

The Fight To Fit Back In

Craig Lewis had been gone so long that when he walked into the front office of Fluvanna County High School, the secretary gave him a quizzical look.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

She studied him with a blank expression for a moment, and then, suddenly, her eyes widened with recognition.

"You're back!" she said, smiling broadly.

"I am," Lewis said, his close-cropped hair still at Army standard.

He managed a smile, though it felt strange to be back in this squat brick building again.

He'd grown up in this rural community outside of Charlottesville and, what now seemed like eons ago, had graduated from Fluvanna in 1997 before later being hired to teach and coach baseball at his alma mater. But it had been more than two years since he'd been a regular presence in these hallways. More than two years since Lewis, a lieutenant in the Virginia Army National Guard, had been ordered to flight school and then to Iraq as a Black Hawk helicopter pilot. Now he was home and finally ready to see his old boss, Fluvanna principal James Barlow.

"Is he available?" Lewis asked the secretary.

"Let me check," she replied.

Lewis -- accompanied by a reporter chronicling his return to civilian life -- shuffled his feet nervously. Given the way he'd left here, it wasn't going to be easy asking for his job back.

When the Army National Guard had decided to send Lewis to flight school back in 2005, he initially thought he'd be able to finish the school year at Fluvanna before heading to Fort Rucker in Alabama. But, suddenly, the schedule had changed. The commander of the Guard's 2nd Battalion, 224th Aviation Regiment had told Lewis to report to Fort Rucker within a week.

Lewis, floored, had begged for permission to finish the school year first. Otherwise he'd be leaving Barlow and his students in the lurch. But he was given no choice. This was what being in the National Guard was all about: One day you were a citizen, the next a soldier.

"I've got some bad news," Lewis had been forced to tell his principal on a Monday morning in January 2005. "They moved up my flight school date . . . My last day is going to be Wednesday."

Barlow, Lewis remembered, had been incredulous.

"This Wednesday?" he'd asked. "As in two days from now? You've got to be kidding."

Now it was May 2007, and Lewis was a newly minted veteran of America's long conflict in

Iraq. He and the other 350 members of his battalion had been back in Virginia for almost three months, and many were still trying to piece together the civilian lives that had been interrupted by the war. Some were contending with divorce; others were struggling to reconnect with their children. Lewis was grappling with another problem all too common for returning members of the National Guard: finding work.

Lewis knew he should have come in to see Barlow as soon as he had returned from Iraq. But he hadn't been ready to start teaching right away, and, in truth, he wasn't even sure he wanted to anymore. After the rigors of flying a helicopter in combat, teaching didn't seem ambitious enough. But he needed a job, and he didn't know what else to do. Plus, as he'd been told again and again, he was entitled to have his old job back.

Federal law requires that employers hold jobs for deploying reservists, even if they've been gone for as long as five years, though employers aren't always eager to comply. The principal of Fluvanna High was a gruff, no-nonsense man who had spent years as a public school administrator and teacher. On his desk sat a prop, an urn positioned so that the troublemakers who got sent to his office had a clear view of its thick, bold lettering: "Ashes of Problem Students."

Welcoming Lewis into his office, Barlow was warm but businesslike. And as Lewis explained his circumstances -- "I'm now home and would like to teach again" -- Barlow listened intently but with a professional detachment, his face devoid of emotion.

Later he would say that he was surprised to see Lewis, whom he hadn't heard from in so long and whom he had assumed had moved on. If Lewis was serious about coming back, why hadn't he been better about staying in touch, or even made an appointment instead of just popping by unannounced? Still, Barlow was the one who had hired Lewis, and, he said: "I wanted to look out for him. He did a good job here."

Lewis, now 29, had been teaching special education before he'd left for flight school. But he told Barlow that he would prefer to teach physical education when he came back.

"I'd love to help you," the principal said. "But I don't have any openings." One of the physical education teachers might retire after this year, he told Lewis, and that would create a slot. "I'll keep an eye out," he said. "But I can't promise anything." Plus, he added, seemingly unaware of the scope of the law protecting reservists' jobs, Lewis had been gone for more than a year, so the school wasn't obligated to take him back.

