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A CULTURE OF SUCCESS

Army ROTC cadets fight their way to the top, earning the no. 1 spot

BY KIANA ROPPE
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PHOTO YUE WU & KAIT MCKINNEY

I got my first taste of ‘Army Strong’ that Tuesday. It was a little before 6 a.m. at Lied Recreation Center. I stepped out of my car, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The smell of morning dew filled the air and I could hear birds chirping nearby. It was still dark as I stood there looking toward the front door, toward the struggles I knew awaited me. My only thought was to return home.

Determined to try, and with the help of a friend, I crept toward the entrance where a herd of students was standing. I thought, “Are they all waiting for the same thing I am?” Indeed they were. The doors opened and the students poured in. My expectations of the coming events mainly derived from media influence, including movies like Blackhawk Down, G. I. Jane and the beloved Disney Channel Original, Cadet Kelly. The difference is that I can sit happily on the couch and watch those movies, but here and now I would have to join the no. 1 Army ROTC program in the Midwest brigade. Daunting, isn’t it?

According to the U.S. Army, “A Soldier in the U.S. Army is the embodiment of physical strength, emotional strength and strength of purpose.” My experience with the Cyclone Battalion’s physical training proves they have the physical strength covered. In fact, the Cyclone Battalion is one of the best (if not the best) in the nation. This past summer, at the Leader and Development Assessment Course (LDAC) at Fort Lewis in Washington, Iowa State cadets earned a 295.6 average out of 300 on the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT), the highest score of the 273 programs in the country.

On the first floor of the gym students and ROTC cadets gathered in three groups (platoons) with three lines (ranks) in each. Seeing this, I timidly walked over and stood at the end of the line nearest me—I thought I would just do what everyone else did. An
ROTC cadet from each of the three groups shouted for attendance. This morning workout routine is a class: Military Science 150: Army Physical Readiness.

The class is required as part of the ROTC program at Iowa State, but is open to all students. It’s taught four days a week from 6 a.m.-7:15 a.m. Mondays and Thursdays are filled with a mix of cardio and strength training. Tuesdays are primarily upper-body and core strengthening and on Fridays, they run 45 minutes straight. "It’s pretty vigorous, so it wouldn’t be appropriate for a new exerciser, and it is heavily focused on muscular strength/endurance development of the upper body and torso," says Warren Franke, a Kinesiology professor at Iowa State, "The exerciser uses their own body weight, which is a basic principle of functional training." As we began our stretches for the day, I couldn’t help but chuckle, imagining how silly I would look if I did these moves anywhere else. That’s what’s so great—the Army isn’t as cold or strict as it may seem. Cadet Brandon Amerine admits the Ranger Challenge Teams, teams of cadets that prepare for the Ranger Challenge Competition each year, develop camaraderie and he recalls a specific incident last year when he was a junior. Amerine says his Ranger Challenge Commander (the cadet in charge) joked that he wouldn’t jump in the fountain outside Mackay Hall as they were running. Willing to face the challenge, Amerine jumped in and rolled around, enjoying his victory. Afterward, he returned to team formation and ran back to Lied as water dripped from his drenched clothing. "We get our job done, we do it above and beyond, but we have fun while doing it," he says.

As part of ISU’s ROTC Program, the juniors—MS IIIs—plan and implement the physical training workouts. "By having even more students put into the class, students that they don’t see all the time, it forces them to communicate a lot more," says Master Sergeant Benjamin Pingel, a class instructor. "They have to plan their workouts for a cadet that can run a 10-minute mile and maybe a couple other students that can’t run nearly that fast."

Cadet Adam Nguyen was initially enrolled in the class as a regular student, but he later grew to love ROTC so much that he joined. "I didn’t join ROTC as a cadet until my junior year of college, however I’ve been taking the MS 150 course since my freshman year at Iowa State," Nguyen says. "I joined this course just so I can get a great workout, but in addition to that, I’ve ended up gaining more."

I would be working out under Cadet Jake Rajcula. For each exercise, we counted the reps, “one-two-three, one, one-two-three, two,” all the way to, “one-two-three, one zero.” Never having heard military counting, I found it quite odd that the number ten was said as one-zero. Eventually I caught on and quietly joined in with the counting, letting it serve as the rhythm for my movements. By the time we got to calf raises my lack of military strength was catching up to me. Standing on my tippy toes, “The Wizard of Oz” came to mind and I began to think, “There’s no place like home,” wishing I could cut this workout short. It wasn’t necessarily the exercises themselves that were so difficult, it was the repetition—each exercise had at least ten reps with no breaks, not even for water, before continuing on to the next. Being out of shape and dehydrated—most likely due to my love of diet soda—this became difficult for me.

