

'His heart is in it'

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Editor's note: This is one in a series of occasional stories focusing on families of members of the military serving in the war against Iraq.

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A week before Easter, U.S. Army Pfc. Michael Fitzgerald called his mother to say he wouldn't be home for a while. It had been more than two months since his unit was sent to Hungary.

But Michael, who is attached to the 18th Airborne Corps Field Artillery, was kidding. He was calling from Ireland on his way back to the United States, his mission finished.

He only had a short time to catch up with his parents, his three sisters and his brothers before he had to return to his base at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Airborne wasn't an obvious match for Michael, but it was his choice, said his mother, Dale Fitzgerald.

"That was brave of him because he's scared of heights ...," she said. "I think it didn't dawn on him that he'd be jumping out of planes."

Dale Fitzgerald said her son jumps from 400 feet and reaches the ground in seven seconds. "He can rattle off exactly what needs to be done" in that time, she said.

Dale Fitzgerald has framed a letter from the Army congratulating Michael for helping with "the training of free Iraqi forces who are returning to Iraq to assist U.S. and coalition forces."

She cherishes a video news clip showing his unit training in Hungary because it features an interview with Michael. The Fitzgeralds received a copy of the tape from the local NBC affiliate.

A fourth daughter is away from home, too. Chrissy, 26, is a military police officer with the U.S. Navy stationed in Norfolk, Va. She joined eight years ago, right after high school.

Michael, a 2002 Boonsboro High School graduate and former wide receiver on the football team, also enlisted as soon as he finished high school.

Hannah, 17, said her brother sounds smart and confident about his mission on the tape.

Military service is "a good thing for him," she said. "It is making him more mature."

Hannah said she and Michael used to clash, in a normal sister-brother way, but they've grown closer and are having more adult conversations.

Hannah and her boyfriend drove with Michael when he had to return to Fort Bragg.

Becky, 15, got something else from the tape.

"He had a dimple. He always has a dimple when he's lying," she joked.

Becky, a cut-up, playfully trash-talked about her brother. She said she misses Michael because he makes her laugh and doesn't miss him because they're rival "bathroom hogs."

Dan, 14, said he looks forward to hanging out with his brother again.

Dan wants to join the U.S. Air Force. After seeing some air shows, he concluded, "I want to fly."

Michael Fitzgerald, the father, was in the Navy and is now in the Army National Guard, his wife said.

Sarah, 11, kept quiet while her siblings talked and answered questions.

"I miss having him fall asleep with his head on my shoulder," Dale Fitzgerald said.

Since he was young, Michael has looked out for his mother.

"The day before he left for boot camp, he bought me a dozen roses," she said. "He said, 'Don't worry. I'll be AOK.' I cried."

When Michael turned to his mother at his boot camp graduation and said he loved her, she cried for a half-hour.

Michael is the kind of person who doesn't lose face and who wore his football bruises as badges of honor, his mother said.

Once, as a prank at practice, the offense let the defensive line come through en masse and clobber Michael.

"He got up and said, 'Is that the best you got?'" Dale Fitzgerald said.

Michael doesn't know his next mission, but he has told his family he might be sent to help rebuild Iraq.

"His heart is in it," his mother said. "Anything he does, his heart is in it."

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