For a split second, Lewis's brow started to form a menacing crease. I just spent a year getting shot at in Iraq, and you're not even going to hold my job for me? But he stifled the impulse to argue with the principal and softened his expression into a get-along smile. Best, he decided, to get this resolved amicably. His deployment had already caused enough problems.

"If anything does come open," Lewis said, shaking Barlow's hand and thanking him for his time, "please let me know."

Lewis reminded himself that it was only May; there was still plenty of time before the school year started again in August. And he was sure the law was on his side, should it come to that. As he went into the hallway, one of his former students spotted him and came running toward him.

"Mr. Lewis!" she said. "Mr. Lewis! You're back!"

Yes, he was back. He wasn't sure if he belonged here anymore, yet there was still so much familiar about this place and its end-of-the-school-year rhythms: Friday night baseball games, prom, final exams, graduation. Every year it all unfolded with such reassuring repetition.

His former student disappeared to her next class, and Lewis, now nothing more than a visitor, walked out into the afternoon sun, wondering what to do next.

The nearly 500,000 members of the country's National Guard -- who report to state governors for domestic emergencies and to presidents during war -- work in almost every civilian occupation imaginable. They are teachers and truckers, police officers and paramedics, lawyers and line cooks, machinists and mental health professionals. In the past, their part-time role in powering America's military didn't always garner much notice or respect. That changed dramatically after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

If the Guard was once considered little more than a loosely trained bunch of second stringers on call to fill sandbags during floods, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq completely redefined what it means to be a citizen-soldier. Never before had tens of thousands of Guard members been plucked from civilian life, sent overseas to combat and then thrust back into society. Many repeated this jarring process -- disrupting families and stressing civilian careers -- two or even three times.

The repeated deployments have transformed the Guard into a frontline force that is expected to perform every bit as well -- and nearly as frequently -- as its active-duty counterparts. At one point in 2005, the Guard made up half of the Army's combat force in Iraq.

Unlike the ranks of the active-duty Army, who return to large bases and are surrounded by fellow soldiers grappling with life after war, citizen-soldiers are cast back to civilian life almost immediately after their tours are up. Many struggle to resume their old lives and reintegrate into a society that has never been so divorced from its military and so unaffected by the wars it is fighting. And some have problems getting their old jobs back.

Shortly after 9/11, when the Guard started being called for federal duty in numbers not seen since World War II, employers sent their reservists off to war with flags waving.

When there were problems, it was largely because employers were simply not aware of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), which protects reservists' jobs at businesses large and small.

But since 2005, the number of calls to the Defense Department office that handles service members' employment problems has more than doubled, from 5,300 to 13,000 last year. Officials attribute much of the growth to the fact that more soldiers are aware of the office -- and of their rights. But the number of unresolved cases, which can be forwarded to the Department of Labor or in some cases end up in private litigation, also has grown, reaching a high of 765 last year.

That's why business has been booming for Mathew Tully, an attorney with offices in New York and Washington who specializes in reemployment cases and has represented dozens of Guard members and reservists who have had to fight to win their old jobs back.

"After 9/11, the issue was a lack of knowledge," Tully said. "Now what we're seeing -- and we're getting record high numbers of USERRA cases -- is employers saying: 'Yeah, we understand the law. But this is your third deployment, and you're obviously picking the military over us.'" Earlier this year, a U.S. District Court judge awarded Michael Serricchio, a Massachusetts Air Force reservist, a judgment that could reach as high as \$1.5 million. Serricchio claimed that Wachovia Securities refused to give him back his job as a financial adviser after he returned from more than two years of active duty. The verdict, believed to be the highest penalty ever awarded in a reemployment case, should serve "as a wake-up call to companies that there are laws to protect returning reservists, and that they need to follow them," Serricchio said.

