One of the highlights of the Cambridge Fair was the first showing of Frederick Wiseman's new documentary film, Basic Training, at Harvard's Lowell Lecture Hall on Saturday night. Attendance, unfortunately, was sparse, owing to poor publicity, and tickets given a free look at the newest work of one of America's finest documentary filmmakers. Wiseman is a Cambridge law-trained filmmaker. His high HIgh School, shot at Northeast High in Philadelphia, has become famous for its exposure of the miniature fascist society comprised in America's public schools. Titicut Follies, his first movie, shot at Bridgewater State Mental Hospital, so embarrassed the Commonwealth of Massachusetts they went to court for an injunction. It still cannot be publicly shown in this state. Hospital and Law and Order go behind the facades of two more American institutions, the general hospital and the police - with devastating impact. Basic Training is about boot camp: Fort Knox, Kentucky. It contains just what you'd expect it to: tough top kicks threatening to kick ass at the slightest infraction of the rules, lines of men getting shaved and fingerprinted like convicts, and repeatedly, formations of men, marching, marching, marching. But Wiseman has managed to capture the unexpected as well. In one scene, for example, a black GI tells the commanding officer he'd rather go to jail "and get it over with" than put up with any more army crap. In another, a despondent draftee named Hickman explains his desire to commit suicide to the chaplain, who gave a pep talk straight out of Catch-22.

Wiseman's ability to capture the crassness and absurdity of institutions is that of a master editor - he knows when to cut, juxtapose film segments for maximum effect. Technically, his camerawork and sound tracks are remarkably good, especially considering his extremely low-budget style of working: 16mm black & white, mostly hand-held, with a crew of two or four, including himself. Wiseman's standards consistently demonstrate that low-budget documentaries need not be of poor quality.

Some of the scenes in Basic Training reflect the changes wrought by the Vietnam war. Dissident or listless GI's and, perhaps, the attitudes of trainers who've been there reflect how bad the war has been for morale. One memorable sequence shows a column on a brisk march, singing not the traditional ribald hiking song, but "Mr. Nixon drop the bomb, so I don't have to go to 'Nam." Training lectures on the M-16 and Claymore mine harp the same thing - "We don't like it there, but we're there, so we do the best we can and try not to get killed."

A lot remains the same about the Army, though. Much of Basic Training reminded me of a late show movie called The D.I., a bit of Fifties patriotic schmaltz in which the bumbling draftees, under the tutelage of Jack Webb, the drill instructor, toughen up, sharpen up and become REAL MEN. The D.I. ended with a "graduation day" parade on the drill field, with the Marine Band blasting away on the soundtrack. Basic Training ends with a similar parade, only the marching is sloppy and the brass slightly off-key, and the men are not marching off into a John Wayne movie.

Bruce Marten