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Basic Combat Training grandpa trades in F-16 for M16

FORT LEONARD WOOD, Mo. – A 52-year-old grandpa and former fighter pilot is going through Basic Combat Training on Fort Leonard for no other reason than service.

That service during the past 30 years includes the Marine Corps, the Air Force and missionary work.

For Sgt. Steven Lyzenga, a former major, the transition to Army life is with Company A, 3rd Battalion, 10th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Chemical Brigade.

In 1981, he went through Marine Corps Officer Candidate School, but he wanted to fly, so he transitioned to the U.S. Air Force Officer Training School. For 14 years he served his country as a F-16 Falcon pilot for the U.S. Air Force.

“I loved flying. I just left the Air Force for a different mission,” said Lyzenga, a Newport News, Va., native.

He departed from his aerial job to serve a higher power through Christian humanitarian work. As a missionary, Lyzenga visited 35 different countries including Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Zimbabwe. After about 12 years of travel, he decided it was time to go back to serving the United States.

“I wanted to finish my term as a guardian of freedom. I am concerned with what is going on with terrorism. Before I got too old, I wanted to do my duty — and finish my 20,” Lyzenga said.

“Personally, doing this at 52, I’m raising all kinds of eyebrows. I don’t know if a fighter pilot, or a major for that matter, has ever gone through basic training. I’m still scratching my head a little bit — wondering why I am here,” he said.

His road to the Army began when somebody challenged him to finish his time in the military.

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“I said, ‘No. I’m too old.’ Then, I ended up in the Air Force recruiter’s office where they told me I was too old to fly. I prayed about it. Then, the Army recruiter said I could go in as enlisted, but retire at my highest rank. So, the door was opened and we prayed about it some more. The answer was keep walking forward as long as the door stayed open. It was a year-long process for me. It wasn’t easy, but every door stayed open, so I kept walking through it,” Lyzenga said. “I’ve traded in my F-16 for an M16.”

For Lyzenga, his adventure into BCT may mean he is one of the oldest to ever attempt the Army’s entry level school. He is the oldest Soldier-in-training his cadre has ever trained.

“I have to say this is a first for me, and for these drill sergeants who have been here way longer than I have,” said Capt. Memorina Barnes, Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 10 Infantry Regiment commander. “Sgt. Lyzenga is extremely motivated and humble. He has experience things that some of us can only dream of, yet he is down to earth, willing to learn and participate in all training events.”

The grandpa said Basic Combat Training has been different from his officer training schools.

“I’m getting yelled at more,” Lyzenga said.

One of his favorite things about BCT is the Basic Rifle Marksmanship training.

“As a pilot, I only had a 9 mm pistol. Qualifying with the M4 (carbine assault rifle) was a pretty neat experience,” he said.

But, even better than shooting a rifle has been the fellowship he has felt being back in the military.

“It’s been a good experience. I love the camaraderie. In my Christian humanitarian work with the church, and now I’m a Christian business owner, even in the midst of both of those, I missed the camaraderie that came from my military service. Even with these young adults,” Lyzenga said. “They are all here to grow up and become adults. I came here to stay young and feel like a kid again.”

And he is keeping up with them. Out of 59 Soldiers in his platoon, he has the highest physical fitness test score.

“People say ‘RHIP – rank has its privileges, but I say AHIP – age has its privileges.’ My maximums are lower than theirs of course, but I’m enjoying the physical aspect of training,” he said.

Lyzenga said the discipline he learned in his early military career stuck with him, and that has helped him through BCT.

The challenging part for him, aside from missing his wife, his cell phone and Starbucks, is being with the younger Soldiers.

“I’m with the privates from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. It has taken a little getting used to,” Lyzenga said. “I’ve heard some of them call me ‘grandpa,’ but most of them call me major. I don’t think they are suppose to, but they still do.”

Lyzenga said his faith has helped him through some of the toughest times in BCT.

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“When it gets me through is when I’m standing at attention and the wind chill is 10 below outside. I’m praying continuously,” he said.

When Lyzenga graduates next month he will be with a National Guard unit in Newport News, Va., as a 29E Electronic Warfare Specialist.

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For more information, contact the Fort Leonard Wood Public Affairs Office at (573) 563-4145. Melissa Buckley is a Guidon staff member.

About Fort Leonard Wood

Fort Leonard Wood is a thriving and prosperous installation that has evolved from a small basic training post 70 years ago to a premier Army Center of Excellence that trains 80-90,000 military and civilians each year.

Home to the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, Fort Leonard Wood now trains and educates service members and develops doctrine and capabilities for the Training and Doctrine Command’s U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School, U.S. Army Engineer School, and U.S. Army Military Police School, three gender integrated Initial Military Training brigades, one of only five reception stations in the Army, and the Army’s largest Non Commissioned Officers Academy.

Over the past several years, Fort Leonard Wood has received numerous additional responsibilities to include supporting the 4th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, a large Forces Command unit that is responsible for all deployable capabilities at Fort Leonard Wood. A colonel-commanded Marine Corps Detachment and an Air Force Detachment, which are both the largest on any Army installation, are located on Fort Leonard Wood; a large Navy Seabee Detachment and elements of the Coast Guard train here as well.

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