

FEATURES



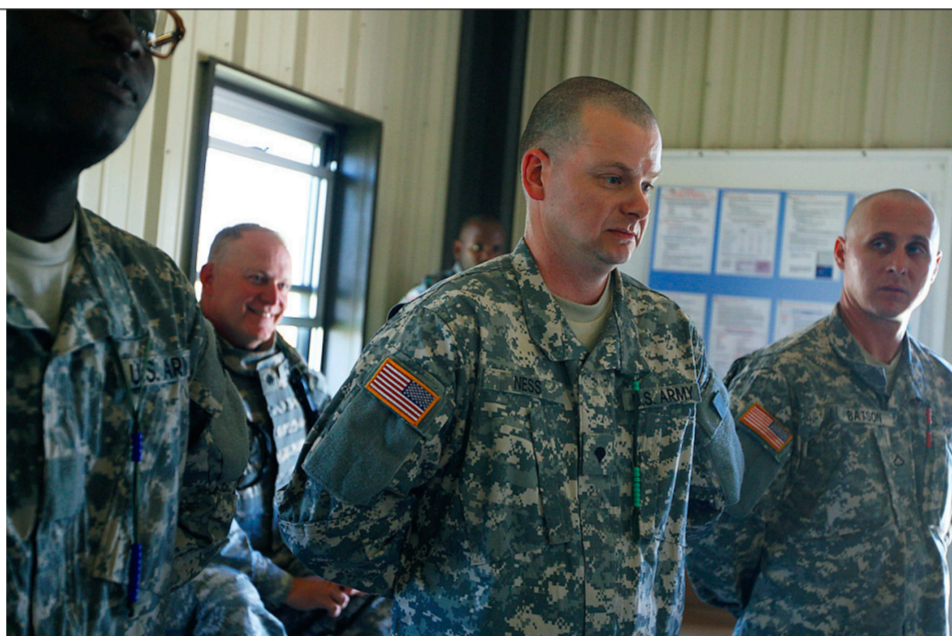
Private First Class Shane Dixon, 38, is advised by Private First Class Stephen Michael Miles, 19, who is just two years older than Dixon's son, during marksmanship training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Army recruits during marksmanship training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. At classes here, as many as one in seven soldiers are over 35, and many drill sergeants look to the older soldiers as mentors or proxy disciplinarians. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Lieutenant Colonel Michael S. Patton, commander of a basic-training battalion, smiles in the background as some of his older recruits discuss their experiences at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. From left: Specialist Mark Sakyi, 37; Specialist Jason Ness, 36; and Private First Class Christopher Batson, 35. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Army challenges older recruits, and vice versa

The pace of over-35 enlistment in the US Army jumped sharply in the first months of this year, and while rising unemployment is an important factor, older recruits say the economy is not their only motivation

BY JAMES DAO
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, FORT SILL, OKLAHOMA

Private First Class Shane Dixon is known as Old Dix. Specialist Jason Ness goes by Gramps. Private First Class Christopher Batson's nom de boot camp is Pops. None of them are over 40, but to the 18-year-old soldiers in basic training here, they are as ancient as a first generation Xbox.

Yet in the three years since the US Army raised its age limit for enlisting to 42, from 35, a steady stream of older recruits has joined the ranks, pushing creaky muscles through road training, learning to appreciate — or at least endure — US Army chow and in some cases deploying to combat zones.

And while the number of such recruits, more than 3,500, is small by US Army standards, the pace of over-35 enlistment jumped sharply in the first months of this year. Motives vary, from a yearning for midlife adventure to a desire to serve their country. But rising unemployment is also a major reason, say US Army officials, recruiters and training officers.

"It's a guaranteed job, as long as you go to work every day," said Captain Jared Auchey, company commander of the US Army Experience Center in Philadelphia, who estimates that one in 10 of the enlistments at his high-tech marketing office are over 35. "There are no layoffs in the Army."

The US Army recruits about 80,000 soldiers a year, and the older recruits are having an impact even

on basic training, officers say. At classes here, as many as one in seven soldiers are over 35, and many drill sergeants now look to the older soldiers as mentors, or proxy disciplinarians.

Staff Sergeant Arron Barnes, Fort Sill's drill sergeant of the year in 2009, said the older recruits tended to bring technical skills and maturity, were easier to instruct and were often more committed than teenage soldiers.

"They contribute at a higher level because they have no other place to go," Barnes, 26, said. "This is their life."

