

solo

Chino likes to scrap. So much so that he's paid his own way to fly from his station in Honolulu, Hawaii, to Fort Benning, Ga., to compete in the 2007 All-Army Combatives Tournament. Unlike the powerhouse teams from Forts Bragg and Riley that boast almost 30 fighters each, along with a robust entourage of trainers and coaches, the Army units of the Hawaiian Islands failed to put together a team, meaning Chino is all alone.

Chino is short for a middleweight, and could have made welterweight if it wasn't for the extra flabby skin around his waist, the stubborn remnant of extreme weight loss. A shaved dome, dark eyes and gaps in his teeth complete his portrait. When he smiles, he looks like a Ming Dynasty bodyguard minus the silk robes and ponytail.

"I hope to be in the UFC someday. If I can't get in, then I'll compete professionally somewhere else until I get good enough," says Chino, whose real name is Guillermo Villa. The Army Specialist left a wife and 5-year-old daughter behind for five days to test himself against the best the Army has to offer. Or at least the best that aren't currently deployed.

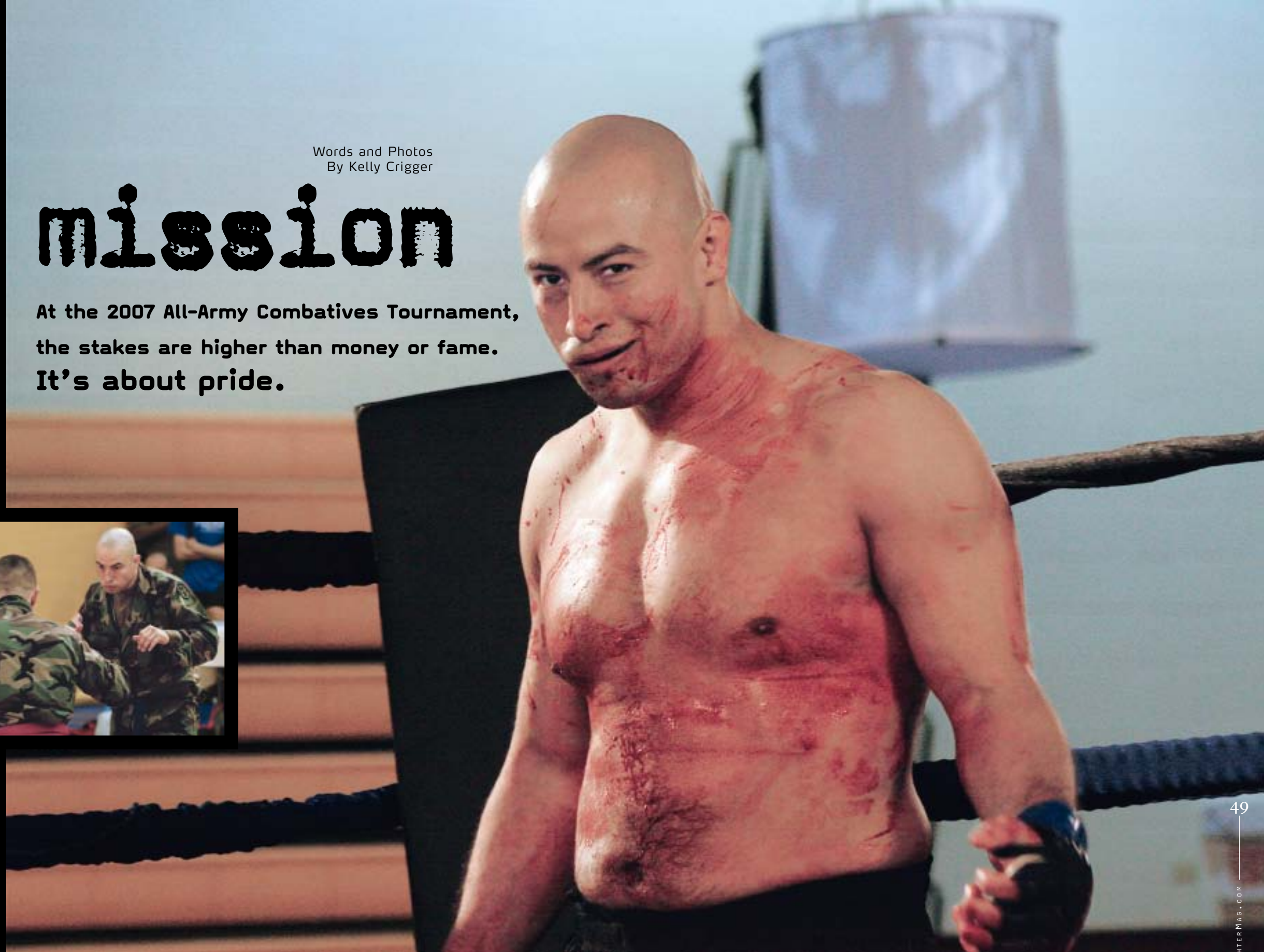
"Three of last year's champions are in Iraq or Afghanistan," says Matt Larsen, the father of Army combatives and director of the competition. "It's inevitable that when over 100,000 troops are deployed the competition will be a little watered down, but the ones who are here have been training hard and want to win badly."



