



Book excerpt >>>

Without question, the toughest military training I ever participated in was Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE). Its purpose is to train aircrews and special forces in the event they are shot down or worse yet, captured by the enemy. We had heard about SERE from the officers and it would be safe to say that what we heard psyched many of us out. This was clearly part of the strategy. Most former prisoners of war will readily tell you that their experiences were as mentally demanding as they were physically demanding. All the talk about what we would be going through just provided more fuel for the fire in our imaginations.

The first day, we were all herded into the main assembly area for a "briefing." We had been directed to dress in fatigues and combat boots, and to bring an empty laundry bag with us. Our laundry bags were dark green and were large enough to fit a small child inside. We were forced to listen to endless lectures on completely irrelevant subjects, all designed to bore us to death. If you dozed off, an officer was quickly there to prod you back to consciousness. The meaningless talks lasted most of the day and we were all getting pretty edgy. Sitting all day watching someone drone on about absolutely nothing wears you out, and all you want to do is close your eyes and end your misery. We were all having the same problem and when I looked around, all I saw was nodding heads being poked back to reality.

Finally, the mental torture ended and they ushered us all out of the auditorium in single file. Waiting outside was a fleet of trucks. Before boarding the back of the trucks, we were instructed to place the laundry bags over our heads. I slipped mine on and was enveloped in total darkness, unable to see, a condition I would experience for the next seven days and nights. It now became clear to me that the real training was about to start.

The officers were our "captors" and we were their "prisoners." I felt someone push me toward the truck and I banged into it. I heard him yell "get aboard" and I reached up and found the edge of the truck bed. I hoisted myself up and was told to move forward on my hands and knees and remain in that position. By this time I was getting disoriented but I knew I wasn't the only one. It wasn't long before many of my fellow prisoners were stuffed in the back of the truck, crammed together as tightly as they could squeeze us. The next thing I felt was a combat boot crushing down on my left shoulder. One of our captors was walking around the back of the truck, only he was using our backs to do it.

After all the trucks were loaded, the convoy left and headed into the foothills of the nearby mountains. Based on everything we had heard, I was certain we were headed for the mock prisoner of war (POW) camp. It was a rough ride over gravel roads that seemed to take forever. Since we couldn't see anything, I suspect that we spent most of the remainder of the day riding around in circles. Otherwise, we would have been a very great distance from our home base and I knew the encampment was not that far away. The ride wasn't easy on my hands and knees that were getting bounced around on the rough roads. Plus, the feel of combat boots on my back was a constant reminder that our guard was cruising around the truck, keeping a close eye on us.

After what seemed like an eternity, our convoy came to a halt. All of sudden our captors were all screaming for us to unload from the trucks. Still blinded by our laundry bags, we scrambled off the truck onto the dirt road below. At that point, a few of the prisoners made a break for freedom by throwing off their bags and running for the hills above us. I couldn't see what was going on, but I could tell from the screams from our captors that several prisoners were attempting to escape. My suspicion, which I could never confirm, is that this break for freedom was planned in advance. I say this because I found out later that they all ripped off their hoods simultaneously and scattered in different directions to confuse our captors.

As soon as this happened, our captors went around and started whacking the rest of us with a stick. We were told that if any of us tried such a stupid idea as to escape, that we would be dealt with severely. By now it was far too late since the guards had us well surrounded and under their complete control. The few who did escape seized the moment of opportunity, making their coordinated move during the confusion of unloading the trucks. How far they got I will never know, but I do know that most of them did get caught. We heard them yelling for help as they were dragged back down the hills that would have been their refuge if they had made it to freedom. I often wondered whether or not what we were hearing was really our fellow comrades or our guards, who may have been yelling and screaming just to psych us all out. My best guess is that it was a combination of both, because when the training ended, we were told that a few guys actually did escape at the unloading point and were not caught until days later.

