

The Secrets Military Trainers Never Tell Young Recruits About War

An ex-Army Ranger's new mission to educate students considering joining the ROTC.

By [Rory Fanning](#) / [TomDispatch](#), April 7, 2016

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US Soldiers in Iraq in 2005.

Photo Credit: Sgt. Jeremiah Johnson/U.S. Army

Early each New Year's Day I head for Lake Michigan with a handful of friends. We look for a quiet stretch of what, only six months earlier, was warm Chicago beach. Then we trudge through knee-deep snow in bathing suits and boots, fighting wind gusts and hangovers. Sooner or later, we arrive where the snowpack meets the shore and boot through a thick crust of lake ice, yelling and swearing as we dive into near-freezing water.

It took me a while to begin to understand why I do this every year, or for that matter why for the last decade since I left the military I've continued to inflict other types of pain on myself with such unnerving regularity. Most days, for instance, I lift weights at the gym to the point of crippling exhaustion. On summer nights, I sometimes swim out alone as far as I can through mats of hairy algae into the black water of Lake Michigan in search of what I can only describe as a feeling of falling.

A few years ago, I [walked across](#) the United States with 50 pounds on my back for the Pat Tillman Foundation in an obsessive attempt to rid myself of "my" war. On the weekends, I clean my house similarly obsessively. And it's true, sometimes I drink too much.

In part, it seems, I've been in search of creative ways to frighten myself, apparently to relive the moments in the military I said I never wanted to go through again—or so a psychiatrist told me anyway. According to that doctor (and often I think I'd be the last to know), I'm desperately trying to recreate adrenalizing moments like the one when, as an Army Ranger, I jumped out of an airplane at night into an area I had never before seen, not sure if I was going to be shot at as I hit the ground. Or I'm trying to recreate the energy I felt leaping from a Blackhawk helicopter, night vision goggles on, and storming my way into some nameless Afghan family's home, where I would proceed to throw a sandbag over someone's head and lead him off to an American-controlled, Guantánamo-like prison in his own country.

This doctor says it's common enough for my unconscious to want to relive the feeling of learning that my friend had just been blown up by a roadside bomb while on patrol at two in the morning, a time most normal people are sleeping. Somehow, at the oddest hours, my mind considers it

perfectly appropriate to replay the times when rockets landed near my tent at night in a remote valley in Afghanistan. Or when I was arrested by the military after going AWOL as one of the first Army Rangers to try to say no to participation in George W. Bush's Global War on Terror.

I'm aware now, as I wasn't some years back, that my post-war urge for limits-testing is not atypical of the home-front experiences of many who went to war in Afghanistan or Iraq in these years and, for some of them, judging by the [soaring](#) suicide rates among Global War on Terror vets, the urge has proven so much more extreme than mine. But more than a decade after leaving the army as a conscientious objector, I can at least finally own up to and testify to the eeriness of what we all brought home from America's twenty-first-century wars, even those of us who weren't [physically maimed](#) or torn up by them.

And here's the good news at a purely personal level: the older I get the less I'm inclined towards such acts of masochism, of self-inflicted pain. Part of the change undoubtedly involves age—I hesitate to use the word “maturity” yet—but there's another reason, too. I found a far better place to begin to put all that stored up, jumpy energy. I began speaking to high school students heavily propagandized by the U.S. military on the charms, delights, and positives of war, American-style, about my own experiences and that, in turn, has been changing my life. I'd like to tell you about it.

Filling in the Blanks

The first time I went to speak to high school students about my life with the Rangers in Afghanistan, I was surprised to realize that the same nervous energy I felt before jumping into Lake Michigan or lacing up my gym shoes for a bone-shaking work-out was coursing through my body. But here was the strangest thing: when I had said my piece (or perhaps I really mean “my peace”) with as much honesty as I could muster, I felt the very sense of calmness and resolution that I'd been striving for with my other rituals and could never quite hang onto come over me—and it stayed with me for days.

That first time, I was one of the few white people in a deteriorating Chicago public high school on the far south side of the city. A teacher is escorting me down multiple broad, shabby hallways to the classroom where I was to speak. We pass a room decorated with a total of eight American flags, four posted on each side of its door. “The recruiting office,” the teacher says, gesturing toward it, and then asks, “Do they have recruiting offices in the suburban schools you talk to?” “I'm not sure. I haven't spoken to any on this topic yet,” I reply. “They certainly didn't have an obvious one at the public high school I went to, but I do know that there are [10,000](#) recruiters across the country working with a [\\$700 million](#) a year advertising budget. And I think you're more likely to see the recruiters in schools where kids have less options after graduation.”

