

BLOOD , SWEAT & PERFECTION

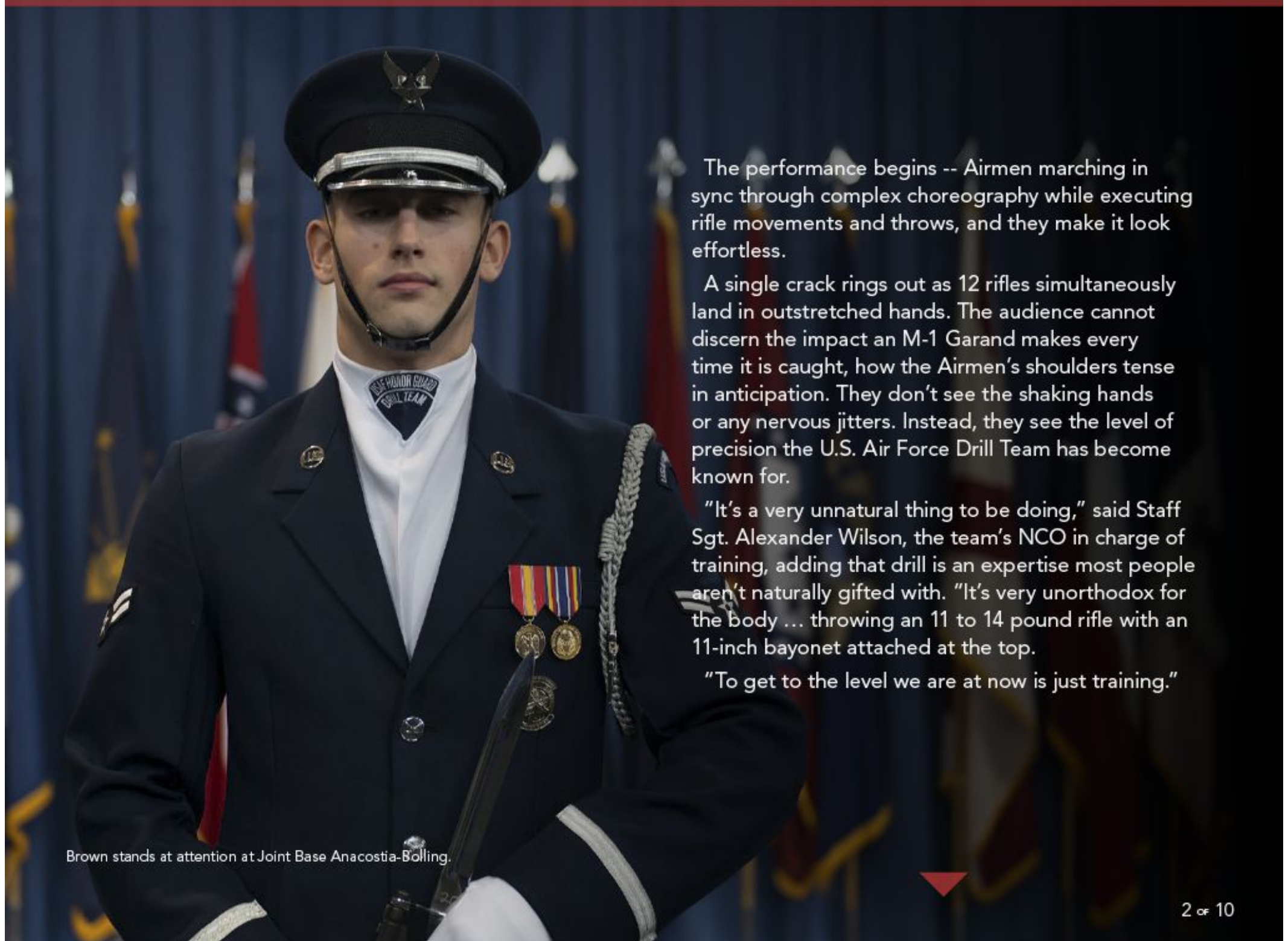
STORY: STAFF SGT. JETTE CARR // PHOTOS: TECH SGT. BRIAN FERGUSON
MULTIMEDIA: JIMMY SHEA // LAYOUT: COREY PARRISH

**A spot on the U.S. Air Force Drill Team requires keeping
the highest standards**



Airman 1st Class Larry Brown practices after failing his initial attempt to qualify for the U.S. Air Force Honor Guard Drill Team's 4-rifle team.





