping

What makes someone successful in boot camp? The thing would be, just do what you're told. If you have questions, ask them so you don't do the wrong thing. Then that's how you get yelled at and all that fun stuff. So do what you're told, always ask questions, and always ask for help. Yeah, that would be it. Don't sleep during the day. That's one of things I learned at boot camp. How to shoot a weapon, of course. A little bit of land nav—it's been a while since I did that.¹⁰ But, most of all, don't get caught sleeping.

I had two male drill sergeants. Again, they were like our parents. One was more laid back. The other one was more strict. So the more laid-back one, he literally told us in the middle of BCT, I didn't want to be a drill sergeant; I had to come here. Oh, OK. But the laid-back drill sergeant, he actually kind of made it fun for us. The first couple of weeks was kind of strict, but after that he started having actual fun with us. Being goofy with the other drill sergeants was fun for us, making us laugh. And the other, strict drill sergeant, he would do the same. But our platoon was the absolute worst because, man, we couldn't do anything right.

So the drill sergeant had this thing with us called family time. So he gets all the platoon in our bay, which is also the female bay. Gets all of us, talk about where we're from, what was growing up like, just getting to know us. And he called it family time. Yeah, so towards the middle or the end, they started warming up to us a lot. Sometimes you'd just joke around and have fun. They genuinely cared about us, and sometimes they had the same feelings we had—of course, we're all just human.

¹⁰ Land navigation.

I did not see myself as a soldier until I actually got through it

To be honest, I didn't really think there was a lot of Army bases. Then when I went to AIT, they were still talking about duty stations, and we were getting our duty stations, and they'd say, "You're going to Fort Hood," and I'm, "Oh, cool, I don't know what that is." And then I got here, and I'm like oh s**t. They gave me the crappy end of the stick. And people went to Fort Campbell, Fort Drum, Fort Bliss. Wow, all these duty stations and even more outside the country. To be honest, I put down Fort Bliss. Outside the U.S., I put Germany, and inside the U.S. I put Fort Bliss. I forgot what else. I don't know—I forgot the second one, and then I put Fort Hood. I thought oh, Fort Hood sounds nice. I didn't do my research. Fort Bliss, because I heard a lot of people say they actually love Fort Bliss, and I was just like let's just see what that is as a duty station. And now my friend who's the infantryman, he's stationed down there. He's like, "I hate this place so much." They call it the "Dirty Dorito."

So when we were done with training, our instructor—she was one of my favorite all-time instructors ever because she actually treated us like actual people instead of just trash. She was so nice, so cool, and she actually made us laugh. Once we got our duty stations, she allowed us to look it up: what kind of base it was, what it looked like and all that good stuff. I looked it up. I didn't have no type of clue what it was. I'd never even seen Texas before, and then all I thought was cows. And then I get here and OK, it's not so bad.

My great-grandparents, my dad's grandparents, came to my Basic training graduation. I told them I'm down in South Carolina, and they're in North Carolina, and they actually made it. It was actually nice, just to catch up and talk. Sometimes I feel bad because I'm not really in touch with them as much as I am with my mom's side because my dad passed away when I was little. But it's always nice talking to my dad's side of the family.

Graduating from Basic felt like oh, I'm finally free. Oh my god. It was as if a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. At graduation from AIT, I was nervous. I'm going to my actual duty station. They tried to get me out as soon as—like ASAP. Yeah, like "Oh, my flight isn't until this time." "Nope, you're leaving now." At AIT graduation,

they had us as holdovers. Some of the people still didn't have their duty stations by then, so they were still there. And I got mine, and they said, "OK, you're leaving on this date." I didn't even get to say goodbye to a lot of people. So I called my taxi; I'm like, "OK, I go to the airport."

Actually, I did not see myself as a soldier until I actually got through it. Because all the drill sergeants there, they never called us soldiers; they called us privates. They said, "You all are not soldiers yet, because you all haven't been . . ." not to the real Army, but "You all don't know what it's like, and you all can quit any time." So I never considered myself a soldier until I got here to Fort Hood. Even in the AIT, when my sergeant called me *soldier*, I'm thinking I still don't consider myself a soldier because I can quit any time. I can quit any time and leave, not finish training and not even get to do my job.

So, the first day I got here, I'm actually here, a soldier. It was like in the moment just, wow, I'm actually a soldier. What's the word? I think surreal, I don't know. It was just wow, it's like I became extremely self-aware.

Life in the Army: *They can always depend on me*

I talked to my sergeant from back home, from high school; this was her first duty station as well. When I got here, I didn't know what to do at all, so I called my sergeant and said, "I don't know where I'm supposed to go, who I'm supposed to talk to." She's like, "OK, I'm going to look it up for you." She gave me the number and said, "Call these people and tell them that you're on your way to Fort Hood, and you need a ride." I'm like, "OK, thank you so much, sergeant—I love you."

I wasn't fully there; I was on a connecting flight, and I had no idea what happens when I land. It was just, "I don't know what to do. I really don't know what to do." So I called the number. The people from Reception came and picked me up from the Killeen airport, and then we went on post. I met a few people there that I still talk to ever since coming here. So, after that, everybody was like really chill, really cool, not really just in your face, or rude or mean like that, so it was a nice break. People are not as strict, because Basic training was extremely

strict. Just from Basic all the way to here, just expecting somebody to always correct you. And knowing that now people are not saying much of anything to you—it's a real change.

Some people actually need to be told what to do in order to do the right thing. Some people take it in stride like, "Oh, this is going to be pretty easy," and there's a very small, small, small group who just need to be told what to do in order to do the right thing.

A lot of people bothering us and us being in front of the computer

This being my first job and then, Army as a first job, it was kind of hard just trying to get used to it. Waking up at a certain time almost every single morning and then, on top of that, working nine to five and sometimes over that. Sometimes you stay here to like seven, eight o'clock. I was not used to that at all, but now it's just second nature. I'm taking a nap, somebody calls me, "Hey can you come do this for me, please?" and I'm like, "Yeah, sure, I'm right here; I'll be down there in two minutes." So, yeah, I'm used to it now.

OK, so 0900 I come here, start with work, and get on the system. XO comes in a few times in a day, asks for something or starts asking questions.¹¹ But usually my NCO just asks me; he asks me to go get something. Then throughout the day, people just come in, "Oh, can I get this, can I get that?" or "Can I see my hand receipt?"¹² But it's a little bit more; it's just us being at the computer all day. And then issuing out equipment, fixing a lot of people's problems. And then you get people who will come barging in and just say, "Oh, I want this." And then the staff call, which my NCOs go to.¹³ And then just make sure soldiers are squared away. And yeah, that's the typical work week. It's just us running back and forth, going to the SSA, coming back, drop off the recycling, come back with how many pounds of recycling there was.¹⁴ The last time we went to recycling we got 330 pounds' worth

¹¹ Executive Officer (XO).

¹² In the Army, a hand receipt documents the person responsible for equipment at any given time.

¹³ A staff call is a type of staff meeting.

¹⁴ Supply Support Activity (SSA).

of recycling. I didn't know it could weigh that much. So that was the typical work week. Just a lot of people bothering us and us being in front of the computer.

We also do Motor Pool Mondays; I absolutely hate them. Working on a truck that works half the time, and then just PMCS'ing a truck. We'll do maintenance on a truck that we barely even use. Then we don't go back until like 10:00, 10:30, 11:00, back to the office. And then there's military training like today. Everybody goes throughout most of the month. Almost every Thursday of the month, everybody goes to a section or a platoon to do training. Last week it was mechanics, but every last Thursday it's MOS training. Everybody just goes with their own MOS on the last Thursday.

Every day, we do PT. I'm in headquarters, and people don't really expect headquarters PT to be hardcore. Oh, no—we get work in. I'm hurting right now. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays we do run days. So it goes back and forth. We do distance; we do sprints then distance; or sprints, distance, and sprints. And then for muscle failure, which is Tuesday and Thursdays, we do push-ups and sit-ups and improve on our PT tests, and we do more arms and abs. Everybody has an exercise that they do. I do my signature exercise, and then we just do our muscle failure. The main focus on muscle failure is arms and abs. Sometimes they do legs, and it just irritates us because we have to run tomorrow and ran the day before, so we're hurting right now.

Usually my NCOs will tell me what I'm going to be doing the next day, and there will be like a surprise. Like "Oh, you got inventory." They will tell us at the last minute, just catch me by surprise because inventories take a while. But most of the time, if it's just something small, I don't have a problem with it. If it goes past 1700, yeah, I'm going to be upset. I'm trying to go sleep.

Sometimes it's a really slow day. We've finished all our work, so we're sitting here twiddling our thumbs. Or we're just waiting for something or waiting for our NCO to come in and tell us to do something, which he usually does on a daily basis. And then, you got days where it's just a fast-paced day, and there's too much to do, and sometimes we have to work after 1700 just to get them done. Or sometimes we have

to continue it the next day because there's so much to do. At least I'm on my feet doing something. So I try to see the bright side of what it is.

It gives a few headaches, because I have to do paperwork. Well, my MOS has to do FLIPL, a statement of charges when you issue military gear and they lose it.¹⁵ And sometimes it's a sensitive item, like handcuffs. So, a FLIPL is basically—say, if I lost something, and it was over my base pay a month, then we have to initiate a FLIPL saying that I'm conducting an investigation.

The MPs—mostly, like 95 percent of them are really cool; they're pretty good to talk to.¹⁶ And then there are the small part who are rude. "Do this, do that," and I'm just, "I listen to my NCO, not you." Everybody says it's different with the MP unit, but I don't think it's any different than working with anybody else. Because all my job is just really, you just give them their road gear equipment and then give them their vests, and they're on their way.¹⁷ That's really it. It's not really different, in my opinion.

We're kind of like a family

The people I work with, I can always depend on them, always, and they can always depend on me. Like, CQ, or stand duty, if they need me to take over their shift for a couple of hours, I can do that. I can always take over somebody's shift for a couple of hours. If you want me to take over your shift completely, you have to let me know ahead of time, and if they do that, yeah, of course, I can do that. There would have to be a valid reason. Together, we're funny. For PT we do a lot of hardcore stuff, but together we're like any other platoon. We crack jokes on each other, and we're kind of like a family. The company's OK. There are a lot of people who, it just seems, they're not all there. They don't use common sense sometimes, and you think of the comment, "Common sense isn't common." You think it would come easily to people.

¹⁵ Financial Liability Investigation of Property Loss (FLIPL)

¹⁶ This soldier works in the supply section of a Military Police (MP) unit.

¹⁷ Road gear equipment and vests are for MP garrison duties, such as guarding base entrances.

I absolutely love my first sergeant. Me and my PAC clerk, we call him “Dad” because we love our first sergeant.¹⁸ Then XO, I love the XO too. He’s great. The commander, eh. I don’t know. He’s never been an XO because when you’re an officer you go to platoon leader, usually to XO, to commander or OIC.¹⁹ So he has never been an XO, so he doesn’t know what Supply has to go through just to get what he wants. But the XO, he knows what we’re going through, and he can be patient with us. He actually talks to us, where the commander really just comes in, says what he needs. I mean, he’ll come in when we have treats and stuff like that. I have to go through both of my NCOs just to do something, and it’s like sometimes he doesn’t understand that. Just because you’re a commander—I can do it because you’re my commander; I work for you. I work for you directly, but I have to go through my NCOs first, and he doesn’t understand that sometimes.

I met the brigade sergeant major because a nice little group of us had to have lunch with him. He’s really nice, and he’s completely understanding. When I met him, he said, “Don’t waste your soldier’s time. If you don’t have anything to do, send him home.” Because no one really wants to stay at the company all day just doing nothing, and that’s what they do with this whole battalion. Just waste our time; let’s just send them home. The installation commander, he’s really cool as far as I see him. Really professional and cool, all of them. And he really took the time, like “OK, I’m going to go run with the MPs this morning.” He actually did that. We had a battalion run, and he ran with us. It was only us too. He took the time out of his day or out of his morning to come run with us, so I thought that was pretty cool.

