Prologue

IT WAS ALL two-lane country roads out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Jeff Kisbert[1] sat behind the wheel of his dusty Ford Focus, a maroon beret beside him on the passenger's seat, never to be worn again. He cruised past wild grass and empty lots, his window down. The cold wind felt good after the stress of the last few weeks, the last few years. It was early afternoon, December 28, 2010.

For several weeks, Jeff had been collecting the required signatures for his military separation checklist. First, he had gone to the health center and asked them to sign: yes, he was up to date on all his shots. Then he stopped by the library and hounded them to confirm: yes, all his books had been returned. The biggest headache was the signature to verify he had returned all the items the Army had issued—one helmet, one bulletproof vest, two sleeping bags—across what felt like a lifetime, before everything had been lugged to hell and back through his two deployments. He had tracked it all down and held his breath as the guy behind the supply desk ticked through the lost list. Finally, he had the two dozen signatures he needed. The ordeal had taken longer than Jeff could have imagined. But he was done.

For more than four years Jeff had served as an infantry soldier, one vertebra in the millions-strong backbone of the Army. His first deployment, to southern Afghanistan's Kandahar province, came just as Defense Secretary Robert Gates extended the length of tour to fifteen months. "Our forces are stretched. There's no question about that," Gates said in April 2007, and Jeff found himself among the surge of troops flown in to re-energize the war.

His second deployment took him to Zabul, the poorest province

in Afghanistan, and much of his worldview changed after witnessing that level of poverty, where healthcare and education were faraway abstractions and the closest thing to an institution was the village well from which the locals drew water to survive. Rumbling down a cracked road one day, Jeff's Humvee rolled over an Improvised Explosive Device (IED).[2] The blast threw him off the gunner's seat, but he was lucky. He woke up with a concussion. Some friends on patrol with him didn't wake up at all. When Jeff returned, they gave him a Purple Heart.

He felt more satisfaction when he received the stamp releasing him from the Army. On the last day of service, an officer took his checklist and scrutinized it for all the required appointments and signatures, then stamped the sheet with the black print of a dragon head, the emblem of the XVIII Airborne Corps. Headquartered at Fort Bragg, the unit traced its history back to the Battle of the Bulge during World War II. Jeff rubbed his thumb over the emblem and felt a flush of pride. He had earned it. His final stamp of approval.

He brought his leave papers to the battalion headquarters and handed them to a sergeant who nodded absently as he scribbled his signature.

"You didn't even read it," Jeff said. "That's my terminal leave. I'm out of the Army now."

The sergeant's head snapped back in shock.

Jeff realized he was smiling. He walked out of the building and took off his beret.

From the road, he pulled out a flip phone and called his fiancé. "It's done," he said. "I'm out of here." His destination was McLeansboro, a small town in southern Illinois, where his fiancé was staying with her mother. The plan was to pick her up and drive down to St. Louis, where they had met two years earlier and planned to start their new life. "No more driving out for four-day weekends," he told her. "This is the last drive."

But first he had one quick stop to make.

Matt Jackson[2] had joined the Army a couple months after Jeff

in 2006. The two met after basic training and quickly became best friends; by the time they had completed two tours in Afghanistan, they might as well have been brothers. At one point they pledged that if they couldn't find wives after leaving the military, they would go to Montana, pitch a tent on some rocks, and inhale cigarettes and Red Bull for their remaining days.

Thankfully, it never came to that.

Matt had gotten married in 2009 and lived with his wife in Fayetteville, twenty minutes outside Fort Bragg. He had achieved his final stamp of separation from the Army a few weeks before Jeff, but they had worked through much of the process together. The freedom they had gone to war for had never felt so sweet. "I was on top of the world when I got out," Matt said. "It's a great feeling when you can do what you want to do again."

His plan was to transfer his infantry skills into law enforcement. A few Army buddies had transitioned out before him and found jobs as police officers and firefighters. Matt liked the idea of serving his country and his community in a new capacity. He felt equipped for the task and eager to get started.

When Jeff arrived at Matt's apartment, he headed straight for the bathroom to change out of his uniform. "Well, you're not waiting for anything, huh?" said Matt's wife. For Jeff it was a cathartic moment, like casting off an old skin—and shedding all the rules and regulations that came with it. In his new skin of jeans and a sweatshirt, he and Matt stepped outside. They each lit a cigarette and savored their first smoke together as civilians. It felt surreal. They were out, back in the real world, their lives in their own hands again.