The performance begins -- Airmen marching in sync through complex choreography while executing rifle movements and throws, and they make it look effortless.

A single crack rings out as 12 rifles simultaneously land in outstretched hands. The audience cannot discern the impact an M-1 Garand makes every time it is caught, how the Airmen's shoulders tense in anticipation. They don't see the shaking hands or any nervous jitters. Instead, they see the level of precision the U.S. Air Force Drill Team has become known for.

"It's a very unnatural thing to be doing," said Staff Sgt. Alexander Wilson, the team's NCO in charge of training, adding that drill is an expertise most people aren't naturally gifted with. "It's very unorthodox for the body ... throwing an 11 to 14 pound rifle with an 11-inch bayonet attached at the top.

"To get to the level we are at now is just training."

Brown stands at attention at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling.



“Drilling has taught me that with enough training
Anything is possible.”

Honor Guard Drill Team members look on as Airman 1st Class Larry Brown, in blue, attempts to qualify for the drill team's 4-rifle team.

The U.S. Air Force Drill Team is part of the U.S. Air Force Honor Guard at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, D.C., and they also work alongside the Air Force Recruiting Command as "Ambassadors in Blue." The team travels around the world performing intricate, challenging drill routines for the public and military members alike to "recruit, retain and inspire Airmen."

Standards are high for each proponent of the honor guard, and the drill team is no exception. Joining their ranks can be a feat unto itself.

Drill hopefuls participate in a challenging eight-week course that acts as an audition for the team. While there, the Airmen learn drill fundamentals and are put through physical conditioning to prepare them for the sport. Finishing the course doesn't warrant an automatic welcome onto the team. The members have to be selected.

"We demand perfection even in the beginning stages of the course," Wilson said.



Brown buttons his uniform before his qualification test for the U.S. Air Force Honor Guard Drill Team's 4-rifle team.



"You're expected to perform to a certain standard, and if you don't meet that standard, I'm sorry to say, 'Better luck next time.'"

Wilson began the course with roughly twenty other Airmen, but the majority never made it to the end. Though he made it through the entire painstaking process during his first attempt to join the team, Wilson didn't make the cut.

