

Basic changes

In-your-face drill sergeants and PT pain are out. Coaching and combat training are in. So far, instructors and recruits like the results

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FORT JACKSON, S.C. — Three seats back, duffel bag in his lap, a freshly shorn recruit sat silently surrounded by 20 other stone-faced soldiers.

After in-processing at the reception station, the new soldiers boarded the white school bus and waited, knowing their drill sergeants would arrive shortly with those fearsome campaign hats perched above steely eyes and mouths poised to abuse.

Drill Sergeant Herman George boarded the bus.

They waited.

Each scared face stared at his duffel bag as if his mother might pop out and offer up a hug.

They knew what was coming. They'd heard stories from previous generations of soldiers — stories of curse words and push-ups, even hushed tales of recruits being roughed up. But as the bus moved closer to their new barracks, no yelling. Tears that had hovered on the brink seeped back inside, shoulders relaxed down into natural positions.

The bus driver turned on the radio. Soon, the private sitting three seats back began bobbing his head — just barely.

"If you feel like giving me a lifetime of devotion," the private started singing along with the radio, "I second that emotion."



Pvt. William Holdreith, 34, joins fellow soldiers for PT during basic training.

George finally came to life.

"Two-thirteen is the best basic training battalion in the United States Army!" he yelled.

And then, "Get off the bus in a safe, calm manner, hoo-ah?"

Welcome to the kinder, gentler Army. It's a place where soldiers do push-ups from their knees if they get tired. They perform sit-ups on sleeping mats so as not to bruise their tailbones. If they're not feeling well, they're encouraged to report to sick call. And their drill sergeants yell only sparingly.

It's a world of second chances for recruits who go AWOL or flunk the physical training test; a home to some young adults who haven't quite stopped abusing their substances; a place where the sick, lame or lazy are encouraged to give it another go.

These are recruits who played video games growing up instead of climbing trees. They are from a generation reared by parents who viewed spanking as child abuse. The only authority they didn't question was their own.

Overall, they may be softer on

the outside than previous generations. But they multitask better. They understand technology. And they volunteered for the Army while watching their possible futures unfold on 24-hour newscasts featuring lost limbs, lost friends and lost lives.

In the middle of a war where the rules change daily, the Army realized that these are just the kind of people it needs — and that the service must retool to make good soldiers out of the Millennial Generation.

"The soldiers have already committed. They know they're going to war," said 1st Combat Training Brigade Commander, 13th Infantry Regiment Col. Jay Chambers. "It's to our benefit to lead them instead of drive them."

The drill sergeants say they're seeing a payoff to the new method of training recruits.

"The feedback downgrade is that they're better trained for the fight," said Command Sgt. Maj. Sandra Emery of 2nd Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment. "They're better-prepared to infiltrate and command and execute. I wish I'd had these kids when I was in Iraq."

Army officials say the new generation of recruits learns more effectively when drill sergeants dial back the aggression and intimidation. Rather than confuse soldiers by yelling at them for everything

from an untied boot to a misplaced weapon, they make sure the punishment for a missing M16 sticks out.

Instead of pushing recruits past their abilities in physical training, they concentrate on form — and making sure there are fewer injuries. Rather than force soldiers through difficult tasks to meet a checklist, they coach them into good marksmanship habits. And rather than tell impressionable young people that they're not paid to think, they encourage them to plan their own maneuvers.

When drill sergeants are more mentor than menace, "The soldiers shoot better, are in better physical condition, and their hearts and heads are in the zone," Chambers said. "In combat, there's not going to be a drill sergeant — or a sergeant at all. They can't wait until they get killed for someone to tell them what to do."

Winning the attrition war

No one woke up one morning and thought, "I wonder what would happen if we were nice to the new guys?" But even before the Army went to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, attrition statistics showed something had to be done. A Government Accountability Office report issued in April 2000 showed that in 1998, 36.9 percent of all service members

