



# TRAINING GROUND

BY STATE SENATOR MIKE STACK

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My career as a lawyer and state senator had kept me busy, but I wanted to contribute more. After hearing that Army JAG officers were in demand, I decided to throw caution to the wind. My motivation was a combination of patriotism and pure insanity.



Senator Stack (CENTER) with members of the 173rd JAG Office Basic Course.

I raised my hand and swore the oath of office last July. I was commissioned as a First Lieutenant in the Army National Guard and reported to training at Fort Lee, Virginia, shortly thereafter.

Our Pennsylvania Guard does an excellent job in the global war on terrorism. They also are tremendous recruiters. I am certain the Army recruiters gave me the same “pitch” as other applicants. The training would be a gentleman’s course, designed to give me a little introduction to the Army. I would be able to come and go as necessary. Relax and don’t worry! This was sugar-coated language for boot camp.

On a sweltering July morning, my JAG class assembled for the first time. Our uniform was Army shorts and T-shirts, reflective belt and athletic shoes. We would be running and marching right off the bat. A first sergeant and a chief warrant officer (similar to drill sergeants) greeted us with respectful condescension. We were told to march and ask questions later.

The first sergeant was inappropriately named Suttles. She was career Army, hard as nails and didn’t mince words. We were lawyers, but we had to learn how to be soldiers first. She started us off with stomach scissors and push-ups. I had gone from the sweet life of a senator to the rigorous demands of Army monotony.

The initial shock wore off about a month later, and I began to assimilate. I was pleasantly surprised to find there were guys older than me. The age range was 25 to 47, and

several JAG officers were close enough to my age that I didn’t feel completely out of place. Besides, 40 is the new 30! About half the class had previous military service and had been deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Panama and other places. Others were direct commissioned officers, or DCOs. Some were previously enlisted soldiers and were now officers. They would often give special instructions “for the benefit of the DCOs” so we would know how things are done.

After a day of marching, doing paperwork and hurrying up to stand around, shut-eye could not come soon enough. I set my sights on the same goal I had used in law school, in politics and throughout life: survival, then victory.

I spent Independence Day in full combat gear, crawling across a grass field in 100-degree heat. Although I had never imagined such a scenario and thought I might die of heat exhaustion, it was fun.

All members of the 173rd Officer’s Basic Course had to complete the Army physical training (PT) test consisting of push-ups, sit-ups and a 2-mile run.

The test was a source of anxiety and insecurity for most of the class. I thought I was beyond this immaturity, but I wasn’t.

I jog regularly and so thought I’d have an easy time with the run, but what I didn’t know was that it would be more of a rocket-propelled sprint. It seemed like the entire class bolted past me, and I feared finishing last. That fear inspired me to run faster,

and I finished near the front of the pack. I thought my heart would explode through my chest. I survived but was doomed, as I was now assigned to the fastest running group and be expected to run ridiculously fast at all times. Take my word for it, I am not that fast of a runner.

The Army is a bit like high school — my colleagues liked to gossip. I kept a low profile, but my classmates eventually heard I was a senator. They told me they thought it was great that I was serving, but why go through the torture? They had an outstanding point that I pondered endlessly.

“Free time” finally came when we reached the JAG school in Charlottesville, Virginia. After relentless agony, I would now be attending military law school for ten weeks and be taught by elite Army officers utilizing the “firehose method.” They would saturate us with enormous amounts of information during a short period of time. There would be exams and PT four days a week. Daily formation would be at 05:30.

Our class of seventy-eight men and women would also form up and engage in the structured world of drill and ceremony. The class was divided into Alpha and Bravo companies. We would follow commands and move in a military manner. For two and a half months, we would sprint up and down the hills of Charlottesville. Each morning, I contemplated deep thoughts such as, “Oh my God, you idiot, you’re in the Army!” But after a while, my consternation turned to pride. The trash men would beep their horns and give us the thumbs up, and private citizens would thank us for our service. Our instructors reminded us that joining the military in a time of war was a bold decision and that less than 1 percent of the population served. Many of us will be sent to Iraq or Afghanistan.

The academic training was excellent. We learned military operational law, fiscal law, ethics, wills and legal writing. Operational law was enjoyable and known as the “law of blowin’ stuff up.” It was like being back in law school, but with a military uniform on.

My colleagues began to check out my Web site and asked why I wasn’t promoting my military training. I told them my reasons for entering the military were personal, not political. Besides, we had not graduated yet. Would I like to promote that I washed out? Hell no!

The Army wants to put you in a position to succeed. Eventually, I passed all my exams, endured my ruck marches, completed Army trial practice and ran, ran, ran. I achieved a “300,” the highest obtainable



Senator Stack (LEFT) talks with Lt. Townsend, a fellow JAG officer.

score in the physical fitness test, along with a number of my colleagues. I was certified as an Army judge advocate and graduated with my class on September 29, 2007.

One would think that was enough training, but the goal for JAG officers in today's Army is that we be warriors first and lawyers second. Army lawyers are often in situations that result in combat. We were instructed that soldiers need officers to lead them out of trouble. JAG officers are no different than any other officer.

General David Petraeus, the U.S. commander in Iraq, believes JAGs are an indispensable weapon of any military unit. Collateral damage needs to be avoided and public relations disasters such as Abu Graib must never happen again. The JAG can help guide decisions of commanders within military and international law standards.

I finally reached the home stretch after I traveled to Fort Benning, Georgia, for the finishing touches on my training. It seemed incomprehensible that there was another month to go, but false enthusiasm is better than no enthusiasm.

With genuine insincerity, I drove on with purpose. After all, I was previously worried that I would not finish Fort Lee.

Fort Benning is known as the "mother

of infantry." A new group of cadre or commanders took us through additional skill sets. We carried our M4 rifles everywhere and learned to clean, maintain and fire

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them. The obstacle course, known as the confidence course, was challenging to say the least.

During the land navigation course, I was given a map and compass and told not to lose my way in the woods. I emerged from the deep, humid Georgia forest mentally and physically challenged but still in one piece. Later, we climbed under barbed wire, lived in a simulated Forward Operat-

ing Base (F.O.B.) and carried out countless movement exercises as simulated artillery exploded around us. I was inspired by how well our unit came together as a team.

My personal heaven and hell on earth came to an end on October 28, 2007. Apprehension and doubt were replaced by confidence and respect for the Army. The Army stresses values that are important to lawyers: loyalty, perseverance and duty to one's fellow man. I was heartened by the fact that so many excellent people are willing to serve and I was honored to be able to serve with them. I have been assigned to the 28th Infantry Brigade in Harrisburg. The brigade has a rich tradition dating back to the Revolutionary War and has played a substantial role in every conflict.

I have only trained so far, but this experience has given me the opportunity to observe brave men and women who risk their lives for all of us. They are from Pennsylvania but are deployed to the Middle East and around the world. I am honored to wear the same uniform. ■

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