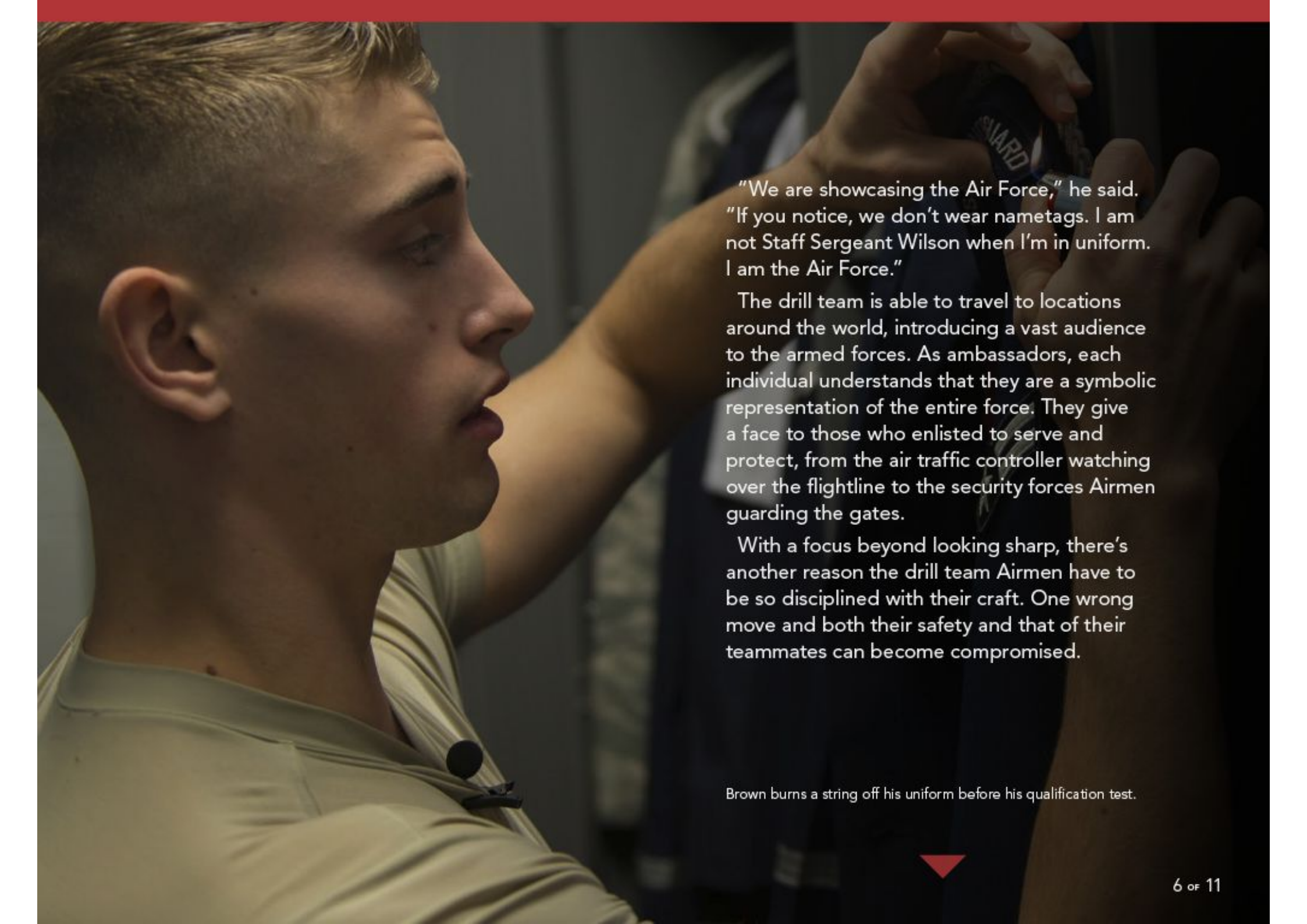
"I took that to heart, 'better luck next time,' so when the second team training class came around, I went through that one," Wilson said.

His persistence paid off, and he was accepted as a drill team member the second time around.

On the team, each member continues to train. They pick up new moves or hone in on ones they struggle with. It's a never-ending process, according to Wilson. With nearly four years of drill under his belt, there are still many aspects he feels he needs to improve upon.

The group is focused on uniformity. The crisp movements, the ironed creases on their sleeves, even the similar haircuts lend to the image.

Brown practices after failing to qualify for the U.S. Air Force Honor Guard Drill Team's 4-rifle team.



"We are showcasing the Air Force," he said. "If you notice, we don't wear nametags. I am not Staff Sergeant Wilson when I'm in uniform. I am the Air Force."

The drill team is able to travel to locations around the world, introducing a vast audience to the armed forces. As ambassadors, each individual understands that they are a symbolic representation of the entire force. They give a face to those who enlisted to serve and protect, from the air traffic controller watching over the flightline to the security forces Airmen guarding the gates.