But Tully believes the problem has become more severe since the economy started tanking last fall. With employers of every size shedding jobs, many have lost patience with the disruptions that repeated deployments have imposed on them. Some have had to scramble to find temporary replacements, often on very short notice. And for small employers, it is

especially burdensome to hold a job open indefinitely.

The void Lewis's sudden departure left in Fluvanna's teaching ranks was filled by a substitute qualified to teach special education. Still, as Barlow would later observe, "it's always difficult when you lose the regular teacher."

That's especially true when that teacher gives a mere three days' notice before reporting to flight school.

The Army chooses its pilots carefully. To make sure Craig Lewis was fit for flying, doctors poked him like a lab rat. They tested his eyesight and depth perception. They dilated his pupils and shined lights into his eyes until he felt as if he were in a sci-fi movie. They gave him an EKG to make sure his heart was healthy, drew his blood, tested his urine, checked his reflexes, asked him about how much he drank, and threatened him with a \$100,000 fine and jail time if they discovered he was lying.

He had joined the Guard in 2002 during his senior year at Bridgewater College, where he majored in sports and health education and played fullback for the college's football team. Though Lewis could bench-press 425 pounds, his father wasn't sure he was cut out for the military. But Lewis, caught up in the post-9/11 patriotic fervor, had been eager to serve. And eager to learn to fly, which he saw as an elite job that would earn him instant prestige and respect.

"We've got an aviation unit right here in Virginia that flies Black Hawks," the National Guard recruiter had told him when he'd asked about flight school. In 2005, after three years of putting on a uniform one weekend a month and waiting for a spot to open up at Fort Rucker, Lewis was finally on the verge of fulfilling his ambitions. Before arriving at flight school, Lewis had flown in an airplane only twice -- once to basic training in Oklahoma, the other to Las Vegas for a bachelor party. One thing became clear to him almost immediately: Unlike some of his classmates, he was not a natural pilot.

"I was totally overwhelmed," he says. But what he lacked in natural talent or instinct, he compensated for with hard work, studying his flight manuals every second he wasn't in class or with his flight instructor. He fell asleep at his desk with his books open more times than he could count, then rose at 5:30 a.m. to read some more. In class, Lewis's round-the-clock studying paid off, and he earned a 96 average. But when it was time to fly, he froze, infuriating his otherwise soft-spoken instructor.

"What the [expletive] are you doing? Are you an idiot?" his instructor would scream at a decibel level that rivaled the whirl of the helicopter blades. "How many times have we gone over this?"

The instructor would get them in the air, let Lewis take over the controls, and within a few seconds the helicopter would start jerking wildly. Inevitably, the aircraft would tilt to a perilous angle, the instructor would grab the controls -- "I got it," he'd huff -- and effortlessly right the aircraft. "Look at how easy this is," he'd say.

To Lewis it seemed impossible. There were three sets of controls that had to be used in harmony. Mess one up, and the others would go completely out of whack. Flying a \$6 million Black Hawk was a little like juggling, but with both arms and both feet. What surprised Lewis was how delicate he had to be with the controls. Anything more than a feather-light touch could send the aircraft reeling.

For Lewis, the hardest part wasn't getting the chopper to move; it was getting it to hover, a skill every pilot had to master to pass the first test, known as a check ride. No matter how hard he tried and no matter how loud his instructor yelled, he couldn't get that mass of metal to sit still in the air.

Lewis's first check ride was coming up, and he knew there was no way he'd be able to pass. He was right. He quickly lost control of the chopper and was failed on the spot.

"You're letting the aircraft fly you," his flight commander admonished.

Lewis thought for sure he was going to get booted from the school. Every other member of the class but one had passed his or her check ride. But as the commander reviewed Lewis's file and saw his stellar classroom grades, he decided to give Lewis some extra time, with a warning: "You have no business here if you can't control this aircraft."

Slowly, Lewis improved, passing his second check ride. He passed the next test, too -- a short, solo loop around the airfield. But because of his early troubles, he was the last in the class to complete it. And he knew what that meant: He'd be hazed.

