



OPERATION: Don't Screw This Up

By

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Introduction

So, you're thinking about joining the Army, or maybe you've already signed the dotted line and you're waiting to ship out. Either way, this guide is here to give it to you straight so you don't screw it up.

I'm Christopher Chaos, a U.S. Army veteran who spent nearly a decade in uniform and now spends his time helping people understand what military life is really like. My YouTube channel has helped hundreds of thousands of future soldiers, current service members, and veterans get answers that recruiters, official sites, or drill sergeants don't always explain clearly.

This book isn't just about what you *need* to know — it's about what you *won't hear anywhere else unless you've lived it*. I'm not here to scare you or sugarcoat anything. I'm here to help you go in prepared mentally, physically, and realistically, so you don't learn everything the hard way.

You'll find tips on what to do *before* you go, habits to start (and break), what Army life is actually like, and the common mistakes that derail people before they even get started. Whether your goal is to crush basic training, make a career out of the Army, or just survive the first enlistment, this guide will give you a strong head start.

Let's dive in and get you ready.

– Christopher Chaos

Chapter One: What You Must Do Before Joining the Army

Thinking about joining the United States Army? Before you sign your enlistment contract or board that bus to basic training, there are a few things you absolutely *must* do. These aren't optional suggestions—they're essential steps that will set you up for success and prevent you from falling behind before you even get started.

Let's walk through the five must-do items that every future soldier should take care of before leaving for basic training.

1. Get in Shape (Especially Your Cardio)

Yes, the Army will get you into shape, but if you show up completely unprepared, you're going to suffer unnecessarily. Many recruits make the mistake of thinking, "They'll train me once I get there," and while that's partially true, it doesn't mean you won't struggle.

The biggest area to focus on is your **cardiovascular endurance**. You don't need to be a marathon runner, but you *do* need to be able to handle running, marching with weight, and keeping up with intense physical training. If you show up with zero cardio endurance, you're going to fall behind fast.

A good starting point is being able to run 2–4 miles at a steady pace without stopping. You should also try doing practice ruck marches with a weighted backpack. Start light and build up. Mix in push-ups, sit-ups, and core work so your body is ready for general physical demands.

Arriving with decent fitness means:

- You'll adapt faster
- You'll reduce your risk of injury
- You'll stand out in a positive way

2. Handle Your Bills and Finances

If you've got bills like a car payment, phone, or student loans, get a plan in place. During basic training, you won't have reliable access to a phone or internet. That means no logging into apps or calling your bank.

Before you leave:

- Set up **automatic payments** for every recurring expense
- Or assign a trusted family member or friend to manage your finances

Don't assume you can "just figure it out" once you arrive. That mindset can get you into serious financial trouble.

3. Learn What to Expect

The Army isn't just push-ups and yelling. It's a full-time job with rules, structure, and expectations. Going in blind can be overwhelming.

Watch YouTube videos (like mine), read blogs, or talk to current or former soldiers. Learn about:

- Basic training routines
- AIT (Advanced Individual Training) structure
- Daily life as a soldier

Understanding even a little bit about what you're walking into can:

- Reduce your anxiety
- Help you mentally prepare
- Make you more adaptable

4. Enjoy Your Free Time While You Can

This one may sound simple, but it matters: take time to enjoy your favorite people, food, and experiences before shipping out. Basic training and AIT will limit your freedom. Even after training, Army life still has restrictions.

Go eat at your favorite restaurant. Take a mini trip with your friends. Spend quality time with your family. These memories will give you comfort during your toughest days in training.

Just don't go overboard. **Avoid trouble:** no illegal drugs, no wild arrests, no major risks that could jeopardize your enlistment.



Before you leave for basic training, be proactive:

1

Improve your fitness, especially cardio

2

Set up a way to manage your bills

3

Learn what Army life is like

4

Enjoy your time with friends and family

These steps will give you a head start and reduce the shock factor when you arrive. More importantly, they'll help you stand out as a soldier who's prepared, responsible, and ready to tackle the challenges ahead.

Now that you know what you *must* do, let's talk about the habits you need to *start* building next.

Chapter Two: Good Habits to Start Before You Join

Why Good Habits Matter

Joining the Army will throw you into a strict, structured environment where habits matter more than you realize. The military is built around routines, from how you wake up to how you address people, how you organize your space, and how physically prepared you are.

If you can build the right habits *before* you ship out, you'll adjust faster, stand out from your peers, and avoid unnecessary stress. You don't need to be perfect. But you do need to be **prepared**.

