



SERE School Trains the Best for the Worst

*I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command,
I will never surrender the members of my command
while they still have the means to resist.*

-Article II, U.S. Military Code of Conduct

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JO2 DAN BALL

Living off the land is often romanticized in movies, books and television as peaceful coexistence with nature, where food is delicious, nutritious and easily obtainable and shelter is convenient. The reality of wilderness survival is more likely to include life-threatening injuries or illness, hunger, exposure to the elements, fatigue and, under wartime conditions behind enemy lines, constant movement to evade pursuers. Today's sailors and Marines are living in a fortunate age when there are very few times that finding an insect under a rock conjures up the thought, "What a good source of protein." On the other hand, there are worse things than eating insects. The field instructors of the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) School prepare students to know what to do when things go from bad to worse.

As a part of Fleet Aviation Specialized Operational Training Group Pacific, NAS North Island, Calif., SERE School is actually an advanced code of conduct course. All military personnel get their initial code of conduct

instruction during basic training in which they're taught an American service member's legal responsibilities regarding capture by enemy forces. But SERE training goes far beyond that. Because the school is a combination of courses designed for personnel with jobs that entail greater than normal risks of being stranded behind enemy lines or captured by enemy forces, students get a deeper insight into the philosophies behind the code. Aviators, aircrewmembers, and special forces and force reconnaissance personnel are the types of jobs that require SERE School training. The instruction starts with classroom work, and for several days it focuses on real-world applications of the code of conduct for a service member. After the classroom, students board a bus and end up at the Navy's remote training site near Warner Springs, Calif., ready to break down the acronym SERE into individual lessons. Here, they begin with the survival and evasion portions to learn methods of avoiding capture by the enemy. Eventually, they'll be captured and enter resistance and escape training.

Facing page, SERE students sample some of the local edible plants. Below, students learn to keep low and out of sight, and the best ways for crossing roads during daytime navigation and evasion training.





Left, students learn various ways of stowing gear for easier carrying. Below, students travel from point to point, trying to reach objectives and remain undetected. Facing page, top and bottom, students use landmarks, compasses and maps among other techniques to plot out travel routes that keep them away from obstacles and observation.

The field instructors who teach the survival and evasion lessons are comprised of male and female sailors and Marines from many communities. They are highly motivated and well trained, and possess an immense knowledge of the subject. As instructors, they are part naturalist, part guide, part psychologist and part mentor. Before each class shows up at the field site the instructors have been on the course making preparations, and it's apparent that they know the area well. They move easily through the cactus and brush on the foothills of the Palomar Mountains and note the things that have changed since their last visit—new animal tracks, obstacles in need of repair, a washout on a service road. Driving the course during an inspection, YN2 Steven

Gohanna notes an increase in the quail population, shows off the only pine trees growing in the area and gets excited about a quarter-inch of water running in a streambed. "I need to take a picture of this," he said. "Nobody ever believes me that water actually runs here, because most of the year it just looks like sand and rock."

In Warner Springs, there is a lot of sand and rock. Interspersed with hilly plots of field grasses, cacti, brush and groups of small stubby trees, the scenery here plays tricks on the eyes. What looks like an unmarked rolling



field is actually a bunch of grass islands in a sea of dirt roads; large obstacles such as portable bridges; and bright manmade objects such as red parachutes, which seem to appear only when you step within a few yards of them. Occasionally, a bright orange fence marks off a dangerous boundary. Gohanna points to one that appears to have been set up at random among some trees. "It's invisible from here, but just past that fence is a 70-foot drop into a ravine."

Many precautions are taken to avoid accidents. Besides the orange fences, students are given very strict



ground rules about safety. Deviation from the regulations is not acceptable and can result in being dropped from the course. For almost all of the students, not having a SERE background will keep them from working in their fields.

When the students jump off the bus, the course is ready and the instructors are waiting—at the end of a march, that is. Class starts immediately after introductions. Two field-trained corpsmen conduct a field health and safety brief and let it be known that they aren't there to treat hunger pangs. A lesson on core

values follows the brief. There must be no contraband items in the students' possession, i.e., candy bars, matches, tobacco, flashlights, etc. The students are given a grace period to pony up anything they might have brought along, knowingly or not. Afterwards, they are instructed on how to carry the allowed items in the most convenient way.

After these preliminaries the students get down to the focus of the course, survival and evasion. The body of students is broken down into smaller groups with an instructor, sometimes with an instructor-in-training in

to, to guide them. Then, the students are introduced to the finer aspects of navigating through hostile territory. The rule about navigating is twofold. First, they need to figure out how to get where they're going without being spotted, keeping in mind that someone might be looking for them anywhere, anytime. Second, they have to reach specific locations on schedule. With the clock ticking, caution sometimes





Above, a SERE instructor teaches a variety of techniques for land navigation. Right, despite their best efforts the students can get distracted, disoriented and flustered.

has to be sacrificed for speed, which can result in close calls.

