

Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) Training

In the northern jungles of Okinawa there's a group of individuals stranded, without the aid of food, water, shelter, and the basic necessities required to survive. They are tired, hungry and looking forward to going home at the end of their ordeal.

This may sound like an episode of "Survivor," and in a sense it is. But instead of contestants, the individuals participating are U.S. Marines and there isn't a million dollar prize at the end.

Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape training (SERE) is held monthly at the Jungle Warfare Training Center at Camp Gonsalves.

According to Staff Sgt. Clinton J. Thomas, chief instructor at JWTC, the purpose of the course is to teach Marines the skills they need in case they are separated from their units in a combat zone and must survive off the land while evading the enemy.

"We focus more on the survival and evasion portions of the course more so than we do with resistance and escape," the Grand Rapids, Mich. native said. "We teach them enough to survive on their own in the Okinawan jungle. If you can do that, you can survive just about anywhere."

The 12-day course is broken down into three phases: classroom instruction, survival and evasion.

During the first three days, Marines are put in a classroom environment where the instructors teach them the basics of survival. They are taught how to identify and catch food, build tools, start fires and construct shelter.

The survival phase takes place on a beach where the Marines put the training they received to use by surviving on their own with nothing but a knife, a canteen and the camouflage utility uniforms on their backs for five days.

The last phase of the course is four days long and the Marines are broken into teams of four to five men. The teams must stay on the move through the muddy and tangled jungle to avoid being captured by students from the man-tracking course.

"We've built our own POW (prisoner of war) camp where we stick the students if they are captured," Thomas said. "They're forced to wear the POW uniforms we made and the instructors interrogate and attempt to pry information from them to test their resistance level. We set them loose after several hours so they don't spend the entire evasion period in the POW camp."

During their time in the POW camp, Marines are subjected to forced labor such as digging trenches, filling sandbags and cutting wood. They are also put in a small three-foot squared cube-like cell where they are tempted with food to give up information.

While evading capture, the Marines are given free range to move anywhere they like within JWTC's 20,000-acre training grounds. When evening draws near, they are instructed to find a "safe zone" where the captors are not allowed to enter. If able to reach the safe zone, the students can get five to six hours of sleep per night. If they do not find the zone, they are still subject to capture and may only receive a few hours of sleep if any at all.

The average student losses between 12-15 pounds while going through the course. During their time in the field they must rely on the nutrition given to them through natural food sources in the jungle such as snakes, insects, fish and plant roots.

Students participating learn to get through the torment of starvation and weariness by staying motivated and appreciating what they are going through.

"I thought the survival portion was very interesting. I'm not used to catching my own food and finding or building my own shelter," said Lance Cpl. Daniel L. Pendergast, rifleman with 1st battalion, 25th Marine Regiment now assigned to 4th Marine Regiment. "The course has shown me where my limits are as far as how long I can go without food. Learning how to deal with that is the only tough part."