

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES ACADEMY

A TRIP OUTSIDE
THE TRIATHLON
COMFORT ZONE

BY DAVID B. GLOVER

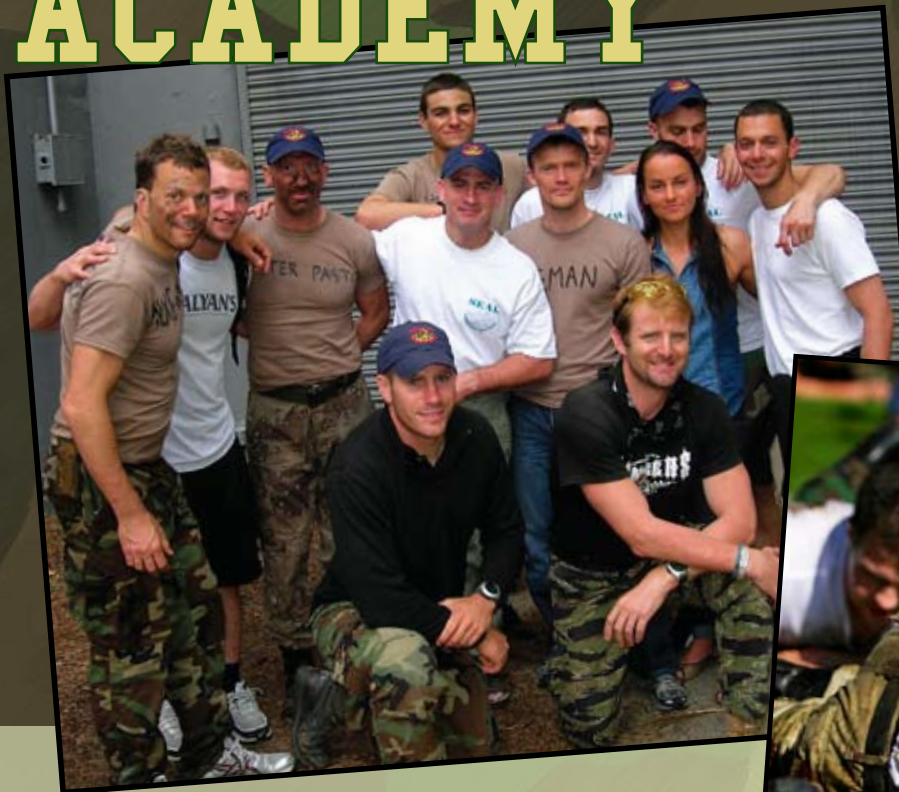


Photo: Will Ramos

FORT STORY, VIRGINIA BEACH, VA.

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“Our goal is to turn whiners and wannabes into warriors.”

- Instructor Jono

I am a triathlete. Since 1995, I’ve competed in nearly 100 triathlons at all distances, including 24 Ironman-distance triathlons with their standard distances of a 2.4-mile swim, followed by a 112-mile bike ride, then a 26.2-mile run. Ironman triathlon events with their well-marked courses, well-stocked food and beverage aid stations, and abundance of volunteers are known, comfortable events. Frankly, I’m becoming bored with them.

The weeklong Special Operations Force Academy held at the Fort Story military base in Virginia Beach, Virginia offers a unique endurance challenge – a week-long physical and mental military training experience that culminates in the 24 hour SEAL Adventure Challenge (SAC), a “24 hour non-stop hell week simulation.” These two programs give a taste of what it’s like to be a member of an active Special Forces team in the military.

The Academy began on Sunday afternoon. On Tuesday night, we were not even halfway through the week, and the instructors were reprimanding my team again.

“Swim out to the platform. Silently,” quietly ordered Instructor Jono as we treaded water in our shorts and shivered in the cold water of the lake.

“Stay with your swim buddy.”

We slowly and silently swam out across the dark lake in the moonlight, towards the platform a hundred meters away. My swim buddy was struggling,

and we were falling behind the others.

I whispered quiet words of encouragement to keep him moving, and tugged gently on his arm: “We’re almost there. You can do it. Keep going.” By focusing on my buddy, I could avoid dwelling on my own discomfort, fatigue, and shivering.

Time seemed to condense into a series of single moments during that swim. There was no past or future; there was only the present now – swimming in the dark and the cold. When we finally reached the platform, the other buddy pairs were on their way back to the dock. My swim buddy and I paused briefly, and then started back.

“Keep moving. You can do it,” I encouraged in whispers.

I was cold, but I accepted the cold. This is what I had signed up for when I committed to participating in the Academy.

The two of us soon joined the rest of the team treading water in front of the dock, and Instructor Jono.

Jono barked, “Dive to the bottom, pick up a rock and place it on the dock. Now!”

I dove down deep into the pitch black darkness and scooped up a handful of small rocks from the bottom. I placed a rock on the deck.

“Again!”

I dove again and retrieved another rock.

“Out of the water! Line up in single file, tallest to smallest! Move!”