In this chapter, I'll walk you through five key habits that will give you a head start on Army life. These aren't theories, they're habits I learned the hard way or wish I'd developed sooner. And trust me, every drill sergeant will notice who came in ready.

Let's start with the first habit.

Be Early — Always!

There's a saying in the military: **"If you're on time, you're late."** That's not just a catchphrase. It's real.

You'll hear phrases like "10 minutes prior to the 10 minutes prior." That's because formations, appointments, and operations depend on timing. Being early shows respect, discipline, and awareness. Being even a minute late can lead to severe consequences quickly.

Start training yourself now. If you have a 9:00 AM appointment, show up at 8:45. Get used to planning ahead, factoring in travel time, and *arriving early without rushing*. That mindset alone can separate you from the pack when you hit basic training.

Don't wait until the Army forces this habit on you. Start showing up early now — to work, to appointments, even when hanging out with friends. It builds self-discipline, and that's one of the core values of Army life.

Use “Sir” or “Ma’am” — and Learn Rank Respect

Respect is a cornerstone of military life. It starts with how you address people.

In the Army, you’ll refer to officers as “**Sir**” or “**Ma’am**,” and enlisted leaders by their rank, like “Sergeant,” “First Sergeant,” or “Sergeant Major.” You won’t call people by their first name once you’re in uniform, especially if they outrank you.

If you’re not used to this, start practicing. Use “sir” and “ma’am” with civilians. Get comfortable calling people by titles. Yes, some might tell you not to, just explain that you’re training for military service. Most will respect that.

It might feel weird at first, but it becomes second nature. And when it does, you’ll have one less thing to worry about during training.

Build a Fitness Routine That Works

Physical fitness is part of daily life in the Army. You’ll do morning workouts, ruck marches, obstacle courses, and fitness tests. But if you’re out of shape when you arrive, you’ll be playing catch-up while everyone else is moving ahead.

Start now, even if it’s just walking, running, or doing bodyweight exercises at home. Focus on cardio (such as running and rucking), strength training (push-ups, planks, bodyweight squats), and consistency. Try to work out **at the same time every day**, just like you will in the Army.

You don’t need to look like a bodybuilder. You need to be durable, disciplined, and ready to move. Showing up with some fitness built-in will make your life way easier.

Wake Up Early — Before You're Forced To

Morning workouts in the Army often start at 6:30 AM. That means you're waking up around **4:45 to 5:30 AM**, depending on your routine. If you're used to sleeping in, that's going to suck.

Train yourself now. Start setting your alarm earlier, even just 15 minutes earlier each week, until you're regularly up around 5:30 or 6:00. Use that time to work out, read, plan your day, whatever keeps you focused.

The more natural it feels to wake up early, the less shocking it will be when the drill sergeant is yelling at you at zero-dark-thirty.

Be Clean and Organized

In basic training, you'll be judged on how well you fold socks, stack t-shirts, and clean your area. Barracks inspections are real, and if your space is dirty or disorganized, everyone pays.

Start now. Keep your room clean. Organize your closet. Fold your laundry. Clean your bathroom. Build the habit of tidying daily.

It's not just about impressing leadership, it's about learning to respect your space, your gear, and your responsibilities. That attention to detail will carry over into everything else you do in uniform.



You don't have to master everything before you leave. But even making progress on these five habits can give you a huge edge.

Show up early

Speak with respect

Build your fitness

Wake up early

Stay clean and organized

These aren't "Army-only" habits; they're **life skills**. But in the Army, they're the difference between surviving and thriving.

Next, we'll talk about the habits you should break, because bringing the wrong ones with you can create major problems fast.

Chapter Three: Habits You Need to Break Before You Join

Bad Habits Will Slow You Down

You already know the Army is strict. What you might not realize is that some of your **civilian habits**, even the harmless ones, will **get in your way** once you arrive.

Some habits only matter during basic training, while others can hurt your reputation, slow your progress, or even get you in trouble throughout your career.

The good news? You can start breaking them now.

In this chapter, we'll go through five habits that you **must let go of** before you join. Whether it's to avoid getting smoked or just make a better impression, these changes will set you up for success from day one.

Break the Tobacco Habit

Smoking, vaping, or chewing tobacco? You won't be doing any of that in basic training. It's a hard stop. Some people try to sneak it in, but most get caught. And even if you don't, withdrawals during training are brutal.

