

## The Making of an Agent

After 16 weeks of action-packed exercises that will test them to the core, the recruits in Training Class No. 283 will pass into the elite ranks of the Secret Service -- or leave humiliated



### [Inside Secret Service Training](#)

Special Agent in Charge Michael Bryant talks about the Secret Service and the rigorous program would-be agents must complete at the James J. Rowley Training Center outside Washington, D.C.

*By Laura Blumenfeld – Washington Post*

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#### **LESSON ONE: Get Ready To Die**

The teacher walks into the mat room.

"Good morning, Mr. Mixon," the students say in unison.

"Cut that [expletive] out. Don't act like you give a crap about my morning."

Steve Mixon smiles, or maybe it's a snarl. Before he became an instructor at the Secret Service training camp outside Washington, Mixon served as a team leader on President George W. Bush's Counter Assault Team.

"Everyone's going to leave today in some degree of pain," Mixon tells the special agent trainees. The 24 recruits, dressed in black combat pants and jackets, stiffen into four rows, jingling handcuffs. Scott Swantner clenches his jaw. Krista Bradford rubs raw knuckles. One trainee, who broke a rib, is keeping it a secret, fearing he'll be discharged.

"Everything is in play here, guys. Everything you learned from Day One," Mixon tells them in a basement that muffles rifle blasts. "Assailant control. Guillotine chokeholds."

For the members of Special Agent Training Class No. 283, this is finals time. They have been cramming here for months, since days after the election of Barack Obama, hoping to join the men and women charged with protecting the president.

Not all of them will make it.

If they fail, they will leave humiliated. If they pass, they'll become members of an elite, stealthy service during a period of exceptional pressures. At their annual party, Ralph Basham, the former director, greeted his replacement: "I'm the happiest guy in Washington because I'm not the director of the Secret Service anymore."

With the rise of Islamic terrorism, the agency's roster of protectees has grown. With the election of the first African American president, public scrutiny has exploded. Presidents typically receive 3,000 threats a year, says a Secret Service expert. Obama is outpacing the average.

"We understand the historic significance," says the current director, Mark Sullivan. "If we make a mistake, it's going to be devastating for the country. We're not going to let the country down." That promise depends in large part on what happens inside this 493-acre compound. Unmarked, behind barbed wire and hidden in the woods, the James J. Rowley Training Center sits so close to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway that its inhabitants -- in chemical weapons suits, suicide bomber vests or white robes while role-playing the pope -- can hear the commuter traffic's oblivious swish.

Obama's security detail drills here two weeks out of every eight. The vice president's detail, the first lady's, the agents who protect foreign dignitaries and former presidents, as well as the tactical units -- the counter snipers posted on the White House roof, and the Emergency Response Team, which stops incursions into the White House grounds--also drill here.

Overseeing them are instructors like Mixon, who wears a size 52 suit jacket, whose T-shirt says "Fighting Solves Everything," and whose 2-year-old son knows how to do a one-man takedown. This morning Mixon, 40, is testing control tactics, or ground-fighting.

Forty minutes into the wristlocks and head stuns, the trainees' necks burn with scratches. Dan Batt is supposed to disarm a classmate but accidentally knees him in the groin.

"Right in the junk!" Mixon laughs.

Dan wants to apologize for his clumsiness -- his infant daughter is teething and kept him up half the night -- but the men keep wrestling, too afraid to stop. A student in the class ahead of them flunked out the week before graduation for buckling during push-ups.

"Next!" Mixon calls.

Scott Swantner ten-huts, shoulders back, towering over the others. A former rifle platoon commander with the Marine Corps, Scott lost three fingers in Iraq. In Beltsville, he attended remedial control tactics with Krista Bradford every Friday before sunrise.

"Yes, sir!" Scott says cheerlessly. For the last scenario of their four-hour exam, the mat room becomes a heavy metal bar. Red and blue lights flash in the dark. The rock band Disturbed blares from speakers.

Their instructions: *"Patty McGuire has made threats against POTUS [President of the United States] and you have an arrest warrant . . . An informant told you Patty is in the bar."*

In pairs, the trainees open the door.

"Why don't you [expletive] off and die?" shrieks Disturbed. The instructors pounce with sticks and training knives. They slam the trainees into the wall. They rip at their hair. One trainee shatters his instructor's cheekbone. But another freezes, goes into "brain vapor-lock," as his partner is repeatedly shot.

Krista and her partner wait outside for their turn. "If they clench their fists," Krista strategizes, "I'll pull out my baton."

Krista is 4 feet 11 inches. She moves like a gymnast, nimbly, with concentrated grace. She has lively green eyes, fine features and a buoyant ponytail. She cheers Scott, Dan and the others between drills with Dove chocolates. A social worker, she also used to work at Disney World, dressing up as cartoon characters.

"She was Minnie Mouse, for God sakes," Mixon grumbles.

Within seconds of entering the mat-room bar, Krista's partner, an Army National Guardsman who earned a Bronze Star, is knocked to the ground. A role-player drags Krista across the floor by the cuff of her pants. He straddles Krista and punches her.

"Get off me!" Krista screams.

"Get ready to die!" the music screams.

"Keep fighting!" Mixon screams.