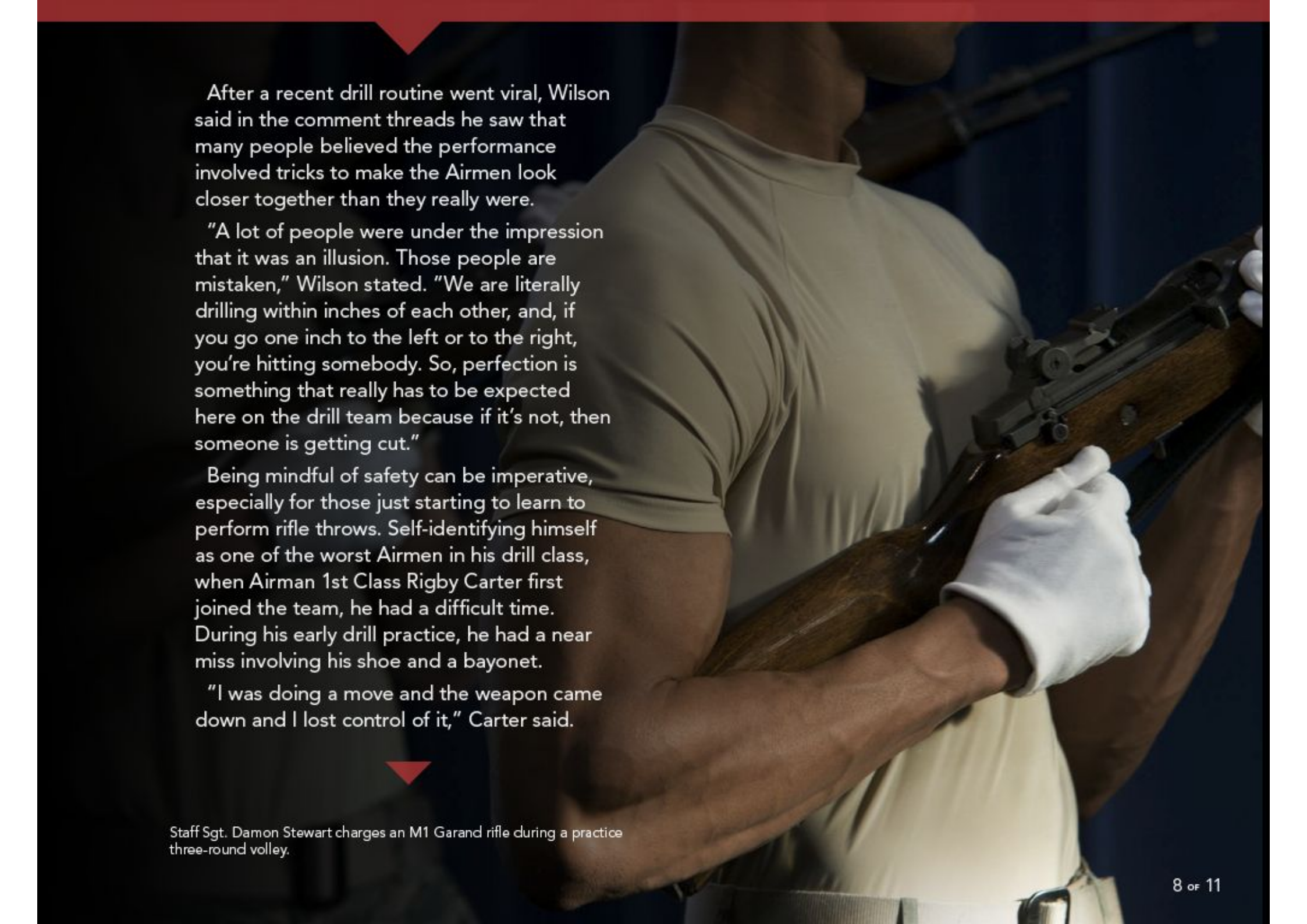
With a focus beyond looking sharp, there's another reason the drill team Airmen have to be so disciplined with their craft. One wrong move and both their safety and that of their teammates can become compromised.

Brown burns a string off his uniform before his qualification test.