If you're serious about joining, **start weaning off now**. It's better to go through the headaches, cravings, and withdrawal symptoms on your own time than in a high-stress environment where you can't take a break.

Even after training, some soldiers return to tobacco, but if you can kick it for 10+ weeks, maybe don't pick it back up. You'll save money, feel better, and perform stronger.



Caffeine Dependency

Rely on coffee, energy drinks, or soda to function? That's going to be a problem in basic training.

You might **not have access** to caffeine, especially during the first phase. Some drill sergeants allow it from the start or later on, but don't count on it. If you're used to daily caffeine, be ready for headaches and fatigue without it.

Start by scaling back now. Reduce your intake slowly so your body adjusts. You'll feel better, sleep better, and avoid crashing hard during your first weeks of training.

This is especially important if your "morning ritual" includes an energy drink. Trade it for water now and thank yourself later.

Casual Speech: "Bro," "Dude," and First Names

In civilian life, calling people "bro," "dude," or using first names is normal. In the Army, it's **unprofessional**, and in training, it's a **red flag**.

You'll be expected to use rank and titles. Slip up and say "bro" to a sergeant? You'll likely pay for it with pushups.

Break the habit now. Avoid casual language when talking to authority figures. Practice saying "yes, sir" or "yes, ma'am" at work. Just make sure to call them by the correct rank when you join, such as a Sergeant or other non-commissioned officers.

You'll still joke with friends in the barracks later on, but in any **formal** or **mixed-rank** environment, your words matter. Learning this now helps you blend in instead of standing out for the wrong reasons.



Hands in Pockets & Slouching



Believe it or not, there's a **regulation** that says you can't walk around with your hands in your pockets while in uniform (AR 670-1). It seems small, but it's enforced, especially in training.

Leaning against walls, standing with poor posture, or lounging casually while in uniform can get you corrected, loudly.

Start fixing your body language now. When you're standing, stand tall. Keep your hands out of your pockets unless you are retrieving something. Carry yourself like a professional.

You don't need to be rigid. Just be aware of how you carry yourself, because in the Army, **everything is judged**, even when you think no one is watching.

Over-Casual Attitude

A lot of new soldiers come in with a laid-back, casual vibe, especially if they're straight out of high school. That can be a problem.

In the Army, you're expected to be alert, serious, and mission-focused, not chill, distracted, or unmotivated. If you come in looking lazy, tired, or unbothered, you'll become a target.

Start breaking the "too casual" mindset. Show urgency when someone asks you to do something. Walk with purpose. Speak clearly and confidently. Be coachable, respectful, and sharp.

That doesn't mean you can't relax during downtime, it just means you need to **flip the switch** when it's go time.

The Army isn't trying to make you perfect, but it is trying to turn you into someone reliable, focused, and disciplined.

Breaking these habits now gives you a chance to **show up ready**, not just physically but mentally. You'll blend in faster, avoid attention for the wrong reasons, and gain respect from your peers and leaders.

Here's a recap of what to cut:

Smoking, vaping, or dipping

Daily caffeine reliance

Casual language and first-name culture

Hands in pockets / sloppy posture

Over-casual or lazy demeanor

Cutting bad habits is just as important as building good ones. Do both, and you'll enter basic training lightyears ahead of most.

Chapter Four: What You Should Know Before Becoming a Soldier

Beyond the Recruiter's Pitch

By now, you've probably seen the commercials, camaraderie, helicopters, missions, and cool gear.

But there's more to being a soldier than what recruiters or marketing materials tell you.

This chapter lays out five truths every future soldier needs to know. These aren't meant to scare you, they're meant to prepare you. Because the better you understand the Army lifestyle, the smoother your transition will be.

Let's break it down.

You Won't Always Be Doing Your Job (MOS)

Just because you signed up to be a mechanic, infantryman, or welder doesn't mean that's what you'll always be doing.

Your **Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)** is your official job, but the reality is:

- ✓ Some MOSs do their job daily
- ✗ Others barely do it at all

Examples:

- **Welders** often end up doing general vehicle maintenance or helping in motor pools.
- **Infantry soldiers** do tons of training, but not actual combat unless deployed.
- **Cooks and Human Resources?** You'll probably do your MOS daily.

Be flexible. You'll do **your job, details**, and a lot of **random tasks**. That's normal.

You'll Be Limited by a 250-Mile Radius

If you're on active duty, you **can't travel freely** on your weekends, especially over long distances.