The role-player twists Krista's arms around her neck and pulls, choking her with her own hands. She gags. Her nose is bleeding. Her cheek is bleeding. Blood blisters on her legs, bruised by training bullets while chasing assassins through the woods, trickle and ooze.

On her back, in the dark, Krista watches the role-player's face swirl into darker shades of gray.

She is losing consciousness. Mixon yells, "Do something!"

In the Secret Service, the saying goes, "You never quit. You always win. Everything else is negotiable."

"Here it comes! Get ready to die!" the music screams.

Krista grinds her teeth into the meat of his palm.

He releases her, and Krista and her partner stagger out of the room. Their final exam is over. A drop of sweat dangles from the tip of her partner's nose. He looks at Krista, gasping:

"Did we pass?"

### **LESSON TWO (Nine Months Earlier): Do Whatever It Takes**

Business was slow at the Sherwin-Williams paint store. Dan Batt, a sales associate, sat cataloguing colors: Salute red, Nantucket Dune.

Dan is 24, the second-oldest of nine home-schooled children, a quiet man with sloping shoulders, fair skin and pure black hair. He has a face that often gets skipped over in a crowd, a modest chin and nice-boy eyes.

Dan smiled mildly as a teenager tramped into the store.

"But I want it, Dad!" A blast of cold Buffalo air blew in with the girl and her father.

She wanted to paint her bedroom Lime Rickey green. It was, Dan thought, a hideous color.

"This is a very, uh, fun color," Dan later recalled saying.

Dan always deferred to the customer. His wife was seven months pregnant, and they needed the paycheck.

"Yes, he said to everyone. "Yes, yes, yes."

No, this wasn't the career he'd wanted. His mother, who read her Bible, had taught him about good and bad, and he dreamed -- never mind that he is shy -- of fighting for good. When Dan's cellphone rang later at the store, "Restricted Number," he felt something lurch inside his chest. Maybe his wife was having early contractions.

Or maybe, improbably, it was the other call, the one that meant Dan had mixed his last Lime Rickey.

Twelve hundred miles to the south in New Orleans, Krista Bradford, 32, was driving her car. She almost didn't answer when her call came.

Krista had just assessed a 4-year-old autistic girl. She told the girl's mother to buy crayons and blocks, she later recalled. As a social worker, Krista was tired of rappelling into lives after they'd crumbled. She wanted to try something preemptive, such as law enforcement.

Krista herself had experienced the limits of social services. She was given up at birth in an adoption that failed, and later moved into an adolescent group house where she reached for a serving bowl and was stabbed in the hand with a fork.

"I'll be a good protector," Krista believed. "I know how important it is to be protected."

The application process took nine months, complicated by a background check that tracked three different childhood last names, and a job history that included dressing up as Jiminy Cricket and Dopey.

Eventually one afternoon, her cellphone flashed: "Withheld." "Hello?" Krista said, thinking: *I'll do whatever it takes.*

Four states away, in an Oakland, Calif., shipyard, Scott Swantner, 30, watched a freighter offload a container. An Iraq war veteran, he was two weeks into a job at the Pacific Maritime Association. He had the air of a man whose penalty kick had clunked off a goal post.

Earlier in the year, Scott had spent a month filling out the 34-page Secret Service application. He had flown from his Berlin Marine post to California to renew his driver's license, which had been shredded in Nasiriyah by a rocket-propelled grenade. He had passed the written test, the drug test, the vision test, the hearing test, the initial interview, the panel interview, the home interview, and the "worst experience of my life," the polygraph, which elicited every foible and shame.

Tall and broad, Scott had played right guard for the Naval Academy football team. He has thick, brown hair, buzz cut for the military. His features project success. Scott's father, a termite inspector, constantly told his winning boy, "Don't screw up."

Yet, somehow Scott had. He had fallen short on the Secret Service's physical exam, he guessed, "because of my hand." As a Marine, Scott had hoped to emulate his grandfather's World War II service in the Pacific. Instead, in Iraq, Scott lost two soldiers in his platoon -- "You feel you let them down. It'll always stick with you" -- and, later, part of his left hand.

Things that had come easily for Scott were now doubted. Secret Service screeners questioned Scott's commander: "He says he can physically do this, but can he?" Can he still shoot?

Eventually, Scott was told they had found a better-qualified applicant. Scott took the shipyard job. He was talking to a longshoreman when his cellphone beeped: "Unknown."

The voice sounded friendly. "Hey, it's Charlie White." From the San Francisco Field Office. "We want to offer you -- "

The Secret Service had never accepted anyone with his disability before but had reconsidered. They were going to give Scott a try.

The acceptance calls rang out in 24 corners of the country. In Plant City, Fla., a YMCA director felt his phone vibrate during a board meeting debating zumba dance classes. In Tulsa, a police officer exhausted from jumping fences while chasing drug dealers till 2 a.m. snapped open his phone. In Baltimore, a Home Depot manager folded his orange apron then and there in Hardwood Flooring.

Their family and friends sometimes found the news confusing: "So you're going to be a spy?" "Do you change your name?" "Will the president talk to you directly through that plastic thing in your ear?"

The new recruits -- 21 men and three women, 25 to 32 years old -- assembled in Glynco, Ga., for 12 weeks of basic federal law-enforcement training. Then they moved to a Residence Inn in Maryland. They unpacked creatine bodybuilding powder and Aveda Comforting Tea, boxing DVDs and voodoo dolls.

