



Making that final phone call home, Villwok joins other reservists Sunday night at Fort Riley.



Reserves

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From the beginning, they suspected their eventual destination. Their orders said they were getting activated for Operation Desert Shield.

A chalkboard at the Fremont headquarters gave further hints:

"Oil is a commodity. Life is not," it read. Another message in chalk said, "What is our mission? Win the war."

At mail call, Villwok steps forward five times.

He collects letters from his father, his aunt, his brother and his brother's girlfriend. But the first letter Villwok reads comes to Fort Riley with a U.S. Army postmark from his friend in Saudi Arabia.

Villwok hasn't been eager to communicate with his family. In fact, he says, he got in trouble for making too few phone calls. The Army wants soldiers to keep in touch with the folks back home.

That's been no problem for Tichota, who's called home almost every day. He left his girlfriend in Fremont. Now she writes him every day.

"Gary gets more mail than anyone in the company," says Villwok, who'd rather not answer

the letters he gets.

"I'm having fun," he says. Writing makes him think about school, about Fremont and his parents.

Several weekends ago they visited him at Fort Riley. Because orders for deployment are issued days or hours in advance, the soldiers and their families never know which will be the last visit.

"There's a good and bad side to this — you've got to say goodbye all over again," Villwok says.

His family probably understands. Villwok's father, brother and uncle also were in the Army.

"I love it; just putting on the green," Villwok says. "Honestly, I enjoy it. This is the real stuff now."

Villwok had no problem switching roles from student to soldier. He looks the part. A week after getting activated, he had his already buzzed-off hair trimmed further. Now there's only a little bit left on the top. His "Marine Dog" cut, he calls it.

Tichota looks more like a criminal justice major. He admits he joined the Reserves to pay his way through college, not because he expected to enjoy the Army.

"I don't regret joining because the money's great and I need it to go to school," he says. "I just never, never thought it would happen."

Villwok has outlined reasons why he wants to go to Saudi Arabia:

to see a new country, a new culture; it'll be a conversation piece. He wants to have some stories to tell his grandchildren.

He wants to tell them that he enjoyed the Army and its routine. He doesn't mind sharing a room with 28 other men or the 5:30 a.m. wakeup call for a march in 40-degree temperatures.

"I've been singing a lot of the cadences when we go marching," he says.

He demonstrates:

*"Iraqi soldiers
Beuer hit the hill
Army's coming
Shoot to kill"*

But the company wasn't activated to do any shooting. It's a rear-echelon, port-city outfit, one that can keep more than 100,000 combat troops stocked. It moves supplies from ships into warehouses. Other units transport the supplies to the battle lines.

Still, Villwok wants to be prepared. Even at a comfortable distance behind the front lines, terrorism poses a threat, he says.

"There's always the chance that some kid will come up and throw a bomb," he says, "or you go into some place and it's going to blow up."

Getting activated has demonstrated to Tichota and Villwok how other students take things for

granted. The reservists will be allowed only a few personal items when they go abroad: a set of civilian clothes, a Walkman and tapes, a disc camera (other cameras are too big), some "hygiene stuff," writing utensils and paper.

Other things that they as students have come to expect, they won't even be able to find — Saudi Arabia is an 830,000 square-mile dry campus.

The Army also has placed restrictions on religion. U.S. troops are not allowed to enter mosques out of respect for the Muslims. And the Army has renamed its chaplains "keepers of the peace, or something," Villwok says, to avoid religious friction.

"I'm Catholic; I still have to pray. I just won't tell anyone," he says.

Tichota is less concerned about the details. He just doesn't want to go.

"This is not helping you at all in life; what's it going toward?" he asks his friend.

"It's the best thing that happened all year," Villwok says. "I miss school, but you can always get your education. This doesn't happen but every 20 years."

Never mind that they aren't doing anything very different from college life. Take away the barracks, the camouflage jeeps and the salutes, and Tichota and Villwok

could be on campus. They sleep in bunk beds, eat dining hall food, open their mail and study history. Even today's combat training wasn't much different from intramural football.

As they walk back to the barracks after the drill, Tichota and Villwok still have some college student in them. There's little discipline in their steps. Their rifles are casually at their sides. And they're talking about the weekend.

But the new setting has made them realize they are caught in a series of events they can do nothing about.

Because of decisions they made more than two years ago, Villwok and Tichota can only wait for the next order to come, until the setting changes again — from prairie to desert.

On Veterans Day — late Monday afternoon — Villwok and Tichota file onto a jumbo jet at Forbes Field in Topeka, Kan.

The transition from college student to soldier is nearly complete now; the uncertainty is replaced with a clear destination.

As the civilian 747 airliner takes off against a Kansas sunset, members of the 1012th General Supply Company know where they are headed: a Saudi port city only a couple hundred miles from Kuwait.