Yet their paths, intertwined so closely as soldiers, had already begun to diverge. In their final weeks at Fort Bragg, they had attended a mandatory seminar hosted by representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The representatives glossed over certain services, such as the post-9/11 GI Bill that pays for education and retraining, while doubling down on others—in particular, Jeff noticed, disability compensa-

tion. Inside a packed classroom, he listened as the VA official listed condition after condition: "if you have trouble sleeping, if you have nightmares, if you're ever feeling anxious," in order to emphasize one point: "You can get paid for these things."

Jeff left the meeting disgusted. "I didn't want to have anything to do with it," he said. He was moving to a new city, getting married, enrolling in a bachelor's degree program to pave the way for a long-term career. He felt ready "to grab the world by the horns," not file a list of disabilities. "I wanted to get out and get on with my life," he said.

Matt had a different response. He took the VA agent's advice and filed for every condition he could think of. "My thought process was if they want to give it to me, they'll give it to me. If not, they'll deny me." He was not alone. In the twenty years after 9/11, more than 1.3 million veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have become compensation recipients on the VA disability payroll. [4]

Some decisions come to define everything that follows. "I was pushing him to go to school," Jeff says, "and he was pushing me to go to the VA."

Introduction

VETERANS DISABILITY COMPENSATION was conceived in a phrase tucked into the closing of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address in 1865. Speaking before thousands on a muddy spring day, the president expressed his gratitude to the grieving families of those who had sacrificed life and limb to keep the nation whole. It was the nation's obligation, he believed, "to care for him who shall have borne the battle." Today, his words are honored by a plaque at the entrance of the Department of Veterans Affairs headquarters in Washington, D.C., which has assumed the charge of helping make former soldiers, and their families, whole.

To this day, the nation stands overwhelmingly behind the sentiment Lincoln conveyed. When men and women are maimed by battle, they deserve the best care we the people can muster to return them to health and compensate them for whatever cannot be restored. Unfortunately, the path of care and compensation leads into a quagmire of despair and dysfunction.

America has allowed itself to grow apart from its service members. The military is respected, honored, even revered in our culture, yet too often the engagements are shallow and insincere. Companies advertise their support for soldiers to boost business. Politicians pay tribute to the troops for an applause line. Most damaging of all, the public's perception of its veterans has become a convoluted caricature, saddled with battle wounds—those that can be seen, and those that can't. Too frequently the picture zooms in to focus on their disabilities. And, on paper, the nation's veterans are sicker today than ever.

- Between 2000 and 2020, the number of veterans receiving disability benefits nearly doubled, even as the overall veteran population fell by about a third, from 26.4 million to 18 million.[1]
- 36 percent of veterans from the post-9/11 service era are disability recipients, compared to 11 percent after World War II.[2]
- They are assessed to be more disabled, on average receiving compensation for 7.96 conditions, compared to the World War II cohort's 2.4.[3]
- Since 2000, the number of veterans rated at 70 to 100 percent disability, the most severe category of impairment, has increased nearly *seven-fold.*[4]
- As a percentage, more veterans today are compensated for disabilities than ever before in the VA's history.

These numbers paint a bleak outlook, but the picture is a distortion. The reality is that the VA disability apparatus has strayed from its purpose and lost sight of its mission. Military physicians balk at the stream of patients who arrive with no desire to improve, wishing only to log their ailments for compensation. VA doctors cringe when they see vets "performing symptoms" and internalizing ailments in response to the incentives offered for being disabled, but fear the backlash they will face if they speak out. "There's a great many veterans pretending to have fictitious conditions," said one VA examiner. "And a great many doctors pretending to treat them."

Millions of veterans have been folded into a VA disability model that reflects a flawed understanding of human nature, an outdated view of current medical capabilities, and an antiquated assessment of the labor market. It operates like a misguided assembly line, churning out diagnoses of disability and applying bandages of cash in lieu of the rehabilitative care veterans deserve.

The impact of a disability diagnosis can be serious and lasting; it can disrupt a person's identity, limit their opportunities, and constrict their vision for the future. But far too often, disability is both a symptom and a disease among veterans. Disability has become a

way to reinforce destructive stereotypes and resist proven methods of recovery. It has become a means of cloaking a grab at entitlements and a back door out of the civilian workforce in a robe of virtue. It has become a story the country is too eager to believe and retell, before even checking to see if it is right.