A few days later, Lewis was greeted by the instructors with a flight suit a couple of sizes too small that had been spray-painted orange and black. They made him wear swimming goggles and a child's pair of purple water wings. Then they presented him with a bike that had been outfitted to look like a helicopter -- rotor blades, a rear tail, even landing skids -- that he had to ride around the base's courtyard while the rest of the class pelted him with water balloons and soaked him with a fire hose.

He was too relieved at the prospect of making it through flight school to be humiliated. Instead, he made his rounds on the bike, trying not to get knocked over by the fire hose spray as his fellow students cheered him on.

The curious whistle in the distance was getting closer fast. But Lewis was so new to Iraq that he didn't even look up from the transmission filter he had been inspecting. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that his instructor pilot was diving to the ground.

"GET DOWN!" his instructor screamed.

The mortar hit a few hundred yards away with a titanic boom that shook the ground and kicked up a huge dust plume. Shrapnel and debris came bouncing past Lewis, who finally hit the deck.

Afterward, Chief Warrant Officer-3 Shane Leipertz was astounded. What kind of soldier doesn't know to hit the deck when there's incoming fire? "Lesson number one: When you hear that whistling sound, you get down," Leipertz grouched.

Leipertz hadn't ordered up the mortar attack, but he was almost glad it had hit so close. He wanted Lewis rattled. Pilots had to get used to flying scared, with bullets whizzing by, an engine out, fuel leaking, smoke billowing from the engine, an incapacitated copilot unable to help. One or all of those scenarios were a distinct possibility in Iraq, and his job was to make sure Lewis could handle every one.

Lewis had been in Iraq a week and still considered it crazy that the Army was going to let him fly combat missions. His evolution from citizen to soldier, from high school teacher to wartime pilot had been so quick, so jarring, that part of him couldn't believe it had really happened.

Within weeks of graduating from flight school in the spring of 2006, he'd been ordered to Iraq to meet up with his unit, which had been sent to al Asad Air Base while he was still at Fort Rucker. Shortly before shipping out, Lewis stopped by Fluvanna High to say goodbye to his colleagues and students, who wished him well. He didn't see Barlow, but left him a message letting him know that he was being deployed to Iraq. He never heard back.

His strained relationship with his principal was a source of concern, but Lewis didn't have time to dwell on it. To prepare for Iraq, the 2-224th had spent two months in the Arizona desert. Lewis had missed out on that and had yet to fly a mission that was not under the supervision of an instructor. He'd never flown with door gunners or in a desert environment, where the

blinding clouds of sand kicked up by the helicopter's blades can wreak havoc for even the most experienced pilots.

He fretted about his inexperience. How could he be ready for this? But Leipertz, who was charged with getting Lewis ready to fly in Iraq, was privately pleased with the way he was handling the stress of the training exercises. There was an unflappable persistence in him that Leipertz admired. Even when Lewis made mistakes, which he often did, he seemed determined to learn from them.

"I am pushing him hard, and he seems to be responding well," Leipertz noted in his journal. "I let him fly quite a bit, and he did well. The temperature was [120 degrees Fahrenheit]. The aircraft was struggling, and so were we."

Lewis grew more confident with each training flight. But when he learned that his first real mission would be to Ramadi and Fallujah, he again thought his commanders were out of their minds. Did they have to start him out in two of Iraq's most dangerous places?

"There's a guy getting out of a truck. Looks like he's got an AK. He's shooting at us."

The crew chief's voice was steady and unexcited, Lewis recalled. For a split second, the content of what he had said didn't even register with Lewis. Then it hit him: Someone is shooting at us. Keep the aircraft level, Lewis thought. Don't panic.

For his first flight, he'd been assigned a new senior pilot, someone he'd never flown with before. And the other pilot was just sitting there silently, as if everything was okay.

"What was that?" the senior pilot asked. Three or four seconds had passed, but to Lewis it had felt like forever.

