



TRAINING TAKES

ROTC numbers at Mizzou are on the rise. David Fisher is one of the cadets who works on field training exercises. Is he ready to make the commitment to a military career?

It's 4 p.m. on a brisk fall afternoon and David Fisher is standing in the middle of Hinkson Creek Recreation Area. He's not about to play a pickup soccer game nor go jogging on the MU Recreation Trail that runs along the empty field.

Dressed in Army fatigues, Cadet Fisher, a Mizzou freshman from O'Fallon, Mo., is about to hop aboard one of the three Black Hawks that are parked in the middle of the field. He and the rest of his ROTC battalion are participating in their weekly lab, where cadets put the skills they learn in the classroom to practical use.

While the cadets get into formation, the platoon sergeants bark some orders to divide them into three groups called chinks (a military term used to describe the cargo, both human and non-human, on an aircraft). Fisher is assigned to the first chink, the first to fly 500 feet above the ground and be dropped off in an open field somewhere between Columbia and Jefferson City.



OFF ★

Photos by Nicholas Benner
Story by Melissa Byrd Alexander



Tiger Battalion Cadet David Fisher runs to board a Black Hawk helicopter at Hinkson Creek Field in Columbia. The Black Hawk will drop off the cadets at an undisclosed location, where they will carry out tactical land operations.

As Fisher and the rest of his chalk wait to board the aircraft, they lie in a circle in the grass with their paintball guns pointed at an invisible enemy and await the details of their "mission" from the platoon sergeants. Once everyone is briefed, the Black Hawks are fired up, and the chinks load into the helicopters.

The crew shows the cadets, some of whom have never flown in a Black Hawk, how to buckle themselves in. One eager cadet asks if the doors can remain open in the air; the pilot quickly shoots down that idea. Another pilot gives a testimonial on the virtues of being able to fly a Black Hawk, as surely one or two in the group will be performing that exact task for the Army in a few years. "Just watch your heads as you run toward the helicopter," he says, leaving the cadets to wonder who had learned that lesson the hard way.

Thirty seconds later, the cadets are up in the air. A few of them snap pictures with their digital cameras during liftoff; the more seasoned cadets just gaze out the windows. The roar of the blades is deafening.

Five minutes later, as the helicopters easily land on the grass of an open field, it's nearly dark. The cadets unbuckle, leap out of the Black Hawks and sprint to the nearby woods to begin their mission to capture the enemy.

This is no ordinary after-school activity. And Fisher is no ordinary Mizzou freshman. ROTC stands for Reserve Officer Training Corps. It trains college students for military leadership and for some, a lifelong career in the military. Like Fisher, most students are recruited while they are in high school, though a few come to ROTC their first year at Mizzou. With a battalion size of 115, a number that is up 40 percent from two years ago, Mizzou's program was recognized as being in the top 15 percent of Cadet Command's 272 units for 2005-06.