As more vets are approved for disability, economists rue the shrinking of America's labor supply. Military service members come from among the best and the brightest of our nation's youth. They are physically and mentally capable individuals with the proven tenacity to endure challenges, and they possess valuable skills gained through military training and experience. The significance of their actual and potential contribution to the workforce is hard to overstate, yet an alarming number are taking a seat on the sidelines of society, as if they have nothing to offer and nothing to gain.

Psychologists and medical experts have been sounding alarm bells for years, warning anyone who will listen that the conditions getting the most attention don't have to be disabling at all, and certainly don't have to be permanent. Good science gets shouted down when it conflicts with the overarching narrative that veterans are impaired and broken and cannot hope to be anything more than what is conveyed in their disability rating.

Meanwhile, inside service halls and online chat rooms, vets advise and congratulate one another on raising their disability levels and achieving the ultimate prize: 100 percent disability. Years into dependency, some wonder where their livelihoods have gone. Said one veteran, "I feel like discarded government waste."

Since 2000, VA spending on disability compensation has more than tripled and become the organization's largest expenditure. In 2021, the VA is projected to spend more than $105 billion on disability benefits—twice the combined value of Delta and American Airlines.[5] It is spending more on veterans' disability today than it is spending on rehabilitation programs, than it is spending on education and re-training, than it is spending on all the services covered under veterans' health care. In fact, the VA spends more on

veterans staying sick than on veterans getting better.

Service members returning to civilian life deserve a better system, and so does the country.

Policymakers recall the flashes when reform seemed possible, when a fix appeared within reach and they could have done more, but the path to reform has always been a political minefield, strewn with failed efforts and professional blowback. Powerful interests suppress even the mention of new ideas, and many with the duty to lead have learned to stay away. When a senior VA official was asked about pushing for a more recovery-oriented disability department, she responded, "Oh no, I will not touch that. I am simply focused on making the system run." Anything more, she insisted, "is too hard to do."

Inside the chambers of D.C. politics, the most controversial issues earn the moniker "third rail." Nobody wants to touch them because no one wants to get shocked. Nothing produces quite the same charge as trying to grapple with the growth of veterans' entitlements. The purpose of this book is to shake loose the paralysis and diagnose the problem for what it is. The aim of this book is to seize the third rail of the veterans disability system with both hands.

PART I:

SERVICE

Chapter 1
The Volunteer Army

MARCO VASQUEZ JOINED the US Army in the country's last breath of peacetime. The new millennium had just dawned and 2001, he resolved, would be the year he began providing for his young family in the way they deserved. More than anything, he was determined to get out of his hometown of El Paso, Texas.

Marco had grown up playing with his Hot Wheels beneath framed portraits of the Pope on the walls of his grandmother's home. Then, after he turned thirteen, his mother joined the Pentecostal church. "That became very awkward," he says. She tore down his Metallica posters, snapped his Led Zeppelin records, and insisted that he start to attend worship with her. After graduating high school in 1995, he wanted to go to college, but his parents would only support him if he attended a Bible college. He chose one in California to get as far away from them as he could.

The distance from his high school sweetheart was harder, and they saved up for months so that she could visit. They had been introduced by a mutual friend when they were both juniors. He was a musician. She was a dancer. He had almost finished his first year of college when he learned that she was pregnant.

Marco dropped out of school and moved back to El Paso. Their daughter was born in August 1998. He married his girlfriend that year, solidifying the family.

To pay the bills, Marco took a job at a discount tire shop. The work had him on his feet all day—changing tires, repairing flats, taking inventory—but "they were paying pretty good at the time,"

he said, about $12 an hour. Within six months, he was promoted to assistant manager. The promotion came with a small raise, but the workload multiplied. After a while, he realized he was working fifty-hour weeks just to make ends meet.

In 2000, he and his wife had their second child, a boy. Marco knew what it was like to grow up poor in El Paso, and when he looked at the people around him, uncles and older cousins who got married and never left, he saw that the struggle to find—and more importantly, keep—a job never ended. He didn't want that kind of life for his family. Education, he believed, would be his way out. "I need to go back to school," he told himself. "If I don't do it now, I'm never going to do it."