Most Army units enforce a **250-mile travel radius**. That means unless you request permission (called a "mileage pass"), you can't just drive home if it's beyond that limit.

Even if you're off-duty, it doesn't matter.

Break that rule and get caught? You could face serious consequences, especially if something happens and leadership finds out where you were.

Want to visit family in another state?

- ✓ Ask in advance
- ✓ Fill out a mileage pass
- ✓ Be approved
- ✗ Don't just wing it

If You're Single, You'll Be Living in the Barracks

As a single soldier, expect to live in the **barracks**, and that comes with restrictions.

Important ones:

- **No pets** (not even fish or reptiles)
- **No personally owned firearms** (unless stored in the arms room)
- **Room checks** are a thing, sometimes weekly or randomly

You'll have privacy, but it's limited. Leadership can inspect your room, and if it's trashed or unsanitary, you can face consequences.

If you're married or reach a certain rank, you may eventually be authorized to live off-post. But in the beginning, **the barracks are your home**.

Chapter Five: MISTAKES to Avoid Before You Leave

Before you head off to join the United States Army, it's just as important to know what *not* to do as it is to know what to prepare. Some mistakes might not ruin your military career, but they can definitely make your life harder.

Here are five common mistakes to avoid before you leave for basic training.

1. Don't Get Married (Yet)

Marriage is a big step, and it's tempting to tie the knot for reasons like BAH benefits or proving commitment before you leave. But basic training, AIT, and Army life are stressful. Separation, lack of communication, and emotional distance can seriously strain a relationship.

If your relationship survives that stress, great. But it's better to wait until you've been assigned to your first duty station, that way, you know what military life is like and if your relationship can handle it before making it legal.

2. Don't Buy a Car

Buying a car *before* you join might sound smart, but it's usually a mistake, especially if you're single.

Why? You won't need it in basic or AIT, and you'll be making payments on something you can't use. If your first duty station is overseas (such as Korea), your vehicle may sit unused for years. You'll still owe money, insurance, and registration while it collects dust.

Wait until you get to your duty station. Then assess whether you even need a car, and what kind makes sense for your budget and lifestyle.

Bonus tip: Don't blow your E-1 paycheck on a flashy car with high interest. Keep it reasonable.

3. Don't Sell All Your Stuff

It's tempting to purge everything before leaving, including your TV, game console, clothes, and furniture, but you may regret it.

If you have a way to store your things (with family, a friend, or in a storage unit), do it. Once you get your first duty assignment, you can request a free military shipment of your belongings.

This is especially useful for things like entertainment items or civilian clothing that make your new life more comfortable. Don't assume you won't want or need that stuff again.

4. Don't Neglect Loose Ends

Unpaid parking tickets? Old bills? Don't ignore them.

These issues don't magically disappear when you join the Army. In fact, they *can* follow you and even affect your career. Leadership may find out about warrants or unresolved legal issues. Unpaid debts can impact your ability to get a security clearance.

Take care of everything before you leave: pay off small fines, close out accounts, and clear your record so nothing bites you later.

5. Don't Load Up on Army Gear

Buying boots or tactical gear before basic training? Skip it. You *won't* be allowed to use non-issued items during training.

Once you hit your first duty station, you can upgrade gear based on your unit's needs or recommendations from other soldiers. Until then, stick to the basics. Anything extra you bring will just get locked up or thrown out.

You'll have time (and a paycheck) to buy better gear later if you really need it.

In Summary:

Avoiding these five common mistakes will save you stress, money, and regret:

1. Don't rush into marriage
2. Don't buy a car too early
3. Don't sell all your belongings
4. Don't leave loose ends unresolved
5. Don't buy gear you can't use yet

Be smart, stay patient, and wait until you've settled into military life to make the big decisions.

Be Ready, Not Just Willing

You've made it to the end, and that already says a lot about your mindset. This guide wasn't just a checklist of "Army prep tasks." It was built to help you **avoid common mistakes, develop the right habits, and understand what's ahead** so you can thrive, not just survive, your transition into Army life.

Basic training is a challenge. So is military service. But showing up prepared puts you miles ahead of the average new Soldier.

If you take only one thing from this book, let it be this: **Start now.**

Waiting until the last minute, or assuming you'll figure it out later, is how people struggle and fall behind, whether it's your fitness, your mindset, or your finances. Put in the work before you go.

That's how you earn respect. That's how you protect your future. That's how you prove you belong in the Army.

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