Leadership training ★

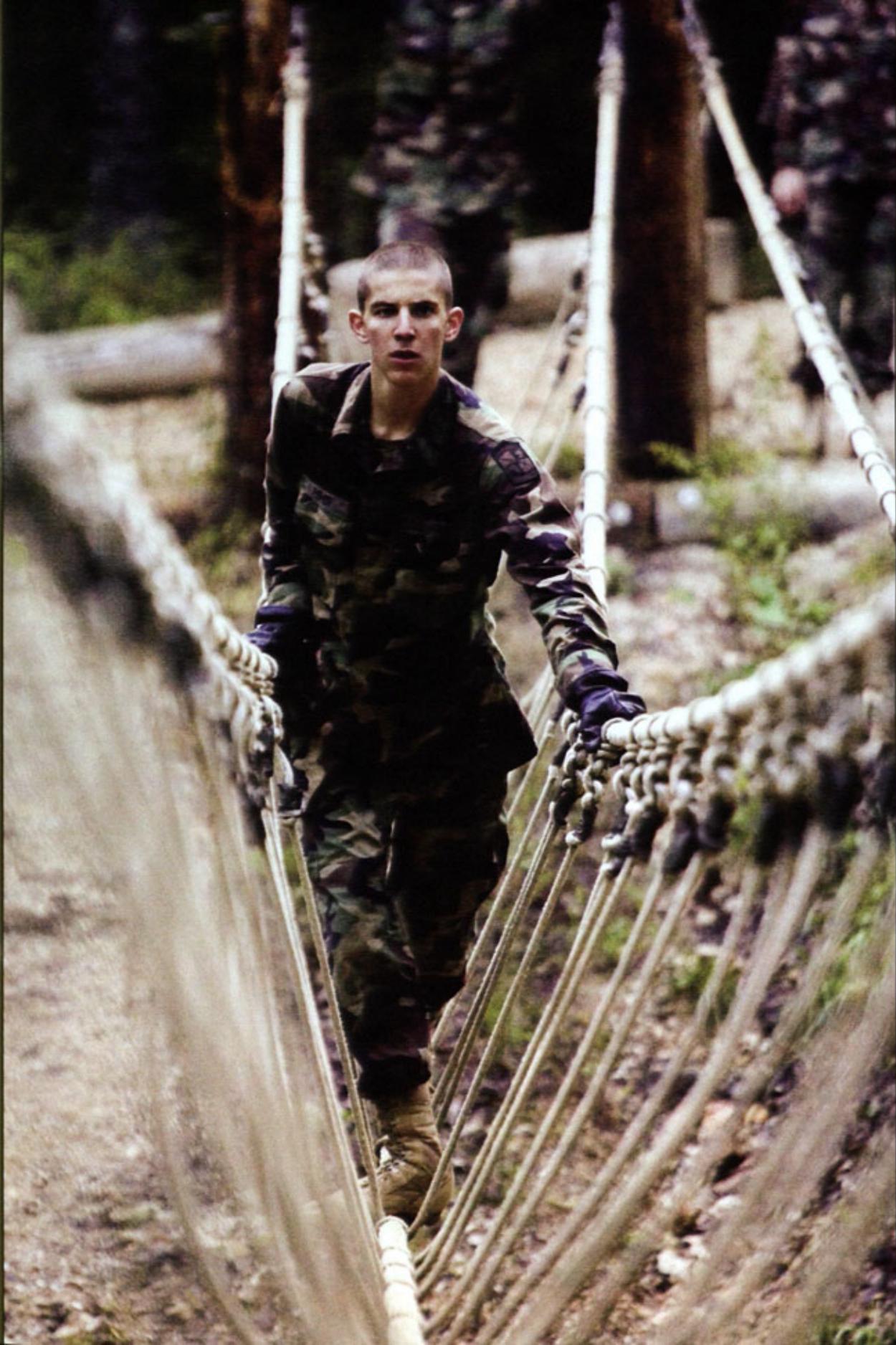
Fisher knew since high school he wanted to join the Army. A self-described country boy,



TOP: Cadets, from left, Harrison Smith, Stephen McKee, David Fisher and Kevin Kasper test the limits of their duffel bags while packing for three days of field training exercises (FTX) at Fort Leonard Wood Army Basic Combat Training Post in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. The battalion participates in one FTX a semester, in which cadets get three days of hands-on training applying skills they learned in military science classes.

ABOVE: During a daytime land navigation exercise, Fisher, right, lines up his next checkpoint with a compass, while fellow cadet Josh Ray checks the map to make sure they are on course. The exercise tests the cadets' ability to plot and navigate to points on a map.

RIGHT: During a timed obstacle course, Fisher maneuvers across a rope bridge as quickly as possible. He will see this obstacle course again when he competes in the Ranger Challenge infantry skills competition. The challenge, known as the "varsity sport" of the Army ROTC, requires more than the usual amount of physical training (PT).



he grew up on a hunting farm in O'Fallon, Mo., where the family only had one neighbor living nearby. Parents Harvey and Julie Fisher were concerned that his social life would suffer, though Fisher proved adept at entertaining himself with hunting, guiding and running.

"David loved the outdoors and would go on hikes for hours," Julie Fisher says. "He would read books, mostly about war and history, and he always found something to do. He kind of liked the solitude."