On their first morning, the recruits ride in government vans to the classified complex. A guard in a booth raises the gate. They cross over, into a mission called for by Congress following the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley. They are admitted onto the grounds and into the secrets of the Service.

"We train unlike any other federal agency," says A.T. Smith, an assistant director, who stands by while the trainees stencil their names on their T-shirts. "We train to the edge, and then we lean over."

The center's drills are increasingly scenario-based, says Smith, who had served as Hillary Clinton's detail leader. "For years, our training was based on the lone gunman and the long-range rifle. Now it's automatic weapons, multiple explosions as a diversion to a secondary attack." An intelligence PowerPoint presentation on "The Emerging Threat" flashes from the old-style assassin, Squeaky Fromme, to chanting Islamic fanatics. Threat experts have created a new Obama-era prototype, a white supremacist who calls Obama "a mud person" and White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel, a Jew, "the Antichrist."

New hazards have prompted a new emphasis in training -- a kind of extreme, lethal improv -- using scenarios that are dynamic and demand responses that run counter to typical human behavior. Smith says, "Our goal is to make it instinct."

To alter reflexes, to rewire the "muscle memory" of recruits, they built 37 buildings, including fake colonial-style houses and a mock airport. Facades line the main street: a cafe, a tattoo parlor and a hardware store.

"It's like a small town," Smith explains.

Except that all day and many nights, explosions rock presidential candidates at the pizzeria. The dogs, on command, break from their leashes and maul shrieking men. Gunmen fire from the All Saints Church at the president's wife. Marine One, the president's helicopter, crashes in the swimming pool, and fleeing black Suburbans climb the curbs at 45 mph. Behind every mailbox, lamppost and flowering bush, a killer possibly squats, racking his AK. Or, he might spray a vial of sarin.

Smith smiles: "I never said it was a nice town. I said it was a small town."

### **LESSON THREE: Be Obsessive-Compulsive**

"Your head's going to spin and you feel like you're going to throw up," says Mixon. "Don't do it in my mat room."

This is Mixon's welcome speech to SATC No. 283 on its first day. "Sometimes trainees pass out in the bathroom, so develop a buddy system among yourselves."

Krista finds a buddy -- the other woman who can't do a pull-up. Dan's buddy is the Tulsa cop who classmates swear can bench-press a Honda. Scott scans the room with the dark-browed scowl of an American eagle, privately amazed that he is even here.

Mixon distributes their "Use of Force" chart, which graphs the amount of force to use on a subject, depending on their level of menace. The trainees' eyes widen at its complexity.

"Details! Think details!" Mixon says. He walks around the room, his chest forward, like a piece of earth-moving equipment. "What is your job? The man in the most powerful office in the world -- you're standing next to him with a loaded gun."

Success, Mixon says, rests on attention to detail.

"Use the force necessary. You can hit them with your car, stab them with a big pin," Mixon says. "We in the Secret Service are super Type-A personalities, people who want to take control and win at all costs." But within legal limits, Mixon warns. "Don't get that little extra shot in there, that extra revenge . . . I want to make sure if I'm going through a door with you, that I can trust you. If not, I'm not going to let you take that walk on graduation day."

All day, instructors say, *Do* sweat the details:

"I expect neat hair! No goatees!"

"If you wore boxer shorts, it's the last day you do!"

"Cut off [alcoholic] drinking eight hours prior to range practice!"

"You know the old joke: We're just one assassination away from wearing the FBI badge!"

The recruits recite a list of rules. Dan reads No. 16 out loud, "No sleeping in class." He stifles a new-father yawn. Dan is the only recruit who moved his family to Beltsville. He wedged a Pack 'n Play next to the bed. He bought his 4-month-old a pink Secret Service onesie. He keeps uniforms in the bathroom, so he doesn't wake his wife and infant when he dresses at dawn.

At the end of the nine-hour hazing, the students stand, soaked and mute. A former IRS employee nods toward a sweat splash on the mat: "That's me and Scott, right about there."

The Home Depot manager stamps his foot. "One day down."

Krista exhales. "Four days and 15 weeks to go."

Krista is counting down to graduation on a hand-drawn chart, penciling an "X" when she wakes up every morning. She tallies Mixon's sessions with a dash that she crosses when completed.

Holidays are coded in orange marker. She jokingly calls it her "calendar of what to dread."

Her meticulousness is actually the sign of a good agent. "You got to have a little OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder] to have this job," says the firearms coordinator. "You worry about every little thing. That's what we do. That's who we are."

Why? The firearms instructor explains: "A bad guy's attacking POTUS, you fire and you miss.

Who you gonna hit? POTUS!" Trainees have to score 80 percent in marksmanship. They spend months learning how to shoot and assemble their Sig Sauer P229 pistols, MP5 9mm submachine guns, Remington 12-gauge shotguns. Krista buys a finger-exerciser to build trigger muscles. She and the others will fire about a thousand rounds at practice targets such as the vacant-eyed white man with glasses and thinning hair, lifting his pistol.

They aim for "center mass," the heart. No warning shots.

"What should be the first thing on your belt?" an instructor asks.

"Spare magazine?" Dan says.

"Right. I've seen people load pagers and cellphones. They don't go bang when you pull the trigger."