The older recruits are, however, injury prone. Rusty joints, forgotten injuries and slow-to-recover muscles cause the over-35 recruits to wash out of basic training at a somewhat higher rate than younger soldiers, said Lieutenant Colonel Michael S. Patton, commander of a basic-training battalion here.

Specialist John D. Butts, 38, exemplifies the new breed. An aspiring writer who was a house painter outside Philadelphia for two decades, he lost his steady paycheck last November after the housing market crashed.

A part-time job at Blockbuster did not pay his rent, and when his landlord threatened to evict him, his girlfriend (now his wife) and her three teenage children, he decided radical action was required. He called a US Army recruiter he had met recently and signed up for a three-year stint.



Private First Class Shane Dixon, 38, takes a water break during basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Despite years as a dedicated beer drinker and smoker, Butts made it through basic here at Fort Sill and is now training with an artillery unit that may head to South Korea this year. A tour in Afghanistan could be in the cards. Over the last two months, he has been yelled at by a 24-year-old drill sergeant, forced to inhale choking gas, done more push-ups than he cares to remember and patiently put up with wise-cracking 19-year-olds who forget to flush the toilet. So far, he has made the grade and is even considering a career in the military.

"I've just tried to keep my head down, keep my mouth shut and not wring necks," Butts said.

The sagging economy, of course, has bolstered military

recruiting at all age levels. But the older recruits represent a new, and perhaps more challenging, opportunity for the US Army, the only service that accepts recruits over 35. (The maximum age is 35 in the Navy, 28 in the Marine Corps and 27 in the Air Force.)

It is not clear yet how well older soldiers handle the rigors of combat. The US Army says it does not segregate older recruits in basic training and does not consider age when deciding where to assign or deploy them. Of the nearly 5,000 military personnel killed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, about 600 have been over 35, most of them career soldiers. The oldest was 60-year-old Steven Hutchison, who served in Vietnam and retired from the US Army in 1988 only to re-enlist in 2007 under a special program for retirees. Hutchison was killed last month in a bombing in Iraq.

During a break in marksmanship training at Fort Sill last week, several older soldiers said the economy had not been their only motivation for enlisting. "I didn't want to be 75 and think back, 'I wish I had joined the Army,'" said Private Mark O'Brien, 36, a corrections officer from Portsmouth, N.H. "There's nothing worse than regret."

But for Batson, 35, the threat of layoffs was the driving force behind his joining. A mechanical engineer from Utah with five children, he was spared when his company

laid off workers last year, but the close call worried him. Deciding he needed a fallback option, he turned to the National Guard.

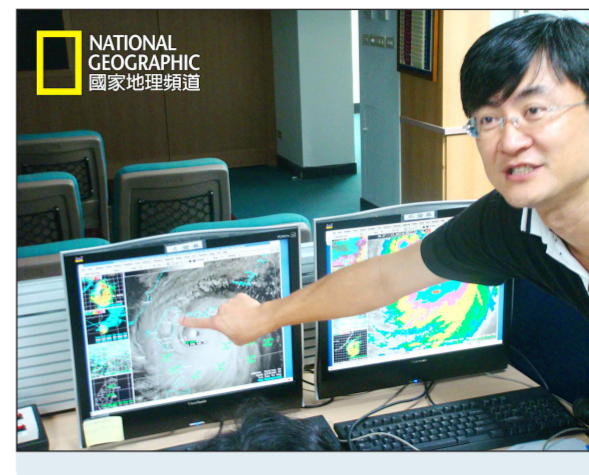
Now, if he is laid off and cannot find work, he figures he can go full time with the National Guard or the regular US Army. In exchange for that job security, he says there is a good chance he will do a tour in Afghanistan.

"My natural priority is my family," Batson said. "I'll do anything I have to do to take care of them." Along with the rigors of basic training, the older soldiers say the hardest thing is being away from their families for nine weeks. The second hardest thing, they say, is coping with undisciplined, couch-potato soft, video-game-obsessed teenage recruits who are, technically, their peers.

Dixon, 38, builds log houses in the Boise area but recently joined the Idaho National Guard in part because he wanted to change careers, perhaps to become a medic. He said he had been chewed out for chewing out youngsters in his platoon for what he considered slacker behavior. He was so tough on one for tromping across a newly waxed floor in his boots that the teenager broke down in tears.

"I should have taken into consideration that it was a 17-year-old kid," Dixon said. "It's not a man, not somebody that I could hold to a level of accountability. My son's 17."