Words and Photos
By Kelly Crigger

mission

At the 2007 All-Army Combatives Tournament, the stakes are higher than money or fame. It's about pride.





The mandatory uniforms in Rounds 1 and 2 camouflage competitors' physiques, but not their martial spirit.



round 1

The Army-wide Combatives Tournament is a two-day event that tests athletes' stamina as much as their fight smarts. The first round is pure grappling, pseudo gi-style. The troops, ranging from a 48-year-old Command Sergeant Major to a 19-year-old private, compete in their Battle Dress Uniforms (BDUs), which allows for grabbing and sleeve chokes. The uniforms add realism by replicating what troops wear on the battlefield, albeit void of body armor, ammunition and other hardware.

The added fabric changes the game for some, and more than one victim falls asleep from the cross-collar choke during Round 1. But each contestant receives one more chance by way of the double-elimination format. Needless to say, Day 1 is a bitch. Each soldier must win at least three times just to reach the second round, and five bouts is not unheard of for those knocked into the consolation



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bracket. The grappling matches last six minutes, based on points for takedowns, sweeps and mounts.

Larsen prefers the deterrence of the old Pride rules, wherein fighters were docked for not pushing the action, and has implemented a similar code of conduct at the tournament. Stalling and passivity lose a fighter points, but Chino doesn't have to worry about that. He wins all four of his bouts long before the six-minute limit expires. The lack of applause doesn't faze him.

"It's OK," he says, munching an energy bar and covering his Kojak look with a beanie between matches in spite of the swampy heat of the venue. "Some of my old buddies from Fort Bliss are here and I've been hanging with them. It's cool."

Among the contestants making it into the second round, Chino is an anomaly. He doesn't wear the bold "Ranger" tab or the easily recognizable 82nd Airborne Division patch or even come from a hard-core unit like many of the Special Operations soldiers. He's a nurse assigned to Tripler Army Medical Center on Oahu—not exactly door-kicking, grenade-throwing line of work, but it suits him.

The grappling rounds conclude late in the day,

with only a short break for a rules briefing before Round 2. The lack of rest isn't surprising, since the tournament was designed by Larsen, a lifelong Ranger who places a high priority on competitive standards and a low one on athlete sympathy. Larsen is the director of The Modern Army Combatives Program at Fort Benning, so when he isn't planning the annual show, he's supervising a cadre of instructors who teach over 25,000 students annually.

"We have to meet and exceed the rigors of combat," he says. "Every time there's a hand-to-hand engagement in combat, we hear about it and apply those lessons learned to our instruction. We can't afford to stay stagnant. The enemy and the battlefield change constantly, so we have to also."

round 2

The second round employs Pankration-style rules, which deem that competitors can strike with an open hand only while standing. Chino looks forward to it. "I'd rather be on my feet," he says. "I mean, everyone has to be a good grappler just to get into this round, so I'll try to keep it standing up." With no closed-fist

Rules of the Tournament

Becoming an All-Army Combatives Tournament champion isn't as easy as running down to your local recruiter, signing away three years of your life and climbing through the ring ropes. Soldiers must compete under three different sets of rules in a double-elimination tournament.

1st Round: Grappling

- Fighters compete in a serviceable (not ripped or torn) Battle Dress Uniform, Desert Camouflage Uniform or Army Combat Uniform with bottoms, brown T-shirt and top. No footgear or socks are permitted.
- The match ends when a contestant submits by tapout (physical or verbal), is choked unconscious or sustains an injury that prevents him from competing further.

Points are awarded for the following:

- 2 Points: takedown (nondominant)
- 3 Points: takedown (dominant), knee mount, sweep, guard pass
- 4 Points: mount, rear mount

Points are deducted for the following:

- 1-Point deduction for stalling
- 2-Point deduction for passivity

2nd Round: Pankration

- Fighters compete in the same gear required in Round 1. All contestants wear pull-on-type shin and instep pads and judo-style kneepads.
- Closed-fist punches to the torso, open-hand slaps to the face, kicks and grappling moves are authorized offensive techniques.
- There are 26 fouls that mirror the unified rules of MMA. Disqualification occurs after any combination of three fouls or after one flagrant foul.

3rd Round: MMA

- Fighters compete in black shorts void of any logos except the words "Army," "Navy" or "Air Force."
- Bouts are three rounds of five minutes each, with one minute rest between rounds.
- All striking (punches, kicks, etc.) and grappling techniques (takedowns, throws, submission holds, etc.) are allowed, with the exception of those 26 techniques specified as fouls.
- Bouts are stopped due to submission, KO, TKO or time expiration. The 10-point must system is used for scoring.

