More than 270 Mississippi Army National Guard Soldiers participate in Operation Fit to Fight for the first time at Camp Shelby, MS, June 17.
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.
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 Atlantic Beach, 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 old 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 OP Iraqi Freedom. The approach of continuous fitness training for a designated time period fits our high OPTEMPO battalion 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 (CD), 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.

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

SGT Josi 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 99 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 knew 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
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 him. The F2F program was designed to provide a safe, specialized health and fitness program to deploying Service Members to help 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 effectiveness of its personnel. Ken told the class that 76 of the 350 Soldiers who took part in the F2F program have been deployed overseas several times, said the exercises were interesting and kept him motivated.

As soon as they got back, they got fast,” he quipped.

Minutes after this point of instruction, the Soldiers participated in their first training ses- sion with the blazing sun directly overhead.

“We started and bam, we threw us right into the lion’s den,” Thomas said. “It was the most in- tense 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 on.”

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.

FCP Tim Lewis said he enjoyed this training, but wants to be prepared for what it entails. “I am the main PT trainer at our Gulfport Re- 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 a tank rounds a minute or towing a heavier weapon than the other guys, you’ve got to be able to do those things. If somebody goes down, you’ve got to get 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.”

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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 per cent from 1990 to 1999.

Also in 2003, 3,000 Soldiers were dis- charged 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 61-211-2, which specifies that infantrymen are required to: occasionally raise and carry a 160-pound person on their back. The regulation further states that infan- trymen frequently walk, run, crawl and climb over varying terrain for a distance up to 25 miles. It also states that infantrymen do var- ious 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’s in your job de- scription,” 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 (MOS) pos- sesa code for heavy lifting.

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, it’s 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 exer- cises and assist in motivating his Soldiers.

“I think this is just what the military needs,” he added. “Not only can anyone do it anywhere, but it doesn’t require any weights.”

By the time the class was over, most of the Soldiers probably weren’t thinking too deeply about the program.

As Maddox lamented, “By the end of the day we were smoked. The only thing I wanted to do was come in and go to bed.”

FCP Titus Johnson, a human resource special- ist who joined the Guard to “test my body to see if I could actually go through the physical train- ing,” 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.

“Tiger” Charlie Lewis, a light-wheeled me- chanic 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 before the class began: “During the 10-minute break 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.

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For SGT Kelly Mullican, who said he lost five to six days a week for the last seven years and hardly ever gets sore muscles anymore, the Train the Trainer session changed that.

“I will definitely be adding this workout to my routine,” he wrote. “This is a very good workout routine for anyone, and it’s easy to conduct. With this program and the diet plan that Ken has pro- vided, it is all anyone needs to stay fit.

Allen summed up this training the best. Nat- ural, 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 Sol- diers go home “as good if not better than I got them in.”

“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. “And if 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 reference material and additional lessons. Check out Kent’s fitness program online at www.1-800-GO-GUARD.COM.

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

>> SGT Michael Thomas