We slowly pulled ourselves out of the water onto the deck. We were all shaking uncontrollably from the cold.

“Closer! Closer!”

We huddled together.

“Now, sit!”

We sat and embraced each other to share body heat.

“Now,” continued Instructor Jono, “Tell me why it’s so hard to work together as a team in order to effectively utilize and maximize your resources in moving your SCUBA and personal gear from the vehicles to the campsite and the lake. You were all lolly-gagging around. I had to point out the wheelbarrows and kayaks that were sitting there and available for you to use to move your gear.” He paused and we shivered. “You need to instinctively think outside the box. Now think about this and talk quietly amongst yourselves.” He walked away.

When Jono returned after an indeterminate number of minutes, we relayed in broken gasps that we would work together better as a team and not act as a bunch of individuals; we would listen to our team leader; and we would not repeat the morning’s episode going forward. Jono seemed satisfied, and then released us to run up to the campfire and warmth.

That night, we slept outside on the ground. The temperature dropped to a low of 34F that night. I dozed and shivered, sleeping no more than 20 or 30 minutes at a time. I finally crawled out from under our tarp and lay down next to the fire and under the stars.

And this was only a taste of what it might be like to be in the Special Forces.

“The only easy day was yesterday.”

- Navy SEAL motto

Each day was different. Every day brought new challenges and discomforts to push each of us outside of our comfort zones.

The sheer volume of activities that we participated in that week seems impossible on paper, until you realize that we had more than a week’s worth of “normal time” because we averaged about 2 hours of sleep per night. That included no sleep on Thursday and Saturday nights – they were



Photo: Will Ramos

our two Field Training Exercise (FTX) nights, which we spent silently patrolling through Fort Story dressed in camouflage uniforms and paint, trying to remain unseen by the instructors and unsuspecting residents of the military base.

Through the course of the week, we learned skydiving, SCUBA diving, shooting, combat medicine, land navigation, patrolling as a team, and swim survival skills, including drown proofing. Drown proofing meant tying our hands together and jumping into the deep end of the pool, where we would expel air to sink to the bottom, push off the bottom, grab a breath of air, expel it, and then sink back down again to the bottom. With so much activity and so little time for sleep, the days and nights blurred together.

The only certain activities each day were the PT (physical training) sessions. We never knew when a PT session would begin, and once it began, when it would end. Each PT session was different, depending on its location, although each session always included push-ups and flutter kicks, when we would lie on our backs with legs extended and flutter our legs up and down. We always counted everything in groups of four: “One, two, three, one. One, two, three, two. One, two, three, three.”

Our first PT session on Sunday at our barracks began with push-ups, sit-ups, and flutter kicks, then low crawls across the asphalt through the weeded fields and into a pond. Low crawls meant we would lay prone, pulling ourselves forward with our arms and pushing with our feet, while keeping our butts and heads down to maintain a low profile, in case enemies were shooting at us. If we were too slow to get to our feet after a set of push-ups, we were dropped back down to a push-up position again.

When we PT’d at the obstacle course, each five-person boat team gently picked up a heavy log, which we then moved from one shoulder to press overhead then to the other shoulder and back as we jogged a mile to the beach, where we lay on our backs in the sand, as we pressed the logs above our chests then did sit-ups embracing the log. Never did we drop the log – that was forbidden and would certainly mean punishment.

For beach PT, we would lie prone with our faces buried in the sand and put on our “beach camouflage” by piling sand on top of our backs and rolling from side to side while wet. We scaled sand dunes as boat teams, pushing and pulling each other up, trying to be the winning team. We entered the cold Atlantic Ocean with arms locked, and then laid back in the surf for surf torture. “Get your heads under water!” yelled the instructors. We stood up together then sat back down together as we shivered. Back out of the water and face down into the sand. More beach camouflage. Bear crawl on all fours in a circle.

By just the second day, my whole body ached and was covered in scratches, bruises, and poison oak.

I reminded myself that it was only a taste of what it’s like to be in the Special Forces.

“It pays to be a winner.”

We heard this phrase stated repeatedly by our instructors throughout the week. The winner was the individual who could do the most pull-ups; the one who was the first person to run from point A to point B; or the first team to complete a navigation exercise. Winning meant a brief respite from another set of push-ups, not having to carry a log from the beach back to the obstacle course, or an opportunity to sleep more.



Author David Glover. Photo: Gunnar Örn Arnarsson

“It pays to be a winner” contests were the only time that the Academy rewarded individuals. The majority of our time was spent working together either as a cohesive boat crew – our team of ten was divided into two boat crews of five men – or as swim buddy pairs. “Never leave your buddy behind” was also ingrained into our minds.

After the Academy, I spoke with Instructor Jono to gain his perspective on what transpired with our team during the week.

The instructors’ goal, he said, was to make it as hard as humanly possible for each of us. They would take each person to the point of wanting to quit, then place the burden on the team to not let that person quit. The instructors wanted us to learn responsibility for the actions of ourselves and of others. They also wanted us to learn to go to other places inside ourselves for reserves and resources in order to always keep going forward.

