

WE'VE GOT THE BEAT: More than 270 Mississippi Army National Guard Soldiers participate in Operation Fit to Fight for the first time at Camp Shelby, MS, June 17.

OPERATION

MSARNG BATTALION PREPARES FOR DEPLOYMENT WITH EXTREME HEALTH AND FITNESS TRAINING ★

FIT TO FIGHT

PHOTOS AND STORY BY SFC CLINT WOOD

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Standing in a cherry picker 40 feet off the ground with my digital camera and looking down at the scene below me on Forward Operating Base (FOB) Slayer June 17, I didn't realize that history was being made. I was more concerned with the right exposure and where to focus.

Below me were about 300 Mississippi Army National Guard members dressed in the Army Physical Fitness Uniform (APFU) executing stretching exercises seven ranks deep that extended about as far as my eyes could see. These Soldiers of the 1/155th Infantry Battalion were preparing to be the first to participate in the high-intensity Operation Fit to Fight (OpF2F), a pre-deployment health and fitness program created by SSG Ken Weichert and his wife, Stephanie, for *GX* magazine and www.1-800-GO-GUARD.com/fitness. The program is also designed to teach designated Soldiers how to train units.

Since I am a former Marine, Ken's method of motivating these Soldiers brought back memories of being a skinny 17-year-old in Marine Corps boot camp 27 years ago. If I closed my eyes, I swear I heard Drill Instructor SSG Strickland "motivating" us on the PT field with colorful language at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) San Diego.

Ken's version included shouting, "Hooah means 'Yes,' and it also means 'I'm ready!' Failure to shout 'Hooah' at the right times could result in extra push-ups. Do you get me?"

As you've probably already figured out, this 26-minute training session wasn't your typical Army Physical Fitness Training (APFT) routine. Not only was it carried out on gravel with jagged edges on the largest state-owned training site in the nation, it also included high-steps, the much-hated mountain climbers, speed skate drills, push-ups and flutter kicks. And with a heat index approaching 100 degrees, the Soldiers' gray APFU T-shirts had turned black from sweat by the session's end.



“HOOAH!” SSG Ken Weichert walks the ranks to motivate Soldiers like SSG William Maddox (left) during the Train the Trainer session.

“If somebody goes down, you’ve got to be able to go that extra mile.”

>> SGT Robert Krebs

In addition to Mississippi, two other states—Washington and Tennessee—are set to participate in the training this year, while more than 20 states have requested the program.

LTC Jeff Van, battalion commander and a builder from Atlanta, said he thought this training was a great opportunity for his battalion since it will be deploying to Iraq next year for a second time in less than three years.

“You can’t do the same ol’ thing over and over,” said LTC Van, the deputy S3 for the battalion during its first deployment to Iraq. “You’ve got to reach out and try something new every now and then. We’re really looking forward to it.”

After he participated in the training session, Van wrote, “SSG Ken’s program is innovative and ‘spot on’ for units deploying in support of OIF. The approach of continuous fitness training for a designated time period fits our high OPTEMPO battle rhythm. The new thought process of physical training is great. It is about time the military got us up-to-speed with the rest of the civilian populace.”

“It utilizes some fun techniques that are kind of out of the box,” said CPT Jeremy Allen, commander of the battalion’s C Company (CO), after the training session. “We’re used to doing some physical training that is really not that all exciting.”

He also said the response from the Soldiers has been overwhelming.

