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Cadets take a knee to look around during lab. Photo by Thomas Bowman

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It's time.

Cadets filed anxiously into the expansive classroom on the first floor of Cook Hall, less than an hour away from having the better part of the next decade- perhaps more -of their lives mapped out. Would they be infantry, on the ground overseas? Diffusing bombs like something out of "The Hurt Locker?" Transporting supplies between bases wherever. They gazed intently the center table in front of them, as though it was a whiteboard full of indecipherable math equations.

And in a way, it was. On the table were gold insignia, one for each of the senior cadets to be commissioned this year: tiny crossed muskets for infantry, crossed cannons for field artillery, crossed revolvers for military police.

Everyone knew which one they wanted. At the beginning of the year, each cadet sent out a giant résumé to 'the big Army' that allows them to determine the Order of Merit List. Their résumés include grade point average, how well they did at the Leadership Development Assessment Course this past summer, and how their instructors- the cadre -feel they've performed over the past three plus years. It determines everything. If you rank in the top 10 percent of the OML, you get your top choice, end of story. If not, at least some part of your career is in the hands of Uncle Sam.

Cadets rank their top 10 branch choices, send everything off, and wait; that is, until now.

Now the next chapters of their lives are literally in front of them.

Senior John Ro has his eyes set on a pair of crossed cannons—the insignia for field artillery. He wants to call the shots with big guns just beyond the front lines.

His classmate, senior Troy Blankenstein, this semester’s cadet head honcho, has dreamed of becoming an infantry officer since he was as tall as a table leg.

Nearby, senior Jon Miller is busy summoning his math skills.

He was in the 52nd percentile on the OML. There are four infantry pins up there. Who else wanted infantry? What are the chances?

Miller is the physical cadet. He’s a stud whenever it comes to PT tests, where the cadets are tested in push-ups, sit-ups and running. He’s a gym-aholic, going for 2 hours nearly every day of the week. He wants to be hands-on in the military; he wants infantry.

A human resources lady walks around to each cadet, handing them an envelope with their name printed on the front. The slip of paper inside is what they’ve all been waiting for.

But they can’t open it—not just yet.

Colonel Chase, who heads the joint Virginia Tech-Radford University Reserve Officer Training Core program, steps to the front of the classroom as cadets fiddle with their envelopes, looking for rips or seams they can peak through.

He gives them a fairly standard but necessary speech, but everyone is only halfway paying attention. He’s a new colonel, so they want to be especially respectful. Plus he was an infantry officer, always a respected position in the Army.

But as his eyes try to remain focused on the colonel, Ro can’t help but feel like this is some special form of torture. In his mind his head is bobbing up and down, as though he’s five years old again and his mom is lecturing him.

“Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh...”

The colonel tells them that branches don’t matter, they’re all soldiers. And if they don’t get the branch they hoped for, they can have ‘boo-boo lip’ for one day; 24 hours of

sulking—that's it.

But they don't want boo-boo lip. Blankenstein feels like he's at the start of a race that's never going to begin—like the starter's gun is permanently jammed. They found out their branch selections were here 48 hours ago, can they just open these things already?

Miller wants to get it over with too. He's pretty confident he'll wind up with infantry, but it'd be nice if he found out sometime like, well, now.

Then finally, after 30 minutes that felt like four days, they hear...

"Cadets, open your envelopes."

And, with a sound as though the world's largest acceptance letter was just torn to pieces, the cadets ripped open their envelopes and pulled out the first part of their post-college lives.

Students and soldiers

In a way, cadets lead double lives. Half the time they can be seen walking around campus, a backpack on their back as they stroll off to class. But the other half of their time is devoted to the Army. They clomp through woods behind the baseball field with their oversized tan boots, sit in military science class decked out in camouflage and wake up before dawn at least three days a week to throw on a gray t-shirt with "ARMY" emblazoned across the front and work out for an hour in the black of morning.