[TELEVISION]



Cable program shines spotlight on Taiwan

The third installment of National Geographic's 'Taiwan to the World' comprises four documentaries and will be broadcast in 34 different languages

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The third season of National Geographic Channel's multi-award winning series *Taiwan to the World* will premiere in its international English-language version tomorrow with *Typhoon Hunters*, a documentary about Taiwan's involvement in a multinational project to better understand how typhoons are formed and the forces that operate within these massive and highly destructive weather systems.

Typhoon Hunters is the first of four documentaries that will appear on NGC on successive Sunday nights at 9pm starting tomorrow. Following it will be *River Quest*, which covers the sport of river racing, which has become popular in Taiwan, and *Hip Hop Nation*, about a group of Taiwanese hip-hop artists who caught the attention of US show organizers. The final documentary, *Tomb Raptors*, shown on July 12, will focus on new discoveries about the gray-faced buzzard, a migratory bird that makes annual stopovers in Taiwan.

This series follows two highly successful predecessors; all three were produced in cooperation with the Government Information Office, but meet the high standards that have made National Geographic a byword for informative and attractively packaged programming.

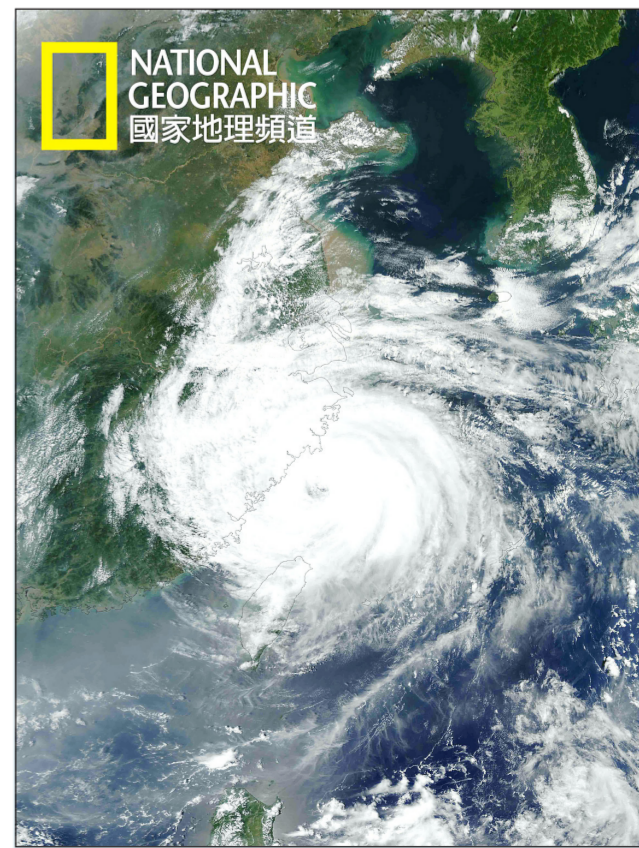
For those with the requisite cable services, *Tomb Raptors* will be available in high-definition format. According to Joanne Tsai (蔡秋安), general manager of National Geographic for Taiwan and China, the fourth series, for which submissions are currently being reviewed, will all be shot in HD to give audiences the best possible visual experience.

The series goes out of its way to show Taiwan's involvement in the international community, and to take a perspective that extends beyond the merely local. In the case of tomorrow's *Typhoon Hunters*, the project to take measurements during the course of a typhoon, at different times and different altitudes, involved specialists from the US, Japan and Taiwan. The documentary looks at the different contributions of each.

Spanish director Jose Miguel Garcia Sanchez was brought in to oversee the project. According to producer Sunny Han (韓欣欣), Sanchez's participation helped consolidate the international appeal of the program and provide a broader perspective. "Some things that we took for granted (as a country that deals with typhoons on a regular basis), he felt needed to be treated in more detail," she said.

Working for National Geographic pushes the boundaries of production companies such as Han's Local Tiger International, as shooting spanned the whole of the Pacific Rim, beginning with Hawaii, and eventually going to Guam, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Taiwan.

Series 3 of *Taiwan to the World* will be broadcast in 165 countries and will be available in 34 languages. Apart from local film awards, documentaries from the first and second series also picked up awards at the Columbus International Film and Video Festival and the Montana CINE International Film Festival.



Top and above: The third season of *Taiwan to the World* premieres with *Typhoon Hunters*, a documentary about an international project to better understand typhoons. PHOTOS COURTESY OF NGC