I just have a lot more empathy

I get first dibs on everything that we order that comes in. That’s a perk. The only perk. Not a lot of people appreciate Supply. And they’re not supposed to, but they say, “Oh, people are going to be sucking up to you.” No, it’s not like that. They come in and ask for stuff politely. I appreciate that. But who really fully appreciates what you do on a daily

¹⁸ Personnel Action Clerk (PAC).

¹⁹ Officer in charge (OIC).

basis? Not really anybody comes to the office saying, “Good job. So thankful for what you all are doing.” Not really. To be honest, this is a thankless job. I like to be recognized for things that I do. When I went to NTC, I was a PV2 doing a staff sergeant’s job. And I was the only person from Supply doing it. Did I get recognized? No. And this is just really a thankless job because people come and they say, oh, I need this, I need that; can you get me this? and there’s a few small thank-yous. Then that’s just about it. My training prepared me somewhat, because you can only imagine so much of what you’re going to do in training. Because, when they say, “Go to the SSA,” or “You’re going to go to the warehouse,” I didn’t know what they were talking about, what building the SSA was. And it’s only so much they can tell you. You really just learn by experience.

To be a better soldier, I’d have to be more patient, if anything. There will be days where I’m ready to go back to my room and relax and there will be something that comes up. One of my NCOs will come up and say, “Oh, we got to do this.” I’m like, why do I have to do this? And then I just look miserable the rest of the day. I think that would be something I have to change. I think with time, I will be able. Because when I first came here, I used to complain about everything. Everything. But now, as time went on, I’m just like, OK, let’s get it done and get it over with. In the past, my patience level was extremely low. I had zero tolerance for stupidity. Now I just have a lot more empathy for other people.

If I stay in, I’m going to become an NCO. I’ll have a squared-away supply room. I’m going to stay with this MOS; I’m not changing. Oh yeah. I want a squared-away supply room with squared-away soldiers, and I can get what anybody needs. That’s my success, what I see for myself. How I present myself in front of other people sets the mood as to how they see me. So if I come off as rude or disrespectful, people will think, “Oh, she doesn’t deserve anything. She’s rude. I don’t like her.” But if I just come off that I have some sort of patience and just, “Hey, what do you need? Do you need anything? Is there anything else you need?” People will think, she can actually get things done without having an attitude. So I think I have complete control over my success.

If I have to go on deployment, I won't back out at all

At first, I was curious about deployment. What is it going to be like? I've heard of Iraq, Afghanistan. I never heard of Kuwait, Qatar. My 18 months of being in the Army since I went to Basic, I've heard about deployment, and it's just—well, what is like? That was the only thing that was in my head. I want to know what it's about. And then, once I got here, they talked more and more about it. They'd talk more and more about Afghanistan and stuff like that. I said, "I don't want to go, but if I have to, I will." I'm not going to try to back out of it. That's what I came for—well, not what I came here for, but that's the requirements, and therefore I'll do it because that's my requirements. So, if I have to go on deployment, I won't back out at all. I'm not looking forward to it, but it is what it is. When people walk by and talk about their deployment, I do get kind of jealous. They say, "Man, it was so high," or they just have all these stories where the enemy's shooting at them and all that good stuff. It's exciting.

I know there are senior NCOs who have not deployed, ever. So I think for me, in my opinion, I think it kind of hinders your knowledge, because what if somebody asks you what to do if you go down range? You're not going to have an answer for them. I know all the senior NCOs that have deployed. Like there are a couple NCOs and above who have deployed, and then just some E-5s who just haven't yet. I was at NTC, and there was an E-7. She never deployed. You didn't see a patch right here.²⁰ Never deployed. How do you not deploy? Unless they have a profile.²¹ And then it's like OK, if you haven't deployed, you haven't deployed.

The prospect of deployment doesn't really affect my choice to stay in the Army. It's all about if I still need the job, and honestly, I love this job. I love this so much. There's hiccups, major hiccups here and there, but I love doing this, and if I deploy ever, I'm still going to stay in.

It's very important that unit leaders have experienced deployment. Because you constantly hear, first sergeant coming in, he would just

²⁰ Soldiers who have deployed wear a patch on their right shoulder indicating the unit they deployed with.

²¹ A restricted duty profile, generally for medical reasons.

share his experience. Sometimes he comes in just to bother us for no reason, just to joke around with us. But he mostly just gives us his speeches about what deployment is like. He gives us his experience on being down range, and it's good experience to hear from him, because I forget how many times he's been deployed, but he used to be an infantryman, and now he's an MP. So just hearing from him is like an eye-opener. Like wow, that's exciting to hear.

Every MOS has different expectations

Like people who are, I'll say, of higher rank than me, they know what they're doing; I look to them for guidance. But people who are my rank and below are absolutely clueless. Other soldiers picked this MOS because they were told that this is the best job; you wouldn't be doing much. You sit at a desk behind a computer all day. They basically got tricked. Every MOS has different expectations for their specific job. It's not just where it's either more difficult or easier being 92 Yankee or an MP.²² It's about your expectations and what is expected for you to get up there in the ranks or for you to be considered good at what you do. My expectation for promotion is just, all I have to do is basically do what I'm told for my rank. Sometimes I have to take initiative and make sure everyone is squared away.

I think this job will help me after I leave the Army because they always need someone with this type of knowledge and experience out there in the civilian world. Who's accounting for all your equipment, making sure you have the funds to buy more equipment, do all the paperwork, having people sign for personal equipment. There's someone that's always needed out there for this job.

Personal Life: *For me, being single is a plus*

I am talking to somebody, but not really just in a committed relationship. Being in the Army impacts dating to some extent. I want to hang out with this person; I want to actually see this person, go on a date.

²² 92Y or 92 Yankee is the alphanumeric designation for a supply clerk.

"Nope, I'm sorry, I'm stuck in the motor pool" or "Sorry, I'm stuck at the office doing work" or "Sorry, I've got to go to somebody's office and talk about what happened on my papers." Sometimes there's no time. And sometimes it's me who is just like, "OK, I'm still stuck at the office" or doing inventories. Yeah, that impacts it a lot, because of course, I'm pretty sure by the time we get home, back to our rooms, we're exhausted. As soon as I get to my room, I go straight to sleep. I don't do anything. I don't eat. I go straight to sleep because I'm that tired. Then, it really greatly impacts it. If we set a day after work, to go out to eat or just go to the mall or the movies and hang out, and he says, "Sorry, they have me stuck here for the next some-odd hours or minutes," I'm just like, "Oh, well, we're going to miss this, and you just want to do it another day?" And we never get to it. We talk about our day, and I can't really do that with a civilian because they don't know, and then I have to explain what this is, what that is. But with someone who's actually in, we understand the lingo a lot, and I don't have to explain as much. And then we understand where each is coming from, how we would feel, and we just sit there and talk, and then we calm down after that.

Back in Basic training you couldn't date at all. If you were found out, you got smoked, whether it was in basic or in AIT. Here, it's more for you to do whatever you want, but there's regulations as to who can date who, who talks to who. People know their boundaries. Most of them know their boundaries. Sometimes you'll go out with a bunch of friends, and then you just—well, what happened with my boyfriend, we started talking a lot, and we got into a relationship. I wouldn't date anybody in this unit. There are a lot of stories that go around here, and I'm not trying to be part of that at all. So I date outside the unit. It would be friends of friends and just through social activity. Just going out.

There are people who will be so high maintenance. I just want to eat. I just like food. I want to go to breakfast. My favorite time of day is breakfast. I love eggs and bacon. Get some biscuits and gravy. The guy I'm talking to, he asked me, "What do you want to do for a date?" I said, "I just like food, I want to eat." And that's every single time. His

nickname for me is “Hungry” because I’m always eating whenever he’s there.

I do see myself eventually getting married and having a family

I’ve seen people who are married, and it just goes downhill. Because they have financial problems, and the other one’s not pulling their weight, or someone’s doing all the work. So it’s just like, I’m not getting married for a while, for the next few years. And then, they get married, and they’re not even stable, and that’s just something I never understood. Why would you want to do that to yourselves? Well, for me, you have to be stable all around in order to be in a healthy relationship. So, for me, being single is a plus. When you have no one to really hang out with, it does get kind of lonely and sad, and you feel upset about it. So, that’s the disadvantage, just all the emotional and mental type—it’s just a little bit isolating.

I do see myself eventually getting married and having a family. It’s just like, so many people are unstable; they need to get themselves together. A lot of people who are around my age, 18, 19, 20, they are having kids, and they’re starting families. Someone actually asked me a couple weeks ago, “Hey, when are you going to get married and have a family?” I’m like, “Just because you’re my age, you got married, and you have a happy family doesn’t mean I want to yet.” I’m not ready. I’m 19; I’d like to still stay single for the next couple years. I’m not really ready for kids or marriage. So many people are so unstable. It’s OK to have a hiccup here and there, but if there’s something major, I cannot do that.

I’ll be at work, for the most part; sometimes I’ll be here for half a day—barely half a day. Then other times I will be gone for the whole day and then go back home. And you don’t see your family during the whole day. If I do get married and have a family, there’s one thing I want: I just want to see my family every day. Like talk to them and actually go out and have a good time with them. Not just see them where they’re asleep in the morning when you have to leave and then come back when they’re all about to get right back to bed. With this job, yeah. I can do that.

I like this lifestyle, even if you have to live by regulation

The barracks are kind of like mini-apartments. I've got my own little stove-top. I've got a fan. Well, I have a thermostat, and I've got a fan as well. And I can have my own, whatever I need in there, within reason of course. But it's like a mini-apartment. Just keep it clean, and that's all they ask of us. That's fine. I have someone next door who asks me for help sometimes with certain things. And then there are people who knock on my door and say, "Hey, you want to go hang out some time?" "Sure, why not?" It's pretty good.

When I'm not at work, I go to the DFAC and get something to eat. Sometimes I go to the mall just to go get some things because you hear about a sale at Victoria's Secret or Bath and Body Works. Or catch a movie, go out to eat or drive all the way out to Austin or San Antonio if anybody wants. That's what I usually do. I've seen like the biggest malls ever there.

And I've never really been to an amusement park, so when I went to Six Flags—it was absolutely amazing. I've never been to an amusement park like that, and just going there on the weekend it was great. And then, I've seen the biggest malls in Austin. I never knew anything like that existed.

If it's a regular weekend, I sleep during the day and, depending if I have the energy to actually get up and get ready, I'll actually go out to Killeen. I go out dancing. Or if there's a restaurant or something, go eat there. I hang out with my PAC clerk and a couple of her friends. I see my boyfriend almost every day on the weekend. He comes over, or we just go out. I like to get out of my room and actually go do something instead of just being stuck in there. I like to go out and spend some time with somebody. When all my friends are busy, I'm just stuck in my room staring at the wall or watching TV. It gets pretty old, pretty fast.

My friends from home, there is a portion of them in college. Another portion of them pregnant or engaged or both. And then another portion is just working jobs back home. I'd probably hate it. I'd probably hate it because being stuck in the same place and just not being able to go anywhere is terrible. I wouldn't like it at all. So I like

this lifestyle, even if you have to live by regulation, it's fine with me. At least I get to see the world, and I do have my own freedom sometimes.

I did think before I joined, OK, I'm just going to be working 24/7, barely going to have any friends or anybody to talk to, because I thought the Army was strict the whole time. But now, being here, it's completely different. Now you've got first sergeant asking me, "What are you going to do this weekend?" "Nothing, First Sergeant." "Go out. Go have fun!" "OK, OK." "Be young! Go do something." "OK!"

I'm just chilled out most of the time

I almost got 300 on my PT test; I got 299.²³ I'm in the top couple of females. Because I know there's a couple who got 300. PT scores are really important. First Sergeant, he makes it important. If you can't pass your PT test, you need to make changes. You need to start eating right, first off. And start exercising and working out on your own. So PT is a big part in this company. Because there are people who can't pass a PT test, and, well, that's your fault if you can't because we kept telling you that you need to do this and that, but you just don't do it. I'm a self-described PT stud. But if I do not have to do PT, I will not.