But these two lives aren't really two lives so much as two sides of each cadet slowly merging together. Today they have the freedom of college students, but in less than a year will be responsible for the lives of around 40 people and potentially \$25 million in equipment. In the eyes of some, they are still kids; but others have already shook their hand, looked them in the eye, and thanked them for their service. At 21 and 22 years old, they have their whole lives ahead of them, and yet for years will have to face death- the death of their soldiers and the death of themselves -every day.

They're still goofy—Blankenstein, a 6'2" white guy with piercing blue eyes, puts on his best Borat impersonation whenever he pretends to be foreign for a training exercise.

As a crashed car was lifted out of the Dalton Hall parking lot earlier this month, Ro started chanting "U-S-A, U-S-A, U-S-A."

Miller, when asked what he wanted to be called for this article, requested his 'official title' of 'Jonathan Heraldo Ochocinco Cabron Miller the XXXVIII of the Royal Army of Portugal, King of the Irish, Lord of the Spanish Isles, Duke of Normandy, and Baron of the Highlands.' He was told that was too long.

And yet they're extremely serious.

On a run before daybreak, as cadets trotted away from the orange glow of early morning Main Street, they passed a dumpster jutting out in the middle of the sidewalk. Half the cadets went by before someone shouted "dumpster!" to warn everyone that were they to keep running straight, they might be close-lined.

Blankenstein was not happy. He ripped into the cadets at the front of the pack. What if somebody's head had slammed into the top of the trash bin? How could they not think to warn everyone? The lead cadet fumbled over some excuse to which Blankenstein, himself at the back of the pack of 10, replied "I don't want to hear your excuses all I want to hear is 'yes sir!'"

"Yes sir!"

It wasn't about the dumpster or even the potential injury, really. It was about looking out for your fellow cadets, comrades, soldiers.

At lab, when cadets are crunching through the underbrush of the woods sandwiched between the train tracks and the New River, the freshmen sporting Kevlar helmets too huge for their heads, it's Ro's job to make sure they're learning. He gathers his subordinates around, diagramming tactical maneuvers and explaining how to ambush a target. He mentors the juniors, who must lead the training operations, and coaches them through what they did well and what could be improved upon.

Miller is all about hard work. He always leads the fast group through early morning runs, and if he hears voices behind him he's quick to shout "If you can talk you can run faster!" Everyone must do their best.

They're kids and simultaneously adults who will have more responsibility out of college than any of their peers. But they've thought about it, and they're ready; at least, as ready as they can be. They didn't wake up yesterday and say "eh, I guess I'll try the Army."

A dream deferred—just for a second

When Troy Blankenstein set foot on West Point's campus as a four-year-old, he knew he was going to be a soldier.

Something about the structure, the marching and the passion everyone had at the Army football games inspired him.

"You know the little girls that go after Justin Bieber?" Blankenstein asked. "It was kind of like that. It's not as cute and it doesn't really serenade me, but it's the same concept."

On top of that, his granddad went there and, at a time when he was both literally and figuratively looking up to him, who better to emulate?

But a little over a decade later, that dream hit an 'oh crap' moment.

Troy was halfway through his junior year of high school when he started seriously looking into West Point, and quickly realized it just wasn't going to happen. For many who would go to West Point, the process had already started, and the requirements were, by any normal college standards, simply insane.

There's a camp you almost have to go to the summer after your sophomore year. You have to get a congressman and senator's written approval to attend and there's a lengthy interview process with university officials. You need to have a fantastic GPA, Ivy League SAT scores, be in the Boy Scouts, a member of the Student Government Association and have varsity letters in multiple sports. All in all, the process demands years of commitment prior to admission. Troy didn't have years.

What made it worse was he didn't know about ROTC. For Troy, his dream of becoming an Army officer was dead.

"That was a big blow. That hurt a lot."

He spent the next three months in a fog, trying to reorganize a future that for 12 years had hinged on a single acceptance letter. Did he want to be a lawyer? A teacher, perhaps? Maybe he would go into marketing. Who knows? Certainly not Troy.

Then, while touring local colleges with his mom, he happened on an ROTC booth and his eyes lit up.

The guys behind the booth told him you can do everything here that a kid at West Point does, minus going to West Point.