“ **Perfection** is really something
that’s **expected**
here on the drill team,
because **if not**
someone is getting
cut. ”

Staff Sgt. Benjamin Nason, drill team member, practices at Joint Base
Anacostia-Bolling, Md.



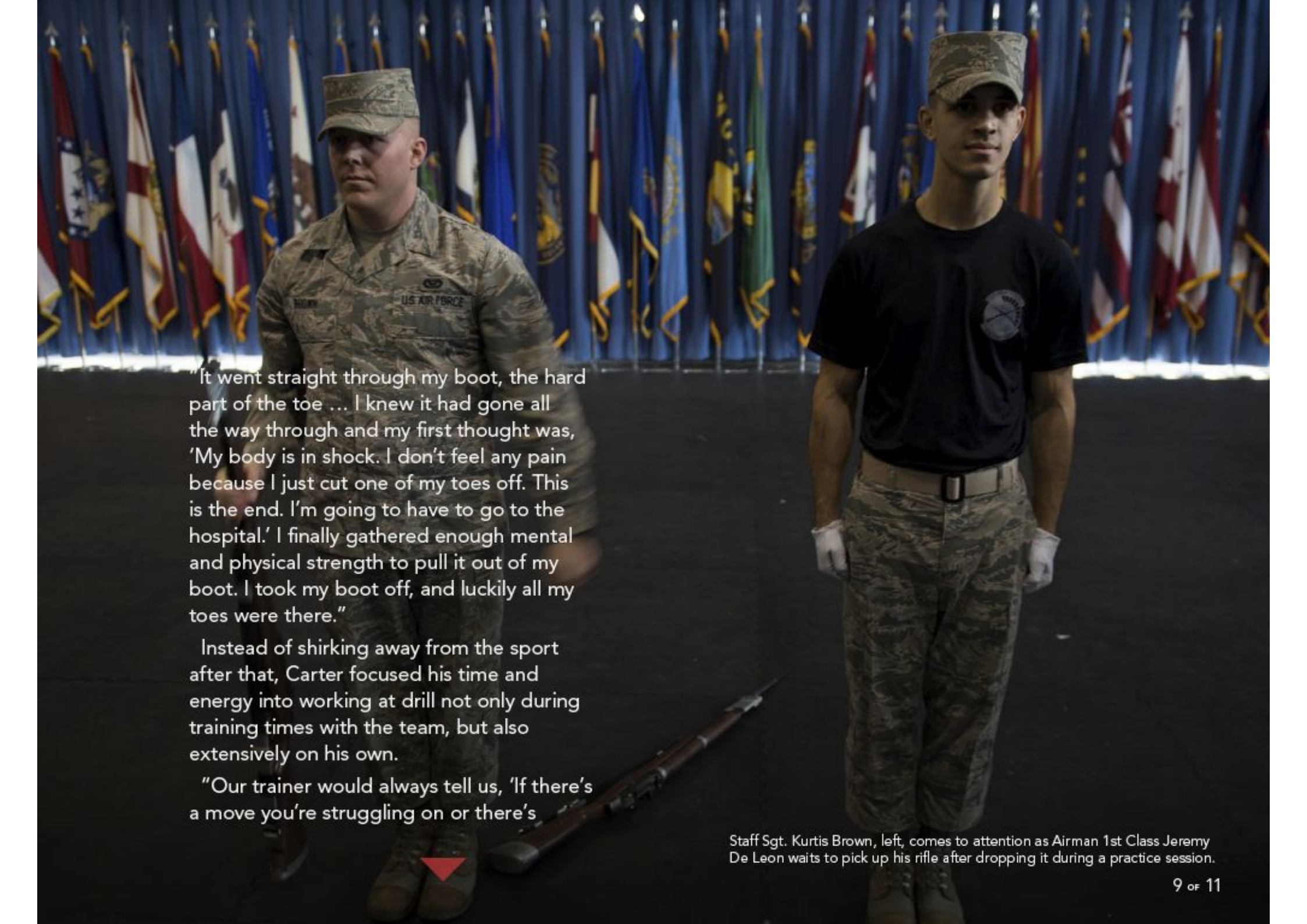
After a recent drill routine went viral, Wilson said in the comment threads he saw that many people believed the performance involved tricks to make the Airmen look closer together than they really were.