I sleep after work as a nap, and then I wake up, stay up for a few hours, and then go to sleep at 12 and then wake up again. So it just never feels like I'm fully rested, ever. I wake up at 5:45 to 6:00 in the morning. I stopped eating so much candy since I joined. I really don't like it that much anymore. Sometimes I feel salads are refreshing after just eating junk. Salads are absolutely refreshing, and then I absolutely love fruit. I had a bad experience with tobacco. A guy that used to work here, he had an open dip bottle and, long story short, it spilled on me, the floor, and the desk, and so my NCO said no more dipping unless *she* says so, and he pointed to me.

I'm rarely stressed out. At first it was like my whole family thing stressed me out. And then work was kind of stressful on top of that. And now I'm just chilled out most of the time. My life is less stressful now than before I came into the Army. Because even though they were real mean to me, in AIT, I asked my sergeant what I should do, and

²³ The maximum score for the APFT is 300.

he's like, "That is not your problem. You don't have to do anything." And I learned that that's not my job, just to keep track of my family. It's nice, too, but it's still not my job. So they taught me you can't just save them every time. So you've just got to sometimes look up. And I did. So all I do now is just work and then my social life. That's it. If there's a major family problem—that kind of thing still stresses me out. In those relationships, I'm completely happy, because my family doesn't do anything. Besides the problems we go through, we don't do anything but joke around and have fun with each other. It's nothing else but that. We have resiliency training, I think, almost every month now for the whole battalion. That's when we talk about our goals and stuff like that. Whether it be for your family or for yourself or whatever, and the unit actually promotes, "You don't have to come here on the weekend. You don't have to be a workaholic." They actually care.

I might as well just save up

I don't know too much about cars, so I'm going have one of my NCOs go with me to look at one. I'm going to be getting my driver's license next week, so I might as well just save up for a car so when I get my license, I can go get it and have it done. I'll probably get a used car, but I don't want something that eats up gas. Then I have my phone bill. That's really it. It's just the phone bill, and always paying off my Star Card. It's a military card; you can only use it on post. So the Army takes out for deduction, my meal deduction, Social Security, some other stuff. Taxes, of course. They take out stuff like that, and then you're left with the rest, which is your every two weeks' pay. But other than that, it's just my phone bill is automatically deducted from my pay. I put money into my savings account, and it's like, OK, don't touch it at all. OK, I'm not going to touch it at all.

My Army Experience: *The Army has really improved a lot of personal things for me*

I have a lot more discipline. I can see where other people are coming from and have empathy for them, and I basically have more patience.

The Army is a good choice for anybody, because even if you're the type of person who is like, "I don't like listening to people," you get to see the world, one. Two, you get new skills that nobody else really gets. So it's really a good experience for anybody.

The Army would be a better experience if it was not really wasting people's time or doing stupid things. Because there are days where it's just stupid for you to do unnecessary things. Like sitting around on the computer all day not doing anything. I'm pretty sure the morale would be up a lot higher. My biggest Army goal is going to school; that's my biggest one. Go to school and easy life. After I get out of the Army, I want to relax fully. I don't have to wake up at six o'clock every morning, five or six o'clock every morning. I don't know. I want to try something new, like go skydiving. Or probably be a professor at some college. That's what I've been daydreaming about lately, and that's something that seems like pretty cool to me. Being in college and being a professor, they seem so fascinating because it's so different from high school. Or it's fascinating how they know so much, and that's inspiring to me. I just feel a bit like I'm a professor, just teaching everyone about what this paperwork does or what you need to do. It just makes me feel good inside.

I'd move somewhere different. I would like to move somewhere that's just nice—not too hot, not too cold, somewhere in the middle. But I wouldn't know where it is.

At the very least I want to get sergeant first class

If I end up having a family and getting ready to have kids, I want them to have everything that they need, and the Army offers that, of course. It's something that's a secure job, and if I can keep doing what I'm doing and doing a good job, I'm going to keep doing that. So that's it. My family I'm not really too worried about. With them it's more of a "I can't really help you, you've got to help yourself." My leadership says, you're a great soldier. If you go farther, you could do great things, or you're already a good little soldier, why not just make it a life thing? So they talked to me about how good I do my job here. It's my job. It's what I'm supposed to do. It makes me feel good. At least they tell me I'm doing a good job sometimes, letting me know how I'm doing.

So my way of thinking is like, if they credit me for what I'm doing right now, and I think what I'm doing now is easy, then the rest of it is going to be easy as well. Well, as time goes on it's going to be a little bit harder, but it's going to be easy enough if I keep going. At the very least I want to get sergeant first class, and, at the very least, I just want to do good enough so I can at least get that. Of course, this is my first duty station, and when they send me off to my next assignment, I don't know what kind of assignment it would be—like what kind of unit I'm going to be in. I could go to aviation, I could go to an engineer battalion, I could go to something completely different; I don't know. There's a wide possibility of where I could go. I want to go see Fort Campbell; I want to go see there.

If I get seriously hurt, that would be the only reason why I'd leave. When I say, "I don't get paid enough for this." I feel like just to put up with the constant BS all day—no, I don't feel I'm getting paid enough for this s**t. But yeah, it's pretty good. I do actually get paid enough for this.

You're trying to get yourself together and look at you now

Back then, I used to think, "Oh my god, they're all stupid people." All day. At first there were days where I did not even want to come to work. I'd sit in bed like, is this really worth it? But then again, I look back, and I'm like yeah, it is worth it. You're trying to get yourself together and look at you now. So the Army has really improved a lot of personal things for me, like self-image. I try to see things more positively. Look at a more positive note than just negative. Like, oh we have an inventory today. And it's like, well at least we don't have to do it tomorrow. Or if it's MPs, I have to give them their road gear. And hey, at least they appreciate it. They say thanks before they leave. So self-image and then looking on the more positive note of things. That's the better things that have changed about me since I joined.

Jim

Jim is a medic from a small town in Vermont. He scored very high on his entrance exams and could have done any medical specialty in the Army, but his first choice wasn't available. He feels he's not being used well in his current job and is hoping to switch to something new. He provides for his mother and is trying to have her classified as a dependent to make it easier to take care of her.

Background: I signed up when I was 17

I am from a very small place in Vermont. It's up in the mountains. Well, actually it's in a valley. There are a lot of ski resorts. It's not too far south of the Canadian border. So we get a lot of Canadian tourists. In the summer, there's a lot of hiking. You usually only see people come up in the winter and then again in the summer.

The high school I attended had to draw from several different middle schools because the area was so small. The middle school that I went to drew from five different towns. They all came together for one middle school and then when we went to high school. There were three different middle schools that went to the same high school. The first year of high school was just like a big melting pot. You meet all sorts of people that you never met before.

Skiing and snowboarding is a big thing because there's easy access to multiple different ski mountains and stuff like that. Some people just like to do snowshoeing. Any kind of thing really outdoors. In the winter, there's ice-skating, and then going to see the high school bas-

ketball games or any kind of sports game, really. Then in the summer, it's all just going to lakes and hiking or just going to the beach, floating down the river. I had a few different jobs. The tubing park at the mountain resort in the summer and winter. Then the indoor water-park, then I had the canoe rental place that I also worked at. Then, right before I joined the Army, I worked at a breakfast restaurant.

Before I joined, I was actually living with my cousin at the time. I had been living with him since February of that year, for about five or six months we were living together. I ended up moving in with him at his family's house. It was a lot of fun. I got to spend a lot of time with him, too, especially like right before I left.

I think I had some GI Joes and the little green Army men

I learned about the Army mostly just from what you see in movies or you see in the commercials and stuff like that. It doesn't really tell you much, just when I was growing up it was like "Army of One" was the slogan. I think really the only Army movie that I remember watching was—and it wasn't even the Army, it was the Marines, what was that one with Demi Moore? "G.I. Jane."¹ And those are really the only ones I remember, I actually remember watching. But I mean, since then I've watched "Saving Private Ryan" and the older movies. I played Call of Duty. I think I had some GI Joes and the little green Army men with the bazooka and stuff like that.

Are you sure this is really what you want to do?

I think the only person that wasn't fully on board initially was my father, because he didn't want me to . . . he wanted me to be 100-percent sure that that's what I wanted to do, and he didn't want me to be rushing into a decision. He was like, "Are you sure this is really what you want to do?" Especially because I signed up when I was 17.

I signed up early because they said it was an option. They were like, "Given your scores, you'll have anything that you want to pick from, and you'll have that security where you know all you've got to do is graduate high school." I didn't think about college initially, until I

¹ Note that "G.I. Jane" is actually about Navy special operations.

saw my friends going through the whole college application process. I tagged along with my cousin to college visits because he was thinking about going to college. He never went through with it. I partly think because I didn't go. I think if I would have gone to college—because we probably would have ended up going to the same college—I think if I would have gone to college, he would have gone. I would have studied like nursing.

Joining the Army: *He didn't have to convince me*

Nobody that I knew had really been in the Army, so I didn't really know, and I never really asked my recruiter to explain it, either. I just was kind of like, "Yeah, this is what I want to do, so let's do it." He didn't have to try to be like, "Oh no, this is like a summer camp, and you're just going to go out and you're going to be doing fun stuff." Nope, it was just like, "This is what I want to do." And he was like, "OK." He didn't have to convince me.

One of my teachers, she was prior Army, and she actually got into contact with our local recruiter and had him come and talk to us about health care. She had him come in to talk to us about health care jobs in the military and what we could potentially be doing affecting the military or what we could potentially do in the military. He gave out his card, and I took the ASVAB, and I scored really high on it, and I called him, and I said, "Hey, this is what I scored on the ASVAB; what can I do with this?" And it just went from there.

I signed up as a 14-month senior.² I went to MEPS in May of my junior year and then picked up my job and everything, did all of that stuff. So when I went again in July, all I had to do was just show up and officially swear in, and that was it. I think there was six of us from high

² The 14-month senior program allows high school juniors who are 17 years of age to enlist in the Army and select an MOS, and then to delay entry into the Army until after high school graduation.

school that went on to join the Army, and a couple others—I know one is a Marine ROTC, another one is in the Air Force.³

The decision was quick. I talked to a recruiter and was like, “Hey, what can I do with this?” He’s like, “These are your options.” I was like, “OK.” And we did all the paperwork, went to MEPS—it was a very quick process. It took only a couple weeks for the whole thing. My dad said, “Just be sure that this is what you want to do.” He had to sign off on me being able to do all this stuff because I still wasn’t 18. I think he was just scared because he didn’t really know much about the Army either; like what Army life was like. So he thought that it was going to be going overseas and getting shot at all the time, and I’m sure he didn’t want that to happen. He’s very supportive now. My mom was nervous too, same reasons. She was just scared that something bad was going to happen. They wanted to make sure that I was doing it because I wanted to.

The Air Force is the baby of the branches. They get all the benefits

I think, looking back, I probably would have chosen a different branch. Maybe Air Force or Navy. I mean, the Air Force is the baby of the branches. They get all the benefits. They get all the nice stuff. Their barracks are nicer, their Basic wasn’t as tough. In AIT, our class was joint Army and Air Force, and talking to the Air Force people, they didn’t do nothing. And they were allowed to go off-base in civilian clothes after two weeks of being there, and we didn’t get to go until our last weekend, and we had to be in our dress uniform. They were so spoiled. They were out drinking all the time and just like living it up, and we were stuck. Lights out, nine o’clock.

And then I think just the Navy, there’s so much different stuff that the Navy is involved in. I think halfway through my senior year, I actually received a call from a Navy recruiter, saying that they had looked at my ASVAB scores and they were interested in getting me in, what was it, some kind of nuclear chemical research? They called me like eight months before I graduated my senior year. I was like, “I’m

³ Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). The Marine Corps does not have an independent ROTC program, but some colleges offer Navy ROTC with a “Marine option.”

sorry, I already signed up with the blah-blah-blah.” But after I got off the phone, I was like, “What have I done?” I mean, I was excited to join the Army but being in now, I think if I could go back, I would probably pick one of those two.

In Germany, there was an Air Force base there, too. I went and saw it, and I was like, “What? You’ve all got these brand-new nice buildings, this huge gym that’s like three stories. It’s got a huge pool in here and everything.” It was nice; it was a nice gym there.

