



# Paraglide

## **Deserters can run, but they can't hide Bragg's Desertion Apprehension Team brings Soldiers back**

*by Janice Burton*

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For almost two years, Pvt. John Smith\* lived in the civilian world. To his neighbors and coworkers, nothing seemed out of place. He was just an average guy working for a living. In actuality, Smith was a deserter from the U.S. Army.

Smith, a Soldier assigned to Fort Hood, Texas, went absent without leave on March 14, 2002. Until August 2003, he lived in a town adjacent to Fort Hood. In August, he moved back to Fayetteville, his hometown.

"Everyone in my family has been in the military," he said. "My grandfather was Special Forces and a Golden Knight. Any tab you could get, he got it."

When he arrived in Fayetteville, his family thought he had simply completed his enlistment in the Army. From August until the beginning of November, he worked as a courier - often delivering packages to the desks of first sergeants on post.

"I didn't think anything about it," he said. "I didn't act nervous or afraid to come out to Fort Bragg. When you act that way, then people get suspicious. I didn't want anybody being suspicious about me."

In November, his luck ran out and he was stopped by a Cumberland County Sheriff's deputy during a random traffic stop. The deputy found a warrant for his arrest for desertion.

"That's usually the way they get caught," said Staff Sgt. Patrick Getzinger, noncommissioned officer in charge of Fort Bragg's Desertion Apprehension Team, 16th Military Police Brigade. "A lot of Soldiers who desert stay in the area close to the post. It's not like the old days, we don't go hunt them down and break in doors. Usually they are stopped for a traffic violation or something and are held in the local jail or the county lock-up. That's when we go get them."

On Fort Bragg, 163 Soldiers deserted during fiscal year 2002-2003. That number was up by 87 from the previous year. Getzinger attributes the increase to the increased number of Soldiers on

Fort Bragg. “You have to keep in mind that there are twice as many personnel accountable to units on Bragg than before Sept. 11,” he said, referring to the large number of Reserve and National Guard units that have processed into the post. “When you take that into account, then the numbers are about the same.”

Getzinger said the number of Soldiers who go AWOL or who ultimately desert, fluctuate with seasons and mobilizations.

“The people we see here range from guys who are having problems with their girlfriends, their units, missing their families, etc.,” he said. “A lot of these guys are young. They get scared and don’t know what to do. So they run and try to hide from it. But it always catches up with them.”

Smith found that out the hard way. From the time he was picked up in November until Feb. 5, Smith was held in the Cumberland County Jail on unrelated charges. On the fifth, he was turned over to the desertion apprehension team for processing. On Feb. 9, he was returned to his unit at Fort Hood, where he says his problems really began.

Smith said he went AWOL because of unfair treatment he felt he was receiving in his unit. He said he attempted to use the chain of command to no avail, and eventually, he said he “just broke.”

That meltdown will have serious repercussions on Smith’s future.

“I’m honestly not sure what’s going to happen to me when I get back,” said Smith. “I think a dishonorable discharge is a guarantee. The worse case scenario is that I’ll be going to (Fort) Leavenworth.”

In addition to that, Smith has to deal with the embarrassment and disappointment he has caused his family. “They’re very upset,” he said.

For the desertion apprehension team, families often play a key role in reporting Soldiers on the run.

“Parents turn in a lot of them. They go home, and after a couple of months mom and dad start thinking that the Soldier shouldn’t have that much leave,” said Getzinger. “So they call and we check our files, and if they show up then we’ll tell the parents to have the individual return to their unit. A lot of parents are able to convince the individual to turn themselves in. We’ve also had parents bring them back here personally.”

Getzinger said when that happens, the Soldiers’ unit becomes responsible for them. “If a Soldier from Fort Bragg turns himself in, then we notify the unit and they sign for the Soldier. A lot of them realize that they have messed up, and they want to stay in, sometimes they can get it cleared up.”

Getzinger said that his office has nothing to do with the Soldier's punishment, but he said the unit has discretion on the type of action taken.