

SERE School Is About More Than Just Being Tortured

WARD CARROLL
DECEMBER 22, 2014

<http://www.wearethemighty.com/sere-school-just-tortured-2014-12>

For my crime of earning a Naval Flight Officer's Wings of Gold and being selected for training as an F-14 Tomcat radar intercept officer (like "Goose" in the movie "Top Gun") I was sent to the Navy's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape – SERE – School in Brunswick, Maine during the winter of 1984. My fellow trainees and I stepped off the C-9 from Norfolk and were hit by a biting wind, the kind that's normal for Maine in January. I immediately wondered why I hadn't tried to push off SERE School until June or July.

The first couple of training days were conducted in a classroom. The lead instructor had been in the backseat of an F-4 Phantom that was shot down over Hanoi and had spent nearly three years as a POW. He explained that since we were all aviators there was a likelihood that we could fall into the hands of the enemy as well, therefore we needed to pay attention and take SERE training to heart. "This is the most important school the Navy will ever send you to," he said. The crux of the classroom training was an in-depth review of the Code of Conduct, a list of five "articles" created after American POWs suffered at the hands of their captors during the Korean War. They were all tortured in one form or another. Many were brainwashed; some even refused to return to the United States after the war.

Here are the six articles of the Code of Conduct:

1. I am an American fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.
2. I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command, I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.
3. If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.
4. If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information nor take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.
5. When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

6. I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.

The night before we were bussed across Maine and dropped in the mountains that border Canada, we decided to stuff ourselves with KFC, hoping that would give us the energy we needed to get through the field portion of SERE. Early the next morning we were issued cold weather clothing and reminded that it was more than we'd have if we'd had our jets shot from under us. And the fact we were also given snowshoes should have been a warning sign that the weather where we were going was more brutal than the already miserable weather at Naval Air Station Brunswick on the Atlantic Ocean side of the state.

After a four-hour drive westward into higher elevations we wandered off the bus and were greeted by a group of "partisans," friendly locals who welcomed us to the Peoples Republic of North America – PRONA. The partisans explained that PRONA was a Soviet satellite (remember, this was 1984 and the Cold War was still in full swing) and that they were a small band of rebels fighting for freedom. (We found out later that the partisans, like everyone else in the land of PRONA, were actually a combination of local outdoorsmen on retainer and DoD personnel on loan to SERE School.) The partisans spoke English with thick eastern European accents. (They were acting, of course, but it was believable.)

The partisans broke us into groups of 10 and led us into the forest where they gave us instruction in some of the basics of survival, including how to use the snowshoes to navigate the massive snowdrifts we encountered. That night we were allowed to make a campfire and eat meat of unknown origin and huddle as a group to stay warm.

The next day our partisan told us that the army of PRONA was looming and we needed to break up the group and attempt to evade individually. I spent the balance of the daylight hours crunching through the forest trying to be sneaky in spite of the fact there was no way to be while wearing snowshoes. Right before it got dark I fashioned a quick snow fort as our partisan had instructed and climbed into my sleeping bag for a few hours of trying to keep the exposed part of my face from freezing.

At daybreak one of the partisans came and got me –obviously my hiding place sucked – and said that the enemy threat was gone for the time being and we were going to form up the entire group and march to a safe place. It was actually a trap (and a lesson in who not to trust during wartime).

The formation was interrupted by gunshots. The partisans disappeared into the forest and suddenly we were surrounded by military trucks and dudes in uniform yelling at us in a foreign tongue. Whatever training scenario context remained in our minds evaporated as our new captors slapped us – like hard – and threw us to the ground.

We were forcibly loaded into the back of the troop transports and driven along a long road down the mountain, repeatedly told during the trip not to look out the back of the trucks or we'd be shot. When the trucks stopped and we were yanked to the ground again I got a quick glance at my surroundings – a prison camp – before I was blindfolded and led to a cell.

The guard removed my blindfold and forced me to sit on a box that was barely a foot tall and place my arms along my legs with my palms facing upward – what he called “the po-seesh.” “Get in po-seesh!” he yelled, Prona-ese for “position,” I assumed.

The guard told me I was “War Criminal Number One Five” and that I should refer to myself as such. Then he pointed to a tin can lined with a plastic bag in the corner and explained that it was my “sanitary facility” in the event I had to use the bathroom, but I was not to use it without permission.

He slammed the door to my cell shut and then peered through the small hatch in the door and, seeing I was not in the po-seesh, promptly re-entered the cell and roughed me up for a bit. I spent the next hours doing the calculus of holding the uncomfortable po-seesh and relaxing with the understanding that if the guard caught me I'd weather another beating.

As I sat there wondering what was going to happen next a wide variety of psyops stuff blared through the speaker mounted high in one corner of the small cell. A mind-numbing cacophony of an out-of-control saxophone was followed by Rudyard Kipling reciting his poem “Boots” over and over in a very haunting voice. (No one who ever attended Navy SERE will forget “Boots.”)

Give it a listen (and try not to go insane in the process):

<https://youtu.be/yGkyhaMdpto>

Occasionally instructions from the guards were piped over the speaker, for instance, the rules for heeding calls of nature: “War criminals wishing to use the sanitary facilities must ask permission by saying, ‘War criminal numbering whatever wishes to urinate or defecate.’ Do not do so until you are told to do so!” At some point a guard entered my cell, blindfolded me, and led me to an interview with the camp commander. His friendly demeanor led me to believe this was the “soft sell” portion of my interrogation. He asked me how I was feeling. I joked I was hungry. He looked concerned and said he'd get me some hot food right after I got back to my cell. I also joked that the music was terrible and I'd prefer the Beatles, and he said he'd make that happen right away too.