Just give me anything in the 68 series

I came in wanting to be a combat medic because it just sounds badass. “You’re a combat medic.” And health care kind of stuff has always been an interest of mine, and the human body and stuff like that. But when I got to MEPS, they were like, “Oh, we don’t have any 68 Whiskey slots available.” I was like, “Well I don’t want to . . .”—I didn’t have a backup plan. I was dead set on I’m going to be a 68 Whiskey, and then they told me that, and I was like, “oh, s**t.”⁴ I was like, “Alright, just give me anything in the 68 series.”⁵ They were like, “Well, we’ve got this.”

My recruiter was very friendly, and any time I had a question, he always had an answer, and if he didn’t have the answer, he always found the answer. I mean, I asked about mostly just the basics, what can I expect. I know he told me it wasn’t going to be easy, like, “if it was easy then everyone would do it” kind of thing. He was very easy to talk to. He would check up on me every couple of days. Mostly closer towards the end, when I was getting ready to go to MEPS, to ship out. But I think other than that, I think the main contact was when I initially signed up, and then he was like, “If you have any questions or anything like that, don’t be afraid to give me a call.” But he would check up on me throughout my senior year, see how things were going, and then contact really picked up again right before I was getting ready to go out, make sure that I had everything squared away, everything was good to go.

⁴ 68W or 68 Whiskey is the alphanumeric designator for the combat medic specialty.

⁵ The 68 series is the CMF that includes all enlisted medical specialties.

Recruiters should tell potential enlistees it's not like you expect it to be. It's not like how the movies portray it to be. It's not always go, go, go, out there getting shot at. There's a lot of just sitting in garrison. I would have liked to know more about the different MOSes in the 68 series because, like I said, I didn't really have a backup plan. I just kind of walked in there, and I was like, "Give me 68 Whiskey." And then when they said they don't have it, I was just like, "Anything in the 68 series."

Initial Entry Training: *There was a lot of yelling going on*

So, I actually didn't end up going to Basic with the people that I arrived with, because there was so many that arrived, and they only had so many available slots per class, and they had an overflow. The people that I arrived with went a day ahead of me, and I went on a class that had arrived later. So I got pushed over; I was over a certain line number or something like that, just by how I had lined up; my number was higher than what the maximum was, so I got pushed a day to the right.

I went to Fort Sill in July, which was awful; it was so hot all the time. It was 100-plus degrees almost every day. First day we got there, we did reception, and it felt like three days in one, because we didn't get much sleep the night before. By the time we got everything issued to us, like blankets, that we needed for our reception, it was three in the morning, and they were like, "You need to be ready at 4:30 in the morning."

There was a lot of yelling going on, on their part. They take away any contraband items that we may have, that we packed away or whatever. They had us go through our stuff, and they had one of those boxes that you can just put stuff in where it's kind of like anonymous. You just drop it in there. They were like, "if we find out that any of you kept any of this stuff, you'll be getting in trouble, and your military career will be over before it even began." Then they issue us our stuff, like blankets, sheets, pillow, pillowcase. I mean, honestly, I can't remember every detail, but by the time we got issued all of our stuff and they took us over to where we were sleeping, it was probably about

3:00 or 3:30 in the morning. And they were like, “Wakeup for tomorrow is 0430.”

And I was like, “dammit, still got to shower, still got to shave and stuff like that.” So by the time I did all that stuff, before the day began and then by the time I was done with everything—because there were only two bathrooms or two shower stalls for everybody that was in there—by the time we were done with everything, we probably had 20 minutes before we had to get woken up. So that first day was so long, and the whole time they rush you around to all these places, to start in-processing at the reception place and because it’s so many people, you rush there and then you’re just sitting there in line waiting.

I really liked throwing grenades

Basic had three phases—Red, White, and Blue phase. During Red phase they kind of strip you of all of your civilian habits. They’re very hard on us. You can’t do anything right. Even if you do it right, they’d say you messed it up and they find something that’s messed up. And then the White phase, they kind of ease back a little bit. You know a little bit more about how things are supposed to be, so they don’t have to be as strict. And then in Blue phase, it’s still not relaxed, but in comparison to how it started out, it’s decent. I think Red phase was four weeks, and then three and then three, or something like that. But it wasn’t until we got to White phase that they would give us half-an-hour on our phones on Sunday, and that was it.

I was surprised, I think, that we had a lot of downtime, and I wasn’t really expecting that. We’d do our training during the day, and then we’d do what they called heat dumps, where we’d just take cold showers, or they’d give us time to do personal hygiene after we got back from our training. Then we’d change into PTs, and we’d go to the DFAC, and then after we ate dinner, it was kind of just like they’d do some light training inside the base that we were in. Teaching us land nav, little things, and it was just like, it wasn’t really as high-paced as I thought it would be.

The hardest part was probably learning how to talk to different NCOs and then the officers. I never really grew up saying sir or ma’am or referring to everybody with their title when I spoke to them. So that

was probably the hardest change mentally for me which, now I do it, and it's just natural. The best part was I really liked throwing grenades. That was fun. I think the day before we threw the live grenades, we went to a grenade qualification course or something like that. And so, they teach you how to throw the grenades, what you're supposed to do, and then they had various stations that you would go through, like I think it was seven different tasks or whatever, so one of them you had to low crawl up behind this little wall that was maybe a foot-and-a-half off the ground and stay in cover and get your grenade ready. And peek, look, and see where you're throwing, and then throw your grenade into a mortar entrenchment or something like that. You had to do all the steps, and then there were other ones, where you're in a little foxhole, and you've got to pop up and throw your grenade, 30 yards or something like that, and you have a specific target that you have to get your grenade into.

We did a EST, I think it stands for Engagement Skills Trainer, where we do a simulated weapons qualification range, and I did really good with that. Then we actually did shooting with our actual M-16s, and I was god-awful. I was a lot better with the computer-based one than I was in real life. It took me forever. But in the simulation, I was killing it.

You can't really be a loner

At the beginning, everybody was butting heads, and then, in the middle, it was like, all right, we've got to work together; we've got to get through this. And then, towards the end, everybody was just like, I'm so done with all of you, and I'm just ready to go and not have to deal with any of you ever. The same people were always getting in trouble. So, they were always getting everybody else in trouble, because they couldn't do anything right, and it was very frustrating, and I think everybody was starting to feel that way towards the end. I made some friends and stuff like that, but for the most part, it was, "I don't like this person; I don't like that person. This person was always screwing up."

In my platoon, the females all kind of were friends with each other. All the females were pretty close together, and then, I think, the

males cliqued up based on mostly ethnicity, and then from ethnicity to also where they were from. I hung out with the Asians. When I was driving down here from Vermont, I actually stopped and visited one of my friends from Basic. He lives in Philadelphia. So it was my first time ever being to Philadelphia. He's National Guard. Most of the people that I went to Basic with were all National Guard and stuff like that. I made some friends in AIT—one that's actually close to home, and I go to see her almost every time I go home on leave. She lives like two hours away, and I'll drive down there and hang out with her and her family. Some friends that I met in AIT went to Germany. Some friends that I went to Basic with or people that were in other platoons in Basic, they went to Germany, as well. So I get to hang out with them and see them again and stuff like that, but yeah. One of my friends from Basic was so funny, and we got into a lot of trouble, actually, that group. He's reserves. I'll see something that he posts on Facebook and be like, "Hey, what's up man? How've you been?" But yeah, most of the time, I don't really keep up with people from Basic or AIT that much.

I think it's good to have friends while you're there, because you are with other people that are miserable, and you share that experience of god this sucks, and you're miserable together. But after you graduate Basic or AIT, you kind of go off and do your own thing. I mean, there's some people that you get really close to, but at the same time, there's others where it's just like, "All right, well, we were friends for these few weeks, I guess." Just because you were in close proximity and you were going through the same stuff together. I mean, you can't really be a loner, because they always enforce having a battle buddy everywhere you go. So there's always got to be—you always have to be with somebody.

There is a peer pressure at Basic; I think if people become friends with somebody that kind of has a s****y attitude, then they tend to adopt that attitude. They're like, "Oh man, F this, F that. I'm just ready to be done with this." They just have a s****y attitude the whole time, and it just makes them hard to work with and hard to be around. When you have a good group of friends, everybody's miserable, but you still—you don't give up, you just keep going, you do what you've got to do.

They don't really let you see that they're human until almost the end

The key to Basic is not getting down on yourself. That's a big thing, because the drill sergeants are always going to find something that you're not doing right. It's not that they're picking on you; it's just they're trying to make you better, basically. And so, if you don't give up on yourself, or if you don't really take it to heart and get all in your feelings about it, then you'll be good.

I'm friends with a couple of my drill sergeants on Facebook. I mean, they're different outside of Basic than how they are in real life. I mean, they don't really let you see that they're human until almost the end anyways, so I didn't even know my drill sergeant had a wife and kids until he brought his son in one day. He was on CQ or staff duty or whatever, so he was going to be there all night, and he had his son, and he brought his son up to the bay when he was doing his rounds. Especially our drill sergeant, our drill sergeants were very . . . like they were tough on us, but at the same time, they were . . . like they took care of us; they made sure that we were trained right. There were a couple times where I was able to go and talk to them one-on-one and talked to them about whatever was going on, and they were able to talk with me and give me guidance.

I first felt like a soldier after we did the last ruck march. Because that's when our drill sergeants started referring to us as soldiers. They were like, "You're not a soldier until you do this." I mean, they were gods. They were the gods, basically, like what they said was the law, so if they said we weren't soldiers until we did the final ruck march, then none of us thought we were soldiers until we did that final ruck march. There was a whole ceremony that we had to do, so as we were marching back to our battery, our area that we were always at, they had this big ceremony going on. We marched around, we came around in front of it, and they had us drop all of our bags, and we had to pull out our berets and put our berets on for the ceremony. And then we all formed up on the drill pad, and our first sergeant came out, and our battery commander came out. There was a ceremony, and then after that it was like, "You're now officially soldiers." It felt good. You're like, "Yes, now I can call myself a soldier." It's done; it's almost over. All you had to do was just make it like . . . you'd done all the training. I think we

had a final inspection by the battalion sergeant major or the battalion commander and stuff like that. They came through; we dressed all up in our dress blues, and they came through and inspected our bays and stuff.

There's only so much you can do simulating in training

I mostly learned about possible duty stations in AIT. We didn't really get our first duty assignment until we were in AIT. They said when we should expect it, like in what range, it was a couple-week range or whatever. So we were checking it every day. We could put what preferences we'd want and stuff like that, so that was one of the first things they had us do. I put all East Coast places for inside the United States. I got Germany, which was the fourth option, the one that I didn't even pick. I mean, I had fun in Germany, but it just wasn't where I wanted to go initially. Well, when I got Germany, there was a civilian instructor; she was like, "Oh, if you're in Landstuhl that's where I was always at when I was partying and blah-blah-blah." I just heard about how Germany was like one big party and stuff like that, which is true, it is. But they were like, "You've got to make sure you're back before curfew." Honestly, I don't remember if I had expectations about Germany. I just was hoping that I was going to be working in the hospital, because they said that I could be working anywhere, really.

In my current job, the most useful thing I learned in Basic is probably respecting senior leaders and stuff like that. The skills that I learned in AIT don't really help me here, because what I do here doesn't really pertain to my MOS at all. They helped me in Germany because I had a base knowledge that was just able to build on with actual job experience. Because there's only so much you can do simulating in training versus actually going out and doing your job. Mostly just what to expect, how the process worked of what my job is.

It's like everything is always a learning experience. So when I first got to my first duty station, I had to learn how to . . . I learned what my job was going to entail in AIT, but I didn't really know how to do my job. So it was a lot of hands-on training and stuff like that, and it's something you just have to keep learning and keep trying to get better. So if you get down on yourself like, "Oh, I'm never going to be good

at this. Blah-blah-blah,” then you’re probably right, you’re not going to get good at it with that attitude. You’ve always just got to be like, “All right, what can I do better next time?” And just learn each time.

Life in the Army: *I actually have some downtime*

After AIT, I went home for two weeks of leave for hometown recruiting assistance, and then I left; I think it was . . . like the 15th of October or something like that.⁶ I know it was on a weekend; it was right before Halloween I left. But it was nice; I got to see some of my old teachers, and they were like, “Look at you! You’ve changed so much!” And it was just funny. They were giving me a hard time. When I got to Germany, it was reception again, which is just like getting all your paperwork in order and a lot of sitting around and doing immunizations and finance stuff and just a lot of checking in. I think it was like three days of different things that they had before they sent you off to your units.