As we began doing calf raises for the second time, I scanned the group and noticed other students who appeared to struggle as much as me. This gave me comfort. The group leader, Rajcula, admitted it took his whole freshman year before he got used to the physical training (PT). “I hated PT in the beginning,” he says. “But it got to the point on Wednesdays and weekends, when I didn’t work out, I actually felt worse sometimes. After a while your body finally starts getting used to it.”
ability to not only be a good soldier, but a good leader. All 6,000 junior contracted cadets in the country are watched continuously for 29 days and then judged based on their physical fitness, Army knowledge and leadership ability. In particular, cadets must complete a land navigation assessment, which includes a written exam, a day navigation course and a night navigation course.

Cadets also completed cultural awareness, weapon training, first aid training, the Field Leadership Reaction Course, where cadets must work together to overcome extensive obstacles and the land confidence course.

The most intricate part of LDAC was the squad situational training exercise. For this, cadets actually lived in a tactical training base and conducted mock missions against a fictional enemy, allowing their minds and acting ability to lead the way.

For the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear training, cadets were able to personally experience the burn of harmful chemicals to prepare them for their career.

Toward the end of the assessment, the cadets literally walk the plank—they walk along a narrow log high above water until they reach a set of handlebars, then each cadet has to zip line down and drop themselves into the water for water confidence training.

How well a cadet does or doesn’t do at LDAC has a significant impact on their future in the Army. National rankings determine if a cadet can join the branch they want—Infantry, Military Intelligence, Aviation, Medical, etc.—and where they can be stationed. A cadet’s rank is comprised 40 percent their GPA and 60 percent their performance at LDAC. Each cadet must compete with every other junior cadet in the country, which is why Iowa State focuses on perfecting the PT test and training their juniors for LDAC.

To ensure ISU’s cadets can handle the pressure, they take a lab every Wednesday that consists of learning basic military training. For underclassmen, training includes acting out missions and scenarios in order to gain confidence and leadership skills, while upperclassmen develop training programs, structure labs, present classes and plan various events. They also focus on land

Lucky for students like me who aren’t as conditioned as Rajcula, grades are scored a little differently in this class. If students improve during the monthly APFT they will maintain a good grade in the class, regardless of where they began, Pingel says. MS 150 is graded primarily based on attendance and the APFT.

The APFT includes a timed two-mile run, two minutes of pushups and two minutes of sit-ups. In order to pass it as a student age 17-21, males must run two miles in 15 minutes and 54 seconds and females must run it in 18 minutes and 54 seconds. For the push-up section, males must be able to do 42 push-ups and females 19. Both sexes need to be able to do 53 sit-ups. The APFT is scored out of 300 points, 100 for each section. Just imagining attempting this test makes me cringe.

I consider running my Achilles’ heel. So, as fate would have it, I was the first to sprint from the back of the line to the front as we jogged around the track for the Indian run. Determined to beat my nemesis, I raced to the front and kept jogging. After one lap, my heart was racing fast, it became harder and harder to breathe and my pace was slowing. Without a word, I dropped out of the group to get a drink. Right after, it was supposed to be my turn again. I’m sure there was an awkward moment when they all looked back and saw that I had vanished. All I have to say after lasting no more than twenty minutes is that Cadet Trevor Thein was right: This was nothing like “Tropic Thunder.”

The goal of LDAC is to assess each cadet's ability to not only be a good soldier, but a good leader. All 6,000 junior contracted cadets in the country are watched continuously for 29 days and then judged based on their physical fitness, Army knowledge and leadership ability. In particular, cadets must complete a land navigation assessment, which includes a written exam, a day navigation course and a night navigation course.

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navigation and water confidence. “We don’t think it’s very realistic that everyone would go off to camp and get an excellent rating, but we want everyone to be prepared to get one,” says Sergeant First Class Fred Beckman.

According to Beckman, Thein says he actually had fun at LDAC—no wonder Thein ranked no. 1 out of the approximate 450 cadets in his regiment. “It was a great experience, not just as a cadet, but as a person,” Thein says. But he was not the only Cyclone to excel. In fact, within the 27 Cyclone Battalion cadets, which includes cadets from Drake, Buena Vista and Grandview, four were in the top four of the regiments of 450 cadets, seven were number one in their platoons, 11 earned an overall excellence award and 12 earned the coveted RECONDO badge. (To get a RECONDO badge, cadets have to score over 90 points on each event of the APFT, earn an exceptional rating for Land Navigation, pass First Aid & the Confidence Course on their first try and earn a satisfactory rating or higher overall—as Smith puts it: “They’re studs.”)

“There is no program better in the nation than Iowa State and the stats show it,” says Thein. “I feel like if I was told I had to go lead a platoon of soldiers tomorrow I would be able to go out and do it. It has not only developed me as a leader but also as a person. The morals and values you gain from a program and family like this is nothing you can experience anywhere else.'