"We're taking fire," the crew chief said again, almost nonchalantly. How can he be so calm? Lewis thought.

By then, they had already passed well out of range of the machine guns. "No point in returning fire now," the senior pilot said. He alerted ground troops to the insurgent's location and carried on as if nothing had happened.

Only then did Lewis realize that he'd been so focused on his most basic task -- keeping the helicopter in formation -- that it hadn't even occurred to him to give the order to fire. Not that he was authorized to for this mission; as the junior pilot, it wasn't his call. But Lewis couldn't consider the implications of all that now. He had to stick a landing on a site near Ramadi that from a distance appeared tiny.

Lewis followed the lead chopper in and slowly lowered the helicopter to the ground.

Because it was a particularly steep landing and dust was swirling, he asked one of the crew chiefs to make sure the landing area was clear. When the crew chief said it was, Lewis set the Black Hawk down softly. But when he looked out the window, he realized that instead of landing square on the pad, the helicopter was straddling the sandbags that formed the perimeter -- the front tire on one side, the rear tires on the other.

"What the hell?" Lewis said to his crew chief. "I thought you said I was good."

"I did," the crew chief fired back. "But you missed it."

One of the pilots from the lead helicopter whipped out a digital camera and snapped a photo, laughing. Within a couple of days, the photo of Lewis's Black Hawk perched half on the landing pad was posted in the flight operations center for all the other pilots to see.

After about a month of flying daytime missions, Leipertz thought Lewis was ready to begin training to fly at night with night vision goggles, which distort depth perception and turn the landscape into a hazy, green blur. There were a lot of pilots who flew flawlessly by day but

had to learn to fly all over again at night.

Before the training flight, Leipertz pulled one of the crew chiefs aside and told him that when Leipertz started talking about football, he should flick the switch on the back of Lewis's helmet that would turn off his night vision goggles and render him blind.

For a couple of hours, Leipertz put Lewis through a series of normal flying drills so Lewis could get comfortable with the goggles. Near the end of the session, Leipertz told him to hold a hover at 10 feet off the ground. Then he asked how the Redskins would do next season, and Lewis's world turned black. It was as if he were suddenly locked in a pitch-dark basement closet. He had been trained for this moment and knew the drill. When your night vision goggles lost power, you were supposed to stay steady at the controls and report as calmly as possible that you had "goggle failure."

But Lewis was so flustered that he mangled the announcement. "I'm a failure," he said, panicking.

"What do you mean, you're a failure?" Leipertz teased him. He wasn't going to take over the controls or let the crew chief turn the power back on until Lewis said it correctly. Meanwhile, Lewis was doing his best to keep the Black Hawk from crashing into the ground, and just repeated the gaffe again and again: "I'm a failure. I'm a failure." Leipertz and the crew burst out laughing. Leipertz finally nodded to the crew chief, and just like that, Lewis had sight again.

For the next few days, any time one of the other pilots saw Lewis they'd mimic him with a falsetto: "I'm a failure. I'm a failure." The ribbing bugged him at first, but deep down Lewis knew the truth: While words may have escaped him during the test, his flying skills had not. He'd held that helicopter at hover the whole time he was blind.

Like flying a helicopter, teaching hadn't come naturally to Lewis. It might have been different if he'd landed a position teaching physical education. Instead he'd found himself working with special education students at Fluvanna. He'd struggled that first year. Developing lesson plans for an entire 50-minute class in virtually every subject -- math, history, English -- was no small task. It had taken him the better part of a semester to get used to it. Flying into Baghdad could be horrifying, but nothing was quite as daunting as managing a classroom of 25 high school sophomores on a sunny spring day.

Not that Lewis spent much time thinking about his old job; Iraq was all-consuming. Though it had been impossible to imagine when he'd first arrived, flying into Baghdad or Fallujah had become second nature to him. He was good at it. In just a few months, he had morphed from the new guy who didn't know when to duck from a mortar strike to one of the unit's rising stars.