Um, what? Holy crap!

And with that, it was time to search for scholarships.

ROTC programs around the country offer scholarships that pay full tuition, room and board for two-four years and provide them both on admission and after a student has tried out the program for a year or two. The catch, of course, is that after two years of college a cadet must either contract- meaning he/she will be a part of the Army for at least eight years after graduation -or drop out of the program and pay back the two years of free college.

Troy's family wasn't poor, but they didn't have \$60,000 saved up for college, either. If he was going to get a degree, he would have to pay for it.

From York, Pa., a city he's still in love with and can rattle off details about as though he's the local historian, Troy and his family toured area schools like Westchester University and Shippensburg College, one of the two places he would eventually apply. Wanting a local option (Shippensburg is a mere two hours from his house) and something out of the way, Troy found RU and applied for an ROTC scholarship at both places.

The letter

"It's here."

Troy's mom had called him three times while he was at football practice and now, standing with nothing but underwear on in the middle of the locker room, she told him his scholarship packet was in her hand.

"Holy s**t!" Troy leapt off the bench he was resting on.

"Should I open it?"

"No don't open it!"

Troy hung up.

"Dude it's frickin' here. My scholarship is here!" he said to nobody in particular, simultaneously climbing out of his underwear and sprinting toward the shower.

After the shortest shower in Blankenstein history he flew out to his dark blue Volkswagen golf and hit 75 miles per hour screaming up the huge hill right outside of school.

Like a tiny blue comet, he zoomed down the hill, through neighborhoods, past the mall and right by the prison. He spun left onto Main Street, still blazing at 60 miles an hour in a 35. He blew by the gym he used to work out at and Maple Doughnuts, which, according to him, houses the best doughnuts on Earth. The Volkswagen flew by the dealership where it first met Troy and the duo roared past the home of the best pizza in the world, Mariano's.

He was racing by his old life to get to the next chapter.

Troy passed the golden arches that gave him one of his first summer jobs, stopped and screamed at one of the 10 traffic lights between the school and his home, and slowed down to a safe 35 as he inched by the police station.

Finally his car screeched to a halt in the driveway. He popped open the door, slammed it without grabbing his backpack and raced through the garage door into the kitchen.

His mom is standing in the middle of the kitchen, tears already streaming down her face. His dad has the video camera, because he always has that thing; they recorded the first time Troy shaved.

"Open it! Open it!" shouted his mom as she threw the envelope at him.

Troy took a right out of the kitchen and into the family room, plopping down on their old green and tan Lazy Boy chair to prepare himself for what was to come. His parents and now his sister crowded around him, jockeying for position over Troy's shoulder.

With a deep breath, Troy tore open the letter.

"Congratulations, you have received a full scholarship to Shippensburg University."

He waded through a few pages.

"Congratulations, you have received a three-year scholarship to Radford University."

"Holy s**t!"

For the second time that day, Troy leapt so high his head nearly banged the ceiling. His mom was practically bawling, his dad and sister started to cry and, well, so did Troy. And the dog, not quite sure what the commotion was all about, barked for the sake of barking.

He did it. The disappointment of West Point was long behind him. Now he was going to be a

soldier. The dream was finally his.

Moving on up

In the years since accepting the scholarship to RU, which wound up being a full-ride, Blankenstein has grown into his own. He's the cadet commander this semester, in charge of all freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors in the program. His presence is leader-like. He's half-a-head taller than most cadets and he uses his low, authoritative voice to say what he has to say in just a few words. His sky blue eyes can be piercing, but they light up easily—especially when he talks about jumping out of airplanes. He's not an in-your-face kind of guy, but prefers to walk calmly around the cadets during early morning physical training and lab, making sure everything is going according to plan and coaching a cadet on, say, how to properly cover yourself from oncoming fire.

Getting there took nearly four years of molding and evolution.

ROTC is very much a self-taught program. Cadre provide the tools and fundamentals for cadets to make their own way, providing only feedback and guidance as they advance from year to year.