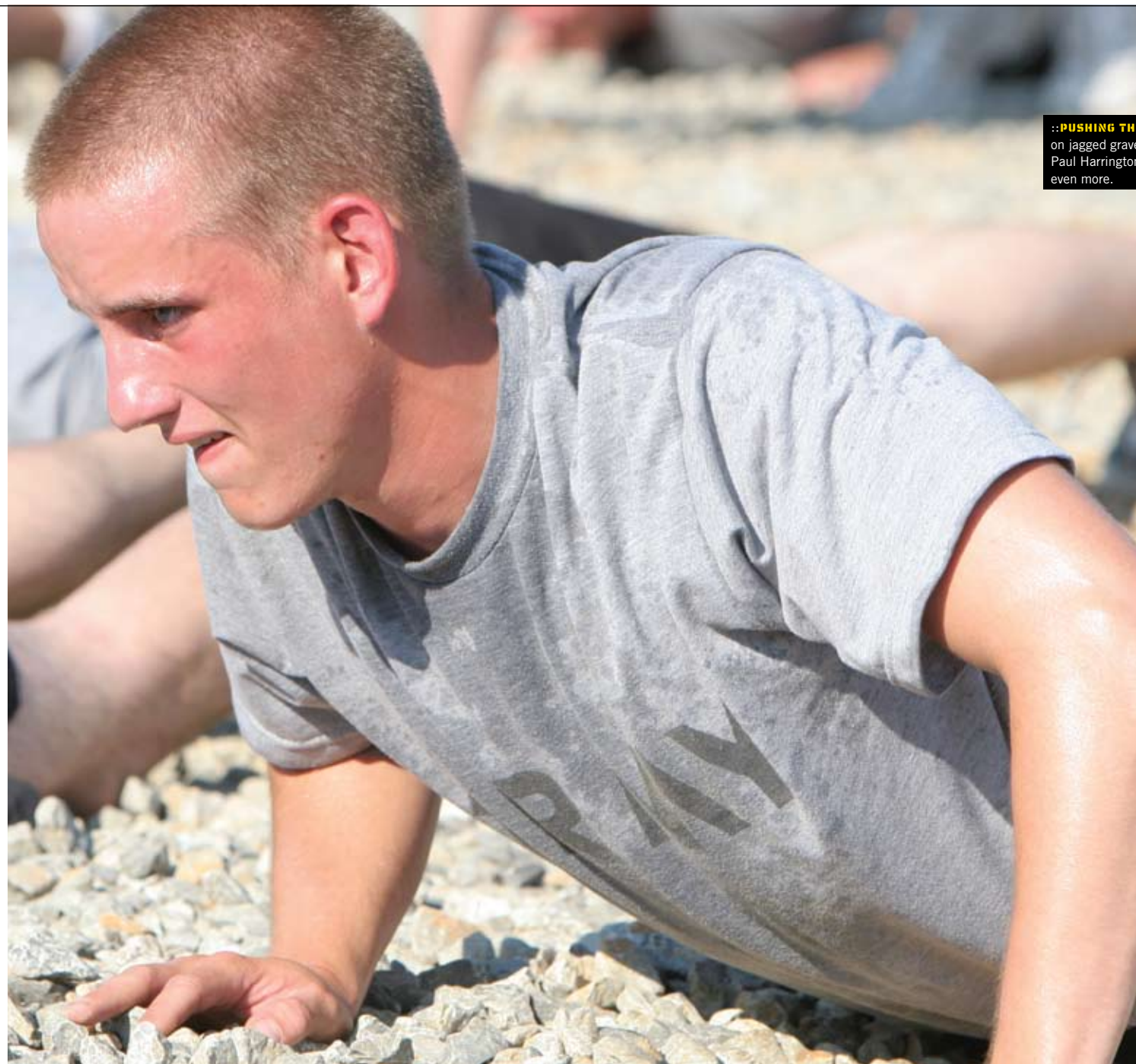
“This is really going to help their physical fitness,” he added.

HISTORY IS MADE

The formation was centered on a Heavy Expanded Mobility Tactical Truck (HEMTT) Palletized Load System (PLS) truck with a demountable “flattrack” cargo bed. SSG Ken and Bianca Buresh, one of his trainers, stood on the cargo bed about six feet off the ground.

They performed every exercise on this narrow platform, while Stephanie motivated the Soldiers at ground level.

Surrounding the formation were about 50 of the Unit Fitness Trainers (UFT) who were trained the day before by Ken, Stephanie and Buresh in the Train the Trainer session at William Carey University near Hattiesburg, MS.



..PUSHING THE LIMIT: Exercising on jagged gravel challenges SPC Paul Harrington and the Soldiers even more.

These UFTs motivated their Soldiers by walking through the ranks encouraging them throughout the session.

SSG William Maddox, a Guard sniper and improvised explosive device (IED) instructor at the camp, enjoyed being in front of his Soldiers.

“Anytime I have the opportunity to be in front of my guys, it gives me a chance to lead by example, and I love that,” said Maddox, who has been in the Guard for more than 15 years. “It gives the guys a chance to get motivated and simply follow my way.”

Maddox, who has been deployed to Iraq twice, said this type of physical training was

also good because Soldiers don’t have to be exposed to possible dangers while training outside in Iraq.

“You can actually do this in your hooch with just three or four guys,” he remarked. “Just make a little room, do a 25-minute session, and you will be [worn] out.”

Maddox also said that this type of training could be done on any type of terrain. “Rocks, gravel, sand—it doesn’t matter, you can still do it,” he said.

CPT Christopher Cooksey, a former Marine and commander of the battalion’s CO B, added that the training could also be done at squad level “as long as you have one motivated

NCO to fire up everybody else and keep them going.”

Nine of his NCOs also were among the UFTs.

“We’re going to make it a very important part of our training,” he said.

He noted that being able to train in a company-sized formation like they did probably won’t happen in Iraq.

