

EXPERIENCING

★ OPERATION ★

FIT TO FIGHT

PART II

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SFC CLINT WOOD

::LEADING FROM THE FRONT::
Soldiers from the 81st Brigade Combat Team, Washington Army National Guard, follow the lead of SGT Ken as they become "Fit to Fight."



I'm lying in a normal Army push-up position, except that my knees are on the lush grass of the Yakima Training Center parade ground with the midday sun beating down on me in the middle of July, and I'm hoping I don't make a fool out of myself.

YOU SEE, I decided the only way to write about Operation Fit to Fight 2 (OpF2F2) was to do some of the operation's high-intensity exercises, too. Along with me, more than 50 Washington Army National Guard (WAARNG) Soldiers from the 81st Brigade Combat Team were doing the Train the Trainer session where they earn the title of Unit Fitness Trainer (UFT).

In last month's issue of *GX*, I wrote about OpF2F, emphasizing that several hundred Mississippi Army National Guard (MSARNG) Soldiers were the first to participate in this program, conducted on the jagged rocks of a Forward Operating Base (FOB) on Camp Shelby, MS. Now once again, SSG Ken Weichert, his wife, Stephanie, and one of SGT Ken's trainers, Bianca Buresh, are the trainers of this operation, a pre-deployment health and fitness program created by SGT Ken and Stephanie for *GX* magazine and www.1-800-GO-GUARD.com/Fitness.

The 81st BCT is composed of five Guard battalions, including one from California, who were spending about 30 days at the training center for their annual training (AT). Once this AT is complete, they will spend about two months in Mobilization Training, including a Mission Rehearsal Exercise (MRE) at Fort McCoy, WI, before deploying overseas in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. This will be the second time the 81st has deployed to Iraq.

Back to that hot afternoon: Several Soldiers and I are standing a few feet apart, and we form a circle around SGT Ken. I have a perfect view of majestic Mount Rainier through the treeline.

"Oh yeah, these are today's leaders, serving our state and serving our countries far and beyond the call of duty each time," SGT Ken hollers.

He then begins demonstrating an advanced push-up, belting out, "All right, first exercise, watch me first, we are going to do the dive bomber push-up again, forward, hold and back, hold."

But for some reason, SGT Ken changes his mind and says, "Oh no, we're not. We're going to go to a wide grip position; we're going to do a leaning lateral press a little bit easier, to your left, up, to your right, push-up position, move!"

I've never done this push-up, and I thought to myself: "How hard could it be?" So I didn't know whether to agree with him.

SGT Ken belts out, "To your left, up, to your right, up!" We were doing normal push-ups, but on the way up, we pointed our fully extended left

::MOTIVATING THE TROOPS:
SGT Ken charges through the PT formation.



::READY, EXERCISE! SGT Ken shouts out exercise instructions to the Washington Army National Guard's 81st Brigade Combat Team for his Fit to Fight training program in July.

and right arms to the sky, rolled our legs over and held our arms up for about three seconds.

By the first "to your right," I was so out of shape that my right arm started shaking as if I were having muscle failure, and I nearly fell over. That was the only time I did this in the next three to four minutes, despite doing several mountain climbers, dive bomber push-ups and leaning lateral presses.

By the time the session was over, my arms and chest were aching. And this was nothing. The other Soldiers had done this circuit three times.

"For the most part, [the training] was humbling, and it was motivational," said SGT Carl Sorrels, a former Marine Reserve combat engineer whose goal is to join the Guard's Special Forces. "It was nice because you got to see that, regardless of what fitness level you're at, there is always room for improvement."



..SWEATIN' IT OUT: A Soldier takes a breather in the heat of the intense Fit to Fight exercise program.

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As any Marine veteran knows, the Corps' physical fitness training is notorious for being intense: For example, Marines have to run three miles and bend and thrust, which is similar to SGT Ken's "Jump Squat Thrust."

Sorrels, who joined the Guard five months ago, admitted that the OpF2F2 training was "still humbling."