As freshmen, or MS1s, which means Military Science 1, cadets learn the basics. They focus on the history of the Army, how the military makes decisions and time management. The new cadets go to lab and PT (morning exercise) just like the other cadets, but they have no leadership positions and often just bumble around after the older cadets, trying to mimic them.

MS2s focus on learning leadership duties in preparation for their junior year. They aren't given leadership positions yet, but it's less than a year away.

Junior year is full of preparation for a giant exam—the Leadership Development and Assessment Course, which determines 40 percent of where you fall on the OML. They learn how to communicate in small groups, lead fellow cadets and execute tactical operations. LDAC assesses a cadet's leadership potential, so leadership development is key.

MS4s are a combination of running the show and senioritis. They plan out each PT, lab and the Field Training Exercises that take place for a weekend each semester. Outside of the classroom, they teach ROTC to their younger schoolmates. They're thrown into all sorts of leadership positions, and all have varying degrees of success; but hey, better to screw up in a training environment than when bullets are whizzing by you.

By the time they become commissioned officers in the US Army, all of them have messed up at some point. They've forgotten to send important emails, muddled the directions they gave to underclassmen for lab or lost younger cadets in the fog of morning runs.

But they also learned from those mistakes, and much more. They've learned commitment by not rolling over when the alarm clock goes off around 5:30 a.m. three days a week. They learned leadership from planning and executing small team tasks and organizing whole labs. And they are experts in time management, balancing studying for tests with toting fake guns through the woods.

In a time of war, the Army needs to churn out officers more than usual. Standards drop across the nation; it's what has to happen. But you get out of ROTC what you put into it, and many of these cadets have poured themselves into the program.

Rodeo

Jon Miller has always been a 'if you want it, give it 110 percent' kind of guy. He's also only recently acquired the ability to think ahead, although a mischievous grin still spreads across his face whenever he talks about dumb stuff he did as a kid.

Dumb stuff like try to be a kid-cowboy.

It was spring and Jon was five-years-old and bored. He walked out into his backyard and spotted a donkey; not an uncommon sight for him because the landlord who owned the place kept them around.

It was minding its own business, picking at the slightly overgrown greens next to a wire fence about as tall as it was.

Huh, a wire fence next to a donkey, thought Jon.

The five-year-old, who barely came up to the donkey's ribcage, traipsed across the lawn, grabbed onto the fence and started climbing.

He couldn't stand on the top, there was nothing firm to plant his feet on, so this was going to be interesting.

Little Jon glanced over his shoulder at the donkey, hands still gripping the fence, and performed a spiderman-like leap onto the back of the animal: and landed.

He slid up and tried to wrap his arms around the neck but his arms were too tiny so he went for the mane but the donkey started bucking like it had seen a ghost and he can't hold on much longer and it's still flailing and oh crap he's in the air where is he going to land why do they have cinderblocks ouch.

Jon's ribs landed with a thud on a pile of cinderblocks, his rodeo aspirations dampened by a donkey and his body pretty banged up.

He may never have tried to corral a four-legged animal with his arms again, but he learned that if you're going to do something, you might as well do it.

Nike

For being average height, Jon Miller is physically intimidating. His shoulders are wide and strong like a two-by-four, and his chest and arms bulge from underneath his gray PT shirt. Miller's also deceptively fast for someone with all this upper body strength. He's usually the second quickest in the 2-mile, running his last one in 12:34. His legs are thin, but not awkwardly skinny like that of a pure upper-body builder. They're lean and his calves are tight balls of muscle. He says most of his speed comes from swimming— the reason his lungs never wear out. He's also deceptively fast in the water.

Today Miller is about to head out on a morning run with the 'A' group, otherwise known as the fast kids. In spring they start at the Dedmon Center and generally run down past the Greenhill apartments and continue onto the street that parallels New River.

It's a chilly black morning, the first post-Spring break PT. Cadets are in black shorts and t-shirts and most wear gloves and beanies.

After a stretch period that's more brief than usual, Miller throws on a vibrant red-orange vest that designates him as both a leader and the guy who gets to make sure no one is hit by a car. He also wields a bright white baton worthy of someone directing planes on a runway.