Marco knew the military offered scholarships through its vast Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) network, and one afternoon, he visited the closest recruiting center inside a nearby shopping mall. There was an office for each of the five branches. Marco had thought about joining the US Coast Guard, but he soon learned that having children hurt his eligibility. He next considered the Marine Corps, but then the recruiter told him that most of his first paycheck would go to paying down his uniform. That wouldn't work; he needed every dollar he could get for his family.

The recruiters in the Army office were more laid-back, Marco remembered, and the benefits, in particular, were attractive to him. "What hooked me was the Green to Gold program," he said. The largest provider of college funding in the country, Army ROTC offered a variety of financial packages to cover tuition, fees, and living expenses. Enrolled students committed to a period of service after graduating.[1] Marco chose a four-year Green to Gold scholarship package, which meant that he would serve for a year in the military, come back to Texas and earn a four-year degree, then return to the Army for three more years of service.[2] The Army would also provide medical benefits for his whole family. "I thought that was great," Marco said.

Then there was the cash. "It was in 2001. There was a lot of

college bonus money, and the infantry branch was throwing out a bonus too," Marco said.[7]

He knew a good deal when he saw one: $11,000 for joining the infantry, $3,000 more for airborne. "I was like, 'Let's go for it!'" he said. "Let's do it."

George W. Bush had just been elected president on a campaign against nation-building, and another war in the Gulf seemed as plausible as a space invasion. The events that would change everything were still two seasons away.

On February 3, Marco signed his papers, then recited the oath alongside a dozen other recruits. An officer shook his hand.

"Welcome to the Army, son."

Marco's actions represent the exact intent of the incentives and benefits the military introduced during the twentieth century to attract new recruits.[3] The GI Bill, first signed into law during World War II, offers service members as much as $22,000 per year for college or vocational training after completing their terms.[4] For soldiers with existing student debt, the Army can help them repay up to $65,000 in loans.[5] And like many other federal employees, service members are eligible for the government's Thrift Savings Plan, a retirement program similar to the 401(k)s offered by many private companies, with the Army matching contributions of up to 5 percent for qualified recruits.[6]

THE MILITARY did not always offer benefits or bonuses to attract recruits. Conscription policies in the United States date back to the American Civil War, with draftees serving in both the Union and Confederate armies.

As America prepared to join the Allied war effort during World War I, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Selective Service Act of 1917. The act created a "liability to serve" for all eligible male citizens, and formed the basis for the national conscription system that exists to this day.[8] In World War II, Selective Service expanded its scopeand influence by doling out deferments to channel manpower

toward designated areas of "national interest."[9] As one researcher put it, the system held complete authority to determine "whether a young man was more valuable as a father or a student or a scientist or a doctor than as a soldier."[10]

On one hand, occupational deferments exempted scientists and engineers and placed more of the burden of service on poor and working-class men.[11] On the other, the draft served as one of the few mechanisms to actively integrate various American populations. The writer Joseph Epstein praised conscription's blending properties.[12] The draft "took me out of my own social class and ethnic milieu—big-city, middle-class, Jewish—and gave me a vivid sense of the social breadth of my country," he wrote. "I slept in barracks and shared all my meals with American Indians, African Americans from Detroit, white Appalachians, Christian Scientists from Kansas, and discovered myself befriending and being befriended by young men I would not otherwise have met."

Despite its imperfect execution, the draft broke barriers that needed breaking. It mixed disparate groups into a unified class of recruits and taught them to approach objectives as a collective.

The movement to abolish conscription gained strength, though, as the Vietnam War dragged on. The draft became the subject of an intense national debate over defining the nature of the armed forces. At the height of the war, General William Westmoreland, commander of US forces in Vietnam, appeared before a presidential commission to testify against voluntary service. His voice ringing with conviction, he declared that he had no desire to command an "army of mercenaries." Sitting on the commission, Milton Friedman, the future Nobel Prize-winning economist, shot back, "General, would you rather command an army of slaves?"[13]

General Westmoreland struck the more imposing figure, but Friedman's position resonated with the public. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced the end of the draft on January 27, 1973. The last inducted American entered the service that June.[14]