"A lot of people were under the impression that it was an illusion. Those people are mistaken," Wilson stated. "We are literally drilling within inches of each other, and, if you go one inch to the left or to the right, you're hitting somebody. So, perfection is something that really has to be expected here on the drill team because if it's not, then someone is getting cut."

Being mindful of safety can be imperative, especially for those just starting to learn to perform rifle throws. Self-identifying himself as one of the worst Airmen in his drill class, when Airman 1st Class Rigby Carter first joined the team, he had a difficult time. During his early drill practice, he had a near miss involving his shoe and a bayonet.

"I was doing a move and the weapon came down and I lost control of it," Carter said.

Staff Sgt. Damon Stewart charges an M1 Garand rifle during a practice three-round volley.

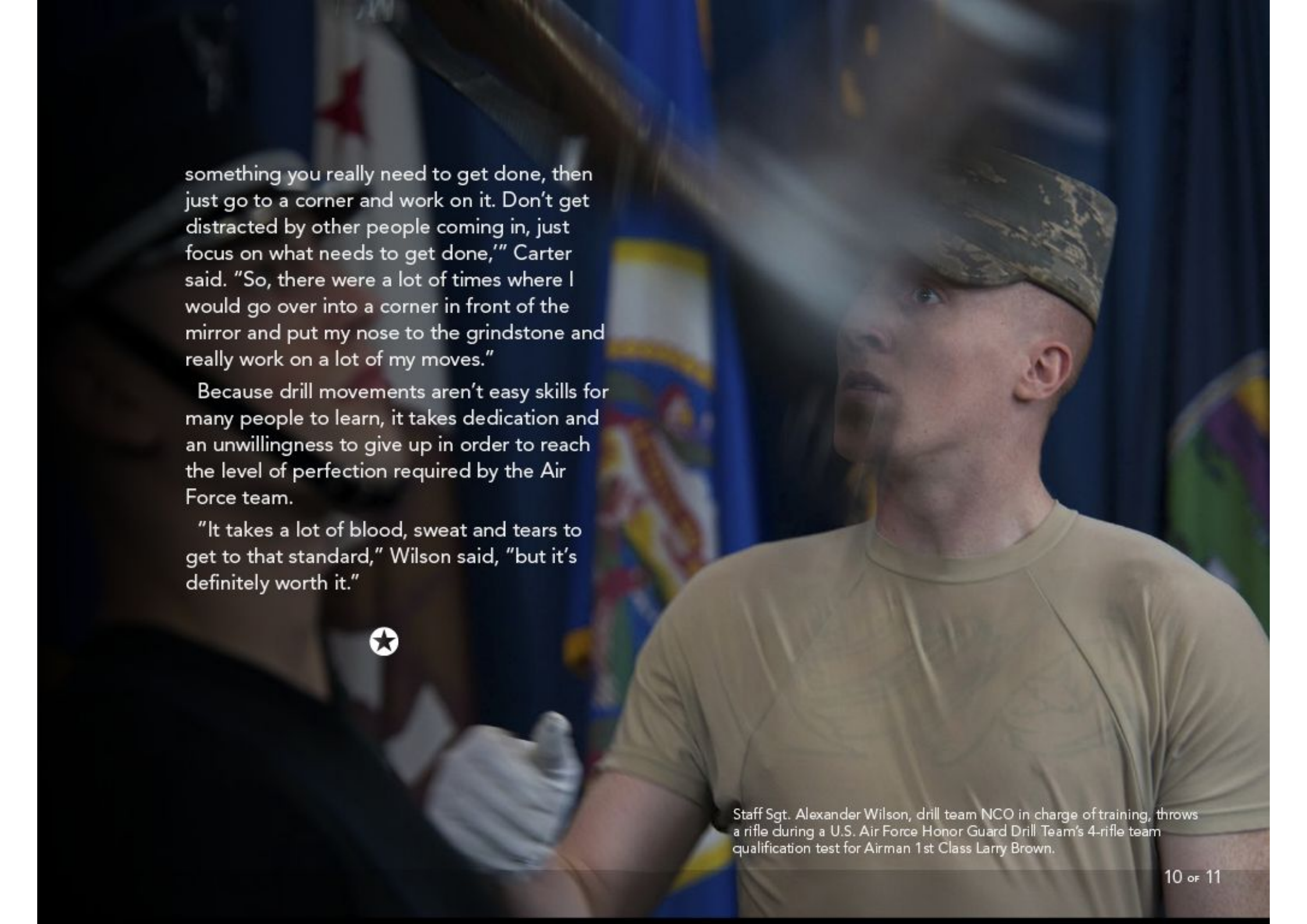
A photograph of two Air Force personnel standing in a hall lined with numerous flags. The person on the left is in full camouflage uniform, including a garrison cap, and is looking slightly to the left. The person on the right is wearing a black t-shirt with a circular patch, camouflage pants, and a garrison cap, looking directly at the camera. A rifle lies on the floor between them.