On occasion, one of his former students would send him a care package, and it would make him think of home and his old job. After he'd mastered managing a classroom, he'd come to enjoy teaching. It was satisfying to have an impact on the lives of young people. That's why he had gone into education -- to really connect with students. But such thoughts were rare and fleeting, and, if he were being honest with himself, difficult. Not just because of the circumstances under which he'd left, but because, as he was slowly realizing, he was no longer Mr. Lewis the schoolteacher. He was Lt. Lewis now.

He'd always just assumed he would return to the classroom after his deployment was over. But Iraq was planting seeds of doubt. Perhaps he should look for a new challenge, something better suited for a combat veteran. Still, it felt good to know that his teaching job would be there waiting for him when he got home.

The lieutenant was brimming with confidence and optimism when he stepped off a plane at Fort Dix, N.J., on a snowy day in February of 2007. He hadn't just survived Iraq; he'd thrived

there. Within days of returning to the United States, he learned he was being promoted to company commander, which meant that not only was he in charge of dozens of soldiers but hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of equipment. It was unusual for a lieutenant to be given a company command, but Lewis's performance reviews made it clear that he was considered anything but usual.

"Lt. Lewis is one of the most talented leaders I ever had the pleasure to work with," gushed one. ". . . His potential for promotion and future service is unlimited."

"Lt. Lewis served with such exceptional skill and maturity he was selected above several more senior officers for company command," raved another. ". . . He is intelligent, well studied, patient and demanding."

It wasn't until Lewis's deflating conversation with James Barlow that his post-Iraq sense of accomplishment suffered its first blow. Although his principal had said he would keep Lewis in mind for any job openings, Lewis saw it as a flat-out rejection. And it bothered him, because Fluvanna was supposed to be his safety net, a sure thing.

No worries, Lewis told himself. This was an opportunity: He could look for something else, perhaps in the defense industry, where he could use his military skills, or in corporate America, where he was sure he'd make an excellent manager. (Though he could have sought work as a pilot, he didn't think he wanted to fly helicopters in the civilian world.) He was a college graduate, a pilot, an officer and an Iraq war veteran. It was only a matter of time before he'd be scooped up by some lucrative company.

Once he landed a new job, he wouldn't have to worry about whether Fluvanna High would take him back. Thanks, but no thanks, he'd say when the school finally came to its senses and asked him to return to the classroom. Lewis was so confident about his prospects that he and a friend from high school bought a \$260,000 house in the hills of Charlottesville.

Sitting in his new home, he updated his résumé to include his promotion and his experience in Iraq: "Responsible for training and preparing over 60 soldiers for future combat operations . . . Planned and participated in over 50 combat missions while deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom."

First, he sent it out to large corporations -- Sears, Lowe's, Wal-Mart -- hoping to land in one of their management training programs. Then he sent it out to every job board he could think of: monster.com, hotjobs.com, and nonprofits such as hireahero.org, dedicated to helping veterans.

Then, nothing. Days passed, then weeks, and there were no callbacks inviting him in for an interview, not even a single pro forma e-mail saying, Thanks for applying. We'll get back to you shortly. It was as if his résumé had disappeared into a corporate black hole. He expanded his search to defense contractors in Northern Virginia, sending out more résumés that seemed to get lost.

June gave way to July -- the dead of summer -- a slow time for business, he told himself. Lewis tried to stay positive. He had plenty of money saved up from his time in Iraq and would be fine for a while. He just needed to apply himself, scatter a few more résumés out there. But as day after day passed with his calls and e-mails unreturned, he began to feel as if he didn't exist or, worse, didn't matter. In Iraq, people's lives had depended on him, on his ability to perform under some of the most intense pressure a person could imagine. More pressure, he was sure, than he'd ever be under in the civilian world. Which was why he didn't understand why no one was calling him back.

Maybe he needed to broaden his search from management training and the defense industry to, well, everything else. So he sought jobs in medical sales, in management positions for health-care companies, even at the post office. He applied for positions whose titles he didn't

fully understand: "media sales consultant" and "customer operations manager."