Instructor Jono shared the following analogy:

“Imagine that you are in the Alaska Wilderness being chased by a pack of hungry wolves. You will do everything in your power to stay alive and fight them off. You can’t give up; otherwise, you will die. You will pull from primal instinct to stay alive. Working as a team develops even a

Continued on Page 45

Continued From Page 25 (SOFA)

stronger sense of survival because you must also keep your buddy alive and would rather die than let the team down."

We ended the week as a cohesive team – "Team Slit Throat." Team Slit Throat

"Arrive as ten!
Leave as one!
Don't get caught!
Hoo Ya!
Hoo Ya!"

- Team Slit Throat cheer

We arrived at the Academy as ten individuals who came from all over the U.S. and from Iceland. During the week, each of us earned our nicknames.

"Stelios," named for a fearless Spartan soldier in the movie 300, is a 17-year-old kid who is still in high school.

"Stranglehold" is nineteen years old and wants to be a Navy SEAL. He earned his name after placing one of the instructors in a stranglehold during our Field Training Exercise. "Chuckles," with his ever-present grin, realized that college is not for him; he wants to be a Navy SEAL.

"Big Balls," named for her fortitude, "Tomahawk" who sports a Mohawk, and "Iceman," named for his cool composure, all come from Iceland. Big Balls is the only female on our team.

"Drill and Kill" is a dentist from Indiana who specializes in root canals.

"Master Pastor" is a pastor and church planter from North Carolina who grows churches from scratch: no people, no money, and no resources. He came to the Academy with a desire to experience a life-change in order to become a better leader. He later said that he learned many things, but one was indispensable: teamwork.

After 11 Ironman triathlon races, more marathons than he can count, and winning outright three of the four "Racing the Planet" Desert Races, "Ghost" came looking for a new challenge. He earned his name by maintaining a low profile during the week until the final day and night when he took over as the team leader.

My name is "Monkey Butt." I earned it at the lake during a PT session that began when I was midway between changing from wet to dry shorts with only a towel wrapped around my waist. My towel stayed on my waist for about 10 seconds, then I was bare ass naked with my chafed behind looking something like a baboon's ass.

*"Nothing is illegal unless
you get caught...
DON'T GET
CAUGHT"*

On Friday morning at about 4 AM, I suddenly understood why the training to become a Navy SEAL, an Army Ranger, or any other type of Special Forces operative must be so difficult and demanding. My five-man boat crew was on a nighttime reconnaissance mission. We had been awake since Thursday morning, after having slept only a few pitiful hours on Wednesday night.

As we huddled around our map of Fort Story, discussing our movement back to our base of operations, I looked at the tired members of my team and thought that if I really was in a truly hostile land, and not on a U.S. Army base, I would want teammates with me that were highly trained and tested and would not quit, as quitting could mean death to the team. It was that simple. Our week of demanding training, sleep deprivation, discomfort, and seemingly childish games suddenly took on real meaning for me. The toughness of the training was necessary to take each person to the point of suffering, exhaustion, and utter misery, as a test to see if they would quit.

Quitting in the field is not an acceptable option in the Special Forces.

*"Bigger, Badder, Better,
Braver, Bolder!!"*

- Instructor Jono

Afterwards, I asked Instructor Jono what the instructors took away from the experience.

He replied that the reason he did it was to meet people and take them through the epiphany that they can do anything, no matter what: "Wow, I want to do that. Bring it!" The instructors help make that total switch and turn it on."

A week after the Academy, I am still tired, covered in poison oak from head to toe and every muscle in my body seems to ache. Essentially, I'm out of commission as a triathlete for a while. However, I am feeling VICTORY for what I did accomplish - realizing the ability to PERSEVERE and NEVER QUIT. I can do anything - this was PRICELESS.

And it was only a taste.

SEAL Training Adventures is a private company that operates two programs: the Special Operations Forces Academy - a six day mental and physical combination of all military Special Operations Force training - and the SEAL Adventure Challenge™ - a 24 hour non-stop hell week simulation. The two programs are designed to give participants a taste of what it is like to be a member of an active Special Operations Force team in the military with the goal to mentally prepare candidates for their training, although the program is open to civilians as well. Both programs have been in existence for over 10 years and are unique from other programs in that the instructors come from the different SOF branches. The next U.S.-based SEAL Adventure Challenge™ will be held September 20-21 in Connecticut. For more information about the SEAL Training Academy and its programs, please visit: www.sealtrainingadventures.com.

David Glover, founder of EnduranceWorks, LLC, and author of Full Time & Sub-Nine: Fitting Iron Distance Training into Everyday Life, dabbles extensively in the sport of triathlon as a professional triathlete, coach, writer, and race director. He has helped hundreds of individuals with his coaching services and educational seminars. As an athlete, his accolades include an 8:51 Ironman PR and being inducted into the Vineman Hall of Fame in 2007. For more information about David, please visit: www.davidglover.net

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