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Green Beret Training: "Ain't Nothing But a Thing"



Tony Schwalm

[The following is an excerpt from the book [The Guerrilla Factory: The Making of Special Forces Officers, The Green Berets](#), an inside look at Green Beret training by a former Lieutenant Colonel of the U.S. Army Special Forces.]

We sat four to a side in the back of a panel van with no windows, two rows facing each other. Each man tried not to look into the face of the man sitting across from him, tried not to betray fear, tried not to look overly confident, tried not to look like he was trying. By October 1993, we had been together most of four exhausting months -- we had formed relationships that sustained through the hard times. We had exchanged glances before a night jump. We had surreptitiously shared in Sunday barbecues with unsuspecting civilians. We had played commando and encouraged each other by word and deed. But the type of courage cowards find in numbers would evaporate as soon as each of us left the van. There was no "we" in this test.

One by one, each student was unleashed into the woods of western North Carolina, to navigate through the Uwharrie National Forest using a map and a compass. The rules were simple. He could not use a global positioning

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system. He could not walk on roads. He could not speak to anyone aside from instructors for the entire period of the exercise. If he lost anything -- compass, map, emergency radio, rubber M16 rifle, signal flares -- he faced the penalty of expulsion from the Q course. Game over. Go home. Wait for the next class.

On this morning, several white vans stopped with no obvious rhythm on the side of desolate two-lane roads all around Troy, North Carolina, disgorged a single camouflaged figure, and drove away, leaving him alone with a rucksack on his back. I watched as fellow officers clambered out the back of the van into a beautiful fall morning. My turn came.

"Captain Schwalm," said the big sergeant driving the van. "Get ready, sir. We're coming up on your start point."

My stomach was in knots. I tightened the strap holding my eyeglasses. Somebody next to me punched my arm. "Good luck, man." The van left the road and then came to a stop. I scooted out, dragging my sixty-five-pound ruck behind me.

"Sir, this is your start point. Get out your map and confirm your location." He gave me a coordinate. I looked at my map and plotted the grid. With a mechanical pencil, I found the spot on the map corresponding to the grid. "Your first point is at . . ." and he said another coordinate. I had to unfold my map to find the location. Across rolling terrain, I had a solid seven-mile walk in front of me. I plotted it and showed the sergeant. He nodded.

"Good," he said. "You'll be given your second point by the point sitter. Do not try to talk to him. Just get your next point, plot it, and get out of there. You don't have time to be bullshitting anyway."

He turned his head and spit a black stream of tobacco juice. "Okay, sir, remember. We're patrolling the roads, and if you're caught, we take you back to your last point. You can't be within two hundred meters of any buildings. No catching a ride or taking any assistance from the locals. Do you have any questions?"

I had heard the rules ten times before. I shook my head, but he read my face. His stiff bearing softened.

"This ain't nothing but a thing. Just do your best. Don't lose anything. Don't waste time. You'll do fine."

Unconvinced, I thanked him and he went back to the van. As I watched him walk away, I looked past him into the cargo area and made out the faces staring back at me. They reminded me of dogs being hauled off to the pound. I wondered what they thought of my appearance.

The sergeant slammed the van's barn doors and climbed back into the driver's seat, leaving me standing somewhere near the town of Troy. The road was the only man-made creation in sight. I moved off into the tree line and sat on my ruck, studying my map. The sun was just breaking over the

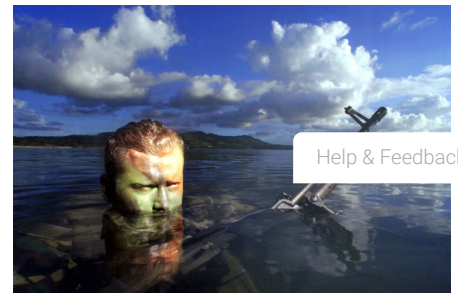
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treetops. The air was dry. I chose a route and set off through the woods with my thoughts, immersed in the solitude.

Questions rose up as I walked. Did the exercise time begin when the last man started or did each of us have his own start time? When should I stop to eat? Maybe we're not supposed to eat. Maybe they want to see if we can go three days without eating. Should I change my socks? Should I sleep? Is it really over in three days, or is that just another mind game? What if I fall off a cliff and break my leg?

My sense was that the answer to the last question was: "Then you die, dumbass."

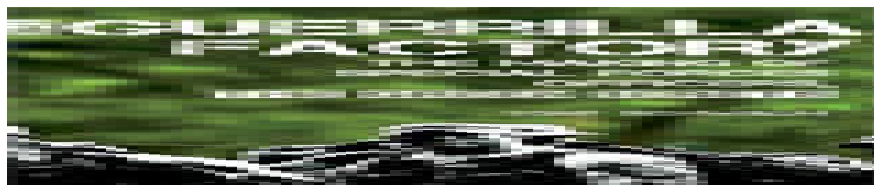
My rucksack felt like it had gained twenty pounds as I busted through mountain laurel.

Trek was intentionally placed right in the middle of the six months of officer training to make it more stressful. If I failed to find my last point before the end of the exercise, I would be tossed from the course. Others who hadn't waited as long as I had would be put back with the next class coming through three months later -- in this case the dead of winter, with its snow, freezing but not frozen mountain streams, and temperatures between really cold and really oh-God-please-kill-me cold. The students in the next class would know who the loser was. They would ask what had happened, was Trek really as hard as everybody said. Certainly any failure would say yes, because he couldn't do it.

I would want to say with as much sarcasm as possible, "Naw, it's easy. I'm just a big pussy." And then, with anger, I'd tell them all that I had accomplished, all the things that I had been -- most important, a commander of a tank unit in the last big war that we won.

I would not and could not say these things in defense of my failure. My failure would cheapen the achievements that I counted greatest in my life up to that point.

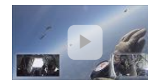
I would say, "Yeah, it's really hard, the hardest thing I have ever tried to do alone in my life. And it cost me my beret."



Tony Schwalm is a retired lieutenant colonel with the U.S. Army Special Forces and a veteran of multiple combat deployments around the world. He is the author of **The Guerrilla Factory: The Making of Special Forces Officers, the Green Berets**, which takes readers inside the grueling training regimen endured by every Army officer who aspires to become a leader in



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