I didn’t really have any expectations for what it was going to be like, so it was just kind of like, hit me with whatever it is. Just give it to me, and let’s get through this. I was just so used to everything being more fast-paced. And then actually being in Germany was like, I actually have some downtime; I don’t know what to do with my life right now. I felt confident that I’d be able to use what I did know and that I’d be able to quickly learn what I didn’t know, to be able to do my job or get what I needed to get done done.

I left Germany October of ’15. I think I found out probably the summer before . . . the summer of ’15, like May or June time frame, that I was going to Fort Bragg. So, six or seven months in.

I’ll just go wherever the Army tells me to go

I heard Fort Bragg was like a black hole here. Like once you get here, you can’t leave. Because it’s so big that sometimes they’ll just transfer

⁶ The Hometown Recruiter Assistance Program allows select graduates of initial entry training to return home to assist local recruiters.

you from one unit to a different unit that's just in the same post. I mean, I'll just go wherever the Army tells me to go.

I went home for a small break, actually, because I didn't take any leave when I was in Germany, so I had a bunch of leave saved up. So I was able to stay straight through for a couple months. It was nice to be able to be home for a while. I didn't really know what to expect until I got here, and they told me, "oh yeah, you're going to 44th Medical Brigade." Even then, I still didn't know what to expect because I haven't worked outside of a hospital, so I had no expectations. The biggest surprise was how big this base actually is. The base I was on in Germany was tiny compared to this.

Coming to Fort Bragg, I still felt pretty confident in my abilities to learn whatever. Because if I was just going to be doing stuff related to my job, I already know that kind of stuff. So I already have that experience. But if it's anything different, then I'm pretty confident in my abilities to learn how to do new stuff.

Nevertheless, I think I like Germany, just because it's a different kind of culture. There's a lot more stuff that I normally wouldn't get to experience over there versus being here, where it's just kind of the same sort of stuff as anywhere else.

I pretty much thought I was just going to be mainly in the United States

Deployment wasn't something that I was overly concerned about or really worried about happening. I think even now it would be something that I'm still not really concerned about, even though I know how much of a possibility it is; it's something that I would like to do, just to have that experience. Knowing the job that I picked, I pretty much thought I was just going to be mainly in the United States.

I mean, I haven't really been in the Army that long. And I know with a lot of stuff going on, external factors, like the drawdown and stuff like that, things were kind of winding down in the Middle East. So it's not really like that's surprising, I guess, that I haven't been deployed yet. If I stay with this unit, yes, I expect to deploy in the near future. There's talk of us deploying soon. The majority, especially the older, senior leaders, have mostly all deployed. The only people that I

really see that haven't deployed yet are the most junior enlisted or like young sergeants that just got promoted. I mean, it would be nice to have that extra money, because that's what a lot of people talk about is how good the money is when you deploy and stuff. So I mean, who doesn't want more money?

Coming up, we're getting ready to be in the field like three times in the next three months. Especially because we're getting ready for deployment soon, so it's going to be a lot more cumulative exercises. The best part about training is learning new things, new skills. I don't think there's any bad part of training. Because all the training is done in the "crawl-walk-run," and we're still coming out of the crawl phase where we're learning how to do everything.

It's easy to plan how the day is going to go

Monday through Friday, I'm in the office from nine to five, except when I'm at lunch. At 6:30 a.m., we have first formation. PT is over by 7:30, and we get an hour and a half to do personal hygiene. Mondays we go to the motor pool and check on our vehicles, make sure that they're all right, they're still good to go. But we don't really use them that much, so nothing ever really changes. I like Thursdays because it's like family day, kind of, so we get released at 1500. We generally do some kind of training in the first half of the day, and then we get released at 1500 after lunch.

The beginning of the week is always getting ready for meetings and stuff like that. But it's usually just like whatever we get down from our higher headquarters. If we don't really get much from them, then there's really not much to do around here. But if we get a bunch, then there's a bunch to do. So it really all depends on whatever we get from up there. It's easy to plan how the day is going to go out and what to expect, but then at the same time, it's kind of boring, too, because you already know what to expect. But then if something like happens where it throws my schedule completely off, I'm like, "Oh man, why can't it just stick to the schedule!" I'm out of here at the latest at 17:00, unless there's something crazy going on, but there hardly ever is.

The working environment is like a family in here. We're very close-knit; everybody has each other's backs. Everybody gives each

other a hard time, but at the same time, it's not like anything mean by it. If somebody has an issue with anything that's being talked about, or if they think they're being picked on or whatever, then it will get toned down, but I've never seen anybody complain about it, because everybody gives everybody a hard time, and everybody gets a hard time.

Our platoon is pretty close, pretty close-knit. I don't really have much interaction with the company. I'd say our platoon is probably the best-performing platoon out of all of them, like the most squared away. Always getting stuff taken care of, especially because that's kind of what we're expected to do in this shop, too, is all about operations and planning. Whenever stuff needs to get done, the brigade commander and the command sergeant major, they look at us to get it done and get it figured out.

I don't really interact with the company too much, outside of showing up for PT in the morning. That's like really the only time I interact with anybody else. There's a lot of confusion about what's supposed to be happening, and there's not really much guidance from them. I think it's also different, too, because our company is a headquarters and headquarters company. So we have guidance from the brigade commander and the sergeant major about stuff going on, and then the company commander and the first sergeant have to try to fit their stuff into whatever they're trying to get accomplished. They don't really have as much pull or authority as they would down at the lower units or whatever.

The last couple months I was on night shifts, which I loved

In Germany, my MOS is on 24-hour operations, so when I was there, I went through a few schedule changes where I was just working. I initially started out working during the week, so I could be trained. And then sometimes I was given the late shift, where I'd be there for a couple hours by myself before the night shift came on. Then there were times where I'd have one or two days off during the work week, like between Monday through Friday, and then I'd work Saturday, Sunday for a 12-hour shift by myself. Then, once they were comfortable with my abilities—once they were comfortable, and I was comfortable with being on my own and doing my own stuff, I was moved up to a differ-

ent clinic, to assist them with their operations. Just issues with people's medical records and stuff like that. Sometimes their stuff would get populated wrong, or there'd be some wrong information in there, and they don't really have the administrative rights to fix that. So I'd be able to go in and change whatever.

Towards the end of my stay in Germany, I think the last couple months I was on night shifts, which I loved. Because it's a small hospital, so it was very slow at night—maybe just get a couple people admitted for doing dumb stuff when they were drunk and getting hurt or babies being born and stuff like that, but for the most part it was—I was the only one in the office, and I'd just be relaxed all night and just hanging out and caught up on a lot of TV shows at night, during night shift. When I was working night shifts, I enjoyed getting off work and being able to go to the gym when nobody was there. Because everybody was always at work. There would be like five people in the gym during the workday or whatever. So I'd work eight at night to eight in the morning, get off, go get some breakfast real quick, change into my gym clothes, head to the gym probably from 10 to 12-ish and come back and shower and sleep from 1300 to 1900. Get dressed for work, go catch the bus and go off to work.

The working environment in Germany was like a family, too, when I first got there. Then when I went up to the other clinic, a lot of people that were there when I first got there, they were leaving around that time. So when I came back, it was just like a bunch of people that I didn't really see or have much interaction with, and honestly, the quality of the training, in my opinion, had gone down. There wasn't as much continuity in between, in training these people how the job was supposed to be done because we switched NCOs. Then after that, I didn't really hang out with anybody in the shop. I hung out with people from the clinic that I went to more than I hung out with people in the shop that I belonged to, type of thing.

The soldiers I worked with in Germany were a lot of fun. I met a lot of people that I really enjoyed working with, and it made work go by really fast. So we were able to just joke around about stuff that happened during the day or funny stuff that happened with patients.

I hung out a lot with the ones in the clinic that I went up to. I enjoy working with a lot of the people at Fort Bragg, too.

They're very hands-on with getting me the help I need

I'm trying to make my mother my dependent, actually, and my NCOs know about it, and they're very hands-on with helping me about it, always asking me about how things are going with it and how things are progressing with it. So they're very hands-on with getting me the help I need to get her. If I need take time off, I just let the higher people in the office know, and they would make sure that it fits, that it's not during any big training events, but they would do what they could to get me the time I need. And it's just her, and she's got a lot of stuff that she has going on; it would be easier for me to help take care of her if she was my dependent. I could have her be here with me. I'd be receiving the BAH and the BAS and stuff like that. I'd have a house or a place for us to be. She just really wants to be close to me. She doesn't really have anything back in Vermont that really ties her back there.

It's pretty much on me, whether I want to succeed or not

The most successful soldier I met was very professional and very approachable. He was easy to talk to, and he actually genuinely seemed like he cared. He was smart, too; he was really smart. So I mean, I think that's half of being successful, is being smart and being able to learn new things, being open-minded or being receptive. He was a PT stud. That's always a good thing in the military, is being able to PT. He always seemed like he was really happy no matter what, and he always just had a can-do attitude, like give him any task and he'd be like, "Roger, got it." And he'd get it done. When I first got here, nobody had anything bad to say about him. I don't think unit leadership would say he's the best soldier, but they'd be like, "Oh here's Jacob, he's squared away. He'll get anything you need to get done." Compared to him, I think other soldiers lack initiative, like not a go-getter kind of mentality, where they just wait to be told what to do instead of trying to ask or just take it upon themselves to be proactive and get something done ahead of time.

I too lack the drive, probably. PT, I suck at running. I mean, if I plan on staying in, I'm going to have to show greater initiative and get better at PT. You need to be able to look good on paper in order to progress. It still matters, like in terms of promotion boards and stuff like that; it matters. And then the whole initiative thing, for later on, because you just need to be able to add that to stuff that you've done to look good, basically. I mean, it's pretty much on me, whether I want to succeed or not. You've just got to be willing to do the work. Because people aren't going to hand everything to you in the Army; it's just you've got to work for it, and you've got to want to get better and better yourself.

I mean, leadership definitely have control over my success because if they didn't like me, they could find something—I'm sure they could find some way to negatively evaluate my performance and stuff like that, but as of right now, mostly what I've seen, it's been fair. They're not trying to get you kicked out of the Army or anything like that. From what I've seen, the leaders I've seen, they want to help you; they want to make you better because, especially in terms of the junior, we're the future of the Army. So a lot of the people who have already been in for 15, 16 years, or at least in the double digits amount of years, they just want to pass that torch on and make sure that the Army goes in the right direction.

We're not going to beg you to stay in

I've learned when it's OK to be more relaxed and when it's time to be professional. My NCOs are also getting me prepared for the boards, doing a lot of training. Being more confident in dealing with higher ranks. They ask me all the time, they're like, "What are your plans for being in the military?" And they'll talk to me about it and talk about the pros and cons of staying in versus the pros and cons of getting out. For the most part, they're always like, "Yes, you should stay in." But then they're also like, "If you want to get out—if that's what you really want to do, and you've thought long and hard about it, then we're not going to beg you to stay in."

One NCO in particular, Davis, genuinely seems to care. He's always asking me about how I'm doing, how things are going in my

life, and I feel really comfortable going to him if I have any issues. I know that he'll help me through whatever I need help with or at least get me in contact with somebody that would be able to help me with whatever situation. He takes care of soldiers, and, in my opinion, he's a really good leader. There's a lot of good NCOs. Really knowledgeable and, for the most part, the NCOs are always trying to help soldiers out.

You could have done anything in the Army. What made you choose this?

Recently I've also been looking at mortuary affairs, dealing with deceased soldiers and processing and making sure that they get their proper final resting, make sure that everything is taken care of. I also really like the 68 Charlie, which is a practical nurse or a nurse something.⁷ Basically they're the same thing as an LPN, and that's just really hands-on with patients.⁸ That's something I'd be interested in, or the mortuary affairs one, or there's a couple other 68 series, too, like they're also options. It was just like recently outside of the 68 series, I've noticed the mortuary affairs was one I might be interested in.