At that moment, we arrive at the appointed classroom and I'm greeted warmly by the social studies teacher who invited me. Photos of Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, and other revolutionary black leaders hang neatly on a wall. He first heard about my desire to talk to students about my wartime experiences through Veterans for Peace, an organization I belong to. “There is no counter-narrative to what the kids are being taught by the instructors in Junior ROTC, as far as I can tell,” he says, obviously bothered, as we wait for the students to arrive. “It

would be great if you could provide more of a complete picture to these kids.” He then went on to describe the frustration he felt with a Chicago school system in which schools in the [poorest neighborhoods](#) in the city were being shut down at a [record pace](#), and yet, somehow, his [school district](#) always had the money to supplement the Pentagon’s funding of the JROTC (Junior Reserve Officer Training) program.

The kids are just beginning to filter in, laughing and acting like the teenagers they are. I’m not encouraged.

“Okay, everyone, settle down, we have a guest speaker today,” the teacher says. He oozes confidence of a sort I only wish I possessed. The volume in the room dies down to something approaching a hush. They clearly respect him. I only hope a little of that will spill over in my direction.

I hesitate a moment and then start, and here’s a little report from memory on at least part of what I said and what happened:

“Thanks,” I begin, “for having me in today. My name is Rory Fanning and I’m here to tell you why I joined the military. I’ll also talk about what I saw while I was in that military, and why I left before my contract was up.” The silence in the classroom stretches out, which encourages me and I plunge on.

“I signed up for the Army Rangers to have my student loans paid for and to do my part to prevent another terrorist attack like 9/11... My training was sometimes difficult and usually boring... A lot of food and sleep deprivation. Mostly, I think my chain of command was training me in how to say yes to their orders. The military and critical thinking don’t mix too well...”

As I talk on about the almost indescribable poverty and desperation I witnessed in Afghanistan, a country that has known nothing but occupation and civil war for decades and that, before I arrived, I knew less than nothing about, I could feel my nervousness abating. “The buildings in Kabul,” I was telling them, “have gaping holes in them and broken-down Russian tanks and jets litter the countryside.”

I can hardly restrain my amazement. The kids are still with me. I’m now explaining how the U.S. military handed out thousands of dollars to anyone willing to identify alleged members of the Taliban and how we would raid houses based on this information. “I later came to find out that this intelligence, [if you could call it that](#), was rooted in a kind of desperation.” I explain why an Afghan in abject poverty, looking for ways to support his family, might be ready to finger almost anyone in return for access to the [deep wells of cash](#) the U.S. military could call on. In a world where factories are few, and office jobs scarce indeed, people will do anything to survive. They have to.

I point out the almost unbearable alien quality of Afghan life to American military officials. Few spoke a local language. No one I ever ran into knew anything about the culture of the people we were trying to bribe. Too often we broke down doors and snatched Afghans from their homes not because of their ties with either the Taliban or al-Qaeda, but because a neighbor had a grudge against them.

“Most of the people we targeted had no connection to the Taliban at all. Some even pledged allegiance to the U.S. occupation, but that didn’t matter.” They still ended up with hoods over their heads and in some godforsaken prison.

By now, I can tell that the kids are truly paying attention, so I let it all out. “The Taliban [had surrendered](#) a few months before I arrived in Afghanistan in late 2002, but that wasn’t good enough for our politicians back home and the generals giving the orders. Our job was to draw people back into the fight.”

Two or three students let out genuine soft gasps as I describe how my company of Rangers occupied a village school and our commander cancelled classes there indefinitely because it made an excellent staging point for the troops—and there wasn’t much a village headmaster in rural Afghanistan could say to dissuade history’s most technologically advanced and powerful military from doing just what it wanted to. “I remember,” I tell them, “watching two fighting-age men walk by the school we were occupying. One of them didn’t show an acceptable level of deference to my first sergeant, so we grabbed them. We threw the overly confident guy in one room and his friend in another, and the guy who didn’t smile at us properly heard a gunshot and thought, just as he was meant to, that we had just killed his friend for not telling us what we wanted to hear and that he might be next.”

“That’s like torture,” one kid half-whispers.

I then talk about why I’m more proud of leaving the military than of anything I did while in it. “I signed up to prevent another 9/11, but my two tours in Afghanistan made me realize that I was making the world less safe. We know now that a majority of the [million or so](#) people who have been killed since 9/11 have been innocent civilians, people with no stake in the game and no reason to fight until, often enough, the U.S. military baited them into it by killing or injuring a family member who more often than not was an innocent bystander.”