When Fisher first learned of ROTC, he knew he wanted to know more. "I originally just wanted to enlist [in the service], but I had family and friends press me into an officer-training program, so I decided to do ROTC," Fisher says. In fact, Mizzou's ROTC program is part of what attracted him to MU.

But Fisher is a little different from the other battalion members. For one, he is not on scholarship — and it isn't because he couldn't get one. Rather than rushing into the commitment, his parents wanted him to see if he liked military life before signing on the Army's dotted line.

A semester to decide ★

And he does like it. He likes it so much that he hopes to complete eligibility requirements and sign a contract by April 15. He plans to become an officer in the infantry, work his way up to Army Ranger and eventually, Special Forces. For Fisher, ROTC is more than a means to an end. "Once I started doing it, I enjoyed it," he says. "It's the lifestyle I want to live."

When scholarship money rolls in, it will be a nice bonus, but it was never a deciding

factor. ROTC scholarships generally cover full tuition along with a stipend for books and living expenses. Fisher feels lucky he had the choice, and his parents are glad their son was able to make an educated decision.

Many students join ROTC because it makes college affordable. Students who complete ROTC incur an eight-year service obligation. The service could be on active duty, Army Reserve or National Guard, or it could break into four years of active duty followed by four in the Army Reserve.

Terrified and proud ★

"Honestly, we knew it really didn't matter how we felt because he had already made up his mind," mom Julie says. "But, for argument's sake, we were terrified and proud at the same time. David wanted, wants, to be in the Army. We knew what a commitment it would be to serve our country. We just wanted David to make sure he was ready to make the commitment."

Fisher, like his parents, understands the danger of his chosen profession. But unlike his parents, he welcomes the idea of seeing action. "Bring it on," he says. Aware that his parents don't share his brazen attitude, he says, "Oh, they are a little apprehensive about it. It's kind of an avoided subject. They know it's a dangerous job, but it's up to me what I want to do with my life, and it is what I want to do, so they just accept it."

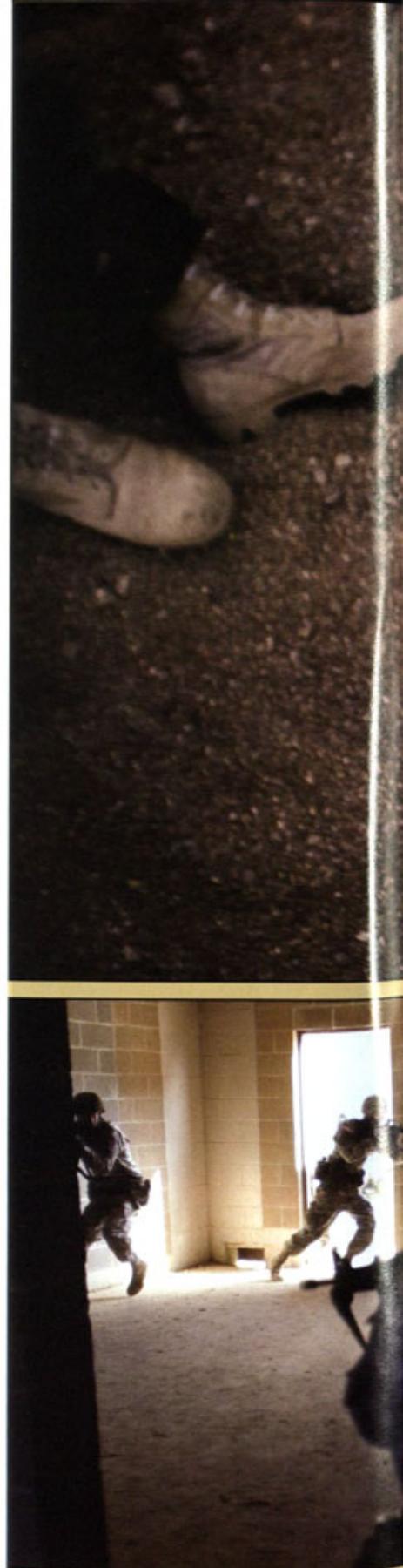
Profile of service ★

So what makes a 19-year-old want to sign up for the Army? Like Fisher, most cadets come from a history of family military service. His grandfather, Roland Henry Fisher, is a

TOP: Cadet David Fisher back-crawls under a barbed-wire obstacle at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.