I was looking at a bunch of different MOSs, because I've been thinking about reclassing and switching out of the one that I'm in now.⁹ I saw it, and it was like mortuary affairs, and I looked at it, and I was like, "That actually sounds really interesting."

I started thinking about reclassing probably when I was a couple months in Germany. In Germany, if there weren't any patients, we just did a lot of sitting around, not really doing much of anything. Here, I don't do it. I mean, not I am not doing my MOS. I mean, they try to put together training and stuff like that, but it's always stuff that I already know how to do. I want to do my MOS or switch.

In Germany, my first-line NCO, she called me into her office, and she was like, "Why are you doing this MOS? I'm just looking at

⁷ 68C or 68 Charlie is the alphanumeric designation for a practical nursing specialist.

⁸ Licensed practical nurse (LPN).

⁹ Reclassing is slang for reclassifying MOSs.

your ASVAB scores, your GT scores.¹⁰ You could have been anything. You could have done anything in the Army. What made you choose this?" And I told her, I was like, "Well, this is just what they assigned me. I told them to give me anything in the 68 series." And she was like, "If you really enjoy this job, and you really love this job, then I'm all for you staying in this job. But I think that you have talents that could be better used other than in this MOS."

Looking back on it, the recruiter should have been like, "Well, if you can't get this, then there's also these other options, too, for you." I feel like I have more freedom now because I know about other options that are out there.

The best part of my MOS is when I was in Germany interacting with the patients. I don't do anything with my MOS now. My job now is simple. It's not hard. It's easy to pick up on and to be able to do. I think it's easy to succeed in this MOS. It's not a very demanding MOS. I think it's tougher to get promoted in this MOS, because it's not as high-demand of an MOS. So once you start getting up to the higher levels, it's tougher to get promoted because they're not advancing people up even higher than you are. So, say I was an E-6; in order for me to get promoted, an E-7 slot would have to open up, and for that to happen, the E-7 would have to retire or just be getting out of the military or for them to get promoted up to the next level.¹¹ If it's not a high demand, then they're not going to be promoting these people up to the higher levels, and it's going to create that trickle-down where people aren't going to be getting promoted yet.

Unless we're deployed, we're not going to be doing our job

I've seen a lot of different soldiers in my MOS. But I think the overall impression is that it's not really what they want or what they really like. Because a lot of them that I talk to, they talk about switching to something else or commissioning over into like doing Green to Gold and

¹⁰ GT score: component of ASVAB—word knowledge, paragraph comprehension, and arithmetic reasoning.

¹¹ An E-6 is the rank that designates a staff sergeant; an E-7 designates a sergeant first class.

becoming an officer through that program.¹² Potentially, I would be interested in that program. I mean, it all depends; I have a lot of different options for what I would like to do, and then it's just really deciding on one and committing to that.

I don't know why so many want to switch—maybe because the same kind of situation that I was in; they didn't really look at other options. Because there's a lot of different stuff in the 68 series if you're interested in the medical field. So maybe they just didn't look at all their options, and they were dead-set on one, and then it didn't work out.

I have buddies that are in some of our lower units that are my same MOS, and they work in the orderly rooms, just getting papers for people's leaves and passes and all sorts of stuff.¹³ So they're doing even less of their job than I am, and it's just one of those things that, because of the type of unit that we're in, unless we're deployed, we're not going to be doing our job. So it's just one of those things that you have to understand, and you've just got to tough it out for however long.

Personal Life: *I'm fine with just hanging out and relaxing*

Typically, I get off work, and I go eat dinner, and I'll wait for the crowd to die down at the gym; at 7 is when people start leaving. Then I'll go work out for an hour and a half or two hours, and I'll come home and shower, and I'll just play Xbox until I fall asleep.

When I go out, it's mostly either going out to the movies or going out to eat with friends, a club, or bar. Then there's a couple different movie theaters around here. The movie theater on base has new releases most of the time. I have a couple friends, and we'll make plans sometimes, go see a movie, s**t like that.

¹² Green to Gold: active duty option program that prepares enlisted soldiers to earn a commission as an Army officer.

¹³ Leave and pass are regulations authorizing leave including ordinary, reenlistment, transition, and proceed time.

On the weekend, same s**t; I don't really do too much. I don't really socialize with other soldiers that much; it's probably once every couple of weeks. On the weekends or whatever, we'll either hang out in each other's rooms, that's pretty much it. During the week, after the weekdays, it's always just really busy.

I like that my social life is very low-key. There's some people that always just want to go out and do stuff. I'm fine with just hanging out and relaxing. I mean, there's some people that all they do is just go out and party all the time and go out drinking, and then there's just some that all they do is sit at home. I just like being relaxed. So, I think it's kind of a happy medium between the two. I just wish some of my friends from back home were down here, because I think I'd be more inclined to go out and do some stuff more often.

I mean, being in this unit, too, is different because everybody just goes home to their families. When I was in Germany, I was always hanging out with people and planning trips and going out and doing stuff because, granted, it's a completely different culture, too, so there's always new stuff that you can go out and see and experience. There was just a lot of people, too, where that was their first duty station and they weren't married at all or anything like that. So it was just like you spent time together, to pass the time. I miss Germany sometimes; I think it's just because I miss the culture and going out and seeing new things.

I'm hoping that sometime in the next 20 years, I end up getting married and having kids

Disadvantages to being single in the Army? I mean, yes and no. I think yes, because married people make more money, but they also have to pay for their housing and stuff like that. But I think, really, if you were just trying to make more money, then you would end up getting married. I mean, obviously, if you love somebody, you're going to want to end up getting married anyways, but I think a lot of people that are single and that are junior enlisted, they rush to get married, because they want to (a) get out of the barracks, and (b) also make more money. You get BAH, which stands for Basic Allowance for Housing. So they pay you—so say, if I was to get married right now to somebody that was not in the military, I think I'd get \$1,100 BAH per month. We

also get paid BAS, which is Basic Allowance for Subsistence, which is food and stuff like that. So everybody gets paid that, but because I'm single and I live in the barracks, I'm on a meal card where we go to the DFAC. I think my BAS is \$360 or something like that, and they take like \$300 and some change for the meal card. But if you're married, then they don't take that meal card, because you buy your own food. So yeah.

Advantages to being single? I mean, I can't think of anything specifically for just being in the military. I mean you meet a lot of people, especially if you go out, and you do like they have a bunch of programs and stuff like that, they have BOSS—Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers. They'll put together trips and stuff like that. They'll do stuff that you just might not do on your own. I think the one BOSS thing that I've been to was they did a Single Soldiers' Fest here where they had this big thing. They had music and a bunch of stuff, and it was a full-day thing. They gave away a bunch of free merchandise and stuff like that.

Most of the people that I've met have been through work interactions and stuff like that. When I was in Germany, I worked in the hospital, and you meet and interact with—I personally met and interacted with a lot more people, because I worked in the hospital versus working here, in this unit. Because I work with all higher-ranking people, like people that outrank me by a bunch, or they're officers or stuff like that, or people that are already married and have kids and stuff like that. In this section, there's only one other person—and he's my roommate—that isn't married, and he's getting ready to get married.

I don't really interact with too many other people, honestly. Yeah. I kind of just do my own thing on the weekends. I have a couple friends that work over in the hospital that I know from Germany, and I hang out with them.

Marriage and family, that's the goal. I think it depends a lot on if they're military or civilian. Because, I think, if they're military, they'll kind of be more familiar with the average day-to-day kind of stuff. Or they'll be more understanding. I'm not always going to be able to be there. Versus if they're civilian, they might not really . . . like you can try to explain it to them, and they can say they understand, but they

wouldn't really know until that event, whatever it may be, happened. I'm hoping that sometime in the next 20 years, I end up getting married and having kids.

I couldn't even tell you who my neighbor was

I live in the NCO barracks. It's a small space, pretty quiet. Because when we first got here, I think our regular barracks were full, so they put us in the NCO barracks. It's pretty nice over there, but I couldn't even tell you who my neighbor was. I don't even know. But I know we're going to be moving barracks soon, back to these ones right here that are under construction; those are supposed to be ours, and they tore them down to renovate them. So, I'm sure it will be different, because that's just going to be all of the 44th Medical Brigade soldiers in there versus the ones that I'm at. It serves a bunch of different people. Then, where everybody else pretty much stays, like over by the hospital, that has hospital people over in there and some other units. These buildings right here will be just 44th Medical Brigade.

I had more interaction with people in Germany in the barracks, but that was just because they all worked in the hospital. So, I knew more people that were in the barracks, but it was also louder too, because everybody would be out drinking or whatever, and then they come back to the barracks and storming through the halls.

I generally describe my health at an eight

I'm below average on physical fitness. I scored a 70 on both push-ups and sit-ups. The scores are important for staying in, because I need to have at least a 60 on all of them in order to stay in. The better my score is, the better I look on paper. But outside of that, scores are not that important. I generally describe my health at an eight out of 10. On my own, I lift, and I'll do some extra cardio.

I'm on a profile right now.¹⁴ Because I got crazy pain in my legs. So I might end up having to get surgery on my legs, or they might just end up giving me a no-running profile, which, if that's the case, I'd

¹⁴ A profile is shorthand for limits placed on an individual's physical activity due to injury or sickness.

have to do an alternate event. Which would be either a walk or a swim or a bike.

I try to get at least six hours of sleep, so I don't have to wake up until 5:45; I'll try to go to bed no later than 11. On the weekends, I sleep later, if my roommate allows me to. He's really loud—yeah, always on the phone.

When I first joined, I lost weight. Being in Basic, I lost like 40 pounds. And then once I got out of Basic, I was like, "Oh man, I can actually order food now and actually eat some food." I put the weight back on. So now, I know how to eat better; it's just actually doing it. I've been being more conscious about what I eat, because I mostly eat at the DFAC, so they generally have healthier foods. They have fish, like baked fish or baked chicken, stuff like that; I try to stay away from going out to eat as much, especially because they're taking my money for this food, so I might as well just go eat there, instead of spending more money to go out to eat and eating junkier foods.

I try to eat at least fruit in the morning and my vegetables and stuff like that at lunch and dinner. I don't go to the short order and get a burger and onion rings and stuff like that; I'll try to eat like veggies with fish or chicken. I'll have a Monster every now and then, like on the weekends if I'm feeling a little crazy.

I don't get stressed. I'm normally pretty level-headed about everything, because stressing about it, it doesn't really change anything about it. So for me, I just accept it. It is what it is, and then just what can I do to improve?

I send a lot of money back home

Since enlisting, it's gotten better. Yeah, pay increase and just having a steady job. So I know I get paid on the 1st and the 15th of every month, so it's like that financial security. My major expenses are like phone bill, internet bill, helping my mom out with stuff, like I send a lot of money back home, to help her out with stuff, which is a big reason, too, why I'm trying to make her my dependent because then I'll actually get extra money to provide for her.

She just turned 54. And it's just her, and she's got a lot of stuff that she has going on; it would be easier for me to help take care of her if she

was my dependent. I could have her be here with me. If she became my dependent, I'd be receiving the BAH and the BAS and stuff like that. I'd have a house or a place for us to be. As far as a monthly budget, it's mostly just I try to think of what I'll need for the month, and then I just try to send the majority of it back home to my mom to help her out.

You're always going to be paid

It's a benefit knowing that you're always going to be paid on the 1st and the 15th. You get more money every year. So I just got a raise this last paycheck, like 20 bucks more than I normally get paid or whatever, the start of the new calendar year. My base pay went up a little bit. Then I also get a little bit more money on the anniversary of when I joined, so in July, I get a little bit more money because you get more money for however many years you've been in. There's different pay rates for each rank or grade in the military and then for however many years you've been. So an E-4, a specialist who's been in only two years gets less money than a specialist who's been in for, say, six.

When I go see the doctor, there are no out-of-pocket costs that I've seen so far. It's pretty much all other than like your life insurance, which varies depending on which coverage you want to have. Dentist, I think I had my last exam a couple months ago. And the last time I went to the eye doctor probably a couple months before that. And I'm blind anyways, so I've got to make sure that my prescription stays up-to-date.