The removal of the draft eventually gave birth to a serious and

devoted professional military. Prior to the 1970s, many conscripted troops, wary of commitment, enlisted with poor discipline and low morale. The new force was different. Populated entirely with volunteers who had individually decided to serve, its ranks drew from those who viewed service not as an obligated stint but as a serious profession, perhaps even a long-term career. Subsequent successes in Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf War, and Kosovo showcased American soldiers at their most effective.[15] On average, experience levels in the military rose, enlistment periods lengthened, and retention rates grew.[16]

But as the makeup of America's military shifted, so did its relationship with the rest of society. Toward the end of World War II, nearly one in ten Americans had served, and flags with tiny blue stars, signifying a family member on active duty in the military, hung from windows across the country. Today, after nearly twenty years of the "Global War on Terror," about 1 percent of the population—about 2.8 million Americans—has served in Iraq or Afghanistan.[17]

In 1971, near the height of America's involvement in Vietnam, three out of four representatives in the US House and Senate had served in the military. In 2018, the portion of Congressional members with military service had fallen to less than a fifth—half the number of representatives who came from prior careers in business.[18] "A people untouched (or seemingly untouched) by war are far less likely to care about it," wrote the military historian Andrew Bacevich, whose son died fighting in the Iraq War. "Persuaded that they have no skin in the game, they will permit the state to do whatever it wishes."[19]

Not long after the draft was dissolved, two University of Michigan scholars described the development of a "separate military ethos" as career-oriented service members replaced their citizen soldier counterparts. Surveys at the time showed broad public support for a voluntary force, while the majority of Americans favored raising military pay to attract sufficient volunteers. But in a 1975 study, the two scholars reported that few civilians had considered "what kinds

of servicemen will, or should, staff an all-volunteer armed force."

By interviewing more than 2,500 Navy personnel, the authors found diverging ideological views between members of the "career force" and the wider public. "It seems inevitable that the military will indeed grow more separate from civilians," they concluded. "As the proportion of career-oriented men in the all-volunteer force increases, the force will be less likely to match the values, perceptions and preferences concerning the military held by civilians."[20]

For generations, conscription had acted as a bridge, flawed but serviceable, that connected the military with the rest of society. Ending the draft not only severed this important tie but initiated a deterioration that ate at other remaining links. These days, service members seemingly detach from the general public and disappear into the removed reality of the armed forces for years, sometimes decades, at a time. When they emerge again, they return to a world that mystifies its soldiers and mythicizes their sacrifices—a world that can never fully comprehend the experiences they've had, the orders they've carried, the bonds they've shared—yet insists on treating them with a deference bordering on idolatry.

Many service members describe the effect as being placed on a pedestal. Civilians celebrate and honor them, but view them as spectacles, treating them as an "other." Cast apart from civilian society, veterans describe living behind a barrier where shallow sentiments and stock phrases like "Thank you for your service" don't reach. They describe a distance that they don't know how to cross.

In America, that psychological distance is growing.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANCE has also grown, extending across the span of the United States.

In the first half of the twentieth century, as the country prepared for two world wars, a rapidly expanding military acquired huge tracts of land in remote, inexpensive areas of the South, where many of the nation's largest military bases continue to operate today. The bases required massive, open areas for ranges, runways, and train-

ing exercises, far from major cities. Multiple rounds of base closures since 1988 have further deepened the military's geographic isolation, concentrating resources and manpower increasingly in the South. This shift has coincided with a higher percentage of military personnel hailing from that region. While southern states have always contributed a greater share of recruits to the armed forces, the disparity has widened over time. In 1976, 32 percent of voluntary service members came from the South; in 2015, the percentage had risen to forty-five.[21]

Less than a week after he took the oath, Marco boarded a plane from El Paso to Fort Benning, a sprawling Southern military base on the Alabama-Georgia border. Assigned to an anti-armor infantry specialty, he learned how to fire an M249 machine gun, aim an Mk19 grenade launcher, and do it all from the back of a roaring Humvee. After sixteen weeks of training, his wife, Amber, flew down with the kids for his graduation.

In July, he arrived at Fort Campbell, another Southern Army base, this one straddling Kentucky and Tennessee, where he reported to his assignment with the 101st Airborne. Known for its brigade-scale air assaults, the 101st Airborne specializes in mobilizing large forces at a moment's notice. Senior military leaders described the unit as the Army's "tip of the spear."[22] Marco received his post to the 502nd Infantry Regiment, nicknamed the "Five-O-Deuce." His division commander was David Petraeus, at the time a two-star general.