A friend said his father was looking to hire for a government contracting job, but even with an inside connection, that, too, went nowhere. Friends and fellow soldiers urged him to stay positive, that it would come together. But the whole experience was profoundly demoralizing.

Technically, of course, he wasn't unemployed. He still had the salary he made in the Guard for drilling one weekend a month, and he was also paid for the required time he put in flying in order to stay current -- usually about \$1,000 a month. But he felt unemployed. He felt its sting, as his lack of a full-time paycheck drained his bank account. He felt its humiliation, as he watched his roommate, an accountant manager at a financial firm, head off to work each day, while he sat on the couch with his laptop open and the TV on. He felt its embarrassment when he was out at a bar with friends, hoping the cute woman flirting with him wouldn't ask the dreaded question: "So, what do you do?"

Maybe he should just swallow his pride and go back to the principal and again ask for his old job back. Maybe he should simply say he'd take whatever position was open, and perhaps even apologize. But then he'd think about the way the principal said he wasn't obligated to take him back, and the memory would make him fume. The school system ought to be begging him to come back, not the other way around. If he once felt guilty about leaving the school in a bind, now he was angry.

The posting for a youth counselor on a local Internet job board was not ideal. A few months ago, Lewis probably would not have applied because the salary was only \$35,000 -- just about what he had made teaching. But it was a job, and he was a shoo-in. Not only had he been a special education teacher, but he had worked as a youth counselor in college.

By now it was late July, and Lewis was getting desperate. He had chewed through \$10,000 of his \$30,000 in savings. So he sent in his résumé and got a call a few days later asking him to come in for an interview, which he aced. He was sure of it. His interviewers had been impressed with his experience and with his composure and comportment. The job was his. He could feel it. Any day they would call with an offer. Only they didn't. One day passed, then another, and when Lewis checked the Internet job board again he saw that they were still seeking candidates. How could he not have landed that job? Replaying the interview in his mind, Lewis suddenly remembered being questioned about his Guard service and his time in Iraq. "What's the likelihood of your being deployed again?" one interviewer had asked.

Lewis tried to make it clear that it wouldn't be for a while; he'd just gotten back. But when pressed, he had to admit that he could be called at any moment for a domestic emergency. That's what the Guard was all about.

At the time, he didn't think the answer had hurt him. But looking back on it, he realized that that was the moment the tone of the interview had changed. And it wasn't long after that that his interviewers were thanking him for coming in and saying they would be in touch. He didn't want to believe his Guard membership could be the reason why no one was hiring him. He was proud of his service, and had featured it prominently on his résumé. But maybe that had been a mistake. Maybe serving in the Guard was a hindrance, not an asset -- at least at a time when reservists were being called for two and three overseas tours. When he mentioned his theory to fellow soldiers, a few said they had run into similar problems.

It was known as the "military service penalty" in some veterans circles, and Lewis was starting to believe it really existed. What employer, especially in this economy, would want to hire someone who could be gone one out of every four or five years? It's a subtle form of discrimination that lawyer Mathew Tully and others says happens all the time but is difficult to prove.

EPILOGUE

In August, about two weeks before the start of the 2007-08 school year, Lewis found a message waiting for him on his voice mail. It was from a school system assistant superintendent: Fluvanna High was offering him his job back. He could return and teach special education.

Lewis listened to the offer, disbelieving and outraged. Now they offer me my job back? he thought. Just a few weeks before the start of school?

Instantly, he knew what his response would be: No, he wouldn't take it. He needed a job desperately, but he wasn't desperate enough to return to a place that had treated him so poorly and was now, in Lewis's view, offering him a position at the last possible minute to cover themselves. (Asked later about Lewis's perceptions, the school system's superintendent, Thomas W.D. Smith, said he was wrong. The job offer had been made in good faith. It was not unusual, Smith said, to fill positions just before school started. The timing of the offer had nothing to do with the lack of notice Lewis had been able to give before his deployment. "We honor his service and wanted to do right by him," Smith said.)