SGT Scott McManus, who became a certified personal trainer at Seattle's Gold's Gym after his deployment to Iraq, said, "I thoroughly enjoyed this training. It was highly charged and motivational [and] very energetic. [There was] great instruction given throughout the entire program. Fabulous."

SPC Jonathan Olander, whose wife is a personal trainer, liked the intensity of the training and the versatility of the time it takes for a workout.

"I was amazed at the type of workout I received," he said. "My wife is a personal trainer (Sorry babe, love you, but [I've] never received a workout like that before). So watch out Billy Banks—there is someone meatier in town."

SGT Ken also gave this outstanding workout to more than 300 Soldiers the next morning on the parade ground in a mass extended formation. The UFTs wearing white T-shirts with "Fit to Deploy" printed on the back stood in front and on the sides of the formation.

1SG Travis Wise, who will be in the Guard 20 years in November, said his expectations of this session were to "get a good sweat on" and learn some new techniques.

"I learned some new exercises that I haven't done before and worked

some muscles I haven't used in quite that way," he said. "It was a good time. It was a good motivator."

He said he enjoyed the trainers actually showing the exercises and techniques instead of just yelling out instructions.

SPC Jacob Smalser, who joined the Guard to challenge himself, loved being a UFT. "It made me feel more confident in doing everyday PT (physical training) with groups that are not at all the same PT level," he said.

Soldiers learn practical exercises

CSM Robert Sweeney, the senior enlisted Soldier of the WAARNG, told the Soldiers before the Train the Trainer Session that they are responsible for monitoring their units' physical fitness throughout their entire deployment.

He said he is going give them tasks to complete this mission, and he told the Soldiers that, yes, Soldiers on the FOBs in Iraq are still doing their required Army Physical Fitness Tests (APFTs).

He also told the Soldiers that Guard members' average age is about 32 years old compared with the Active Army Soldiers' average age of 23 or 24.

"We are an older group, and we're not used to wearing those rucksacks and that IBA and doing those things, too," he said.

To assist the Soldiers in wearing these items and doing things like foot patrols, Sweeney told the UFTs that they need to teach their Soldiers the proper way to get out of vehicles and how to move their bodies while wearing their body armor and gear.

"Our real goal and objective as senior leaders is to bring everybody home and not broken," Sweeney said.

After Sweeney's speech, the Soldiers participated in one of three practical exercises. The first one lasted 26 minutes. It was a group session of several exercises, including push-ups, high steps, lunges and flutter kicks. The second session was the circuit session, where SGT Ken instructed the push-ups and mountain climbers, Stephanie executed exercises using rubber tubing, and Bianca emphasized leg exercises, including lunges, squats and back-way front kicks.

The third practical exercise, "By the Numbers," was a first for SGT Ken's program. It consisted of UFTs forming teams of at least two to watch their partners doing several exercises that SGT Ken and his staff had seen Soldiers doing incorrectly in the earlier sessions.

SSG John Pelerine said he liked this last exercise best because it demonstrated the correct form. Overall, he said this UFT training has prepared him to lead his Soldiers.

"This has given me a very comprehensive block of instruction, so I can take it back to my Soldiers and better lead them in PT," he said. "[That way] they can be better fit for combat."

SSG Rueben Gardner, who has been in the Guard for eight years and deployed to Iraq twice, liked the program because it was continuous.

"I'm going to lead my troops by example," he said. "I'm going to try and implement that big part of not resting and continuing to keep your heart rate up. [I want to] change the old Army [way] and put in the new stuff. I like that, and that is what I'm going to do."

"Being in shape in combat is hugely important because it saves lives," he continued. "People think better and clearer, they look better, and they perform better. It's just an overall successful thing to be in shape."

Sweeney summed up the importance of the UFTs.

"If you're a leader and you can't lead from the front, then you're not an effective leader," he said. "You can't do it."

He added that these trainers don't have to do as many of the exercises or run as fast as their Soldiers; they just have to be "out front." **GX**

