



PHOTOS BY RICK KOZAK, TIMES STAFF

When their drill sergeant, Staff Sgt. Herman George, boarded their bus on the first day of basic training, the recruits here stiffened up, scared silent, expecting to be yelled at. But as the bus driver turned on the radio and one recruit started singing, George said nothing, so the recruits began to relax.

were leaving the military during their first year of service. The Army ranked at the top of the list for lost recruits. The GAO found people left within their first six months for three main reasons: medical problems caused by training, fraudulent enlistment, and performance problems, such as failed PT tests or the inability to adapt to military life. Other reasons included weight issues, character and behavior disorders, and alcoholism and drug use.

But interviews with out-processing soldiers showed that many of them left because of poor leadership techniques, such as obscene language or humiliating treatment, and the GAO concluded that “negative motivation has a detrimental effect on some recruits’ desire to stay in the military.”

In the past, the response has been that those soldiers couldn’t hack it — there was even a sense of pride among those who did make it through that not everyone could.

But it costs up to \$15,000 to put a soldier through basic training. The GAO report said that if the services could reduce their six-

month attrition rates by 4 percent, they would save \$4.8 million a year.

“We estimate that in fiscal year 1996, DoD and the services spent about \$390 million in fixed and variable costs to recruit and train individuals who never made it to their first duty stations,” the report states.

After Sept. 11, 2001, when it became difficult to bring new soldiers in, those numbers became even more important. In 2003, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command changed Regulation 350-6 to ban drill sergeants from using abusive language, allow recruits more personal time, give new soldiers seven hours of sleep a night and cut down on injuries.

As of winter 2006, graduating recruits may also earn off-post one-day passes, rather than the on-post family-day passes they received in the past.

In just one year of training changes, the Army is seeing a difference. At Fort Jackson, the basic-training attrition rate stood at 12.6 percent in fiscal 2004. In fiscal 2005, that percentage sank to 8.8 percent, according to Fort Jackson spokesman James Hin-



The kinder, gentler basic training allows soldiers to do push-ups from their knees if they get tired and perform sit-ups on sleeping mats so as not to bruise their tailbones.

nant. Armywide, about 11 percent don’t make it through basic now compared to 18 percent last May.

Accessions Command Chief Lt. Gen. Robert Van Antwerp “called us all in and said, ‘Look. The Army needs us to analyze how we’re doing business,’” said Col. Thomas Hayden, deputy commanding officer at Fort Jackson. “They’re having a hard time recruiting, and we’re losing soldiers. Let’s look at us.”

Still, old hands might be surprised at how rigorously these new soldiers are being schooled in combat skills.

In December, the Army added more warrior tasks and battle drills to the nine-week regimen, and increased the graduation requirements — changes the drill sergeants say make basic training more difficult than it has been in years past.

Hayden emphasized that the changes are geared toward a different generation, but the schooling still results in highly trained new soldiers.

“The more we understand about them — where they’re coming from — and the more we attempt to know them, the better we are able to modify the training,” Hayden said. “It’s kind of weird that we didn’t figure it out earlier.”

That doesn’t mean it’s been an easy sell with the drill sergeants who must make the new approach work.

Discipline and control

At the drill sergeant school at Fort Jackson, four instructors sat

around a table and worked out the issue. They said drill sergeants themselves have to take a big share of responsibility for the attitudes and abilities of the Millennial Generation: The drill sergeants’ generation raised them.

“We based our ideas of basic training on movies or what our parents told us,” Sgt. 1st Class Bryson Endrina said. “We expected ‘Full Metal Jacket’ when we got there.”

Sgt. 1st Class Deitra Alam agreed, and said the new training was a challenge for the old-school set.



Walker

“As kids, we were physically reprimanded — we were beat,” she said, laughing at how parenting has changed. “These people coming in — they’re not used to that yelling and poking. That’s a shock for them. It’s not a culture they come out of.”

At first, she didn’t understand how the new style would work. “I was like, ‘What does that mean? I got to hand out candy?’” she said. “That’s not what that means. That’s not the spirit behind it.”

Sgt. 1st Class Gregory Walker said he has had soldiers tell him summer camp was harder. “Some drill sergeants say we’re taking their power base away,” he said. “That’s not the case. We have to come up with more creative ways to get discipline to the soldiers.”

All said they eventually saw the changes as good, but sometimes, according to 1st Sgt. Lester Jones, drill sergeants feel as if their “hands are tied by the new rules.”

“Soldiers will tell me things thinking they can get the drill sergeants in trouble,” he said.

“They truly believe they can control the drill sergeants. The focus has been on the drill sergeants who have done wrong in the past. Now, we can’t do this and we can’t do that. It takes away our authority.”

Some soldiers, he said, need to be yelled at. And drill sergeants should still be able to say who stays in and who goes out.

“Right now, the attrition rate is the focal point, not what the drill sergeant has to say,” Jones said. “They tell you they don’t have to do what you’re telling them, they go AWOL, come back, go AWOL again and eventually graduate. That’s one soldier too many.”

But Lt. Col. Mel Hull, commander of the 1st Battalion, 13th Infantry Regiment, said drill sergeants should earn their reputations for being tough mentally, not because they yell a lot.

“The stress should be on the task,” Hull said. “If the drill sergeant is constantly yelling, and the soldier actually does something wrong on the range, how is it going to be any different when the drill sergeant yells at him for that?”

The yelling isn’t completely gone, however. But because the new privates didn’t go through basic before the changes, they don’t know they’re being treated any differently.

For example, a drill sergeant noticed Pvt. Marcus Kelly of Texas had a tube of toothpaste sticking out of his back pocket during physical training.

“I had to do more push-ups,” Kelly said. “My dad told me it would be all drill sergeants yelling and making us do a lot of push-

See **BASIC** next page