“Did you know,” I continue, [quoting](#) a statistic cited from University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape, “that ‘from 1980 to 2003, there were 343 suicide attacks around the world, and at most 10 percent were anti-American inspired. Since 2004, there have been more than 2,000, over 91 percent against U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries.’ I didn’t want to be part of this so I left.”

Full Disclosure

Chicago-area high school students aren’t used to hearing such talk. The public school system here has the largest number of Junior ROTC students—[nearly 10,000](#) of them, 45 percent African American and 50 percent Latino—of any school district in the country. And maybe so many of these kids are attentive exactly because the last thing JROTC instructors are likely to be discussing is the realities of war, including, for instance, the [staggering number](#) of homeless Iraq and Afghanistan veterans unable to assimilate back into society after their experience overseas.

When I urge the students to join me in a conversation about war and their lives, I hear stories about older siblings deluged by telemarketer-style calls from recruiters. “It’s so annoying,” one says. “My brother doesn’t even know how the recruiter got his information.”

“Recruiters have contact information for every junior and senior in this school,” I say. “And that’s [the law](#). The No Child Left Behind act, signed soon after 9/11, insists that your school hand over your information to the Department of Defense if it wants to receive federal funds.”

Soon enough, it becomes clear that these students have very little context for their encounters with the U.S. military and its promises of an uplifting future. They know next to nothing, for instance, about our recent history in Iraq and Afghanistan, or our permanent state of war in the Greater Middle East and [increasingly in Africa](#). When I ask why so many of them signed up for the JROTC program, they talk about “leadership” opportunities and “structure” for their lives. They are focused, as I was, on having college paid for or “seeing the world.” Some say they are in JROTC because they didn’t want to take gym class. One offers this honest assessment: “I don’t know, I just am. I haven’t given it much thought.”

As I grill them, so they grill me. “What does your family think about your leaving the military?” one asks.

“Well,” I respond, “we don’t talk about it too much. I come from a very pro-military family and they prefer not to think of what we are doing overseas as wrong. I think this is why it took me so long to speak honestly in public about my time in the military.”

“Did other factors weigh on your decision to talk openly about your military experience, or was it just fear of your family’s response?” an astute student asks.

And I answer as honestly as I can: “Even though, as far as I know, I did something no one in the Rangers had yet done in the post-9/11 era—the psychological and physical vetting process for admission to the Ranger Regiment makes the likelihood of a Ranger questioning the mission and leaving the unit early unlikely—I was intimidated. I shouldn’t have been, but my chain of command had me leaving the military looking over my shoulder. They made it seem as if they could drag me off to jail or send me back into the military to be a bullet stopper in the big Army at any time if I ever talked about my service in the Rangers. I did after all, like all Rangers, have a secret security clearance.” Heads shake. “The military and paranoia go hand in hand. So I kept quiet,” I tell the kids. “I also started reading books like Anand Gopal’s [No Good Men Among the Living](#), a reporter’s brilliant story of our invasion of Afghanistan as told from the perspective of actual Afghans. And I began meeting veterans who had experiences similar to mine and were speaking out. This helped boost my confidence.”

“Is the military like Call of Duty?” one of the students asks, referring to a popular single-shooter video game.

“I’ve never played,” I respond. “Does it include kids who scream when their mothers and fathers are killed? Do a lot of civilians die?”

“Not really,” he says uncomfortably.

“Well, then it’s not realistic. Besides, you can turn off a video game. You can’t turn off war.”

A quiet settles over the room that even a lame joke of mine can’t break. Finally, after a silence, one of the kids suddenly says, “I’ve never heard anything like this before.”

What I feel is the other side of that response. That first experience of mine talking to America's future cannon fodder confirms my assumption that, not surprisingly, the recruiters in our schools aren't telling the young anything that might make them think twice about the glories of military life.

I leave that school with an incredible sense of calm, something I haven't felt since my time began in Afghanistan. I tell myself I want to speak to classrooms at least once a week. I realize that it took me 10 years, even while writing a [book](#) on the subject, to build up the courage to talk openly about my years in the military. If only I had begun engaging these kids earlier instead of punishing myself for the experience George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and their cohorts put me through. Suddenly, some of my resident paranoia seems to melt away, and the residual guilt I still felt for leaving the Rangers early and in protest—the chain of command left me believing that there was nothing more cowardly than “deserting” your Ranger buddies—seems to evaporate, too.