The students struggle to memorize details that parse life and death. During barricade-shooting, a technician chastens Dan: "Don't expose your leg. You get hit in the fibular artery, you're dead in seconds." Though, if hit, you are still expected to fight: "You have 10 seconds where you can keep fighting." They call it "the dead man's 10 seconds." The one Secret Service employee who died in the line of duty shot the would-be assassin after he'd been mortally wounded. "He fired back. He didn't give up."

"Do not use starch or bleach on the ballistic panels," a teacher says, laundry tips for their sweaty bulletproof vests. "And if you're at the White House and hear shooting, hit the deck -- the vest does not stop ERT [Emergency Response Team] bullets."

During their sixth week, students take an emergency medicine course: "So you're standing post on the golf course, and someone gets struck by lightning ... " They learn how to treat a head of

state who's been eviscerated: "Some of you with military backgrounds were taught to urinate on the intestines to keep them warm. That is not Secret Service protocol." And how to deliver a baby while standing post (happened twice last year): "I don't want to hear about you using your shoelaces or anything nasty to tie the cord. Do not let the woman go to the bathroom, or Junior is going to be bungee jumping into the toilet."

Krista memorizes her flashcards and aces the medical exam.

The "details! details!" theme follows them into a surveillance course, where trainees trail each other around Maryland malls. "Act normal," the teacher says, Rule No. 5. "If you're halfway through your low-fat blueberry muffin -- that's not really low-fat -- finish it. Otherwise, it looks suspicious. If you and your partner are friends, act like friends! And do not make out in surveillance -- it's happened."

During the rescue swimming unit, the instructor specifies, "Talk to the flailing victim. Now, there is an exception: If Mr. Obama falls overboard, do you say, 'Mr. Obama, kick your feet! Move your legs!' No. Get in the water."

The deadliest details emerge during WMD training. Much of it is classified, involving untraceable toxins that could kill the president in his hotel suite while he is showering or clipping his toenails.

"There is an unbelievable amount of unaccounted-for chemical weapons," says the WMD specialist. "And when it turns up, it better not be on your advance. But if it does, this class is going to help."

The students learn how to adjust their gas masks after they've clapped on the president's, whose straps are custom-sewn for a tight seal. They inhale caustic fumes in a gas chamber, discovering their initial symptoms -- Scott's throat itches, Dan's eyes blaze, Krista's lips sting -- to recognize a gas attack.

WMD attacks could come at any time, the instructor says in class: "You're on an advance team in Ohio, and you eat at the Golden Corral salad bar." An assassin squirts SEB toxin from a rubber ball in his sleeve onto the chopped lettuce. The entire team gets sick.

"The president is due in minutes, and you're in bed, projectile vomiting to knock the clock off the wall. Every orifice in your body is going to be exuding liquid, like doing back-to-back advances in Cairo."

The trainees stare, glassy-eyed. It is 4:30 p.m., break time.

"Okay, folks," says the WMD specialist. The students are saturated in detail, in every blood, blister, nerve, bacterial and viral agent that will clot, choke and putrefy their bodily organs.

The teacher smiles sweetly as the students shuffle toward the candy machines. "You guys have a nice day!"

#### **LESSON FOUR: Keep Moving**

The control tactics coordinator addresses Scott as "the delicate one."

Scott is huge and meat-freezer hard, aside from his injured hand.

The coordinator says, "Are we sadists? No. We find and exploit any weakness in all trainees. It's stress inoculation."

"They're terrified, that's our preferred mode," says Mixon. (When the trainees aren't looking, he coos over pictures of his toddler nuzzling cherry blossoms.)

On this sunny afternoon on the race-car pad, the students' source of terror is a tactical driving test. The armored vehicles, many from President George H.W. Bush's old fleet, roll out of a garage, "the inner sanctum."

An instructor who chauffeured George W. Bush cautions, "I hit a bump in Denver and hit Bush's head on the ceiling. He asked me when was the last time I had a drug test. Try to avoid that." Krista slides into the driver's seat, "Anyone want a paper bag?" Her feet strain to reach the pedals.

"Don't forget to lock the back doors. Nothing more embarrassing than the president busting your chops because you forgot to lock the door," an instructor says. Then he shares one of the Service's biggest secrets -- where they hide the presidential spare keys.

"All right, Scott Swantner's up," says the evaluator, Tipper Gore's former driver, his voice drawling over the police radio. Scott shifts vehicle No. 5 into gear, facing a slalom course of orange traffic cones.

The blacktop -- 1,800 feet long, 300 feet wide -- is streaked with truck-tire marks from the Humvee-heavy limousines. One instructor executes a J-turn, performed when a driver can't ram a roadblock. He zooms backward and whips the wheel, spinning the limousine a screeching reverse 180 degrees.

The air is pungent with gas and smoking rubber.

"The track's clear. Turn on your lights and sirens," the evaluator says to Scott.

Scott must complete two runs, no fishtailing or skidding outside the lines. For Scott this is a natural. He thrives inside lines: lays out his uniform just so each night, cooks one low-sodium recipe on Saturday and eats leftovers every evening.

"Ready, set, bang!"

Scott weaves through the orange cones. "Run the course hard, as if you're taking the protectee to a hospital," the evaluator had told them.