'A' group starts out way too fast, bolting by the behemoth 'B' group and overtaking 'C' shortly thereafter. The relaxed stretching at Dedmon fades to distant memory as they charge up the hill right outside the stadium, the group's footsteps like a small stampede.

Miller, ever at the front of the fastest squad, begins to break away. Trudging through the black of morning, his stocky frame is illuminated by his light stick and red-orange vest, the colors mixing to form a small pinkish glow in the distance. The clomp clomp clomp of the group doesn't exist where he is, just a chorus of coughs and gasps somewhere behind. His

steps pad the asphalt as his precise, clipped stride carries him farther away from the rest to a point where it seems the asphalt melds with the dark morning air.

About one mile in, Miller's left shoe comes untied; thank God, now everyone can catch the hell up. But soon Miller's back at it, slowly but surely easing away from the group.

"14:19," he mutters, approaching the 2-mile turnaround point. "14:19 for two miles and this is supposed to be the 'A' group."

Miller gets to the turnaround at 14:40, roughly 30 seconds ahead of everyone else. He stops, waits, shuffles, then starts churning his legs behind the group that's now headed for home.

The pace quickens in no time, with Miller, as usual, at the helm. He has goals for this group, goals that include getting back to Dedmon in under half an hour.

Halfway home and his body is still bent slightly forward, arms swinging, head up and eyes straight ahead in near-perfect running form. His breathing is slightly labored and his right foot slaps the asphalt—the only sign he's a little more worn down than he's willing to let on. After all, he's the leader; if he can't get back in under 30 minutes then why should anyone else?

So he soldiers on past the Greenhill apartments rising on his right, ahead of the clomp gasp clomp gasp of the cadets behind him.

But then he sees headlights in front, temporarily blinding cadets as the yellow beams pierce through the black.

Suddenly Miller is all about safety. He halts the car and lets the 'A' group past.

One, two, three, four...five...six...is that it? Where did everyone else go? Was he really going that fast?

With barely six of the original 14 cadets forming what remains of the fast squad, Miller quickly switches from the push-the-limits, lead by example MS4 to his other role as a senior—making sure everyone's safe.

It's always a tough balance, but especially when they run. It's his job to make sure the squad finishes up in a time worthy of the best batch of cadets, a time that groups 'B' and 'C' will respect, but not everyone can keep the pace he wants to hold and he's got to make sure everyone who 'falls out' makes it back to Dedmon.

Sure, he's got other MS4s in the back to catch people as they fall off the pace, but if anyone slips through the cracks, he'll hear about it in a bad, bad way.

And today, those cracks might as well be canyons. Cadets are dropping like flies. At least five stopped to puke, doubled over on the side of the road, and a few more cramped up or simply couldn't hold on anymore.

So, should he keep pushing or swing back around in search of the stragglers? Miller decides to trust his classmates to catch them, so he heads up the final hill overlooking Greenhill.

After a small breather at the top, he realizes just how far the rest are behind this half dozen, so they lope downhill and around Dedmon to the finish.

All in all, Miller's kind of excited by 'A' group's performance. A lot of them fell out, but those who didn't finished up in 30 minutes, just over seven minutes per mile, and those who couldn't quite hit that will get there eventually.

He got a group to hit the goal time, and his fellow MS4s kept the stragglers safe. He led by example, and his trust in his classmates paid off.

Miller believes if you're going to do something, then do it; no whining, no excuses, just action. He runs faster than everyone else because he hopes it gives them something to aspire to. He'd love to be caught, to lead a group of cadets on a four-mile run in something nuts like 24 minutes. He's showing them that the only way to get anything accomplished is to suck it up and go.

Just do it.

The what ifs

No matter how much you lead by example, how much time you spend preparing for something or the amount of trust you and your squad of soldiers has in each other, no officer is ready for everything.

Soldiers get ambushed, supplies don't arrive on time and plans fall to pieces.

So how do you prepare for the moment when everything you planned, everything you mapped out, everything you told your soldiers, falls to pieces?