My thought now is full disclosure going forward. If a teenager is going to sign up to kill and die for a cause or even the promise of a better life, then the least he or she should know is the good, the bad, and the ugly about the job. I had no illusions that plenty of kids—maybe most of them, maybe all of them—wouldn't sign up anyway, regardless of what I said. But I swear to myself: no moralism, no regrets, no judgments. That's my credo now. Just the facts as I see them.

A New Mission

I'm on an operation and that feels strangely familiar. Think of it as a different way to be a Ranger in a world that will never, it seems, be truly postwar. But as with all things in one's mind: easier said than done. The world, it turns out, is in no rush to welcome me on my new mission.

I start making calls. I create a [website](#) to advertise my talk. I send out word to teacher friends that I'm available to speak in their schools. I'm prepared for my schedule to fill up within weeks, but a month passes and no one calls. The phone just doesn't ring. I grow increasingly frustrated. Fortunately, a friend tells me about a grant sponsored by the Chicago Teachers Union and designed to expose kids to real world educational experiences they may not hear about in school. I apply, promising to speak to 12 of the 46 schools in Chicago with JROTC programs during the 2015/2016 school year. The grant comes through in September and better yet it promises that each student I talk to will also get a free copy of my book, [Worth Fighting For](#).

I don't for a second doubt that this will ensure my presence in front of classrooms of kids. I have nine long months to arrange meetings with only 12 schools. I decide that I'll even throw in some extra schools as a bonus. I create a [Facebook page](#) so that teachers and principals can learn about my talk and book me directly. Notices of both my website and that page are placed in teacher newsletters and I highlight the Chicago Teachers Union endorsement in them. I'm thinking: slam dunk! I even advertise on message boards, spend money on targeted ads on Facebook, and again reach out to all my teacher friends.

It's now April, seven months into the school year, and only two teachers have taken me up on the offer to speak. “He was comfortable and engaging with the students and in the students' reflections the following day he was someone that the students clearly enjoyed talking with. I

will definitely ask him to come back to speak to my classes every year,” wrote [Dave Stieber](#), one of those teachers.

It’s finally starting to dawn on me, however. In our world, life is scary and I’m not the only one heading for Lake Michigan on cold winter mornings or gloomy nights. Teachers out there in the public schools are anxious, too. It’s dark days for them. They are under attack and [busy fighting back](#) against school privatization, closures, and political assaults on their pensions. The popular JROTC program is a [cash cow](#) for their schools and they are discouraged from further rocking a boat already in choppy waters.

You’ll bring too much “tension” to our school, one teacher tells me with regret. “Most of my kids need the military if they plan on going to college,” I hear from another who says he can’t invite me to his school anyway. But most of my requests simply go out into the void unanswered. Or promises to invite me go unfulfilled. Who, after all, wants to make waves or extracurricular trouble when teachers are already under fierce attack from Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his unelected school board?

I understand and yet, in a world without a draft, JROTC’s school-to-military pipeline is a lifeline for Washington’s [permanent war](#) across the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa. Its unending conflicts are only possible because kids like those I’ve talked to in the few classrooms I’ve visited continue to volunteer. The politicians and the school boards, time and again, claim their school systems are broke. No money for books, teacher’s salaries and pensions, healthy lunches, etc...

And yet, in 2015, the U.S. government spent [\\$598 billion](#) on the military, more than half of its total discretionary budget, and nearly 10 times what it [spent on education](#). In 2015, we also learned that the Pentagon continues to pour what, it is estimated, will in the end be [\\$1.4 trillion](#) into a fleet of fighter planes that may never work as advertised. Imagine the school system we would have in this country if teachers were compensated as well as weapons contractors. Confronting the attacks on education in the U.S. should also mean, in part, trying to interrupt that school-to-military pipeline in places like Chicago. It’s hard to fight endless [trillion-dollar wars](#) if kids aren’t enlisting.

Just the other day I spoke at a college in Peoria, three hours south of Chicago. “My brother hasn’t left the house since returning home from Iraq,” one of the students told me with tears in her eyes. “What you said helped me understand his situation better. I might have more to say to him now.”

It was the sort of comment that reminded me that there is an audience for what I have to say. I just need to figure out how to get past the gatekeepers. Believe me, I’ll continue to write about, pester, and advertise my willingness to talk to soon-to-be-military-age kids in Chicago. I’m not giving up, because speaking honestly about my experiences is now my therapy. At the end of the day, I need those students as much as I think they need me.

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