SEAL FOR A DAY

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS OF COVERT MISSIONS, CHLORINE AND A WHOLE LOT OF YELLING AT THE SEAL ADVENTURE CHALLENGE

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PHOTOS BY WILL RAMOS

SUFFERING THROUGH SIMULATED NAVY SEAL TRAINING REQUIRES TRUE GRIT — AND NOT JUST THE KIND THAT GETS THROWN ON YOU BY THE INSTRUCTORS.

THE BOATS WERE HEAVY, THE SAND GRITTY, THE WATER COLD. "BOAT PT" PROVED HELLACIOUS FOR ALL OF US. AND THIS WAS STILL EARLY ON...

IT'S 3 A.M. AND I'M LYING face down on a sand dune, wearing camouflage pants, my face covered in dark paint. I am on lookout for the enemy; who, I've been told by a 17-year-old kid I know as "platoon leader," are Iraqis that have captured the U.S. Secretary of State. I rest my head on my hands, staring straight ahead through the tall reeds. My eyelids become heavy just as I'm noticing how nice it is to lay down. I feel a sharp tug on my ankle. A platoon member I know as "Arrow" saw me nodding off, and the short tug was enough to wake me. "Thanks," I whisper, and resume my post.

Earlier that morning, I had arrived in Virginia Beach, Virginia, with 36 others to go through Odyssey Adventure's 24-hour Navy SEAL Adventure Challenge, run by multi-sport race director and retired SEAL Chief Warrant Officer, Don Mann. As an adventure racer and sucker for most things adventurous, I saw this as an opportunity to gain an experience unlike anything else I'd done. Never having been around the military, except for my ex-Air Force father's disciplinary parenting, I knew I'd be in for a wild 24 hours.

The camp came to exist in 1998 when Mann was asked by the Navy to devise a recruiting tool for the elite SEAL program — a Special Operations division tackling Naval Special Warfare. Only 1 percent of the Navy consists of SEAL members; it's a highly coveted, yet extremely difficult, division to join. SEAL stands for "Sea, Air, Land," the environments in which SEALs are experts. Call me crazy, but that doesn't leave much terrain in which to slack.

In the six years of Odyssey's annual SEAL camp, it's drawn young, aspiring SEALs, older, ex-military men looking to relive 24 hours of their heydays, athletes looking for new challenges, some going through mid-life crises. While the U.S. Navy doesn't allow women to become SEALs, the camp has drawn a handful who want to test their mettle. I am one of three women at the camp this day in May, and one of 36 people about to go through 24 hours of simulated military hell.

NINETEEN HOURS EARLIER

At 0800, I report to a trail center in First Landing State Park with two pair of camouflage pants, two white T-shirts, a cam-

SOMETIMES THE SPRAY WAS MEANT FOR DRINKING. OTHER TIMES THE INSTRUCTORS SPRAYED US IN THE FACE JUST TO TRY TO RATTLE US.

ouflage hat, a swimsuit and goggles, two pair of socks, a backpack and some energy bars.

My heart races as I see the class already doing push-ups, and the instructors already yelling.

I jump in with the group — mostly made up of skinny teenage guys and few buzz-cut older men — and we quickly shuffle into a small building. I grab a seat in the front row next to a young guy with a shaved head. "If any of you think this is going to be easy," welcomes Mann, stern faced, "you can put that idea out of your head right now." We are dead silent and sitting upright while the instructors pace in front of us, and we are sweating from the first of thousands of push-ups in the intense Virginia humidity. "Not everyone will be able to finish every mission," says Mann, who splits us into "boat crews" based on the rows we're sitting in. He explains that we have to pair up with a swim buddy.

"You must never leave your swim buddy's side. If one of you fails at something, both of you fail." I somehow get paired with a Korean soap opera and movie star who goes by "Jenny," there with a film crew shooting a reality TV segment. Jenny is wearing lipstick. I am worried.

Mann wraps up his speech and another instructor yells: *"FALL OUT, FALL OUT!"* Everyone drops to the floor and crawls out in a praying mantis-sort of fashion, not letting their knees touch the ground. I apparently missed this demonstration and am confused, but I follow suit, terrified to not disrupt.

"DROP!" someone yells once we get outside. Apparently, it means drop and do 20 push-ups, and apparently it is a SEAL instructor's favorite word.