Lewis called the assistant superintendent back. Thanks, but no thanks, he said. Instead, he continued the job hunt, though it didn't go any better than before. Finally, in December, a friend introduced Lewis to one of her contacts at CACI International, a huge government contractor that has a Charlottesville office. The man seemed genuinely interested in Lewis and thought his Guard experience was an asset. "We should be able to get you in here no problem," he said when they met.

But by January, when Lewis had still heard nothing back, he was no longer in a position not to work. He'd been back home for nearly a year. That month, he took a job where he could salvage some dignity and also be assured that his military service would be a plus. In fact, it was a requirement. The job at the Virginia National Guard's Joint Operations Center at Fort Pickett in Blackstone was the nerve center for the state's citizen-soldier corps. He'd heard about it from a fellow soldier, who told him: "Hey you're struggling. Come on down here and work here until you find something."

Lewis began serving as a glorified 911 dispatcher, ready to alert guardsmen in the event of natural disasters and coordinate with local emergency authorities, if need be.

The pay was good, almost \$50,000 a year. The problem was that those periods of emergency were few and far between, and instead of feeling vital, he was plain bored most of the time. He read the reports that came in and monitored the weather, but mostly he watched television and surfed the Internet. After Lewis had spent a few months at Fort Pickett, the tedium of the job made him pursue CACI even more vigorously. He e-mailed his résumé directly to the company's recruiter and followed up with a phone call.

He landed an interview for a position as an intelligence analyst that paid about twice what he had made as a schoolteacher. A few weeks later, on a Wednesday in early June, the personnel office called back.

"We just got a new contract we think you'd be good for, and we want to get you in here as soon as possible, say Friday or Monday," the recruiter said. "How does that suit you?"

This was the moment Lewis had been waiting for since he'd gotten home 16 months earlier. A real job offer, and it was exactly the kind of work he wanted, too, not some youth counseling position. But he felt his stomach turn in knots. He couldn't be there by Friday, or the following Monday. He had just been called up to active duty for a three week tour patrolling the Arizona border. The timing could not have been worse, which is what he tried to explain. Any other time he'd be available on a moment's notice. "Is there any way you could wait until I got back?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, no," said the recruiter, who was gracious, though clearly disappointed. He told

Lewis to give him a call when he got back. "Maybe something will open up in the future," he said.

Lewis promised he would call when he returned. He hung up in disbelief, trying to sort through what had just happened. All along, he'd refrained from blaming the Guard for his employment problems. But this missed opportunity was undeniably linked to his service. If he weren't in the Guard, he would be starting his dream job as soon as Friday.

He loved the camaraderie of the 2-224th, flying and being in charge of an entire company of soldiers. He wanted to serve, and he'd known what he was getting into when he'd signed up. But now he wondered if the sacrifice was worth it. If he resigned his commission and focused solely on landing a job in the civilian world, he wouldn't have to answer the "Will you be deployed?" question. He wouldn't have to worry about being called up and having to give just a few days' notice.

How much longer did he have before he could get out? He had to think on it a minute before coming to the disappointing answer: four years.

A few weeks after Lewis's return from Arizona, the CACI recruiter did call again. He had another opening for an intelligence analyst, the same job Lewis had interviewed for before. Could he start Wednesday?

"You better believe it," Lewis said.

On his first day, he woke up early, showered and beat his housemate out the door. Normally, the traffic during his commute to his new office in Charlottesville would have driven him crazy, but not today. He was thrilled to inch along the highway with everyone else on their way to work, and grateful that his new employer didn't seem to have a problem with his Guard service.

Still, he did not mention the rumors that had been floating around the 2-224th for several weeks. In the summer of 2009, the unit's two weeks of annual training were supposedly going to be in the snow-capped mountains of Canada, where the pilots could get used to flying at high altitude.

Which some speculated meant one thing for the battalion: Afghanistan as early as 2010.