If I had an emergency, I would put it probably on credit, because most of my money, like I said, it goes to my mom. So I don't really have much in savings; I try to put money in savings. If I had a large financial emergency, like with my mother or anything like that, they have services that help with that. Yep, I'd be able to contact my NCOs and tell them, and they'd be able to help me get that, because I don't have any experience with that. I'm trying to think of what the program is called. I think it's Red Cross, they have funds that are set up specifically for that, in case there's a family emergency, stuff like that.¹⁵

¹⁵ The American Red Cross provides some financial assistance for emergencies through its Military Family Services efforts.

I think Army retirement benefits are a good deal. So if you do the 20-year career, you keep the health care; you get your retirement checks every month—I think it's like 75 percent of whatever your base pay was.¹⁶ Which if you get up to 20 years as an E-7, that's a pretty good amount. Plus you retire, so for me, if I did just 20 years, I'd retire when I was 38, and I'd still be able to go out there and get another job and still be getting those retirement checks from the Army while making another job, having another paycheck coming in.

My Army Experience: *I'm more laid-back now, relaxed*

Since joining I've seen changes to my mentality, kind of, because I was more just like a slacker, kind of goofing around all the time, not really taking anything seriously. I was looking forward to being more disciplined and stuff like that. I believe I got that. And people from back home think so, as well. That was one of the biggest things that they noticed about me when I came back. The biggest negative is getting shot at, possibly getting shot. I have not been shot at since I've been in.

I'm more alert to my surroundings, I think; I pay attention to surroundings now. Because one of the things that was preached is just being aware of your surroundings and always seeing what's going on around you. And yeah, so I do that a lot, just people-watching always, and if it's possible, I think I'm more laid-back now, relaxed. I don't know. I don't know how to describe it, but yeah. I think the Army would be good for anybody. Anybody that wants to make a change in their life, because it is a big change.

My expectations for the Army changed since deciding to enlist. When you first come in, you kind of just expect it to be how you see in the movies; you're just always going. It's just nonstop. But there's a lot more—well, especially for me, I just do a lot more office work. Just sitting in the office and doing paperwork and doing slides.

¹⁶ Retirement pay for a soldier who stays in 20 years is actually 50 percent of base pay.

I want to be able to move on and still be successful outside of the military

With the rest of my time in the Army, I want to succeed—progress and succeed; getting promotions and setting myself up for success after I end up getting out, because I won't always be in the Army. I'm going to have to retire at some point, and so, I want to be able to get out and not be just stuck on, "Well, when I was in the Army. . . ." I want to be able to move on and still be successful outside of the military. I'm interested in leadership schools, yeah, but probably not like Rangers and stuff like Special Forces. That's crazy; that's too crazy for me.

I'm going to college as soon as I pass this PT test. The last one I took, I failed, so I'm flagged against favorable actions, which includes using my GI Bill to go to college.¹⁷ I want to pursue some kind of medical studies, like biology.

After the Army, I want to stay in the health care field, hands-on with patients. I've always had an interest in the human body and taking care of people. I want to stay in 20 years. But it goes back and forth. I didn't really have an end goal, like oh I'm only going to serve for these four years and then be done. It was just kind of like I'm going to get in and see. Like there's some days or there's sometimes where I'm just like, "Is this really what I want to do for another 18 years, or is this something that I just want to do for a couple more years and then get out?" So it just kind of goes back and forth, but I'm sure I'll at least reenlist, and then it will get to the end, and I'll be going through the same thought process, like "do I want to keep doing this?" And then I'll keep reenlisting, and it will just keep happening.

My mom, definitely, is a factor in my decision. Once I get her down here and get her as my dependent then that will definitely be a major factor in deciding to reenlist or not. She has always wanted me to do whatever makes me happy. She's always said if that's what I want to do, then she'll support it.

¹⁷ The GI Bill is legislation that pays the costs of higher education and other support for qualified military personnel.

Conclusion

There is a mental image of the typical American soldier: male, in the combat arms, enlisted straight out of high school, and from a lower socioeconomic background. The reality, of course, is that the Army is more diverse than this stereotype. The soldiers whose stories we told in this volume come from a variety of backgrounds, with few commonalities beyond the ultimate decision to join the Army. Once in the Army, they begin on similar paths, but their experiences of service are profoundly influenced by their backgrounds and family lives, by their unit experiences, and by their hopes for the future. In this section, we weave together the threads of these experiences, drawing out significant similarities and differences.

Lessons for Leaders

To weave together the complex actions of hundreds of thousands of soldiers into unified military action, the Army relies on leadership, from the highest levels down to the smallest units. Leaders are “the competitive advantage the Army possesses,” and without excellent leaders to build all of the Army’s diverse soldiers into a cohesive whole, the Army cannot execute the tasks it is given by the nation.¹ While other organizations may treat leadership as innate and trait-based, a key assumption of the Army is that it is competence-based, meaning that leadership

¹ “Field Manual 6-22: Leader Development,” Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 2015, p. 6.

can be taught.² From the earliest days of BCT, the soldiers in this book are learning to act as leaders, helping their fellow recruits to succeed. Along with these early lessons in leadership and Army values, the soldiers we interviewed seem to be learning what constitutes good leadership in their officers and NCOs. For the soldiers in this report, the best leaders are those who show interest in them, who empathize, and who demonstrate trust in them. This is not without enforcing discipline or bonding through shared adversity—these soldiers want leaders who demand they become their best selves—but in doing so, these officers and NCOs should lead by example. We also note several instances in which leadership did not meet the needs of soldiers in this report to give concrete examples of ways NCOs and officers can better contribute to soldier success.

The soldiers we interviewed emphasized that they can tell which leaders really care about them, and that this is a key component of what makes a good leader. Often, caring means working with soldiers to help them overcome their deficiencies, as it did for Michael, who said a caring NCO can “relate what you’re going through to something he’s been through before and what he’s done to better it.” Randy had a similar reaction, saying that the best NCO he knows works “to help people improve . . . through teaching and then through just showing the right example. He cares. He genuinely cares about the organization and the platoon and guys.” For Randy, caring also means that if an NCO “realizes he’s wrong, he cares enough to . . . do something about it. Again, I think not the most complicated recipe; you just have to care.” This speaks to the importance of empathy as a leader. Meg singled out her officer as doing a good job of this, connecting with her over the difficulties of parenting when the officer’s spouse was deployed. Nick found empathy in his own loss of rank; being reminded how it felt to have a lower rank made him resolve to be a better NCO. Speaking of his commanding officer, he said that it is “always comforting to know that your boss is willing to go out of his way to assist you, a specialist, lower

² Jon J. Fallesen, Heidi Keller-Glaze, and Christina K. Curnow, “A Selective Review of Leadership Studies in the U.S. Army,” *Military Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 5, September 1, 2011, p. 463.

enlisted, at his [more senior] rank.” Cassandra was similarly impressed with the fact that her installation commander made the time to participate in a morning run with her unit.

For the soldiers in this report, the best leaders are those who lead from the front and who respect their soldiers’ time and contributions. As Nick said of the leaders in his vehicle repair shop, when things are busy, “they’ll turn wrenches.” He also described a collegial atmosphere in which officers trust NCOs to put out “clear and concise” information. Cassandra mentioned that her brigade sergeant major instructed NCOs not to waste their soldiers’ time. In this study’s first report, not doing tasks associated with one’s job—often through having time wasted—was the most commonly cited “worst aspect” of unit life.³

In several cases, we note that leadership did not fully meet the needs of soldiers, although the soldiers themselves may not have labeled this as a gap. This is often due to a failure to observe what challenges a soldier may be dealing with outside of work but may also result from a lack of familiarity with available assistance mechanisms. For Meg, a single mother in a combat arms unit, there was a lack of understanding from her first-line chain of command of the challenges associated with her circumstances. For example, she is routinely reprimanded for not arriving to work early enough, despite the fact that the base day care center does not open early enough for her to reliably drop her child off and arrive on time. This lack of understanding may be contributing to an environment where she feels she cannot seek help with more-serious gaps, such as the lack of a short-term family care plan. Short-term child care options would allow her to take on roles in the unit that require a more fluid schedule, enhancing her future career options. Moreover, a short-term family care plan is a requirement for single parents in the Army, and the inadequacy of her plan could put her career at risk. This is a case where simple interventions in the form of support and help to identify child care providers could improve her quality of life and performance dramatically. Meg’s situation may be exacerbated by the fact that she is on the leading edge of gender integration in the combat

³ Helmus et al., 2018, p. 69.

arms, but it also resonates with the broader experience of women in the military.

A case of mixed success and failure of leadership is Nick's story. Early in his career, Nick lost rank for fighting and was already going through a difficult time dealing with the loss of his grandmother. He spoke to a chaplain and was referred to counseling through what is now the Military OneSource system to deal with the depression he was experiencing. In this sense, the system worked for Nick; he was able to deal with his problems and emerge as a better soldier and happier person. However, Nick does not describe any intervention from his unit leadership that suggests they were aware of his depression and took any action, despite the fact that he recounts numerous instances of showing up late for work, shirking work, or just not being his usual self. Instead, he says, "nobody was tracking me." Ultimately, Nick's situational mental health issues were relatively easy to address through counseling, taking about 10 weeks to resolve. But he recounts two or three months of bad behavior at work and emotional distress that could have been avoided by a leadership more alert to his changed situation.

A final case of possible leadership failure is with Michael's likely attrition from the Army. Michael is another soldier with a difficult family situation, with a wife and child living far away from him. It is a situation that results in social isolation, poor sleep, and a high degree of financial and emotional stress. We know from his story that at one point these challenges became extreme enough that he was referred to base mental health resources, but that, while these may have been helpful personally, Michael still decided to attempt to end his enlistment prematurely by failing physical fitness standards. Like Meg, Michael represents a case where additional burdens outside of the workplace made Army life more difficult for him. Earlier intervention could have helped him to manage the financial hardships of traveling to see family, to better integrate into the social life of the unit, or even perhaps to allay his family's concerns about moving to join him.

Each of the soldiers in this report believed he or she had changed for the better as a result of serving in the Army, regardless of future enlistment intention. Each soldier described this transformation at least in part as an increase in personal discipline or maturity. While not

explicitly tied to the quality of leadership, it does suggest that leadership has played some role in the personal development of these soldiers.

Background

The diversity of soldiers' backgrounds begins with the demographics of their youth: Michael and Cassandra come from large cities, while Jim and Randy come from more rural areas, and Meg and Nick from small cities or suburbs. This is more diverse and more urban than the sample for the larger RAND Arroyo Center study, where more than half of the soldiers with whom we spoke came from small towns or suburbs, but still less urban than the U.S. population as a whole.⁴ Most enjoyed their hometown experiences, and most have close family relationships and friendships where they grew up. As with our larger sample, family is key to soldiers' lives both before and after they join. Meg loves her family and is particularly close with her siblings but, at the same time, serves in the military partly to avoid the small-town trap of poverty and drugs that she sees them stuck in. Jim is particularly close with his mom, whom he is trying to have classified as his dependent. Doing so would allow her to come live with him on post, which would undoubtedly change his military experience significantly. For Nick, coming from a military family, service and family are deeply intertwined. His family's military background shaped his understanding of what a military career entails and gave him an intense desire to serve.

The majority of privates enlisting in the Army do so at a young age, and this is reflected in the group of soldiers interviewed here. That said, the interview group had a range of experiences in the work world before joining the military. After graduating from a military high school, Randy and a friend owned a small landscaping company;

⁴ The Census Bureau lists nearly 84 percent of the population in urban areas. Note that the Census Bureau defines metropolitan as the total area dependent on an urban core that is 50,000 or more people. Soldier hometowns were based on narrative descriptions by soldiers and may be imprecise. This figure is intended for general comparison only. See Darryl T. Cohen, Geoffrey W. Hatcher, and Steven G. Wilson, "Population Trends in Incorporated Places: 2000 to 2013," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, March 2015.

Michael had a position as a student teacher; and Meg worked in fast food. Michael and Meg were also influenced by experiences they had taking college courses prior to joining the military. Both soldiers felt that college was “just not working” for them, though they hoped to return to school in the future.