You don't. You teach thinking on your feet.

That's where John Ro comes in.

Part Two: A future unknown

A black SUV is rumbling down the gravel path toward base a lot quicker than most vehicles do, but there's no reason to worry yet. The guards stand idly, guns held lazily in front of them, and the machine-gunners stand equally lax behind them.

It picks up speed and now everyone is on alert, guns up, machine gun following the SUV's engine as it races toward the gate.

"Halt!" a guard shouts, putting his hand up to signal the driver needs to stop.

Nothing changes.

Now the SUV is bearing down on them. Someone needs to make a decision. They could shoot but what if it's all a misunderstanding? Not likely—they're not slowing down. But what if we wait too long? Who shoots first? What do we do?

Too late. A man emerges through the sunroof of the vehicle, cocks his arm back and hurls a...snowball?

"How are you gonna react?" asks senior cadet John Ro of the cadet who was just assaulted by snow.

The cadet grabs his imaginary machine gun with both hands, turns it and starts ripping into the SUV with imaginary bullets.

"You're gonna kill him for throwing snowballs?" asks Master Sergeant Jones, a member of the cadre or ROTC teachers.

Everybody cracks up, but Ro has a point to make to the cadets standing around watching the demonstration.

"Do you see how little time you have to react?" he asks. "It's a life and death situation."

And it could be. Those snowballs, as Ro points out, could be guns, grenades or missiles. The vehicle, which was full of senior cadets having fun in their final year of college, could have been full of insurgents who had equipped the SUV with a bomb. Or it could simply plow into

soldiers guarding a base somewhere in Afghanistan.

Everyone laughs now as cadets force their older classmates out of the SUV with fake guns so they can pretend to search the truck, and why not? The situation right now isn't serious. And 99 out of 100 times overseas it won't be serious either. Vehicles will slow down as they approach US military bases, get checked out by the guards and pass without incident.

But that one time something goes wrong could wipe out half of Radford University's 100 cadets in an instant.

What they learn now, on a gravel path that serves as a makeshift base, squeezed between a muddied soccer field and the softball stadium, could save their lives in a country an ocean away.

What they don't learn, between English and Geology, while thinking about boyfriends and girlfriends, while deciding whether Wendy's for a fourth night in a row is a good idea, could kill them.

Today, it's Ro's job to make sure there's nothing these cadets don't learn.

He paces back and forth walking them through the process of stopping an oncoming vehicle.

Shout. Show. Shoot.

Yell at them to make sure they know you're there. If they don't slow down, show them your weapon so they know you mean business. And if they're still coming just as fast, let them know you're not bluffing.

Ro, like all ROTC seniors, is nearly a second lieutenant in the US Army, and he acts like one would expect—a combination of authority and college kid.

Looking at Ro, it would be hard not to mistake him for a second lieutenant. His Army Combat Uniform, which looks like pixelated camouflage, is pressed neatly, giving the impression he means business. His hat covers black Oakley sunglasses, which shield his eyes from a bright but cold day. His gloves of a matching color hold a ripped out piece of notebook paper that he refers to sparingly while teaching his classmates.

Ro gestures to the small crowd as he walks from right to left and back again, breaking down material he has clearly mastered into bite size chunks the young ones will understand.

If someone was watching this on mute, Ro would seem to have completed the transition from cadet to Army officer. But his speech is sprinkled with 'you know' and 'OK?'; signs he is still getting used to instructing a crowd, to teaching a group of people who look up to him.

Cadets are rotating between three stations today, and by the third batch Ro has already eliminated the pauses from his speech. They practice tactics, he practices leadership. Fellow senior Troy Blankenstein told Ro he'd be an awesome ROTC instructor and although Ro balked at first, he's definitely thinking about it—Ro's all about giving back.

Of course, that'll have to be after he gets back from his deployment.

Certainly uncertain

When cadets commission as second lieutenants upon graduation, they understand more about where their lives will take them than almost any other recent college graduate.