Once the trucks were emptied, we were marched to the POW camp. It was hot and dusty and breathing inside the laundry bag just compounded the agony. We arrived at the camp and each truckload of POWs was herded into a large tent with a dirt floor. We were ordered to sit on the ground and not move or talk to each other. I guessed there were about fifty of us in each tent and everyone was silent for the first several minutes. We had no idea how many guards were in the tent, if any. After awhile, someone peaked out from under his bag and discovered there were no guards inside. Soon we were whispering to each other through our

bags and comparing notes on what had happened so far. We were all hungry and thirsty but it was only going to get worse. I did notice a small tin can in the middle of the tent that was filled with dirty water. It was just enough to give everyone a quick sip, but I was still dying of thirst.

It wasn't long before I heard the voice of one of the guards. He announced that our tent needed to elect a leader to represent our group. When I heard this, my first thought was we don't elect leaders in the military and the fact that we were not actual prisoners wasn't going to change that. Our leader would be the trainee with the senior rank, whoever that happened to be. The problem was that for all practical purposes, we were all of equal rank because we all had the same date of rank. To break that tie, we would resort to date and time of birth.

From inside my bag, I told the guard that we would determine who our leader was. This was not the answer he wanted to hear. He called for two other guards who grabbed each arm and dragged me out of the tent. My heart was beating at maximum velocity now and I could feel the adrenalin starting to kick in. I had no idea what they had in store for me but it didn't take too long to find out. They threw me to the ground, on my back, then yanked off the laundry bag over my head.

One guard placed a fairly large piece of thick burlap over my face and stretched it tightly over my nose and mouth. I couldn't see anything and had no idea what to expect next. Then another guard started pouring water over the burlap which completely cut off my air supply. Attempting to breathe was futile because the water gushed continuously onto my head, completely saturating the burlap and choking me each time I tried to gasp for oxygen. I was so thirsty that I did manage to take a few gulps of water but I really needed air more than anything else.

I kept telling myself that this was only a training exercise so I had nothing to worry about. Surely my captors would stop soon and send me back to my comrades. Well, it didn't stop so I began to fight back. I had guards holding down each arm, pinning my legs, another holding the burlap, and one controlling the flow of water. I summoned all my strength, got my right arm free, and ripped the burlap from my face. Then I slugged the guard closest to me as hard as I could and caught him on the side of his head. The rest of the guards started yelling "reactionary piggy" at me and that I would be taken immediately to the Reactionary Tent where uncooperative pigs like me were taken to be disciplined. When I heard that, I knew that the worst was yet to come.

They stripped off my clothes and dragged me to the Reactionary Tent at the other end of the compound. First they grabbed my head and dunked it into a barrel of ice water. I was numb,

my ears were ringing, I was choking on the cold water and my strength was gone, but they weren't done with me yet. They dragged me through a bed of small cactus plants infested with all sorts of nasty insects that were anxious to feed on my skin and blood. Next they tossed me into a small tin box to bake under the hot sun for a few hours. Then it was time for the interrogation to begin.

By this time I could hear screams coming from all around me. Obviously I wasn't the only one who had been singled out for waterboarding. I knew that hearing these screams would really psych out my comrades who were still in the tents. They had no clue as to what was going on around them or when it might be their turn to receive the same treatment. Sometimes the fear of the unknown is the worst fear of all, and I knew that our captors were counting on the effect that would have on all of us.

Now completely subdued by the guards, I was dragged back to my tent. We were all hungry but I was suffering far more from dehydration. There was a lantern burning at all times in the center of the tent, and I could never tell if it was day or night. Once we had gone without sleep for about twenty-four hours, they let us lie down on the dirt and close our eyes. Ten minutes later they would wake us all up by screaming at us, and tell us to run in place and do deep-knee bends. Then it was back to the dirt to fall asleep again. Ten minutes later we were up and running in place. This pattern was repeated over and over again many times. After awhile, I couldn't tell when I was awake from when I was sleeping since I was constantly hallucinating. It was all a blur because my mind had lost all sense of reality.

We were deprived of food for the first three days, and only had a few sips of water from the dirty tin can. On the morning of the fourth day, one of the guards announced his arrival in our tent and said he had some food to share with us. However, in order to get it, we had to give thanks to Ho Chi Minh, at that time the leader of North Vietnam. We were instructed to chant "we like Ho for the rice he grow" over and over again. We wouldn't do it, and we all paid a terrible price for disobeying that order.

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