Joining the Army

The soldiers in these interviews also had a varied range of experience with the military before deciding to enlist. Nick, coming from a Navy family, had a high level of knowledge about what to expect from military life, as did Cassandra, because of her experiences with JROTC, and Randy, who spent two years at a military high school. For these soldiers, joining the military was a carefully considered decision. Cassandra was passionate about the JROTC experience and wanted a better lifestyle for herself, while Randy just always wanted to be in the military. On the other hand, both Meg and Michael spoke of joining the military as almost an impulse decision. For Meg, the Army was an escape from poverty and the drug use she saw around her. For Michael, it was an alternative to a college experience he felt wasn't working out for him. They are the only two soldiers in this report who did not decide to join the military while still in high school.

As with the soldiers in our larger sample, the soldiers in this report often considered other military services before deciding to join the Army. Coming out of military school, Randy had hoped to join the Marine Corps, but some tattoos and a fight his senior year of high school meant that the process didn't work out for him. Nick considered other services, but an Army recruiter gave him a decal for his car, and he says that seeing the sticker in the rear-view mirror every day made him focus on the Army. For Cassandra, her JROTC experience was strongly associated with the Army, and her mentors in that program encouraged her to think of the Army, so she didn't spend a lot of time evaluating other services. Michael and Meg, as the impulse enlistees, did not consider other services. Finally, Jim made a quick decision to join the Army when he was in high school but now regrets not having

spent more time considering the other branches. He perceives quality of life in the Air Force to be higher than in the Army, and his frustrations with his MOS make him wish he'd pursued another path.

Soldiers' impressions of their recruiters varied considerably, from Nick, who felt that his recruiter was honest and helpful, to Cassandra, who felt her recruiters lied to her about the realities of service and didn't help her get her preferred job. Yet others, like Jim, were already sold on the Army and didn't expect their recruiter to do more than tell them which jobs they qualified for.

Initial Entry Training

Perhaps more than with other aspects of Army life, in the boot camp experience it is possible to see echoes of the typical movie portrayals of this aspect of Army life. Cassandra and Jim described the first hours and days of boot camp as a disorienting blur of long lines, strict discipline, and uncertainty. Michael struggled with the physicality of boot camp, and Meg found it hard to develop the strong voice required to respond to commands. Nick and Michael, among others, talked about feeling homesick, and Cassandra spoke at length about the smell of perfume on her grandmother's letters. For most soldiers, the camaraderie they experienced was the best part of boot camp, though Jim also enjoyed the military skills they learned, such as throwing hand-grenades. And in the end, the soldiers generally felt they grew as people from the experience, with some, like Meg, saying they wanted to quit and were proud they didn't. Others learned positive lessons, like Jim, who learned that he can't be a loner and can't get down on himself. In the end, Randy, Jim, and Michael all noted that the experience was easier than expected, and Nick thought there ought to have been more time to learn military skills and harder training exercises.

Life in the Army

It was not uncommon for soldiers, upon arrival to their new base and job, to remark that military life was not as strict as they anticipated. Nick was relieved to finally be an “adult” again, and Jim was happy to find that there was “actually some down time.” Likewise, Michael remarked that “They let us have a normal life in garrison” and that it is not as strict as he thought it would be. Cassandra did initially see the Army as a tough work environment, remarking that she has had to get used to the early morning wake ups, full work days and occasionally late office nights. But she has since gotten used to this way of life. This is a common experience as measured by our original survey of 81 young soldiers. We found that many soldiers entered the Army thinking that it would be a mere continuation of boot camp.

Of course, not everyone in our survey saw this revelation as positive. Randy anticipated “living in a Spartan community,” in which Monday through Friday he would be living in the woods, training and shooting. Randy’s anticipation of the Spartan life may be unique, but he is like a number of combat arms soldiers we interviewed in the larger study who disliked the frequent spells of off time and time spent in the barracks that often come with infantry, armor, or artillery CMFs.

Squabbles and even the rare fist fight aside, virtually all our six participants reported strong relationships with their fellow unit members. “My squad is awesome,” “I love these guys,” “I can always depend on them,” and “like family” were just a few of the terms used to describe their work units.

Soldiers were also positive about their leadership, even though some soldiers suggested that not every officer and NCO in their short careers was outstanding. Nick the mechanic suggested his current CO was “phenomenal,” and Michael says his officer “has his back.” Jim noted how his NCOs were working with him to make his mother a dependent and that one NCO in particular “genuinely seems to care.” Cassandra calls her first sergeant “Dad” because “we love him so.” One notable exception was Meg’s first-line NCO, who, she feels, “has a problem” with her and singles her out because of her daughter. This

is softened by her commander and first sergeant, who both contribute to the good vibes of the unit.

We made a point of asking every soldier about his or her perspective on deployment. Randy and Cassandra had the most extreme responses to these questions. Few, for example, want to go on deployment as badly as the infantryman Randy. After having the lone opportunity to participate on a previous combat rotation, Randy commented that he would go back to Afghanistan “right away” if he could, and that he would “probably do it for free.” Cassandra, on the other hand, stated that “I don’t want to go, but if I have to, I will.” The rest of the four participants wanted to go to deployment but for various reasons. Meg, who would have to leave her young child, highlighted the value of deployment in terms of its value to her career, noting that she feels “bad for the NCOs that don’t have a deployment patch.” Nick said he wanted to do “something for this country,” and Michael spoke of deployment as offering “something different” that “a lot of people would never have done.”

Personal Life

As with the soldiers in our larger study sample, most of the soldiers in this report expressed satisfaction with their social lives in the Army, with several noting that the Army provides a ready-made social circle. Nick is surprised at how popular and social he has become in the Army, throwing parties with a close clique of friends. Cassandra has a more quiet social life, going out to eat occasionally with friends and doing low-key social activities. The two soldiers with dependents have noticeably more challenging social lives: Meg used to be more social but finds it difficult to make time for that while juggling her responsibilities as a parent. She doesn’t know any other single moms, so she feels somewhat isolated. Michael, on the other hand, chooses to spend the majority of his free time talking with his wife, who is back home living with his parents. It’s possible that his social isolation contributes to the tough time he is having in the Army.

The soldiers in this volume also spoke about their dating experiences, and several expressed dissatisfaction with the dating scene around their bases. Despite that, Cassandra, Nick, and Randy all have a dating partner in their lives, with Cassandra and Randy dating fellow soldiers. Meg is happily single at this point in her life, saying she's become more picky because of her daughter, but she is tired of getting hit on by her fellow soldiers all the time.

Financially, the presence of a dependent appears to make a big difference between excellent financial health and some financial difficulty for the soldiers in this report. For example, Cassandra, Randy, and Nick have few expenses and are saving or investing parts of their paycheck each month. On the other hand, Jim, who is trying to make his mom his dependent, has to send home money each month. Meg is struggling to get child support she is owed and is on WIC food assistance but still manages to make ends meet each month. Michael had perhaps the toughest financial situation of the group, with a wife and child to support at home and expensive plane tickets required to visit them. Michael also occasionally supports his parents, with whom his wife and child are living.

Summing Up the Army Experience

Many of the soldiers in this volume sum up their service in ways that echo the archetypes of modern military service. Cassandra says she has grown more disciplined and more patient, Randy believes he is a better person who sees the value of helping others, and Meg is confident she is building a better life for herself while gaining the respect of those around her.

Nick learned from an early setback where he lost his rank and now believes he will treat his subordinates with more care and understanding. This, in turn, has fueled an ambition for him to become a senior NCO and be looked up to within the military. After a long military career, he hopes to open his own bar someday, as a gathering place where people can connect.

Meg's story was one of the tougher ones to hear—struggling to balance the demands of motherhood and Army life and questioning her potential as a leader because of all she's trying to manage. But when she looks at her career, she believes she is in a better place now than if she hadn't joined, and she has options. As she decides whether to stay in or leave at the end of her contract, she is weighing the challenge of going back to school in her spare time with the benefits of the Army for her family and the potential of being a successful Army leader.

Like many infantrymen, Randy struggles to see how his skills could translate to a post-military career, even as he knows he has built solid leadership skills while he was in. But he joined for the experiences and wants to stay in until he goes to all the training schools he is interested in, probably a few more enlistment contracts. After that, he thinks he may go home to Nebraska and perhaps start a ranch with his father and brothers. Randy's goal is to have a "good, simple life," and he seems more focused on enjoying the journey than arriving at a specific destination. The Army is building him into the man he wants to be, and he's happy with his choices.

Of everyone in this group, Michael is clearly the most unhappy in the military. In our larger RAND Arroyo Center study, most soldiers felt that they had made a good choice by joining the Army.⁵ But Michael just doesn't want to be in the Army anymore and is taking the extreme step of failing standards so that he can go home to his family sooner. While he feels he did learn discipline and skills from his Army experience, in the end, it just wasn't for him.

Cassandra is a typical, successful soldier, who has a bright future in the Army and the mentorship to be able to succeed. In her career thus far, she has learned how to be patient and now enjoys teaching and helping more junior soldiers. She doesn't have a clear plan for a career after the Army, but right now all signs point to a long Army career for her. Cassandra's upbringing was neither affluent nor stable and, like Meg, she is determined to make good by building a better life for herself than the one she came from. She is saving money and determined

⁵ In our sample of 81 soldiers (including the six in this report), 86 percent said that they believe the Army was the best option for them.

to delay marriage so she can take life one day at a time while she figures out the next step.

Finally, Jim is also weighing his career options. He's seen a transformation in himself, from slacker to motivated soldier, and now believes he can do big things. He'd like to have a longer career in the Army, but he also wants to get out while he can have a full career in medicine post-service. But for Jim, life is in a state of transition as he works to get his mother named a dependent. That will likely change Jim's Army experience profoundly, moving out of the barracks and into family housing and making the military's family health care benefits more precious.

Junior Enlisted Service

These stories show just a small range of the diverse experiences that make up today's junior enlisted Army. From the archetypal soldier to stories that challenge our notion of what Army service looks like, soldiers at the bottom of the military's rank pyramid cannot be seen as one undifferentiated mass. These men and women decided to take a chance on themselves and on the Army, to make them stronger, more disciplined, more advantaged, more mature individuals. Whether these soldiers stay in the military for a career or leave after just a few years, what is clear is that the Army is a transformative institution, and these soldiers are changed by their military experience.

And what should readers of this volume take away from it? For those who write policy for the Army, it is important to understand what soldiers care about and what frustrates them. For senior officers and enlisted leaders, we expect this report provides some nostalgia for your younger selves, but we hope it also highlights what may have changed in the junior ranks since then. For those NCOs and junior officers about to begin leading junior soldiers, we hope to provide a little insight into the types of people you will find under your command and the things that matter to them. As with our larger sample study, most soldiers just want to do the jobs they trained for and to be respected, and their immediate leadership has a big impact on both.

For Army recruiters, we hope this volume shows what recent recruits wish they had known about the Army beforehand, and how a good recruiter can help to prepare a soldier for his or her career.

And finally, for young men and women considering a military career—or for their families—we hope you will take away a realistic sense of what the Army is like; of the joys and stresses of the job beyond the recruitment and training phase. We hope you will see that, while the Army looks uniform, there are as many paths through service as there are soldiers in the Army.

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Army enlisted service is an enduring American tradition. Men and women, often recent high school graduates, leave home to serve their country and experience the challenges of Basic Combat Training and the camaraderie of life on a military base. But there is much more to Army service than the outlines with which most Americans are familiar. A separate RAND Arroyo Center report details the service experiences of 81 junior enlisted soldiers across many similar topics. The objective of *this* report is to provide deeper insight into the junior enlisted experience in a way that is accessible to policymakers and senior Army leaders, junior leaders, recruiters, and individuals considering an Army career.

This volume goes beyond the archetypes and bumper stickers to tell the stories of six soldiers in their own words. In these chapters, readers learn about their decisions to join the Army, the joys and frustrations of their jobs, and their considerations for the future. The narratives identify some leadership behaviors that support soldier success and others that make soldiers' lives more difficult. The interviews have been edited for clarity and readability, and some details changed to protect soldiers' confidentiality; otherwise, these words are theirs alone, with a few opening and concluding thoughts from the authors to capture key lessons.



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