But time will be set aside in Iraq for training like this for a small contingent of Soldiers to keep them in shape. He said Soldiers must stay in shape during deployments because of the unknown.

“Whether they are going to have to dis-

mount, run or move long distances,” he said, “this is the best thing I’ve seen to keep them in shape.”

SPC Jovi Prevot wrote in an email that he was amazed by the workout.

“I work out regularly, and I passed my APFT, but SSG Ken’s workout was more rugged and all encompassing than any workout I have done before,” he said. “We started with cardio and then moved on to work every muscle from neck to calves. It was very tiring, but after it was over, I wanted to do it again. Now I do Operation Fit to Fight nearly every day for my personal routine.”

Van noted how important it is that his Soldiers are physically fit and prepared for anything.

“It is a young man’s game,” he said, noting that carrying today’s armor and equipment can be tough for those who are out of shape, and during patrols and other operations, overweight Soldiers are not the norm.

“Even if you’re doing your cordon and searches or actually doing the operations you’ve been given, there is no time to wait for that guy who’s slow on his PT,” he said. “You can’t wait for the 15-minute one-miler out there. It is of the utmost importance [for Soldiers] to be on their A-game mentally, operationally and physically.”

TRAIN THE TRAINER

More than 70 Guard members from across the state and selected recruiters and retention NCOs, the majority undergoing Annual Training (AT) on the FOB, arrived at the Wilkes Dining Hall June 16 at William Carey University not knowing what to expect. All they knew was that they were going to be attending a six-hour Train the Trainer class.

The training sessions were similar to Tuesday’s battalion-wide training session, but the last one was at midday with the heat index reaching 95 degrees.

SGT Michael Thomas wrote in an email, “I remember getting off the bus and thinking this is going to be boring. This SSG Ken guy is probably just going to show us a bunch of exercises we already know how to do, and this is going to be a waste of a day. Then, I see a stereo system being hooked up outside, and I’m

thinking, 'Well, at least I'll get to hear some music while I'm out here.'

"Then out of the building walks Stephanie and Bianca, and they are hollering and trying to get all of us pumped about what is forthcoming," Thomas said. "Now I'm starting to get a little nervous because, let's face it, I know I am not really fit to fight, although I should be."

The Soldiers filed into the classroom in an orderly fashion to start their day. Like any other military class, there were 10 minute breaks about every hour. But the Soldiers in the battalion were just happy to be away from the FOB, where they spent the last several days. They slept in air-conditioned modified shipping container-like units that held 12 Soldiers. There was a shower tent, but I'm sure this way of life got a little old. The class included two 26-minute high intensity training sessions and several blocks of classroom instruction that included proper diet and nutrition.

Ken, who has served 15 years in the Guard and has been deployed overseas several times, opened the class by telling the group how he was temporarily paralyzed while playing high school football in Chicago in 1985.

After the second-string quarterback was injured, he went from being a defensive right end and the third-string quarterback to the starting quarterback. On a play only 14 yards from the end zone, he said he decided to run for the score instead of handing the ball off to his halfback, knowing he could impress the college scouts in attendance.

"I went for the corner post and dove in," he said.

One player tackled Ken around the legs and another player grabbed his face mask. "I went twirling around and my tailbone hit the ground, and I was paralyzed from the waist down for four weeks and four days," he said.

Ken said even when he was in college, he would still feel pain while standing.

In his freshman year of college, he joined the Active Duty Army as an intelligence assistant. But before being accepted, he had to sign an exception to policy letter. This was a special form that said that if he was discharged because of his injury, he could not receive disability benefits from the Army.

Ken said undergoing 11 weeks of Basic Combat Training (BCT) was the most "painful experience" in his life.



OPERATION MOTIVATION: SSG Clifton Coleman (left) receives some encouragement from Unit Fitness Trainer SSG Derick Booker during the battalion-wide training session.

“It was the most intense workout I have ever done.”

>> SGT Michael Thomas

But he credits the Army's emphasis on building strong core muscles during BCT with rebuilding the strength in his back.

Ken, now a Master Fitness Trainer, eventually created the F2F program to give back to the military what it had given to him.

The F2F program was designed to provide a safe, specialized health and fitness program to deploying Service members to help them prevent combat-related injuries. Ken and Stephanie were also instrumental in having the program recognized by civilian fitness credentialing agencies. The operation's goal is to reduce combat-related stress, raise morale within the units and increase the retention rate.

Ken said he first wrote this program in 1989 while stationed with 11 other Soldiers at a code interception site in Iraq. The team worked three days on and three days off, and it needed a way to train together, he said.

Once he returned home, he noticed that the Soldiers who kept themselves in shape in Iraq weren't able to keep it up back in the states.

