



Mississippi MUSCLE

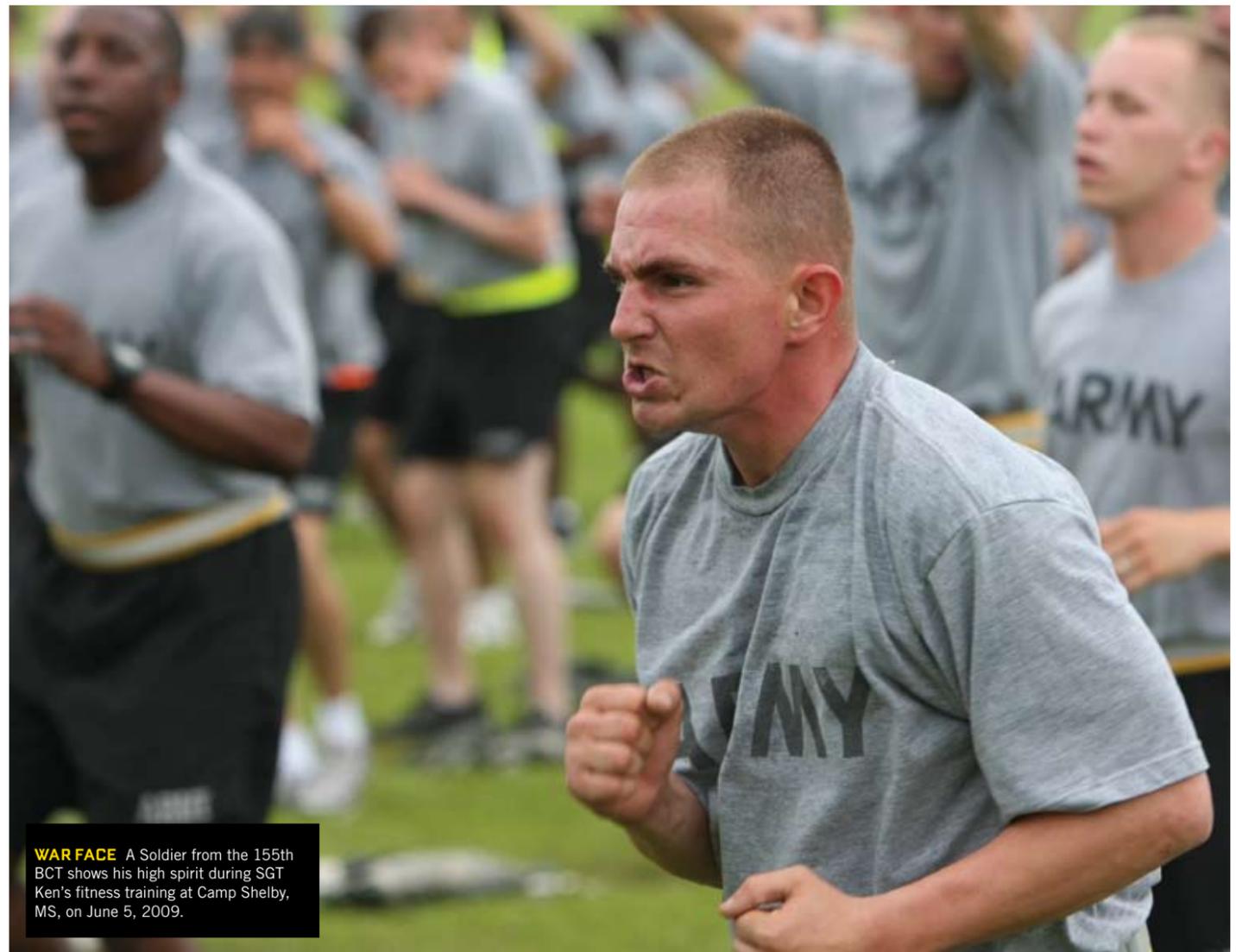
SHELBY HOSTS MASSIVE GUARD PT EVENT

~ Story and photos by Clint Wood ~

As an Army National Guard Soldier, I'm "always ready."

Same goes for my civilian job. It was short notice when I was sent down to Camp Shelby. But I couldn't wait to go. This event was going to be huge.

STANDING ROOM ONLY
GX's Ken Weichert leads calisthenics for more than 850 Mississippi Army National Guard Soldiers at Camp Shelby, MS.



WAR FACE A Soldier from the 155th BCT shows his high spirit during SGT Ken's fitness training at Camp Shelby, MS, on June 5, 2009.

THE EVENT was "Operation Stay the Course" on June 5 at Camp Shelby, MS. GX's Ken Weichert, aka Army National Guard Master Fitness Trainer SGT Ken, led one of the largest Army National Guard physical fitness training sessions on the camp's grassy parade field. I witnessed the session from the gunner's seat, or "hell hole," of a Huey helicopter hovering at treetop level.