Recently here, Obama's security detail had practiced assaults on a motorcade parade. A mock Obama, first lady and two daughters strolled, waving to cheering crowds. Suddenly, over the trees, mortars crashed. Fanatics in pickup trucks thundered out, crippling "the Beast," the president's limousine. Counter snipers in a tower fired back. The Counter Assault Team stampeded. The first family was bundled into the spare limousine, "the Tomb," and sped out of the kill zone.

Scott's class had also practiced "pushing out" of the kill zone. The maneuver: Drive a Suburban into the president's rear fender, pushing his disabled limousine.

"If you're 'pushing out' on a \$3 million car, you're not out of gas," the instructor said. "You're in the woods, you're taking rounds, the limo's dead. What do you do?"

"Push it out," Scott said.

"Want to know what we do, in two words?" the instructor said. "Keep moving."

Motorcade attacks average 45 seconds, he said. "Get out of the kill zone. If Iraq has taught us one thing -- you cannot stop."

In Musayyib, Iraq, Scott's Marines kept him moving the night a Russian-made fuse tore off part of his hand. Scott was clearing houses. A group of frightened girls showed him grenade fuses inside an old helmet. "I'm taking these," Scott said, reaching down. Then, he recalled, "I heard a pop. The guys I was with wouldn't let me look down."

But they kept Scott moving. It took 15 minutes to walk to their patrol. Scott was in shock, dripping blood, but somehow he moved his feet.

Privately Scott blames himself: "I should have known." But he jokes with friends, "Give me seven!" He tells himself, "Got to move on."

And though doubtful, Scott keeps moving.

On the driving pad, the evaluator scratches his head. "I don't see any problems with this class," he mumbles, and he adds their test numbers again. "Scott might be the weakest." Scott scored 68, missing the 70-point minimum.

The evaluator announces: "I need Car 5 to stay here. Which is Scott Swantner?"

Scott bites his lip. He calls the feeling "black hole," a place where a voice warns of disappointment. "It's my voice," Scott says later, "It says, 'Don't fail.' With a little crowd of people agreeing -- my family and guys I served with in Iraq. I don't want to let people down." The evaluator notes, "could be his fingers, driving with your thumb and index finger." On the range, it was the same. When Scott jerked the trigger, the instructor shook his head: "He doesn't have much there to hold on to the gun."

The rest of the class rumbles off the pad. The evaluator tells Scott, "We got to run through this again, get you up to snuff."

"Yes, sir."

Overhead, gray clouds crowd out the sun. Raindrops pit Scott's windshield.

Two days later, Scott joins the others outside the mat room for their control tactics midterm. One role-playing instructor moans, "I got killed 24 times today. This is embarrassing."

Mixon is giving the test, pretending to be a member of the president's political staff. Mixon the political aide races over to Scott on tippy-toes, his eyes wild, his voice high:

"Oh, my God! You gotta help me! This guy is in there, and the president's going to be here in, like, 10 minutes! I told the guy to leave and he told me to go [expletive] myself! Make him leave! He scares me!!"

Scott stalks off to investigate.

Mixon the staffer smiles, "Thanks! I'm going to go get a latte."

After each student fights the assailant, he or she is directed to a small, dark room. Except for Scott, who is told to wait in the stairwell.

"I don't like being separated like this," he says.

Out on the driving pad, in fact, the driving evaluator had made a math mistake. Scott had qualified, first try.

"This has been the longest week," Scott sighs in the stairwell. He begins to pace. It is part of him now, a survival instinct. Two words: keep moving.

### **LESSON FIVE: Be a Meat Shield**

Dan's wife is kicking him. Third or fourth time tonight. The baby is whimpering, and Dan is sleeping through it, even though he lies closer to her crib. Dan pops in her pacifier, he later recalls, amazed by how quickly his wife wakes up. It's as if she possesses a different set of senses.

In the morning, at the center, Dan huddles in the fake lobby of a fake hotel with Krista and the Tulsa cop. On the mezzanine above them, Bill Clinton's current detail skulks along the railings, poking submachine guns around corners, practicing clearing halls.

The mandatory three-mile runs are giving Dan painful shin splints. "You still got five weeks, man," the Tulsa cop tells Dan. "You don't want to get stress fractures."

But Dan is afraid he'll be dismissed if he doesn't run. And besides, he's a guy who says yes: at the paint store to Lime Rickey, and at a recent baton drill to battling three of his biggest classmates - a sky diver, a self-described Cro-Magnon and Scott -- all at once. Afterward, Dan tottered away in a cold sweat, as dizzy as he'd been when he fainted as an 8-year-old altar boy. "Dude, you're white. You need to get checked out," said the Tulsa cop, lugging Dan off to the emergency medical services office down the hall.

Dan's gentle nature is a problem, and it worries him. "My whole life I'm always right in the middle," he once said. He may be the most agreeable recruit, but Dan won't make it as an agent if his response is always affirmative.

On this morning, at the fake hotel, Mixon ambles over to the students and cracks his neck. He's here to teach them how the Secret Service says no.

"We'll start with basic stuff. Attacks on the rope line, lapel grabs, overzealous handshakes. "

During the George W. Bush years, an instructor says, Bush always told them if he was planning to shake hands. "We're not in that environment now. We're in a Clintonesque environment, you have to deal with spontaneous rope lines."

