

# A weekend in hell with the Royal Marines.

## What I learned about myself and the human spirit.

### “The pain and suffering”

The ‘feint hearted need not apply’ and the legal disclaimer was also pretty scary. The premise of the event, survive 24 hours being ‘beasted’ physically and mentally by



current and ex Royal Marines. To put off weekend warriors the entry criteria suggested applicants should be able to run 6 miles, do 30 press-ups, 30 sit ups and 5 pull ups. Phone and watches were to be confiscated, sleep deprivation and hard effort was to be expected and if you were not to the mark you would fail the event and be sent home. A corporate sugar coated event this was not!

For those who know or follow me you will know that I’m not a stranger to hard physical challenges but spoiler alert this proved to be the

hardest event I have ever attempted but in some ways the most rewarding.

Before the event applicants were given a kit list and told to make their way to a railway station south of Manchester for 12 noon, be well feed and ready to start. It soon become apparent that all the hyperbole before the event was not for effect. I confess after just 10 minutes I was regretting signing up, the body was in shock and I was considering handing in my arm band and VW from the event (Voluntary Withdrawal).

For anyone who has seen the tv programme ‘SAS who dares wins’ what followed was akin to that in format. Lots of arduous ‘phy’ physical exercise which involved heavy sandbags, water, hills, mud, tyre flipping while being watched like hawks from the directing staff searching for any misdemeanour or lack of effort and dishing out group punishment for even something as innocent and placing our hands on your hips. The psychological torment began by offering an exit from the physical pain if you VW’ed.

I was the second oldest of my fellow competitors but in truth the field was older than I thought it would at be around 40. I was clearly not the fittest but dug deep broke the

challenge into manageable chinks, just get to night fall, then just see out the night, get to 6am and then its only 6 hours to the end. All the while those around me were withdrawing from the course.

Hell seems worse at night though. Our accommodation was a bivvy - essentially a piece of waterproof tarpaulin held up by two poles, string and pegs. When in our bivvy we were to change into dry kit and then change back into our wet and stinking clothes for the numerous activities that came at us thick and fast throughout the night. Particular low lights included a log run in the early hours of the morning, a run to the local river for group sit ups and the monotonous carrying of sandbags, did I mention pull ups and numerous bear crawls. On one occasion we were pulled from the comparative safety of our bivvys and made to sit in stress positions, blindfolded and then marched to the other side of the field and then with flashing strobe lights adding to the disorientation asked who we thought as the weakest recruit. The mental torment continued even during the limited 'sleeping opportunity'. We were subjected to 'Incey Wincy Spider' being played loudly and on repeat play – I kid you not! It was a relief when the previous childhood favourite was drowned out temporarily by the planes landing at Manchester airport.

Morning proved not to be the blessing I had hoped for as the 'Phy' seemed to go up a notch with the lead DS maintaining that the torment would not end until he had whittled the starting field of 12 down to 6. 'Give me your armband number 1, no staff' became an all too familiar soundtrack. Exhausted and with every muscle screaming for mercy I continued - by now I was entertaining thoughts of packing it in, I could return home head held high I had experienced hardship and torment not many had, was it worth the



agony for a T-shirt? Yes was the answer – I'd come so far I wasn't the fittest of those that remained but I tapped into my strength, my mental resolve and fortitude. I was determined to stay the course if I was withdrawn by our tormentors that was one thing but give up voluntarily, no not now, I only had a few hours left !

Those hours seemed quite surreal at the time and even more so looking back. I think eventually the brain won the battle over the body. I would finish the ordeal despite the considerable pain I was enduring.

The terrain became more urban as we neared Manchester Airport - the sight of an Easyjet plane taxiing above my head as we ran underneath the airport was an unexpected image. Our tormentors calls with withdrawal seemed to have stopped, the

sky was a cloudy grey so difficult to discern the time of day. I was hopeful though that the end may soon be in sight. And then a hotel carpark and our support vehicle next to a huge 'Thank you sign', surely this marked the end but as we neared the sign I realised it was not for us but for departing hotel guests! My flicker of hope dashed but albeit briefly because moments later our tormentors became our biggest advocates and at that moment our best friends as they told us the ordeal, our trip to hell, was over! We had done it we were the sole survivors – it felt amazing!

## **The reward, the learning**

Was it worth it? a familiar question I am often asked, particularly during this my 50th year and one littered with many physical challenges. The answer is always Yes and its not for the physical reward – I have many T-Shirts!

I know it is very cliched but these challenges are learning experiences and yes you learn about yourself and create powerful memories. But what does that really mean and why do I and others continually subject themselves to hardship and pain while others winch at even the thought of any type of physical exercise that takes them outside their comfort zone?

Take 'Hell weekend' for example, my hardest challenge to date and in some ways the event with the biggest reward. The hardest because it was unique for me in that I was handing over complete control to someone else, I had no idea what time it was, how long was left or what that coming up next. Contrast with climbing Kilimanjaro which while longer and in some ways more physically demanding had clear parameters. This complete un-predictability was a new dynamic presenting a new challenge that needed to be overcome. Over the years, seeing and being amazed by how the body and mind can respond and overcome uncertainty and stress is a powerful and satisfying thing, an addiction maybe. My reward is another strong positive memory, another layer of self-belief, of confidence, I become a stronger better person. It's a powerful thing.

Now many of you will be reading this and saying well that's all good to hear but its not for me. I'm not like you, neither though was I! I hated PE at school, no co-ordination no desire for fitness.

We all have to start somewhere and really don't let your age be an excuse but start small. Set yourself a challenge that will be difficult but not impossible, this will be very individual, we all have different fitness levels, for some it could simply be going for a 10minute walk each day for others it could be entering a 10km run. Put in place a plan, get support if needed and use this as a focus. Trust me the reward will be worth it, the feeling when you complete a challenge beyond your limits cannot be beaten.

Getting others to experience this feeling and reap the rewards is why I became a PT and called my personal training business, Personal Best. It's not about being 'The Best' it's about pushing yourself to make the most of your mind, your body, the human spirit and being the best you can be.

Finally...

A big thank you to Civvy 2 Commando. Although I referred to them as our 'tormentors', they were quite simply amazing, the event was well planned and organised and although I have no experience of military service I'd say realistic. The warnings about the intense nature of the challenge were there before you entered, so there can be no genuine complaints. Their professionalism, their fitness, strength and mental fortitude makes you feel humbled and proud that they and others in our elite armed forces are putting themselves on the line daily for our protection. We owe them all a huge debt of gratitude and admiration.



Our tormentors