After nearly four years of service in the military, Army Ranger Weston Finch, son of Zeke Finch and Robin Conklin and a 1999 graduate of Holyoke High School, has returned home.

Along with him, the local hero has brought his wife Aniela and years of unforgettable experiences and qualities learned during his time as an Army Ranger.

The Rangers are a light infantry force that specializes in direct action raids. Because of the type of assignments they are given, Rangers are not allowed to provide many details of their service time. However, Finch was willing to share what he could about his army experiences.

At the time he enlisted, he had received a B.A. in Psychology and was attending grad school. Yet, he said he always felt like he was being called to join the military.

“I finally decided that school would always be there if I want to come back; but if I want to be in the military, I need to join now,” he said.

From the beginning, Finch said he knew he wanted to become a Ranger, and therefore signed a Ranger Indoctrination Program (RIP) contract upon joining the army. In 2005, he was sent to Fort Benning, Ga. for basic training and was an 11 Bravo, Infantry.

In Feb. 2006, he took a three-week Basic Airborne Course, which teaches soldiers the techniques involved in parachuting from airplanes and landing safely. Upon graduation, he was assigned to the 75th Ranger Regiment to attend RIP.

RIP is designed to instruct and select, from a pool of candidates in grades E-1 to E-4, those suitable for service in the 75th Ranger Regiment. The four-week program consists of physical training and continuous preparation for service in the Regiment.

According to Finch, the program is specifically designed to weed out those who are not qualified or committed enough to become an Army Ranger. The attrition rate is extremely high, and soldiers are allowed to quit at any time throughout the program.

In order to graduate, soldiers are required to pass a 60 percent Army Physical Fitness Test, complete a five-mile run at no slower than eight minutes per mile, successfully complete a Combat Water Survival Test, complete two of three road marches—one of which must be a 10-mile road march—and receive a 70 percent or higher on all exams.

Finch was one of the select few to pass the program and was assigned to the Second Ranger Batallion, Alpha Company, Blacksheep Platoon in Fort Lewis, Wash. This platoon happens to be the same one that Pat Tillman, the Arizona Cardinals football star, was assigned to when he was killed in 2004—though Finch joined the platoon too late to know Tillman.

Starting out as a private, he worked his way up the ranks for 11 months. It was during this time he was deployed for his first assignment to Iraq. By this point, Finch had met his future wife Aniela, and the two were e-mailing each other back and forth while he was in Iraq.

For Ranger School, Finch returned to Fort Benning, Ga. for a three-week pre-training course.

As described by the military’s web site, “Ranger School is one of the toughest training schools a soldier can volunteer for. Army Ranger NCOs (non-commissioned officers) are experts in leading soldiers on difficult missions—and to do this they need rigorous training. For over two months, Ranger students train to exhaustion, pushing the limits of their minds and bodies.”

There are three distinct phases of Ranger School that require soldiers to make quick decisions in adverse situations—these phases are called “crawl,” “walk” and “run.”

The Crawl Phase, also known as the Benning Phase, lasts 20 days. It’s designed to assess and develop the necessary physical and mental skills to complete combat missions and the remainder of Ranger School successfully.

The Walk Phase, a.k.a. Mountain Phase, takes place in the mountains of Georgia and lasts

21 days. During this phase, soldiers receive instruction on military mountaineering tasks as well as techniques for employing squads and platoons for continuous combat patrol operations in a mountainous environment.

The Run Phase, a.k.a. Swamp Phase, of Ranger School continues to develop combat arms functional skills. It consists of exercises in extended platoon-level patrol operations in a swamp environment in Florida.

It sounds grueling, but Finch made it through the course, and received his Ranger qualification tab. He was then able to return to his platoon.

Ranger Regiments are capable of deploying anywhere within 18 hours, and Finch was deployed three more times during his service. They usually carry out surprise, or “shock,” strikes or are involved in rescue operations. For an idea on the type of operations carried out by Rangers, Finch recommends the movie “Black Hawk Down.”

Because of the intensity of their assignments, Rangers’ deployment times are much shorter than a typical Army soldier’s.

Of his experiences in Iraq, he was willing to say he felt like what the Rangers are doing there is valid. “I had good experiences with the Iraqi people and I’m happy with what we accomplished over there,” he said.

Between all his deployments and training courses, Weston and Aniela found time to develop their relationship. They were engaged during his second deployment to Iraq and married soon after. She then joined him at the base in Fort Lewis, Wash. and was there during his last two deployments. The couple spent their first anniversary apart.

“That’s definitely the hardest part of the job—being away from family,” said Finch.

Aniela agreed. “It was hard on me and his family, but we were all really supportive of him. We believe God called him to it.”

She added the support of the other wives on the base helped tremendously, and her advice to other military spouses is to join a group or community. “Being involved in a community is so important for a spouse,” she said. “It’s hard to do alone.”

Yet, despite all the support, Finch said he knew how hard his deployments were on his family, and because of that, he left the Rangers in the summer of 2008. During his service time, he had worked his way up from private to to anti-tank gunner to squad leader and finally, platoon sargeant.

He and Aniela then returned to Colorado to catch up on lost time with his family, which also includes his grandmothers Ardis Conklin and Oresta Sargent. However, he’s not completely done with the military, as he will continue to be a member of the National Guard until his service time is done.

The Finches, including their new Bulldog Aco (named for Alpha Company), are now in Holyoke. He and Aniela have no specific plans for the future at the moment, but Weston said he would eventually like to finish grad school.

No matter what he does, it is certain his time in the military and as an Army Ranger will stick with him. “It is the most fulfilling thing I’ve ever done,” he said. “I love the dedication and hard work it takes and the other people I met in the service.”

Though he admits the military is not for everyone, he offered encouraging words for those who may be considering it. “The military can offer you so much financially,” he said. “It helps you establish a base and the qualities you learn are unparalleled.”

However, he added, it does require a lot of sacrifices. “It’s a heart decision,” he said.

With the recent recession now stealing headlines from the operations in Iraq and

Afghanistan, the Finches hope to remind people they need to continue to remember and honor the sacrifices of those in the armed services and their families. “Please continue to pray for them,” said Finch.