Mixon says: "You may say, why do I need to know this?" because new agents don't work on the president's security detail. They investigate crimes and work advance or security posts. "But my first post-standing was in Brownsville, for President Clinton. I was standing there in my new J.C. Penney suit, and Clinton dives into the crowd. The shift leader grabs me by the back of my belt loops and made me help. You could be working rope lines in a matter of weeks."

Dan watches Mixon demonstrate releasing a fan's handshake. He peels back the fan's thumb with so much force, it makes a popping sound.

"If he's still jaw-jacking, saying to the protectee, 'We need to save the three-legged mosquito!' and the protectee's giving you that 'Oh, [expletive]' look, you'll peel him off," Mixon says. "The press is always around, and he's just a knucklehead, not necessarily a threat, so -- " Mixon cuts to the Tulsa cop. "You can't punch him in the face."

During a break, Dan calls Amanda. She's busy changing the baby. They met when he was 11 and she was 9. They still speak to each other with a childhood sweetness.

When the trainees reassemble, Mixon initiates them into the most sacred rite of protection:

"If there's an attack, get as big as you can to protect him. Make a nice meat shield between the protectee and the problem."

It takes a few beats to understand "meat shield."

"And where's the shielding for the protectee?" Mixon says.

The students blink. "The shift leader?" "The limousine?"

"No," Mixon says. "Point to yourself. You are the shielding for the protectee."

Scott taps his foot. Dan and Krista exchange glances.

"Your job is to get big. Get your lats out wide. We are now a meat shield. A sandwich: Kevlar, your body, another layer of Kevlar -- covering the protectee."

For the U.N. General Assembly, Mixon says, "you'll be working foreign protectees, Sultan Abu Bin Abu Babab. In an attack, get the protectee's head down, cover vital organs. If he falls, pick him up. You may have to think for them -- 'move, move, move' -- they may be literally pooping themselves."

"Do the protectees know what our responses are going to be?" says Krista.

"The president, yes. But the first lady of Iceland, no. On 9/11, two agents snatched Cheney out of his desk, and his feet never touched the ground till he was out of danger."

For weeks, the class practices shift formations, as if working a security detail. A pudgy politician makes speeches: "Keep paying your taxes! We need the money!" Dan, Krista and Scott shadow him out of boardrooms, into ballrooms and onto a Boeing 707 replica of Air Force One. They encounter actors and role-playing agents as innocuous as a flirty redhead and as deadly as a bald man wielding a syringe of Ebola.

Mixon critiques them: "You guys made a nice meat shield," he says to Krista. When shots rang out, Krista cupped the candidate's body with her own, his greasy hair sliding over her throat.

"Excellent job controlling him. Bradford got as big as she's ever gotten in her life. Mighty Midget came to the rescue."

To Scott, who repelled an autograph seeker, Mixon says, "Too much aggression. You were on him like a spider monkey jacked up on Mountain Dew."

"I'll turn it down, sir," says Scott. He's adjusting to post-Iraq rules of engagement.

And Mixon scolds Dan, who saw a man throw a bottle. "Apparently, you can throw a bottle at the president and nothing happens. Don't wait for someone to hit you. You can hit him back first."

But Mixon levels his biggest criticism at the entire class. "Everyone took steps backwards when the shooting started." He glares at a former police officer.

"I'm used to going down on a knee," the former cop pleads. It's a reflex, basic officer safety.

"Well, resist. Now you're working protection. You need to be the shield."

Students remove their earplugs and safety glasses, dazed, looking existentially perplexed. An instructor who had protected Bush shrugs:

"That's the premise of protective training -- to override human nature."

In the evening, Dan drives back to the Residence Inn, to human nature as it seems intended. He locks his training gun and bathes the baby. She eats potato puffs in her high chair and laughs at her dad on the floor doing push--ups.

Dan's wife, Amanda, a luminescent brunette, cooks them tuna casserole and tries not to think about his work. "It's hard for me to visualize," she says.

The baby is sitting on Amanda's lap, gnawing a teething ring. Dan is mulling Mixon's lesson, which he's not yet internalized.

But the words "meat shield" spark recognition in Amanda's soft eyes. When she was pregnant in Buffalo, "I slipped and fell on the ice. As I was going down, I was thinking, 'Don't fall to hurt the baby. Don't fall on your stomach.' I didn't care if I broke an arm, I had to protect the baby."

Amanda sprained her wrist. She used her body as a shield.

Dan turns to his wife, nodding, as if the tumblers in his head were finally grinding in the right combination. Click: meat shield.

"It's the instinct, the mother instinct," Dan says. "When the cubs are in danger, the mother bear gets big, as Mr. Mixon says."

Being a Secret Service agent might be a stoic, macho job.

It is also a little bit like being pregnant with the president.

### **LESSON SIX: Stand Your Ground**

"Let's see -- gun, lip gloss," Krista says. It is 5:30 a.m. at the Residence Inn.

Dan texts Krista, "R U driving in this morn?"

Yes, but Krista has to drive in early for remedial submachine gun. She qualified on the MP5, but her supervisor said she needs practice. He also assigned her to remedial physical fitness, though her scores are on par with the Tulsa cop's. Krista jokes to Dan and Scott that she has remedial lunch and remedial breathing.

She plays the song by Pink: "So What?" She never lets the guys see her tear up. She averages 96.5 percent on her written exams.

