

FAUX BOOT CAMP FOR WANNABES

A military-style workout, fatigues and all

By John Hanc

'Platoon, form up." Feeling slightly ridiculous in a pair of olive drab fatigues, I shuffle into line, next to seven other men and women of various sizes and shapes. We're standing in a Manhattan loft that has been converted into something like a Green Beret Theme Park. Hanging above me is a web of camouflage netting. A pup tent stands nearby. Down the corridor, a life-size G.I. mannequin, wood face fixed into a martial snarl, is poised to attack.

Walking back and forth in front of us, looking very stern, are Rafael Colon, a muscular, 30-year-old former Marine sergeant from Brooklyn, and Lauren Brenner, a 30-year-old Great Neck native and owner of Pure Power Boot Camp — which, despite its trappings, is not in some Southern swamp, but in a second-floor loft on West 21st Street in Manhattan.

"Pvt. Brill," she calls out to an athletic-looking young man standing next to me. "Give me one of the principles of leadership."

"Honor!" he calls out. "Pvt. Greenman," Brenner barks, to a short woman with curly black and gray hair. "Give me another principle of leadership."

"Trust!" "Good. OK, platoon, jumping jacks. Begin." Honor? Trust? Jumping jacks? This, I thought, is one weird workout. And in her halter top, matching camouflage pants and bandana, Brenner hardly looks like your typical drill instructor. But this whole shebang — the over-the-top military decor, the platoon, the attitude — is her idea. And what makes it even more unusual is the assortment of apparatus — ropes, ladders, walls, nets — arrayed



Lauren Brenner, 30, a Great Neck native and owner of Pure Power Boot Camp on West 21st Street in Manhattan, barks commands to her "troops" during a recent workout.



Newsday Photos / Bruce Gilbert

behind her: This, Brenner says, is the only indoor obstacle course in Manhattan.

Colon did his basic training at Parris Island in South Carolina. "This is the closest thing to it that I've seen," he said, looking around the obstacle (aka "confidence") course. "It even smells like the military . . . the tent, the sweat." But there's one important difference: "In boot camp, it's about breaking you down, then building you up. Here, it's all about building you up."

The authenticity is surprising when you consider that Brenner has never served in the armed forces. She was a Wall Street broker who worked on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange for six years. After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, she began to think about a change of career into fitness. But she didn't want to open a traditional gym. "I wanted a place where you could join and be part of a group,

and be accountable to that group," said Brenner, a longtime fitness devotee. "The military has been training people this way for decades." Part of that training, she said, is an emphasis on values and responsibility to yourself and others (hence, the principles of leadership — a potpourri of values she picked up from various sources — that she asks all her "recruits" to learn.)

Brenner was allowed to visit the Army's confidence course at Fort Knox in Kentucky and had it replicated here at the 6,500-square-foot facility she opened in mid-January. Very few complete it the first time. Our calisthenics done, I watched Pvt. Brill — full name Chris Brill-Edwards, a 27-year-old Manhattan construction supervisor — as he swung and shimmed his way through the course like Spider-Man. With his coaching, I managed to get through most of the obstacles — flinging myself over walls, crawling under a low net, high-stepping through a lane of tires. Then, we all reassembled for a team-building drill: I locked arms with Brill-Edwards and portly recruit Chris Hohner, as we did 25 sit-ups together. Hohner struggled, but with a lot of grunting, moaning and "you can do it!" — we did it.

Still, I didn't come away from this intense, 60-minute battle unscathed. My leg smashed into a wall as I tried to hurdle it on the run, leaving a long, red scrape on my thigh; I also had a burn on my chest from the "belly robbers" — a sort of horizontal ladder constructed of thick logs that you have to pull yourself across.

I was waiting for my fake Purple Heart. Instead, I got high fives and a sense of satisfaction at having met a very different kind of fitness challenge. That, it seems, is what the "recruits" are paying for.

"Working out at the gym gets boring," said Brill-Edwards. "I like the variety here."

"I love this," said Elizabeth Greenman, who is really not a private but a professor of design at Marymount College in Tarrytown. "These are real obstacles you have to overcome."

"The obstacles here parallel the obstacles in life," Brenner says. "I want to see people step out of the box and out of their comfort zone." As I chugged out of my uniform, wincing from the scrapes and bruises, I realized I had done just that. ■

John Hanc is a regular contributor to Newsday.

Calisthenics Are the Backbone

At the core of most boot camp-style workouts are calisthenics — those old-fashioned but effective exercises that use your body weight for resistance.

Exercise physiologist Sal Fichera of Forza Fitness in Manhattan recommends this beginner calisthenics regimen: In the first week, do two sets of 10 push-ups (men should shoot for military style push-ups — feet together, body straight, back flat, hands just wider than shoulders; women can modify the position with knees on the floor) and 15 crunches. In the second week, increase to two

sets of 15 push-ups and 20 to 25 crunches. In the third week, add two sets of 10 squats. By the fourth week, Fichera says, "exercisers should be able to do 20 push-ups, 15 to 20 squats and 30 crunches for two sets."

From there, you can either join a gym or keep increasing the sets and numbers of the movements. For good descriptions of these and other exercises, and a comprehensive home program based on military-type training, see "The Special Ops Workout" by Mike Mejia and Stewart Smith (Hatherleigh Press, \$15.95). Or check out the Training Camp video series

done by former Navy SEAL Scott Helventson, who trained Demi Moore for the movie "G.I. Jane." The series of six videos — for different levels and aspects of fitness — is available, at \$19.95 each, through Collage Video: www.collagevideo.com/SEAL or call 800-433-6769.

For information on Lauren Brenner's Manhattan-based boot camp training class, which includes an individualized eating plan designed by a registered nutritionist, visit www.purepowerbootcamp.com. The cost is \$895 for six weeks of boot camp; a concentrated weekend program is available. — John Hanc