Then he asked me where I was stationed. I said I couldn't answer that. He asked me what kind of airplanes I flew. I said I couldn't answer that either. After a second round of refusals his friendly mood shifted into anger, and he ordered the guard to take me back to my cell, saying I was “insincere” and needed to see the provost marshal for further “re-edu-ma-cation.”

After another extended period in solitary confinement in my cell accompanied by

“Boots” on repeat, I was blindfolded again and taken to another part of the camp. As I was led through the snow I heard loud banging and people screaming. Once inside the building my blindfold was removed and one of the guards told me to climb into a small box, barely big enough for me to fit.

Once I'd wedged myself in, the guard slammed the lid. He instructed me that when he banged on the box once I was to yell my war criminal number, and when he banged twice I was to yell my social security number. This went on for a while, and fortunately I don't get claustrophobic, cause if I did the confined space would have freaked me out.

The box treatment was followed by some “up and jumps,” known to the rest of us as jumping jacks, and other calisthenics punctuated by guards slapping me and throwing me to the floor. When I was good and winded a guard led me to a room where a big burly man with a red beard was waiting.

Red Beard asked me a few questions about my military profile, and each time I didn't answer he slapped me. He produced an American flag and threw it on the ground and told me to dance on it. I tried to avoid it but he pushed me and I wound up stepping on the flag and as I did a photographer appeared and snapped a shot.

After another round of questions I didn't answer, Red Beard decided it was time for stronger measures. He pushed me to the floor and made me sit on my hands. He straddled my legs as he fired up some pipe tobacco and started blowing smoke into my face using a large rubber tube.

I couldn't breathe. The room started spinning. My head hit the floor. I puked. And to my horror – even though I'd hadn't quite finished puking – Red Beard blew more smoke in my face.

This felt like real torture, and I was convinced he was going to kill me. As I fought to get a clean breath of air, I managed to beg him to stop and offered to tell him something, hoping to employ the technique where you try to bend but not break by throwing out some meaningless bullshit.

I told him I was stationed in Florida even though I was really stationed in Virginia and that I flew helicopters even though I flew jets. Red Beard laughed and called the guard back in, telling him to give me as much food and water as I wanted because I'd been very helpful.

As I was led back to my cell blindfolded I felt like a total pussy who'd caved too easily.

After another period in solitary with my morale at an all-time low, a guard came and got me and led me back to the camp commander's office. The camp

commander told me about a junior enlisted man who'd gone through the same torture but instead of talking he'd come off the floor screaming "Article Five!" – a reference to the Code of Conduct where it states a POW should only give name, rank, and date of birth. "You are supposed to be an officer, but an enlisted man is stronger than you," he said. "And you are insincere. You told us wrong information. I am sending you back to the provost."

Sure enough, after more time in my cell to contemplate my shortcomings as an officer, I was back in front of Red Beard.

I hated Red Beard. I hated PRONA. And I felt another emotion that was like an epiphany: I wasn't about to let America down again. The nation was depending on me to be strong. That's why they'd given me my Annapolis education and put me through flight school. (Seriously, all of these things ran through my brain in that torture chamber.) If I had to die, so be it. Let the smoke blow . . .

After some more passing out and puking followed by more passing out and puking, Red Beard let me go.

The next day we were let out of solitary confinement and forced to do hard labor around the camp where our tasks included carving a "heli-mo-copter pad" in the ice-covered ground – an impossible task for which we were beaten for our lack of progress. One guy was stripped to his underwear and forced to stand at attention as his clothes were burned in front of him.

The camp commander gathered us together and, holding a Bible aloft, told us our beliefs were bullshit and that the only religious figure Americans truly worshiped was St. Walt Disney. He threw the Bible down and stomped it, which caused some of the prisoners to react enough that the guards felt obliged to slap them and throw them on the ground.

This cycle of hard labor in the freezing cold followed by "re-edu-ma-cation" sessions from PRONA's propaganda machine went on for hours and hours, until the sun was about to set on our miserable existence once again. Morale was low. We were sure we were never getting out of there and our lives as we knew them were over.

Suddenly there was another burst of gunfire and a group of guys in cammies rappelled over the walls of the compound at various spots. They took the camp personnel into custody and announced that they were Navy SEALs. The flag of PRONA hung against the main guard tower was replaced by the Stars and Stripes as the National Anthem played over the camp PA.

There wasn't a dry eye among us as we sang along. We were Americans, and we were free again.

The Senate Intelligence Committee's recent report on the CIA's enhanced torture techniques during the early years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has restarted discussions about DoD's methods and where they're taught and learned. The SERE School curriculum has been lumped into those discussions. But for me SERE wasn't about the torture. It was about the realization that the pomp and ceremony, the pageantry and adulation that surrounded wearing a Navy officer's uniform was meaningless without the courage and commitment that underpins them.

SERE taught me a big lesson in sacking up, and I can say without any hesitation that it was, in fact, the most important school the Navy ever sent me to.

(Editor's note: This story deals with a specific SERE curriculum that no longer exists.)



Ward Carroll

Editor-in-chief at [We Are The Mighty](#)

Ward is a retired Naval Aviator, novelist, and military commentator. He was the editor of Military.com for nine years before joining We Are The Mighty as editor-in-chief in September of 2014.

<http://www.wearethemighty.com/sere-school-just-tortured-2014-12>