More than 850 Soldiers from the Mississippi Army National Guard's 155th Brigade Combat Team participated on the camp's parade field in this follow-up program for Operation Fit to Fight (OPF2F).

As some of you know, OPF2F is a comprehensive fitness and nutrition instructor-training program designed to prepare Soldiers for overseas deployments and to ready new Guard Warriors for the rigors of Basic Combat Training (BCT). Soldiers have to go from

executing Side-Straddle-Hops (jumping jacks) for 30 seconds in cadence to 20 seconds each of sprinting in place and the much-dreaded moun-

"It was just motivating being out there with so many Soldiers."

—SGT David McGriff, two-time OPF2F participant

tain climbs. The pre-deployment health and fitness program lasts more than 40 minutes, during which Weichert barks out commands like, "Failure to shout 'Hooah' at the right time could result in extra push-ups!"

More than 400 of the brigade's 1st Battalion, 155th Infantry Soldiers were the first Guard Soldiers to train in OPF2F in June 2008 on one

of the camp's forward operating bases. They did the exercises on jagged rocks instead of grass to simulate the conditions they'd encounter at bases in Iraq.

I can tell you from experience, if we hadn't walked on those rocks to and from buildings and other living areas in Iraq, we would have slipped and slid in the gooeuy mud after the rains.

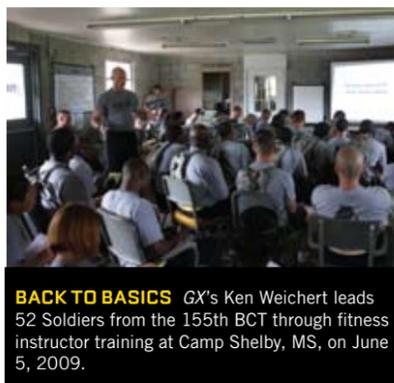
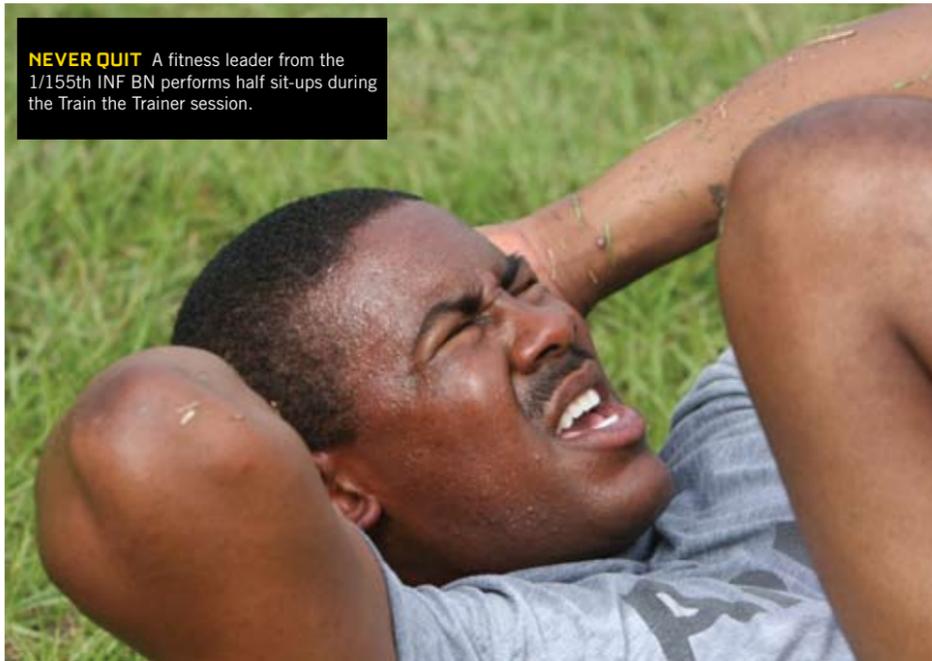
SGT David McGriff participated in both operations. "It was just motivating being out there with so many Soldiers," he said. He was impressed with their determination to keep exercising despite pain and discomfort.

How intense can this routine be?

McGriff, who averages between 210 and 220 on his Army Physical Fitness Test, described the intensity as "amazing."

"We were at the point where we forgot about the time limits," he noted. "If you asked me

NEVER QUIT A fitness leader from the 1/155th INF BN performs half sit-ups during the Train the Trainer session.



BACK TO BASICS GX's Ken Weichert leads 52 Soldiers from the 155th BCT through fitness instructor training at Camp Shelby, MS, on June 5, 2009.



NO PAIN, NO GAIN Fitness leaders from the 1/155th INF BN perform elevated push-ups during the Train the Trainer session.

how long I thought we were out there, I wouldn't be able to tell you."

SGT Marlin Gattlin, whose lowest APFT score is 289, said there's always room for improvement in his physical fitness.

An interesting statement coming from this gangly Soldier who could pass as a track sprinter and can crank out 104 push-ups and 90 sit-ups.

"All PT I take as a challenge, even if I'm getting smoked," he admitted.