RIGHT: Fisher, middle, enters the doorway of a model Iraqi home during a room sweeping exercise. "Everything we learn is applicable," says Fisher, who could be performing this task in Iraq in a couple of years.

FAR RIGHT: During three days in the field, hot meals are few and far between. From left, Ray, Smith, Fisher and Kasper enjoy a breakfast of bacon, scrambled eggs, fried potatoes and hotcakes at the end of a long weekend.





Korean War veteran who served in combat engineer units that retrieved disabled tanks. His uncles, Brian Thorton and Kenny Hyde, and cousin Casey Boaz also were in the service. Capt. Lindsey Decker, who is in charge of recruiting new cadets into the battalion, says it's actually pretty rare for someone to come into the program without that background.

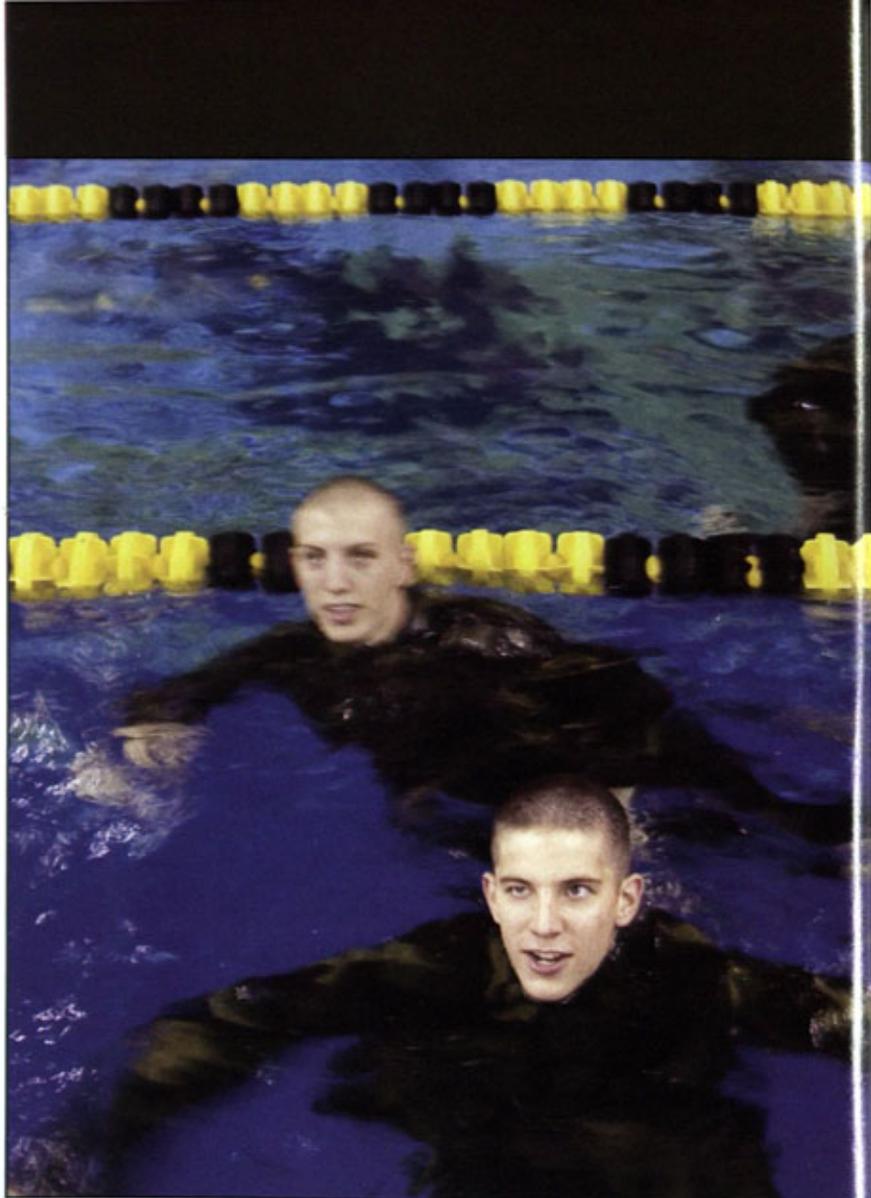
The program also appeals to those who enjoy being part of a team, adds Capt. Douglas McConnell, a first-year cadet instructor. He is careful not to pressure freshmen into committing. "It's for some people and not for others, and I respect that," he says. "I want them to come to their own decision." Cadets generally have until the summer after their sophomore year to decide.