In the bathroom, a green smear of Biore Pore Perfect mask dabs the pull-up bar Krista installed for practice. Last night, she hit her cheek while cranking out four pull-ups. Enough for her to pass.

"Don't be defined by other people's limited perceptions!" says the Post-it on her bathroom mirror.

Her instructors may see a perky, size-2 woman dispensing ibuprofen and Alka Seltzer to classmates who are beat-up or hung-over. They may see that she is only one of two recruits who'd never used a weapon or been in a fight before.

But what they don't know, Krista says, is that she'll do "whatever it takes." Tumbling as a child from failed adoptions to foster homes, with no sense of where her mother was, she used to write letters, "*Dear Mrs. X, Today I graduated from high school . . .*" She felt like she'd been "born in midair." Now she is determined to embrace an identity that is defined by standing your ground. Standing one's ground -- standing post -- is the recruits' next lesson. First, a classroom lecture: "No playing BrickBreaker."

"No hands in pockets." Hands should be up and ready; as Mixon puts it, "New York, Italian."

"In Muslim countries, no pounding a balled fist into a palm. It's like the middle finger."

"If you have to go to the bathroom, suck it up. Don't drink water. You can always get an IV after your shift."

Then, the students are tested in the tactical village. Krista and Mr. Home Depot stand outside a bookstore, where a candidate is signing books. Across the street, men squeal up and rob a bank. Some of the other recruits had chased the robbers.

"It may be a diversion, a favorite tactic of Tommy Taliban and his al-Qaeda friends," Mixon says. Never abandon your guard post, Mixon says, even if someone faints: "Make sure he's not doing the funky chicken with foam coming out of his mouth, it could be a nerve gas attack. Otherwise, it's not your problem."

A role-player nicknamed "the horse" tries to push into the bookstore. Other trainees didn't notice him, but Krista, weighing 105 pounds, blocks him with her flattened palm. A drunk rolls out of the bar next door, distracting Mr. Home Depot. Another man lopes up, wearing a suicide bomber vest.

"Bomb!!!!" Krista yells, shooting the suicide bomber. Mixon had taught them to shout so loudly, "dope dealers two blocks away should be flushing toilets."

Afterward, Mr. Home Depot says, "Can't believe I didn't see the guy with the freakin' bomb."

Home Depot has such good aim on the range, he routinely rubs Krista's trigger finger with his, to transfer his magic.

"You had tunnel vision," the evaluator says to him, and turns to Krista, "Even with the horse in front of you, you saw. I watched your eyes. I'm impressed. You a former cop, ma'am?"

Krista braces for his smirk, "I'm a former social worker, sir."

"No. You're a protection agent now."

But not until Krista passes control tactics, which she fails along with four other trainees. "You've got to find that inner bitch," the coordinator says, "the thing that pisses you off, and use it."

Two weeks before graduation, the five retest. The scenario: standing post; bad guys pounce.

When it's over, they can barely speak, panting:

"You do okay?"

"Who knows."

"No one knows."

"Did he shoot you?"

"I think he did."

Everyone passes except for Krista. When Mixon tells her on the spot, all her breath leaves her body.

"I know I can do it," she says, her lips pale. "I'm going to graduate." She is mottled with so many blood blisters from training bullets, a massage therapist pulled her aside to ask about an abusive relationship.

After she leaves, Mixon explains that Krista didn't "demonstrate the warrior spirit." Like Krista, Mixon grew up without a mother. Her heart gave out when he was 2. No one tucked him in at night, and he realized, as Krista did at an early age, that he would have to make his own way. One spring evening in 1981, as a "poor, badass kid" in Kentucky, Mixon watched the news on his black-and-white TV. He saw a man in a gray suit jump up, as if he were impenetrable, and block a .22--caliber bullet meant for President Ronald Reagan. Right then, Mixon decided he wanted to be that hard man. He still keeps the old TV in his garage. Now that he has a 2-year-old, he tells the boy when he trips and cries, in a voice blunted with gruff love: "Shake it off." As a social worker, Krista's slogan is: "positive reinforcement."

As an agent, Mixon's slogan is: "Americans sleep well in their beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would harm them!"

"We can't pass her cause we think she's a nice girl," Mixon says.

Over the next week, Krista sticks with her class. They dress in business suits and visit the intelligence division at headquarters, inside a vault. They see pictures of 50 "class 3" subjects who, if given a chance, would attack the president, including one grizzled white man, "whereabouts unknown, last seen in Tennessee." A class 3 must be supervised if the president visits his district. "Be creative," an instructor had advised. "Some agents take them out for ice cream, take them bowling, make sure he's on his medication. In L.A., we took class 3s to the movies when the president was in town."

They peer into the 24-hour duty desk, a glass-enclosed room resembling a flight-tracking center. The names of 37 protectees light up the wall, along with their call signs and locations. The Obama girls are at Camp David; Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter are in Walnut Mountain, Ga. The next day, the review board convenes and decides to give Krista one more try.

"My whole future depends on tomorrow, and when I pass, Jess," her pull-up buddy, "and I are going to go get eyelash extensions," Krista jokes. The anxiety has whittled her weight so sharply, she's using a safety pin to hold up her pants.

"If I had to go through the extra training and the adversity you faced," Dan tells her, "I don't know how I could get up in the morning."