I don't think SFC Kenneth Coxey got "smoked" when it came to doing the upper body exercises of the session. His biceps were as large as my thighs.

But Coxey, the coordinator for the BCT commander's Personal Security Detachment and a sheriff's deputy, said the session was still "real intense" compared to his workouts. And one wasn't enough. He and McGriff were among the more

than 50 BCT Soldiers spending six hours earning the title as Fit to Fight trainers. To earn this title, the Warriors had to participate in a 30-minute Fit to Fight session on a grassy field. Soldiers driving by the field slowed down to watch.

The classroom instruction included combat fitness training, long- and short-distance running training and nutrition. **GX**

Watch testimonials from these high-speed Soldiers at: YouTube.com/nationalguard

Smoking the Younger Soldiers

While photographing the Train the Trainer session, I couldn't help but notice an older Soldier in the front row of the formation "kicking butt."

And the 42-year-old SSG Walter Mullins had good reason.

The former Navy Sailor said his personal goal is to stay fit.

"I want to stay in shape as long as I can," commented Mullins, who was told he qualified for the Navy's Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training after taking his first physical fitness test in boot camp. BUD/S is a prerequisite before SEAL training.

He described SGT Ken's exercise routine the same way he described SEAL training: "intense."

"My abs are still burning," he admitted.

Mullins, who paints semi-trucks for a living, joined the West Virginia Guard for his first time and



DEEP IMPACT SSGs Walter Mullins, left, and Annie Adam perform squats during the Train the Trainer session.

served from 1986 to 1988. He rejoined the Mississippi Guard in 1996.

He has been deployed once to Iraq from Dec. 7, 2003 until Jan. 5, 2005, stationed four miles from Fallujah.

Smoking the Guys

SSG Annie Adam of the District of Columbia Guard didn't even break a sweat during the Train the Trainer session. She was definitely in shape.

When asked if she knew she was outperforming most of the male Soldiers in this class, the 24-year-old intelligence analyst smiled, "Yeah, that happens. It feels nice to get out there and show some people up, because I've worked really hard to get to [this] place."

She said fitness is very important to her. At home, she runs five to 10 miles a day, at least six days a week and works out at the gym two to three times a week. In this training environment, she runs three to six miles daily.

So what did she think of the battalion PT session? She said she was skeptical because of the size of the formation.

"But once I got out there, as soon as ... Weichert started his routine, I knew that I was going to be in for a pretty good PT session," she explained. **GX**

>> SGT Ken led the formation from a flatbed trailer. Here's his story.

From the Grassy Field

By Ken Weichert

AT 7 A.M., I could already feel the sweltering Mississippi summer heat rising from the moist, grassy field at Camp Shelby.

"Fall in!" shouted CSM Johnny Marlow. His piercing order sent a horde of several hundred screaming Soldiers running toward the flatbed truck stage. They stopped suddenly, leaping distance from the truck.

Marlow leaned over to me and said, "They're all yours."

When the troops were formed and ready, the high-energy exercise music came blasting through the speakers, signifying the start of the workout.

At first, some chuckled at this new style of military aerobic conditioning. But smiles turned to grimaces when the muscle-targeting phase kicked in.

Halfway into the lower-body session, some fell to their knees in complete exhaustion, and some tasted their breakfast a second time.

As the focus shifted to upper-body training, the entire battalion probably started to realize they would feel the effects of this program for days to come.

I held up a deck of oversized playing cards and announced, "Whatever card I draw, you drop and do that many push-ups, shout 'Hooah' on the last push-up, roll over and do double in crunches, shout 'Hooah' on the last crunch, and jump up and do jumping jacks until the next card! If you are up early, motivate somebody else! Do you get me?"

"HOOAH!" responded the Soldiers.

By the time the seventh card was drawn, muscle fatigue had quickly overwhelmed most of the mob.

"The louder you are, the fewer cards we play!" I shouted.

With my last statement, the crowd grew much louder, indicating a universal desire to establish a swift cease-fire.

"It's the type of training that prepares you for combat, Soldiers!" I shouted to what may have been the largest fitness formation in Guard history. "Are you gonna quit?"

"NEVER!" responded the Soldiers.

"Are you fired up?" I shouted.

"HOOAH!" responded the Soldiers.

Near the end of this 40-minute workout, I bellowed, "Hang on a few more minutes, Soldiers! Quitting is not an option! Do you get me?"

"HOOAH!" cheered the Soldiers.

Finally, with less than a minute remaining, I lifted my arms to attract their attention and began the final countdown: "10, 9, 8 (crowd joining in), 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!"

"At ease!"

"You did it! How do you feel?"

The answer was a deafening applause that could no doubt be heard for miles. **GX**



A NEW CLASS OF LEADERS GX's Ken Weichert poses with 52 of the newest fitness instructors after the Train the Trainer session at Camp Shelby.



FOLLOW OUR LEAD GX's Ken Weichert and his fitness leadership team drive the massive formation through a series of push-ups.