On a Tuesday morning, Marco was stomping through fields, slinging equipment for an air assault exercise, when the entire training program suddenly froze. "Radio communication ceased. Everything was grounded. No one was moving," he remembered. "We just sat there."

He looked around. Everybody appeared as bewildered as he was. Marco always carried a flip phone inside his Army rucksack, tucked into a little plastic bag so it wouldn't get wet, and when he took it out to call his wife, her first words to him were, "Oh my god."

His stomach plunged.

"It's worse than Pearl Harbor," she said, then moments later, she screamed. "The second tower just got hit."

Marco still had no idea what was happening. "What do you mean the second tower?"

"We're being attacked," his wife replied.

The details came slowly, but the rumors spread fast. In bits and pieces, Marco and his squad mates learned about the World Trade Center buildings, about the planes, about the attacks on New York and the nation's capital. Ordered to stay where they were, some soldiers started getting angry, others gaped in shock. Then, as if the same thought hit everyone at the same time, a hush came over the camp. A buddy sidled up next to Marco.

"We're going to war."

Marco didn't reply but he knew it was true.

"That's all I was thinking," he said. "We're going to war, dude."

In the days that followed, military recruitment centers around the country received a flood of phone calls. Among high school and college-aged men, willingness to join the service jumped from 21 percent in July to 32 percent by October 2001. Just as in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, an attack on American soil jolted the public sentiment, and enthusiasm for the nation's armed forces spiked. Nearly half of Americans said they were more likely to enlist.[23]

Yet for all the goodwill, enlistment figures remained little changed. Between 2001 and 2002, the number of young men and women who joined the military's active components actually fell.[24] Many of the individuals who contacted recruiters simply didn't meet the requirements.

The military has long battled perceptions that it draws from lower-achieving segments of society, scooping up misfits with few other options. However, the records have never substantiated this perception, and in recent years, they point to the opposite—a growing worry that fewer and fewer Americans are qualified for service. A 2015 report titled "Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve" found that

75 percent of the country's youth population was ineligible to join the military. Reasons for disqualification include health and physical issues, drug use and criminal history, poor conduct, low educational attainment, and inadequate aptitude; a third were estimated to have multiple disqualifiers. "As military leaders look ahead to the coming years, they are increasingly concerned that there are not enough qualified candidates to defend our nation," the report said.[25]

Candidates wishing to join the military are first screened to ensure they meet a range of physical, educational, and citizenship requirements. Those who move on must take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), a comprehensive exam that covers nine subjects, from 'Arithmetic Reasoning' to 'Mechanical Comprehension.' A sample multiple-choice question might test recruits on how a generator component operates, or which car part contains a vehicle's coolant. Minimum ASVAB scores vary according to a recruit's desired service branch and job function, but all must demonstrate sufficient competency to enter service. Of the military's active service members, 75 percent scored in the top half of the Armed Forces Qualifying Test, a component of the ASVAB, significantly higher than the ability distribution in the general population.[26]

The Department of Defense publishes a series of quality benchmarks to guide recruiting efforts, and consistently demands that recruits meet a higher standard than the civilian population. The military conducts tests to gauge character, requires candidates to be healthier and more fit than civilians, and bars anyone from service who has a history of drug use or criminal behavior.[27]

Enlistees are also typically more educated than the average citizen. According to a 2007 Congressional Budget Office report, 91 percent of recruits were high school graduates, compared with 80 percent for all eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old US residents.[28]

And despite common misconceptions about the military's "poverty draft," recruits don't typically enlist out of financial need. A 2008 Heritage Foundation study found that only 11 percent of military recruits came from the lowest economic quartile, while 25

percent came from the highest.[29] In 2010, the National Priorities Project reported that more than 50 percent of recruits had lived in ZIP codes from the upper half of the nation's income distribution.[30]

In one of his final speeches as Secretary of Defense, William Cohen capped his comments with a heartfelt endorsement of the nation's armed forces: "On countless occasions I've been asked by foreign leaders, 'How can our military be more like America's?' I'll repeat here today what I've said time and time again. It's not our training, although our training is the most rigorous in the world. It's not our technology, although ours is the most advanced in the world. And it's not our tactics, although ours are the most revolutionary in the world. We have the finest military on Earth because we have the finest people on Earth—because we recruit and retain the best that America has to offer."[31]

MATT JACKSON GREW up in Marion, Illinois, alongside his two cousins and best friends: Dustin, older by a year, and David, fifteen months younger. Dustin joined the Marine Corps first, in 2000, and his brother followed him into the armed forces not long after. When the invasion of Iraq launched in March 2003, Matt and the entire extended family found themselves situated daily in front of the television, following every bit of news that came out.