"As soon as they got back, they got fat," he quipped.

Ken also informed the classes of an Army report stating that, in 2005, almost one third of 18-year-olds who applied for service in the Armed Forces were overweight. The share of applicants who were obese doubled to 6 percent from 1996 to 2005.

Also in 2003, 3,000 Soldiers were discharged because they were overweight, and thousands of others have been put on notice to lose weight or lose their commissions.

Ken also showed a slide during class of Army Regulation 611-201, which specifies that infantrymen are required to occasionally raise and carry a 160-pound person on their back. The regulation further states that infantrymen frequently walk, run, crawl and climb over varying terrain for a distance up to 25 miles. It also requires infantrymen to do various other lifting tasks while carrying a minimum of 65 pounds evenly distributed over their entire body.

"You have to be able to carry another Soldier and all of his equipment at the same time for at least 25 meters; that is in your job description," Ken said.

For example, a Soldier carrying as much as 127 pounds of a basic fighting load (enough gear and ammunition for him to survive for a week in the field) could carry a fellow Soldier with this much weight or a little less.

Ken also told the class that 76 of the 350 Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) possess a code for heavy lifting.

SGT Robert Krebs, an infantryman/armor crewman who has been in the Guard for four years, noted that all the Soldiers in the unit

should be physically fit, too.

"If we're all physically unfit, then it makes it harder on everybody to do his or her job, whether it's loading 10 tank rounds a minute or toting a heavier weapon than the other guys, you've got to be able to do it," he said. "If somebody goes down, you've got to go that extra mile. You've got to pick them up, and tote them off. And your body can handle more if you're physically fit when it comes down to it."



FIT TO FIGHT: CPT Jeremy Allen executes a modified reverse back bend during the Train the Trainer session.

Minutes after this point of instruction, the Soldiers participated in their first training session with the blaring sun directly overhead.

"We started and bam, he threw us right into the lion's den," Thomas said. "It was the most intense workout I have ever done. It wasn't even two minutes in and I was sweating like I had just completed a 15-mile road march. Every part of my body was hurting, but after it was over, I was glad that my platoon sergeant had picked me to come to this training. This is exactly the type of workout that I need to get 'fit to fight' before our deployment comes around next year. Plus, it was great because when the whole battalion had to do the workout the next morning, I was in my platoon sergeant's face the whole time motivating him to keep going. I may pay for that later though."

SPC Vincent Miller, a light-wheeled vehicle mechanic who has been in the Guard for almost

six years, said the exercises were interesting and kept him motivated.

"I like the different exercises; they keep you very active," he said.

SFC Tim Lewis said he enjoyed this training, but wasn't prepared for what it entailed.

"I am the main PT trainer at our Gulfport Recruit Sustainment Program (RSP), and we're going to try and implement some of this on drill weekends," he wrote. "I may also be able use it in the future at a unit level."

if I could actually go through the physical training," said the most challenging part of the training was "trying to keep up with the pace."

"It is a very high-speed pace all the way through," he said.

For SSG Charlie Lewis, a light-wheeled mechanic with 21 years in the Guard, this "pace" will improve his physical fitness.

He said his personal goal now is to stay in shape and get his fellow Soldiers in shape. The class also taught him to train, stay hydrated and keep the mind-set of "never quit and never stop," he said.

Speaking of hydration, Ken dropped this bombshell during his diet and nutrition block of instruction: He told the students for every Coke or Pepsi they drink, it takes 27 glasses of water to wash out the acidity of one soda.

CPT Jeremy Allen thought the classes also gave him a firsthand look at the effectiveness of the new fitness-training techniques.

"Now we can better train our Soldiers on what to eat and what to do to stay in shape," he said. "It helped us learn how to do the training and how to conduct it properly, so our guys can get the most out of it. It is not enough to just know, it is [knowing] how to teach it. So we learned how to teach it effectively."

Allen added that he was glad he was able to lead his troops from the front as a trainer. This built his confidence in being able to do the exercises and assist in motivating his Soldiers.

"And they got a lot more out of training knowing that I knew what I was doing, so they keyed off of me and were able to push themselves a lot harder," he said.

Allen summed up this training the best. Naturally, his first goal in the deployment is to complete the battalion's mission. His second mission, he said, is to ensure that all of his Soldiers go home "as good if not better than I got them over there."

"I owe that to their families and all their friends, and their physical fitness is a major part in their completion of their mission," he said. "So physical fitness is going to be an important part of our training between now and when we go overseas, so they are able to do their job and do what they've got to do so they get home safely."

The trainers also received DVD-R reference materials and printed lessons. Check out Ken's fitness program online at www.1-800-GO-GUARD.com. **GX**