For starters, they have a job that pays around \$52,000 a year after factoring in the basic allowance for housing and basic allowance for food- both tax free -that the Army provides. Then within 18 months, when they're promoted to first lieutenants, they'll make about \$63,000 per year. To top it off, new Army officers get 30 days of paid leave per year—try finding that anywhere else in America.

The Army also covers a boatload of other expenses, providing free health care and offering discount rates on things like family dental insurance, which is just \$9 per dependent per month.

They know this job, in one way or another, will take them through at least the next eight years of their life. It could stay with them until the end.

They know that if they do what is expected of them, they will rise through the ranks of the military, a career looked at as one of the most honorable in America. Or, if they choose to leave the Army, they know the skills they learned there will translate to leadership positions in the civilian world, leaving a million opportunities at their fingertips.

And yet what happens in their futures, despite the aura of stability, is anyone's guess.

They will live in many places, but where those places are is a mystery. They could be placed from Virginia to Alaska to Germany and will move around every three-four years, not knowing where they'll land next until the move is upon them. That's fine for a single guy, but when it's time to think about a family as some already have (Blankenstein is getting

married in less than a month), it gets exponentially more complex. Spouses have to change jobs, kids have to change schools and sever friendships. The family's life revolves around the soldier, whose life revolves around what the Army tells him to do.

The only place a soldier will almost certainly live for a year or two of their career is in Afghanistan, Iraq or another combat zone. Right now, most units deploy at least once every three years for an average of a year each time.

Being deployed isn't the worst thing in the world. If nothing else, the money is good. Soldiers get to set up a savings deposit program while they're there with absurdly high interest rates only the Army can offer. If they don't have a family, they can shut down all your bills while they're away. Soldiers get hazardous duty pay, imminent danger pay and every month they're deployed past one year they get a \$1,000 bonus—and that's all tax free.

But when they have significant others, it can get rough.

Communication between the soldier and the family is limited, and that, combined with such a long time away from home, is believed to be a huge reason the Army divorce rate is higher than that of civilians.

Nothing like thinking about the likelihood of divorce before you're married.

Worse than that, they have to think about death before they've lived a full life, and the death of the soldiers they command.

When you sign up to be a soldier, you know what you're getting into, but younger officers are often in more peril than older ones because of the nature of their positions. They are less experienced, so they do more executing of missions than planning.

According to the "Faces of the Fallen" project conducted by The Washington Post, as of February 20 of this year, 3,680 Army soldiers have died during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (the mission title in Afghanistan). Of those 3,680, 569 are 22-year-olds and 446 are 23-year-olds, the age these cadets could very well be when they are first deployed to the Middle East. 22-year-olds and 23-year-olds have the second and third most deaths of any age, only behind the deaths of 691 21-year-olds.

Most of those deaths come from enlisted men, although 258 second lieutenants, first lieutenants and captains have perished during OIF and OEF, and all the cadets commissioning in less than a month will at least be captains by the time they are able to leave the Army.

The likelihood of one of them dying overseas isn't great, but who thinks it will happen to them until it does? It could happen, and that's something they must live with.

What's much more likely is that one of the soldiers under their command will die in combat. Enlisted soldiers have a much higher death rate than officers, and cadets know that if they draw up a plan that results in the death of their soldiers, in the words of senior cadet John Miller, "that's on you."

And surviving overseas is only part of the battle. According to military.com, 30 percent of soldiers who've spent time in a war zone must deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, in this case caused by witnessing what transpires during war, upon their return home, and an additional 20-25 percent experience partial PTSD in their lifetime.

PTSD causes intense feelings of fear, horror and helplessness and gives those afflicted terrible flashbacks and nightmares, and puts them at risk for other psychological disorders such as depression. In fact, according to military.com, 88 percent of men and 79 percent of women with PTSD met the criteria for another psychiatric disorder, the most common of which was alcohol abuse.

It's a lot to consider as a teenager before signing a contract that gives the Army control of some part of their lives for at least eight years after graduation.