Double Elimination

A double-elimination tournament is broken into two sets of brackets, the winners' bracket and losers' bracket. After the first round, the winners stay in the winners' bracket and the losers "drop down" to the consolation bracket. From the winners' bracket comes the eventual tournament champion and runner-up. In the losers' bracket, fighters compete for the eventual third- and fourth-place positions. This type of tournament allows each fighter at least two chances to compete, so even if he loses his first bout, he can still achieve third place by sweeping the remainder of his matches.

strikes allowed, some of the matches resemble high school slapfests. But there's a reason for the rules. If these were full-contact fights, the tournament would take weeks to allow for healing between matches.

"We have to test their striking ability without getting them beat up too much or they'd never make it to tomorrow," explains Larsen. But open-hand strikes went the way of color-matched Speedos and shin guards, evaporating from most competitive scenes in the early 2000s. For the fighter who typically trains on a punching bag with a closed fist, the transition isn't easy. Chino finds out the hard way that closed-fist techniques don't cross over very well to open-hand rules.

In his first Pankration bout, Chino, dressed in the requisite black PT shorts, loses focus and punches his opponent with his fist, earning a reprimand from the judge. Moments later, he does it again, getting disqualified. He isn't finished, but he's now in the consolation bracket and the best he can hope for is third. (His opponent goes on to the finals, where he loses a lopsided match.) Chino's last match of the day is a tough win against Specialist Travis Weiner from the 101st Airborne Division. After getting the worst of it on their feet, Chino goes back to his bread and butter and takes Weiner down, catching him in an armbar halfway through the fight.

On the next mat over, a near-brawl breaks out when a sergeant from Fort Knox, Ken., deliberately throws a soldier from Fort Hood, Tex., at a heckler in the crowd. (Some people throw cups and popcorn to show their displeasure, but only at an Army tournament will you see a soldier throw another man at a heckler.) The sergeant's lack of discipline earns him a disqualification, while the unruly fan is quickly escorted away by several large men with "Army Combatives Instructor" emblazoned on their shirts.

Meanwhile, the favorite team to win the tournament pulls steadily away from the rest in points. Fort Bragg is clearly in front, and the two-time winner, Staff Sergeant Tim Kennedy, breezes to the finals in the light-heavyweight division. Kennedy fought twice in the IFL for the Chicago Red Bears and is clearly more skilled than the rest of the field. For his efforts, Kennedy receives plenty of camera time from the The Military Channel and the *Army Times*.

round 3

The fights start just after noon on the second day. More than 1,500 of Fort Benning's locals show up despite the televised "Battle of the Unbeatens" Cowboys vs. Patriots game. Chino's opponent has an entire cheering section from Fort Riley, Kan., while

"Every time there's a hand-to-hand engagement in combat, we hear about it and apply those lessons to our instruction," says Larsen.

Chino has only one friend from Fort Bliss and a few Georgia sand gnats in his corner. It's the third-place consolation match for the 185-pound division with full MMA rules. The finals have already seen two submissions and a TKO, and Chino hopes to keep the excitement going.

The fighters' shorts are sans sponsors, colored pure black with only one word across the left thigh: ARMY. Chino's opponent, Private Michael Goede, comes out firing, but immediately takes a low leg kick dead center to his groin. Chino goes to a neutral corner and waits for Goede to stop seeing tweety birds and for the tightening in his abdomen to cease. When the action resumes, it doesn't last long. Chino catches the scrappy trooper with an uppercut that splits the bridge of his nose wide open. When the referee breaks them apart, Chino is covered in more blood than the special-effects supervisor on the set of "Saw." While the doctor examines his opponent's cut, Chino refuses to look in his direction, instead facing the neutral corner and staring straight down. The doctor needs only a split-second look at the gash to stop the bout.

Chino quietly returns to his wife and daughter, proud to have earned third place despite having none of the boisterous support enjoyed by so many other fighters. Fort Bragg and MMA standout Tim Kennedy dominate once again, with Fort Riley taking second place and Fort Campbell tying with Fort Benning for third among the 29 teams involved.

"In the end, it's about victory," Larsen says as the crowd filters out. "We can never let our culture get to a point where not acting is acceptable. September 11th is a good example. We'll never know



A tale of two warriors: Three-time light-heavy winner Staff Sergeant Tim Kennedy (above) applies some finishing touches. Middleweight Specialist Guillermo "Chino" Villa (left) grinds his way to third-place honors.

what happened on those planes, but we do know that most of the people on board didn't fight back. Our job is to grow that warrior spirit and build better fighters."

If a lone underdog fighter paying his way to fly 4,500 miles to take third against larger programs is any indication, then Larsen is doing his job well. 🇺🇸