WATER-LOGGED

"COLORADO!" The first time I hear this, I ignore it. The second time, I meet eyes with the guy who is yelling it and realize that he is talking to me. Yelling at me. *"COLORADO! WHERE IS YOUR SWIM BUDDY?"* It's my boat captain yelling. I am ordered to check the ladies room, which is where I find Jenny. We return to the grassy field outside the gymnasium and resume order, and drop for more push-ups, flutter kicks and various calisthenics.

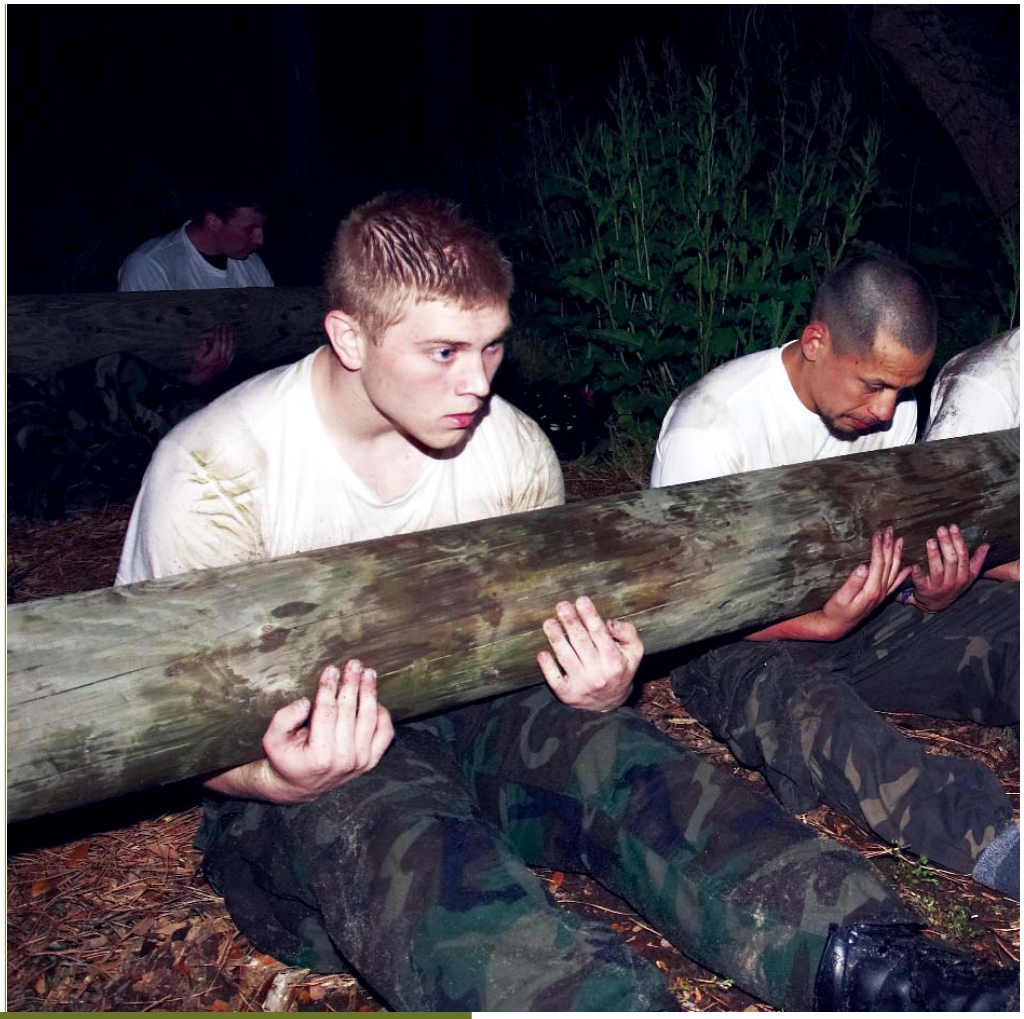
A kid next to me — he can't be older

than 16 — is having a hard time lifting his feet for flutter kicks in his huge black boots that must weigh pounds more than my Montrail running shoes. "You got it," I whisper to him. He grimaces but survives. After at least 200 flutter kicks and push-ups, we shuffle into the gym to start our pool time.

Navy SEALs spend most of their time training in water, and with good reason. What sets SEALs apart from other military groups is that, as maritime special forces, they strike from and return to the sea. And, while larger military forces cannot approach targets quietly, SEALs train to attack in a stealth, covert manner.