Marion was a small town, and Matt lived on the same street as his grandfather and two of his uncles. About three miles long, it was spelled two ways, either Link or Linck Road, depending on which end you drove in from. "Obviously, the guy who made the street signs was an idiot," Matt said. If the family wasn't having Sunday dinner together at the church, they met at his grandfather's house to discuss the latest from the war—the little clips they had seen that day, anything they had heard.

One day, Matt's grandfather called for everyone to quiet down. Papa Jim then got out a VHS tape and popped it into the living room's bulky video player. It was a recorded news segment, the reporter giving his dispatch from a US military base in Iraq. Dozens

of service members scurried about behind him.

"Right there!" Papa Jim shouted, pointing at the screen. Everyone leaned in and squinted.

Papa Jim was convinced it was Dustin. At 6'3", Dustin had always stood taller than anyone around, and after a decade on the sidelines watching his grandson sprint up and down the court at school basketball games, Papa Jim swore he could spot the kid's movements anywhere—including the background of a dusty military compound halfway around the world.

Plus, Papa Jim insisted, the guy on TV had a long neck, and everyone knew that Dustin, too, has a long neck. Eventually the family let him have it. "Who really knows?" Matt said. "It was probably just a guy in a Marine Corps uniform running with a hundred other guys."

Matt had been in third grade when the first Gulf War began, and he remembers Operation Desert Storm as a blur of photographs and news footage. In February 1991, an American-led coalition pounded into Kuwait, liberated the capital, then drove into Iraq with so much homegrown American moxie that a ceasefire was called within days. One Army unit, Matt heard, took out forty-one Iraqi battalions in less than seventy-two hours.[32] In 2003, as American boots stomped through Iraq once again, "That's what a lot of people were thinking," remembers Matt. "We're going to frickin' show up, break your shit, then leave."

Few proceedings in Operation Iraqi Freedom followed the script of the Gulf War, though. Enthusiasm at home soon became harder to sustain, but Marion was the kind of small Midwestern town that adored its sons and daughters in service. Supporting the troops was "kind of our thing," Matt said, and watching his cousins ship off to war "gave the rest of us an obligation. Like, maybe we should do our part."

Growing up, Matt had one clear role model: Dustin and David's father, Uncle Dennis—a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne who served four years' active duty in the late 1970s and had remained in the National Guard ever since. Uncle Dennis taught Matt how to

shoot, how to hunt, how to be a man.

As kids, Matt and his cousins would spend hours rooting around in the attic, looking through Uncle Dennis's old military gear—an old pair of boots, a pocketknife, a compass. Weekends they took everything out into the backyard and staged battles until it got too dark to see. Military service was never far from Matt's mind. "It was something I grew up being interested in," he said. "I always wanted to do my part, also, and serve my country."

After graduating from high school in the spring of 2001, Matt enrolled at a local community college, but passed only about half of his classes. "I was young and immature," he said. Before he could drink legally, he would wait outside bars until somebody left, then ask for their wristband and use a piece of gum to attach it again. After a couple of years, Matt decided school wasn't for him. "I didn't know what I wanted to do. I kind of just dicked around," he said. He dropped out and began to work for his dad's construction business, delivering pizzas on the weekend for extra cash.

Construction slowed as winter set in. With the holidays approaching at the end of 2005, Uncle Dennis called one day and asked Matt if he wanted to drive down to Fort Benning together. David, Matt's younger cousin, was coming back from his first deployment. When they arrived on base, Uncle Dennis suggested that Matt stay in the barracks with David for a few nights. Matt was eager to hang around. "It was just like a giant dorm," he remembered.

Looking out the window, Matt saw soldiers packed tightly into group formation, running, marching, drilling in sync. He noticed how orderly everything was, the entire base grid-like and clean, how there was no trash or even tall weeds anywhere. And he listened spellbound to David's stories—about driving through Iraq, about loading up tanks, about bonding with the other guys. Serving in the Army, he began to understand, was saying yes to a transformation. It was saying yes to direction and structure, something you could be proud of, and he couldn't stop talking about it with Uncle Dennis during the eight-hour drive home. When they got back to Illinois,

Matt was ready to say "yes" to the Army.

