

## Sludge and swamps fail to stop Marines

A cold breeze whisked through the air as the Marines lined up in groups of four in front of the water-filled culverts. The temperature slowly dropped as the Marines of Headquarters and Service Company, Combat Logistics Regiment 27, 2nd Marine Logistics Group stood quietly, looking upon the muddy terrain.

Then they began, diving quickly into the large cylinders that marked the beginning of the Battle Skills Training School Endurance Course. Little did these Marines know that this 3.4-mile course would be one of the most physically and mentally challenging events they'd ever take on.

The BSTS E-Course has broken off thousands of Marines for more than 10 years. The course features a multitude of natural and artificial obstacles that vastly outweigh the difficulty most Marines are used to. Participants are required to conquer muddy walls twice to three times their size, crawl through trenches filled with thick sludge and water, swim through deep swamps and run along rocky streams, just to name a few.

Master Sgt. Joel Morgan, director of BSTS, said it can take Marines anywhere from 41 minutes to one hour and 43 minutes to complete the course.

"This is the type of training most Marines come into the Marine Corps to do," Morgan said. "They want to train, get dirty and do challenging things like this to test themselves."

Morgan, a native of Fairmont, W.Va., has served on the BSTS training staff for the past year and eight months. During that time, he has seen more than 100 groups of 12 to 150 Marines take on the intimidating course.

BSTS Instructor Sgt. Robert Millar said the purpose of the course is to physically test Marines, provide combat conditioning and foster unit cohesion.

"The course is huge on teamwork," the Phoenix native said. "There are many obstacles that require the groups to work as a team. If they choose to not work together, it will be a very long 3.4 miles."

Millar added that most of the course's difficulty revolves around mental toughness. He said participants are constantly pushed to their limits in a variety of ways, which is something he sees affecting Marines throughout the course, especially now in the colder seasons of the year.

The beginning of the course misleads Marines, Millar said, referencing the first few obstacles offered along the course. Participants first must crawl through waist-high culverts, then run along a 1.5-mile trail, jump over a 6-foot wall, then run a little further until they reach their first mental challenge – an unexpected long, dark swamp.

"This is where the intimidation factor begins to kick in," said Millar, who's an infantry mortar man by trade. "They get trumped when they see something they're not used to like the swamps. That real mental unknown then kicks in and remains in their minds."

Capt. Catherine Deleal, commanding officer of H&S Company, agrees, stating that the course isn't something Marines can train for or expect. The Staten Island, N.Y. native said everyone just has to ask themselves if they're going to give in or make it through.

Millar explained that this is the point where teamwork really comes into play. Many Marines become afraid to cross the murky water and literally begin to freeze. Other smaller Marines, in Morgan's words, "can't touch the bottom and breathe at the same time." Without help from fellow teammates, some Marines won't last to the end.

“The most challenging part of the course was the swamps,” said Queens, N.Y. native Staff Sgt. Carlos Malagon, a Marine with 2nd MLG Communication Operations. “It just sucks you in. One person actually thought he was dehydrated while he was going through one of them. That just shows how mentally and physically difficult they are and how much of an effect they have.”

The remainder of the course features a 10-foot rope climb, eight 6-foot hurdles and a 1.5-mile creek run.

“The water level along the creek varies from knee-high to waist-high,” Millar explained. “The creek really exhausts the Marines. No matter how hard they push themselves, they will all be broke off by the time they pass the creek.”

As they make their way toward the finish, Marines confront more swamps, creeks and their newest challenges - sludge under low lying barbed-wire. Millar said everyone has to get extremely low to the ground to get through, so low that some people can't fit.

Gunnery Sgt. Marlon Hayes, managerial accounting chief, 2nd MLG Comptroller, managed to keep his face clean the entire course up until the point when he was forced to literally submerge himself deep into the sludge to slide under the wires.

“I was having fun until then,” the New Orleans native said. “That horrible smell got into my nostrils and never left ... it sucked.”

Marines barely have enough energy left to reach the finish after they complete this final portion of the course, but eventually, they all make it.

“We're Marines, we have to adapt and overcome no matter what we face,” said Gunnery Sgt. Keith Priest, the H&S Company gunnery sergeant. “It takes that same confidence to get through each of these obstacles. In turn, every individual who completes this course can apply that same confidence to their everyday lives.”

The instructors at BSTS agree that the course brings out both the best and the worst in most individuals. It takes participants to their physical and mental limits causing many to break down along the way. The key is that they pick themselves up as a team and make it through to the end.