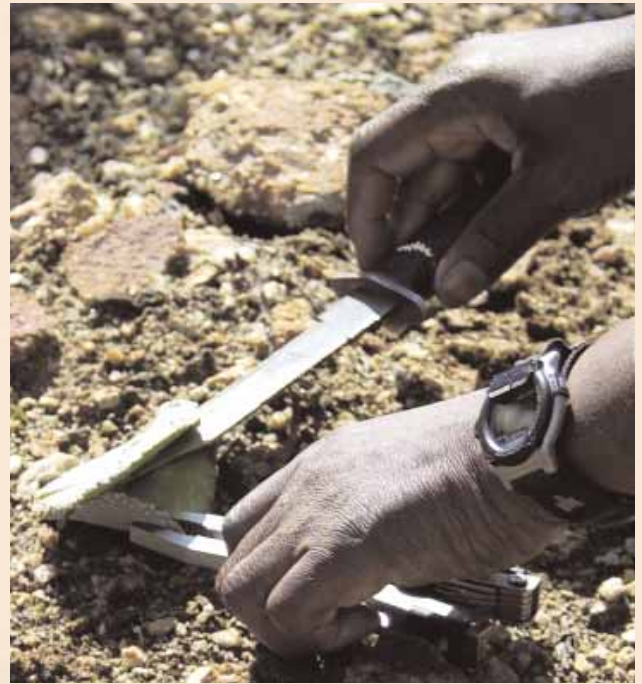
On the morning of day two, a group of students got off course and while standing along a roadside trying to get their bearings, they were spotted. They hit the dirt as a sport utility vehicle drove by and the driver gave them a big smile and wave. Luckily, the driver was not a SERE staff member looking for them, just a civilian on a side road. The students cursed at their own lack of attention. The instructor, IC1 Leroy McClellan, gathered the group to go over what just happened and the consensus was that there was no excuse; they had simply lost their focus. "They had plenty of time to spot



the vehicle and hide," he noted later. "Fortunately, the truck was just one of the few locals who have access to this road. But the thing is that he wasn't trying to sneak up on anyone. He was cruising along and everyone should have heard him a long way off. They were so into the map that they had no clue." Hopefully, the



Left, a SERE instructor explains how this raised shelter is used in swampy areas. The platform in front can be layered with mud and used as a fire pit. Below, some of the food sources that can be found in the area include cactus and wild potatoes.



lessons are not lost on them. As it is, they now know exactly what not to do in a similar situation: don't stand along a roadside without watching the road very carefully.

Survival lessons are interspersed with navigating. In print, these lessons sound like a Boy Scout handbook—fire-building, trapping, creating shelters, finding edible plants—but there are no s'mores waiting at a campfire afterwards. There isn't even a campfire, just more navigation, evasion and, by now, hunger pangs.

Some of the lessons take place on the fly. Edible plants are where you find them. If there is a convenient patch of something and enough time, the instructor might stop to point it out and let everyone have a sample. In this manner, a patch of wild potatoes on a hillside is subsequently harvested and devoured by hungry students who haven't eaten for some time. Fire-building requires only a large sandy pit, dry tinder and the proper sticks to ignite it.

Other lessons take place in designated areas. The section on shelters has demonstration models set up like a rustic subdivision around a creek bed. The shelters vary in size and complexity, covering short- and long-term stays in various climates.

A lot of the training at SERE School contains lessons learned by service members who made it back across enemy lines or, unfortunately, spent time as prisoners of war. Their experience allowed them to become highly valued advisors for the school and

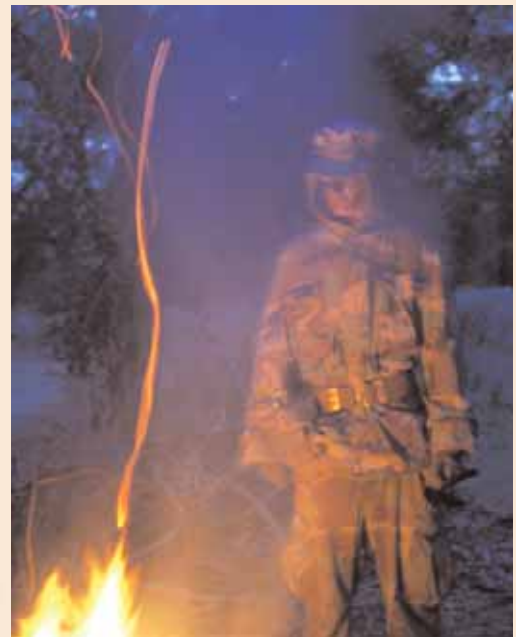




Above, a SERE instructor demonstrates how to use a jungle penetrator rescue hoist. Left, instructors review and celebrate the end of another training cycle. Below, a student seeks warmth at a signal fire that the class built for an assignment.

to help prevent the same issues from happening today. Their stories are incorporated into the training to show students that the lessons do work.

The students take the course seriously. One female student, a future SH-60 Seahawk pilot, said, "Of all my training, this course was probably the most intimidating. I heard so many rumors about it that I was practically shaking when I showed up. I love the outdoors but I didn't know anything about survival. It's tough and dirty, but every minute we're doing something that's interesting and unique. All of these lessons are important. I hope I never need to use them, but I'm glad I'll know how."



The tight schedule keeps the students on their toes and the constant movement keeps their minds off the discomforts. Throughout the course, they become very close to their classmates. Most of the modesty they brought with them disappears very quickly. When they sleep the students huddle together to stay warm as the temperature dips into the 20s and frost coats their packs. When they're hiking they know that everyone else is just as hungry and dirty as they are. Not knowing what is coming next also bonds them. When surprises occur, they must act as a team. There is a chain of command for each group, as well as the entire class. The leaders are doubly challenged as they are responsible for ensuring their team acts properly, no

matter what comes up. When there are lapses in leadership and issues could have been avoided or resolved in the chain of command, the instructors take the group leaders aside later to advise them on appropriate responses.

For many of these students, SERE School is the first extended amount of time they've spent in the wilderness. Special forces and deploying personnel go on to complete other types of survival training, such as desert environment and peacetime hostage survival, also offered at the school. The hope is that none of the students will ever face the kind of scenarios that they experience in SERE training. But if they do, they have received the best training available for the worst situation. ✈