These cadets, however, seem as ready as anyone can be for a future as uncertain as theirs. They know they can't control a lot of what will happen to them as an officer and they're not going to think about those variables—it would drive them crazy. All they can do is plan for what they can and not worry about what they can't. It takes a lot of foresight to realize that.

Trashcan fires and encyclopedias

Ah yes, foresight.

When John Ro was 14, he was a bit of a troublemaker. He had recently moved from Hawaii, where he had spent the vast majority of his childhood, to Florida and then quickly to Virginia, leaving him thousands of miles from home in a part of the country completely environmentally and culturally different from what he was used to.

His parents had also gotten divorced during the family's month-long stint in Florida, and the combination of all these new circumstances took its toll.

Like many teenagers with problems outside the classroom, John did some outlandish things

to get attention. Like, one day, lighting a bathroom trash can on fire.

The fire didn't do too much damage- it barely made it past the trash can to blacken some of the surrounding tiles -but it was enough to get John and his family an appointment with the superintendent of Fairfax County Public Schools.

John sat there in a conference room that looked like something you'd see on TV- long, sleek brown table, plenty of black chairs surrounding it - dressed in a black suit, his hair freshly cut. His mom and sister were with him, waiting for the meeting to begin.

The superintendent and his entourage walked in. He was a tall white man whose hair matched his skin color. He wore glasses without frames, a nicely cut navy blue blazer and walked in with his shoulders held high—the alpha male.

This wasn't a meeting so much as it was a preliminary hearing to decide what to do with John. The superintendent began by chatting with the 14-year-old, just getting to know him. Then the nice guy hat came off.

The alpha male started firing questions at John, who was already petrified just by being there. He attacked his morals and used language way above teenage comprehension.

"A lighter is to lighting a trash can as a baseball is to, fill in the blank," said the superintendent.

"Uh, I don't know, a home run?" replied John, nervous and confused.

"Oh, so you think lighting a trash can on fire is like hitting a home run?"

Ouch. Obviously that's not what Ro meant, but he was frightened, embarrassed and, after all, shouldn't he not have to worry about analogies until the SATs?

It all went downhill from there. At the conclusion, John got to see his usually feisty mom cry and plead with the superintendent to give him another chance. He couldn't bear watching what he had done to his mom and he was worried about his future.

John's immediate future was an alternative school, where he would stay for less than a year. When he got back to Fairfax High School, he stayed out of trouble by picking up hobbies and continuing ones he already had. He plays guitar, enjoys fishing, likes tinkering with cars, skateboarding, basketball, football, boxing and combing through the encyclopedia, which is something he's done ever since he was a small child. Little John used to comb

through the Army section, flipping then to all the war pages, then back to the air force or something else military related. He's always been fascinated by the life of a soldier.

His mom married a career Army man while John was still in high school, and his stepdad, whom he refers to as "dad," has been a huge positive influence in his life.

John wasn't even sure he was going to college and now, with a slight push from his parents, he's on the brink of becoming a field artillery officer in the US Army.

Oh, the places you'll go

That's right, Ro got his top choice, field artillery. Blankenstein and Miller did well for themselves too—both got infantry, just as they'd hoped.

They are lucky in the sense that their branches are what they want to do. Not all cadets get their top choice, or even something remotely close to what they wanted. One cadet who wanted infantry wound up in the chemical core, where he'll never see the frontlines. But they worked hard to get where they are, hard enough that the Army put them where they wanted to be.

So with that out of the way, they'll soon be off to Basic Officer Leadership Course, which is held at forts across the nation and trains new officers in the specifics of their branch.

BOLC lasts around four months, at which point officers are shipped off to other, shorter schools where they can acquire more skills before being assigned a unit. The legendary ranger school, for example, is practically a requirement for all infantry officers.

Then, sometime between six months and two years after they commission, they're in the real Army.

Miller, whose five-year-old self jumped on a donkey, will lead without fear and by example.

If the way he leads now is any indication, Blankenstein will lead with a calm, determined focus.

Ro already leads with precision, easily breaking down the complex into understandable chunks.

They've prepared for four years and now the foundation is set. It's time to be soldiers.