This explains the rule of "no freestyle" swimming during the swim test: You can't attack a country with a splashing stroke.

We start off with a timed swim test that we're told will count toward our individual PRT — Physical Readiness Test — points, used as a measurement and screening tool to assess SEAL applicant's ability to undergo more extensive training. We are allowed any non-splashing stroke — side stroke, breaststroke, or what SEALs call the "Combat Swimmer Stroke" — an underwater side stroke sort of thing.



THE YOUNGEST PARTICIPANT AT THE SEAL CAMP WAS 15-YEAR-OLD RICHARD BOWERS; THE OLDEST, 47-YEAR-OLD DONALD GARVEY, WHO SCORED THE HIGHEST IN THE CLASS IN PHYSICAL READINESS POINTS (465 OUT OF 500).

I GET HIT IN THE EYE WITH A CLUMP OF WET SAND THAT FEELS LIKE A SOFTBALL. FOR THE FIRST TIME, I REGRET BEING THERE, SUBJECTING MYSELF TO THE ABUSE WHICH SEEMS OVERZEALOUS. JUST THEN, ANOTHER COMPETITION CATCHES MY INTEREST.

More pool drills include tying our hands behind our backs and jumping into the deep end. The goal of this is to learns how to relax, exhale enough to sink to the bottom of the pool, then push off strongly to resurface for air.

While waiting our turn, I speak with a bald man in his forties who my boat captain calls "Mr. Clean."

"Why are you doing this?" I ask him.

"My son is over in Iraq, and I told him I'd go through this for him." He then jumps in the pool, hands tied behind his back.

BRICK WORKOUT

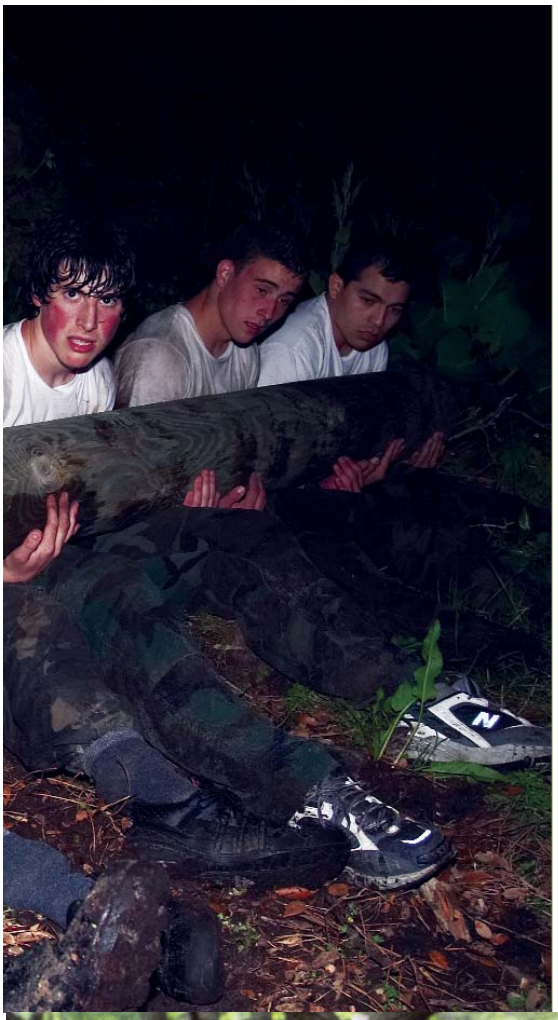
"HOW MUCH DOES ANYONE WANT TO BET THAT THESE TWO WON'T BE ABLE TO DO THIS?" the instructor asks everyone as Jenny and get ready for the next drill. We're to swim a lap out-and-back carrying a brick above the water. If it touches the surface, we'd be banished to do laps around the pool in the praying mantis-crawl.

The instructor's doubt fuels me. We get in. I tell her I'll carry the brick, she can just swim next to me (She is not a swimmer). We make it one length of the pool doing this, and rest at the other end. She asks if I want her to take it. I say no, just swim. We start our second length of the pool, and her camera crew yells at me to give her the brick. I start to sink, the brick getting closer to the water. The instructors yell at her to help me. I hand her the brick. It hits her in the head and she screams. I take it back and swim to the end of the pool, struggling, but hear the 35 people in the group cheering for us to make it to the end. When we get there, someone takes the brick from me and pulls me and Jenny out of the water. I feel the camaraderie among these teenagers and older men, and am exhilarated by it, although I collapse from exhaustion on the deck.