Her mother helps. "*Short people rule!*" reads a card from Krista's birth mother, whom Krista eventually tracked down. When Krista first called, her mother gulped: "I've been waiting for this call for 19 years." Five months after Krista was born, her mother married her father. They had three more kids.

Her classmates also help. The entire SATC No. 283 turns out in the chilly predawn for Krista's test. "She's like the group mom," says one guy, twice her size. Krista had ordered shoulder holsters for them all.

But in the end it is Krista alone, one week before graduation, walking barefoot past her friends into the mat room.

Most of the guys hang back. Scott walks up to the closed door and presses against it, listening: Krista is standing post. Two trainers jump her. She uses her gun and baton to beat them back. Then the evaluator says, "All right, now we're overseas and you're not allowed to carry a weapon." Krista must overcome them, unarmed.

"Get on the ground!" Krista screams. "Police! Stop fighting!" There's pleading in her screams. The guys in the hall are squirming, looking down at their boots.

"Stop! Stop! Aaaagh!" Krista's screams are wild, and after a minute the sounds grow guttural. "Aaaagh! Yaaagh!" Scott's forehead furrows. Goose bumps rise on the arms of a New Orleans cop who once heard the transmission of an officer friend being executed by thugs. He wants to break into the mat room. His eyes fill with tears: "It's what a radio sounds like when a cop is dying."

### **LESSON SEVEN: Get A Will**

The firearms instructor clicks on a PowerPoint slide: a picture of a toilet.

"You're in the hopper; where's the safest place to put your weapon?"

"On the toilet paper holder?"

"No, you get lead all over the toilet paper and then . . . you see? Put the gun between your feet. Which stall do you use?"

No one tries to answer.

"The stall next to the wall. You don't want someone reaching to grab your gun. Call ahead for reservations."

Thus concludes the last Secret Service class, one day before graduation. The previous lecturer told them about alcohol counseling. Four employees had DUI arrests in the past year. She also said: "Get a will."

"Good riddance!" Dan says, tossing a bag of combat training pants into the center's laundry cart. His voice has hardened, as has his body, as has his attitude. Dan turns people down now. And when the shooting started during their final exercises, Dan became a meat shield -- "I didn't even think, it was instinct" -- repudiating a gunman's bullet with a full-bodied no.

That night, Dan and Amanda sleep peacefully. The baby's front teeth have finally cut through her gums. In the morning, at commencement, Dan mills around backstage at the fake hotel.

Everyone is there except for Krista. She was released from training for failing control tactics.

She hung on until the last hour, doing advance work for a candidate at a nature preserve, tramping through goose droppings in the rain, until the training director summoned her to his office. Krista's classmates were stricken. When Scott walked past the mat room, he avoided Mixon's eyes, hunching over his new government-issued BlackBerry.

Mixon said, "I feel like I failed. I've given my all; she's given her all. In good conscience though, I would be attending her funeral next week."

Krista is back home in New Orleans now, running along the bayou, pushing the mandatory three-mile run to five, six, seven. She thinks she should have passed. "The only rule in fighting is to never quit. I never stopped fighting." She appealed the decision and is waiting to hear from headquarters. She says she'll do whatever it takes to become an agent.

Backstage, at the center's fake hotel, an instructor says: "One minute to showtime!"

"I need some Visine," says a recruit. "I drank too much last night."

They all line up: the chubbiest recruit, who lost 85 pounds to enlist; the homesick recruit, who never unpacked his suitcase; the grittiest recruit, who agonized in silence over his detached rib. Each had beat his weakness.

Scott glances around, the doubt for once lifting from his dark brows. On their last day of training, Scott walked onto the outdoor range and plugged 24 out of 30 shots into the heart of a silhouette -- a class record, and a refutation of the claim that a seven-fingered man can't shoot.

Out in the audience, in the front row, Scott's father is beaming, holding two cameras in case one malfunctions. He flew in from California, a giant man, who says, "God help the person who comes up against Scott." And then all at once, he turns red, and lifts a thick thumb to wipe away his tears: "When we got that call at 3 a.m. from Iraq, it was very, very tough ... "

Mixon takes a seat in the back, behind the families watching the ceremony.

There is the speech: "You have completed 28 weeks of the most intensive training of any law enforcement agency in the world."

And the oath of office: "I do solemnly swear . . . so help me God."

Mixon leans forward, rubbing scarred knuckles, his gaze alighting on his pupils' open faces, his own expression different from that of the glowing parents, more knowing, a trace sad.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the special agents of Class 283!" Applause.

Mixon wanders into the crowd to say goodbye. The Tulsa cop's father exclaims, "I'm the happiest duck in the pond!"

"You got your badge!" Scott's father gushes. "You want me to hold it?"

Mixon pushes past a row of chairs to offer Scott his hand: "Congratulations."

"Yes, sir."

"Hey, cut this 'sir' [expletive] out."

Scott meets Mixon's eyes.

Mixon pulls back for a moment and then opens his arms, wrapping Scott in a hug. In a hurried, hidden gesture, Mixon lifts his mouth to Scott's ear. He whispers to the new Secret Service agent, "Stay safe."

*Laura Blumenfeld is an enterprise writer on the National staff of The Washington Post. She can be reached at [blumenfeldl@washpost.com](mailto:blumenfeldl@washpost.com).*