McConnell knows Fisher's strengths and weaknesses better than most. He calls Fisher self-motivated. "He's an achiever as far as setting goals and working toward them," he says. "He's focused."

Reason for focus ★

Fisher knows what's at stake every time he walks into the classroom. Grades are pivotal. When a cadet is being evaluated at the end of the ROTC program, the grade-point average accounts for 40 percent of the total evaluation score. The rest is based on the cadet's performance during the Leadership Development and Assessment Course, a summer program that cadets attend the summer after their junior year. This evaluation determines where the cadet will serve in the Army.

About 4,000 ROTC cadets graduate each year from schools across the country. Each of the 4,000 is rank-ordered with a number between 1 and 4,000 based on the evaluation. The top 20 percent, or 800, can pick their career path. Rebecca Pratte, BSN '07, is such an example. After graduating at the top of her class, she was assigned as an army nurse to Brooke Army Medical Center in Fort Sam Houston, Texas. That's what pushes Fisher to do his best academically.



Wearing full fatigues, cadets tread water for 15 minutes during the Combat Water Survival Test in the Mizzou Aquatic Center's pool at the Student Recreation Complex.

"I know how much it will affect my future," he says. "You strive to do better to have a better future and make a better world."

A self-described "average" high-school student who was satisfied with a 3.0-plus GPA, Fisher knew college classes would be hard. So far, he's doing just fine, thank you. His passion is history, especially of the Eastern Roman Empire. When his military service ends, he envisions getting a master's degree and becoming a history professor.

"I enjoy history because it is like the great story of humankind," Fisher says. "You

can observe how we got here today through the actions of our ancestors. I also like the investigation and research that it often takes to study history."

In addition to history, Fisher enjoys Military Science, a weekly lecture required of all cadets. This class sets up labs held on Thursday afternoons and field training exercises held in April and October.

Transition accomplished ★

For a boy with rural roots, Columbia is hardly the big city, yet it could be New York, for all he knows.



ABOVE: Fisher, already finished with morning physical training, breakfast and a literature class, returns to his Wolpers Hall room to study and hang out with roommate Andrew Curtis before his next class.

BELOW: ROTC cadets are often up before the sun rises. The Tiger Battalion performs a tactical road march from Crowder Hall to Hinkson Field to catch a 6 a.m. helicopter ride to Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.

Typical day of a cadet

- 5 a.m. Up and at 'em.
- 5:30 a.m. Leave for PT (physical training).
- 6 a.m. PT at Stankowski Field MWF.
- 7 a.m. Hit the showers.
- 8 a.m. Eat breakfast.
- 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Go to class. Study.
- 4 p.m. Field training Thursday afternoons.
- 7 p.m. Hang out with friends.
- Midnight (or later) Lights out.

"There's more people and life is faster-paced," Fisher says of life in Columbia. "I personally like college life a lot more than high school life. There is so much more to do, more challenges, more action."

In his first semester, Fisher has made some good friends. "We go out, party, play football, use the rec center, wrestle, pick up girls, shoot the breeze," he says. What gets short-changed in the cadet's life?

"When I have leftover time, I just usually catch up on sleep." ■■

About the author: Melissa Byrd Alexander is a freelance writer who lives in Holts Summit, Mo.