After dragging a dummy across the pool and swimming the length of a lane underwater, pool PT is over, just four hours into the 24-hour ordeal.

WHY AM I DOING THIS?

The afternoon is consumed by more physical exertion, more yelling, more mind games testing mental toughness. We run behind Mann along the beach, in and out of the ocean and over grassy sand dunes into a campground. We eat MRE's — air-sealed, dried packets food ("Meals, Ready-to-Eat") that have a three-year shelf life — for lunch. We do a pull-up test ("I don't think my wife's ever seen a pull-up bar!" an older guy tells me) and a timed three-mile run. I talk to a father and son from another boat crew who tell me that it's the son's 17th birthday present to go through the camp with his dad. They tell me that they were going to go the ROTC-route to put the kid



we must roll around in the sand to coat ourselves, dive into the cold ocean to clean up, roll in the sand again, lift the raft over our heads, and repeat. This turns into doing flutter kicks with our heads in the crashing shore waves, instructors throwing wet sand at us with our paddles. I get hit in the eye with a clump of wet sand that feels like a softball. For the first time, I regret being there, subjecting myself to the abuse which seems overzealous.

Just then, another competition catches my interest. It's a boat race around a set of buoys. But quickly, frustration sets in. Our boat is half deflated (or half inflated, depending on how you look at it). We're slower than the other boats, but we can't be punished for losing this race, I think.

"BOAT CREW 1! YOU LOST! GET YOUR BOAT UP HERE AND DROP!"

I try to justify it in my head that nothing is fair in war, and this will only last 24 hours. Deal with it.

through college, but that he had just earned a running scholarship. The kid wins the three-mile run.

We move on to Boat PT, which entails carrying an inflated raft over our heads across the sand dunes, down to the water. The raft is heavy, and walking with it over our heads requires teamwork. Once at the shore, the instructor yells "*DROP!*" and

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

Log PT is essentially the same as Boat PT with carrying and various exercises utilizing a heavy log. This ensues and extends into the night. Finally, we are briefed for our mission.

Unlike an adventure race or any team task I've encountered in the past, the mission briefing is attended by our platoon leader only, and I have no idea what it entails. The rest of the platoon and I sit around a fire, waiting for instructions, painting our faces with camo paint. A 17-year-old kid asks me my age, and thinks it's hilarious when I tell him I'm 31. He tells me I remind him of his P.E. teacher at his high school. "She does some crazy stuff like you, running for fun and stuff." Then he tells me he is leaving for Iraq in a month.

Around 2 a.m., we start our mission. A platoon of eight of us approach the target by land, bushwhacking and slithering through a campground, while three other platoons approach by rafts. We reach our target, do reconnaissance — which supposedly is our task, although I to this day don't understand what we were doing — and try our darndest to not be spotted by civilians sitting around campfires or the SEAL instructors who are on lookout. After hiding in the sand and staring at the building for an hour or so, we are eventually "caught" by instructors. They spare us any simulated punishment and send us back to the camp.

By 7 a.m., it is apparent that we have survived. They feed us oatmeal and coffee at the campground and, after the obscure task is completed, the atmosphere is finally relaxed. Still in camo gear and black paint, we talk among ourselves, waiting for the graduation ceremony. I learn "Mr. Clean's" name is really John. "Platoon Leader" is a kid named Tyler, and "Boat Captain" is a guy named David. "Arrow" was actually being called "Aero," because he's an aerospace engineer; His real name is Glen. He had done some adventure racing and thought the SAC would be a cool challenge.

All of us agree, it was indeed.

While I finished high in my class (eighth in total PRT points), I had no interest in moving on to BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEALs) training in San Diego to continue aspiring toward SEAL-dom. Nor did I have a choice, as a woman. This didn't bother me, as I was eager to return to my civilian clothes, my civilian life and the sports I do where no one yells at me or throws sand in my face. I did leave the camp with a better understanding and more respect for the kids who devote their lives to be SEALs, to be in the military at all. ■

THE NEXT SEAL ADVENTURE CHALLENGE IS SCHEDULED FOR MAY 21. CALL (757) 404-0211 FOR DETAILS.