Matt's decision to enlist featured several factors common to many veterans. Regardless of service era, vets frequently recount being pulled by a sense of duty—a desire "to serve their country." According to the Pew Research Center, 88 percent of post-9/11 veterans indicated that serving their country was an important reason for why they enlisted, while 93 percent of older vets said the same.[33] A commonly heard phrase among younger recruits is "wanting to make a difference."

More practical motivations exist as well. More than half of veterans say they joined the military to learn skills for future civilian careers, and three out of four post-9/11 vets list educational benefits as an important reason for their enlistment. "I joined for the free shit," said one Iraq War vet, "but I stayed for the people." Explaining her rationale, she continued: "I grew up in a dead-end town where there were no opportunities. I figured the military would pay me to leave my town and learn how to do something new. I knew I would get educational aid, which I needed since my parents were poor. I knew I would get free healthcare, which I needed since I wouldn't be able to stay on my parents' insurance unless I went to school (which I couldn't afford). I wanted to see more of the world, and I knew the military would pay me to see new places and do new things."[34]

Indeed, recent veterans are more likely than their predecessors to join the military in order "to see more of the world," while roughly a quarter of all vets say they enlisted in part because they had trouble finding civilian jobs.[35] "After 9/11 there was all kinds of economic downsizing," said Nicole Gordon, an Army sergeant from South Carolina. "No matter what kind of job you had, you were getting laid off. Businesses were closing. So with that, I had no choice but to serve, because it was either not make it and wonder whether I'm going to have a job or serve my country."[36]

As in Matt's case, a big influence for many enlistees is having family members who served before them. "Grandpa was in Europe for WWII, Dad was a Green Beret, uncle was in Vietnam," said Jon

Davis, a Marine sergeant who fought in the Iraq War. Roughly 80 percent of all recruits have at least one military family member.[37] "There was a great deal of support when I started thinking about joining," said Davis. "It wasn't pressure, but it was support."[38]

Many also join the military in response to a sense of challenge. As a natural athlete, Matt had always relished the special pleasure from pushing his body to conquer new tasks. Growing up, his free time was allocated between half a dozen different sports—soccer, basketball, baseball, track and field, coed volleyball, and softball—and after graduating from high school he took up cross-country. When he was twenty years old, he got on a bike and rode five hundred miles across the state of Iowa. It took about a week—on some days he covered as many as seventy-five miles before sunset—and then the following year, he did it again with no training, "just counting on the fact that I was young and athletic," he said. It was the most fun he ever had. He discovered things about himself he had never known—blissful, bitter lessons earned from forcing his legs to pump against pedals and chains when they screamed for him to stop. "Your body can go further than your brain," he said, and it was a truth he tried not to forget.

Matt decided to enlist as a paratrooper, just like his uncle, even though he was "terrified of heights, absolutely terrified," as he put it. When he was five years old, he was climbing a tree when his foot slipped. A branch gave way and he fell hard, the wind completely knocked out of him. That was how the fear started. Working construction, his team often got sent up to the roof, or the vacant skeleton of some high-level floor, and it was all he could do not to embarrass himself. "I remember sitting on my butt, scooting around, holding onto stuff like I was Spiderman. Like, three to four points of contact," he said. On their drive back from Fort Benning, he asked Uncle Dennis about the scariest moment of his life, and Uncle Dennis said it was when he jumped out of an airplane and his parachute didn't open. He eventually pulled out his reserve, but it was thirty seconds of terror that nothing ever came close to. Matt

thought about his uncle's fear, and about his own. He considered joining the airborne infantry as the greatest challenge he would ever face, and realized that he had already made up his mind. "I wanted to do the hardest thing I could think of," he said.

Months later, he lifted himself from the holding deck of a C-130 transport plane and felt the whirlpool suck of air as the latch popped open at three thousand feet. He had been told it wasn't so bad once you were falling; jumping was the hard part.

Forty guys adjusted to face the door and Matt could feel his heart pounding. This was what he had signed up for. "This is your job now," he told himself. "This is your obligation."

He felt the tug from the soldier in front of him, the anticipation of the soldier behind. His mind was still terrified, but he was a soldier now, too. His body belonged to the pack.

He jumped.