

NEWS

## Goals drive area residents to join Marines

**BY KRISTEN LANDREVILLE SPECIAL TO THE SUN**

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College money, world travel, family tradition and a long-time dream.

Those are some of the reasons why recent high school graduates in the Gainesville area say they joined the smallest branch of the Armed Forces, the Marines.

Those are also among the many motivations for Michael Langston, a recent Chiefland High School graduate who is scheduled to head to boot camp in Parris Island, S.C., on Monday.

"I think it's experience, a guaranteed place to live and the pay for the next four years," said Langston, 18, who will be paid \$1,300 a month, or \$15,600 a year, for his service.

Leland Hill, 18, another recent recruit, said joining the Marines is what he has wanted to do since he was 8. That's why missing his Santa Fe High School graduation to start boot camp was not a big deal, Hill said.

Leadership experience and future opportunities are what Hill named as his other motivations.

Langston also named seeing the world, making friends and receiving money for college as reasons for his decision. When he was considering what military branch to join, he spoke with representatives of the four major branches, Langston said. But he said his decision was easy once he spoke with the Marines.

"I've heard the Marines are the best," Langston said. "They were the most honest and friendly."

The Marines are often referred to as the '911 fighting force,' said Gunnery Sgt. James Bounds, the officer in charge at the Marine recruiting office in Gainesville.

During combat, the Marines are typically the "front line," and every recruit is taught specific combat skills, Bounds said.

The war in Iraq apparently hasn't affected Marine recruiting in Gainesville.

Bounds said that recruiting numbers for his seven-county district haven't changed much.

In the 2002 fiscal year, which ran from October 2001 to September 2002, the Gainesville office recruited 93 Marines. In the first half of 2003, it has recruited 51.

"It's a little bit more, but it's not significant," said Bounds, who has 15 years of recruiting experience.

Nationally, statistics show that recruiting is down.

In the first half of the 2003 fiscal year, there were 16,147 Marines recruited. In the 2002 fiscal year, which ran from October 2001 to September 2002, there were 38,638 Marines recruited nationally.

Both Hill and Langston said the recent war in Iraq didn't affect their decision to join the Marines.

The risk of death does not bother Hill, though he will be in a combat position as a tank driver, he said.

"Death comes to people that aren't careful," Hill said. "And I'm going to be careful."

The risks do fill the thoughts of Langston at times.

"I think about it," Langston said. "But I want to go over there if anything breaks out because I want to be someone who's respected."

Langston, who will work in a noncombat position, said his decision made his parents happy, especially his father, who was a Marine.

"I've had a lot of adults tell me it's a good decision," Langston said.

Not all of the reaction, however, has been positive.

"Some people have said, 'You're going to be in Afghanistan and get shot at,' " said Langston, adding that he tries not to let those comments bother him.

Langston's mother, Cynthia Jackson, said she wasn't bothered that her son could be sent to Iraq.

"I didn't have that feeling, 'Oh my God, my son is going to go over there and die,' " said Jackson, hoping the experience will help Langston become more responsible and grow into an adult.

"It's his choice and his life, it's time for him to start making his own decisions," Jackson said.