

THEY WERE BORN JUST BEFORE 9/11, and they've grown up in an age of nearly constant warfare, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. All while engaging in simulated warfare from their couch with the rise of blockbuster first-person-shooter games like Call of Duty. In some ways, the threat of war has never felt more distant or our perception of it more disconnected. So what does the world look like to . . .

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KENNEDI CARTER

THE AMERICAN SOLDIER AT

Here, nine soldiers at FORT BRAGG IN NORTH CAROLINA share why they decided to join up, what it's like to confront the true reality of being a soldier, and how they see their future.

—AS TOLD TO JOSHUA ST. CLAIR



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PFC Carlos Talavera

HOMETOWN: Houston

POSITION: Wheeled-vehicle mechanic

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Age 25

I couldn't afford college, so I went ahead and enlisted in the Army. My mom cried when I told her. She didn't want me jumping out of airplanes.

I was surprised by the bonds I made. They're stronger than what I knew from civilian life. Still, it's hard leaving my family. On the

flight to Kuwait, I remember thinking how lucky I was to have the things I have.

I'm more self-motivated now. When I was home, my dad mentioned a problem with his truck, and I went ahead and fixed it, which surprised him. I used to have to be told to do things like that.



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PFC Torrell Buckner

HOMETOWN: Indianapolis

POSITION: Information-technology specialist

I grew up in a rough neighborhood. You get caught up in stuff sooner or later. Parties. Smoking. Fighting. I went to live with my uncle and get away from things. He'd joined the Army and his life turned out all right. So I said, "Sign me up."

I knew I'd get yelled at every day because of the type of person I was. I would always talk back. You can't do that in the Army. They try and break you down.

Now I'm working to get security certifications, because they'll help me make decent money when I leave the military.

I used to be hotheaded. I never used to turn the other cheek to stuff. But here, the Army taught me that, so that's good.



SPC Dexter Umedib

HOMETOWN: Tacoma, Washington

POSITION: Platoon armorer/military police

My twin brother and I both enlisted when we were 18. We followed in our uncle's footsteps. I remember as a kid going with him through the gates at Fort Lewis in Washington and being excited.

People think others join the military to shoot guns and fight. But we also join to help better ourselves. I want to become a sergeant and travel. I'd love to be stationed in Italy. My brother is in Japan. Lucky him.

My uncle has deployed three times now. Sometimes he'll have to go sit by himself in a room. I'm kind of afraid of PTSD. But I have resources. Some older guys have been through some bad calls, like suicides. They'll tell me, "Hey, if you're going through anything, just let me know. I'm upstairs, three doors down."



PFC Clayton Moak

HOMETOWN: Crosby, Texas

POSITION: Infantryman

Most people where I'm from in Texas go off to work at the oil plants. But I wanted to go out and do more.

I enlisted without telling my parents. Then I said one day, "Hey, I'm leaving for basic in July." My dad said, "Hey, if you want to do this and start your life, that's great."

I didn't expect to deploy so soon. I knew it could happen at any point. But still, it was a little nerve-racking. The biggest challenges are the mental ones, like being ready to leave the country.

I would love to stay in the military, but I'm still not sure. You can do a lot of traveling, but I want to travel on my own. I think it could benefit me more on my own.

↓ PFC Justin Sablan

HOMETOWN: Sinajana, Guam **POSITION:** Office clerk

I'd say about 30 percent of my high school class joined the military. It's common where I'm from in Guam. My whole family is military, too, mostly Air Force. At first, I thought of joining the reserves or National Guard, because I would've been stationed in Hawaii and close to home. But then I thought: *Why not go somewhere farther and meet more people from different backgrounds?*

During basic, it was hard getting along with others. People tried to mess you over. And we all got punished for one person's mistake. But there are others from home here at Fort Bragg. We back each other up.

I don't know whether or not I'll reenlist. My family owns a food mart, and I took a culinary class in school while in ROTC. That's what I want to do if I leave the Army.



↑ SPC Kevin Dang

HOMETOWN: Lancaster, Pennsylvania
POSITION: Information-technology specialist

I didn't have any plans after high school. I was sitting around for four months. Everyone else just wanted to work at McDonald's and Burger King, but I wanted to do something bigger. My parents were shocked when I enlisted. They didn't expect their only child to just leave the house at 18 and live his own life.

But eventually they said, "You're grown now; you have to do what will carry you in life." As an airborne unit, we had to jump out of a plane as part of training. It was exciting and scary. But I took it a lot easier than I thought. I wasn't too nervous or panicky.

Comforting my family was always the hardest part. When I deployed to Kuwait, I didn't tell my mom until after I arrived there. I didn't want to worry her. I'm still 50/50 on whether or not I'll reenlist. I'd really like to work in an office. My own chair and my own desk. That would be nice.

I see things differently now. Being exposed to so many different cultures here has made me see more with my own eyes, instead of someone next to me telling me what to see.



PV2 William Peterson-Kirkland

HOMETOWN: Ann Arbor, Michigan

POSITION: Paralegal

I was in architecture school, but after the first semester, I didn't want to take out a loan. As I was looking for jobs, an ad popped up for the military. I enlisted, swore my oath, and then got on a bus. Those first two days, I only slept for a couple of hours.

Everyone thinks Army life is training. That's just the beginning. Now I'm in an office starting at 9:00 A.M. I help our attorneys advise commanders on everything from disciplinary actions to operational laws overseas.

My mom says I eat faster at the dinner table now. I think the biggest change is that I see others as part of a team. I plan to finish my architecture degree. I really want to design and build my own home at some point.



↑ PFC Justin Smith

HOMETOWN: Oregon, Wisconsin

POSITION: Infantryman

Growing up, I always wanted to join the military. My parents were 100 percent on board. My whole family said it made them all proud.

Some people think that the military brainwashes people. But in reality, we're all normal people with a different job that demands a little more. Basic was definitely the hardest part. Not so much physically but just being away from home. I was never really away from home by myself before.

I definitely see myself going somewhere else in the military. I also want to do college. Everyone gets married super early in the military. I don't understand why, but I definitely see a family in the future. I want at least two kids. Hopefully, they'll grow up to do something great.



← SPC Peter Hendricks

HOMETOWN: Grand Rapids, Michigan

POSITION: Audiovisual technician

I was about 17 when I enlisted. College was a big factor. I wanted to be able to pay for that and not be up to my eyeballs in debt. There's this perception that people join the military because they don't have any options or didn't get good grades. I was pretty much a straight-A student.

Military culture is very different from the civilian world in that you can really get roasted by your coworkers. But I've not regretted joining the Army.

I just had my first deployment in Qatar. My goal is to get a top-secret clearance and a bachelor's degree. With that, I'd be able to work for a lot of different high-level government jobs. I got a lot of decisions to make.