"It went straight through my boot, the hard part of the toe ... I knew it had gone all the way through and my first thought was, 'My body is in shock. I don't feel any pain because I just cut one of my toes off. This is the end. I'm going to have to go to the hospital.' I finally gathered enough mental and physical strength to pull it out of my boot. I took my boot off, and luckily all my toes were there."

Instead of shirking away from the sport after that, Carter focused his time and energy into working at drill not only during training times with the team, but also extensively on his own.

"Our trainer would always tell us, 'If there's a move you're struggling on or there's

Staff Sgt. Kurtis Brown, left, comes to attention as Airman 1st Class Jeremy De Leon waits to pick up his rifle after dropping it during a practice session.



something you really need to get done, then just go to a corner and work on it. Don't get distracted by other people coming in, just focus on what needs to get done," Carter said. "So, there were a lot of times where I would go over into a corner in front of the mirror and put my nose to the grindstone and really work on a lot of my moves."

Because drill movements aren't easy skills for many people to learn, it takes dedication and an unwillingness to give up in order to reach the level of perfection required by the Air Force team.

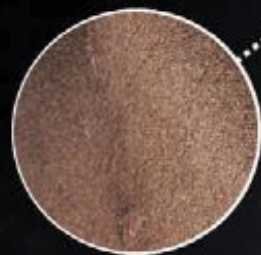
"It takes a lot of blood, sweat and tears to get to that standard," Wilson said, "but it's definitely worth it."



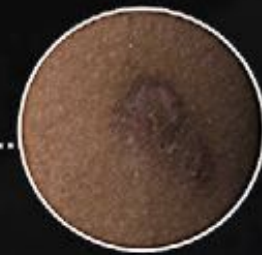
Staff Sgt. Alexander Wilson, drill team NCO in charge of training, throws a rifle during a U.S. Air Force Honor Guard Drill Team's 4-rifle team qualification test for Airman 1st Class Larry Brown.



"This was a self-inflicted cut while practicing a common move called 'wrist breakers'. As I rotated the weapon the bayonet caught my arm and left a big gash."



"This was a self-inflicted cut while throwing a double comeback move. I threw my weapon in the air and on the second rotation I missed the catch and the bayonet caught my elbow."



"During a practice box run, 4 corners sequence, Staff Sgt. Lemmon threw an under move way too close to my body and the bayonet cut all the way through one side of my skin and out the other. I had to get three stitches to sew the flap down."



"One of my fellow honor guardsmen missed the correct angle while performing a rock-to-shoulder move and stabbed my left arm."

HONOR SCARS