

## Air Force Print News Today

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### SERE fire circle: Dehydration, delirium and determination in Desert training

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*Editor's note: The SERE fire circle is a time-honored tradition of Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape specialists. The fire circle is typically beneath a parachute, an iconic visual of the SERE member in the woods, where they gather to learn and join in the camaraderie of the career after their long days in the field. This is part two of an ongoing series following the phases of the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape tech school.*

While our nation is at war in the sands of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Desert portion of Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape is of utmost importance. Learning to survive in the sage and the dunes will prepare these SERE tech school students to teach aircrews, and personnel with a high risk of capture, the basics of desert survival should they become isolated in such an environment.

The students simulate being stranded in the desert, sand and rock surrounding them for miles. As they prepared for the upcoming conditions, water was tirelessly conserved and meticulously consumed. Then, the moment they begin to adapt to the environment, they are told to open their canteens and pour out that precious water.

The psychological effects of this action set the stage for this phase of training.

Students arrive at the training area near the Columbia River Basin for a five-day period that tackles survival in the desert. For the first 28 hours of this experience, the students learn firsthand how to survive with empty canteens and go about acquiring their own water.

"The first day or two it was pretty bad out here," said Airman 1st Class Ryan Dawson, SERE student. "The dehydration was bad. You can't think, you can't talk, you can't do anything. You're so drained, your muscles ache, you get headaches and cramps - it's terrible. Past that, though, it is pretty fun; the camaraderie is great. It has definitely been an experience."

During this phase, the students are broken up into elements. Half of them go to the sage for two days and the other half go to the dunes, then they swap.

When they arrive at their respective desert environment, students complete immediate action procedures, simulating crash-landing in the environment.

"Immediately they have to get out of the heat as they start dealing with the effects of dehydration," said Staff Sgt. Isaac Denton, SERE instructor. "They go to the dunes or the sage and start with acquiring their basic needs: personal protection, sustenance, health, signaling, recovery - so they have to prioritize."

After creating shelters, the students learn other aspects of desert survival, such as what bugs to eat; how to kill, sun-dry and eat rattlesnakes; then of course, how to get drinking water. Solar stills and vegetation bags are a couple of ways to get water suitable for drinking in the desert.

"With a solar still you basically dig a hole in a low-lying area where it could possibly be a little more moist," said Sergeant Denton. "So they dig the hole and line the inside edges with green vegetation and line the top of the hole with a piece of plastic. Then they put a canteen cup down in the bottom, so it can collect the water; then seal that plastic all the way around and put a rock in the center so it has a centralized point. All the water that



A 66th Training Squadron Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape technical school student looks on as the students prepare to move northeast after triangulating their position near the Columbian River. (U.S. Air Force photo / Senior Airman Joshua K. Chapman)

evaporates from the bottom and any moisture from down in the ground will evaporate up in the daytime, hit that rock, then the beads will come down and fall into the canteen cup."

Another way to collect water is a vegetation bag. This method includes wrapping plastic around a sage tree, letting it sit in the sun all day, and, as the moisture evaporates from the plant, it collects in the plastic bag.

Aside from simply learning to survive in the desert, the students are, as in every phase of training, learning to navigate in their environment, how to signal and vector helicopters, and how to determine their location. They also learn night navigation, where they rely on the stars to help determine their location and direction; and night signaling, where they use mirrors and strobes to attract attention to their location.

"Most of the work they're doing is at night," Sergeant Denton said. "You don't really want to be out in the sun working all day when you don't have much water. The way we do this here is during the day they just maintain themselves, taking it fairly easy and staying in the shade. In the evening, around 5 or 6 p.m., is when all the instructors come in and teach. Then the students do most of their work toward the evening when it gets a bit cooler."

The Desert phase is a little more laid back than others because it is not a critical phase of training and most activity is avoided during the day, allowing students to actually get bored, which can be psychologically challenging as well.

Perhaps it was the psychological effects of the heat and delirium caused by dehydration, but the students still seemed very upbeat and appeared to be enjoying the phase.

"This phase has been a lot of fun for the most part," said Staff Sgt. Henry Hoegen, SERE student. "The dehydration was psychologically tough, and trying to occupy your time and not get too bored during the days was also tough, but overall, it has been an exciting trip. As a cross-trainee, I wanted to do something that was a little different than the other jobs I've had. It has been living up to every one of my expectations so far."

As far as doing something different, students also got a chance to try an evasion scenario during this phase.

"The evasion scenario went well," Sergeant Denton said. "They learned a lot, considering they haven't been through Evasion yet. This was their first experience with that and I think they enjoyed it. It was a bonus for them to get to evade out in this environment. During the Evasion phase they'll be in different terrain, so this is one of the few times they get this experience in the desert. That's where their aircrew members usually will be, so it gives them knowledge on training in the future."

Being able to speak intelligently about their experiences is an important element of this training, as the students will be responsible for training high-risk personnel in this specific environment in the future. Experiencing the heat, dehydration, psychological effects and physical adjustment to the hostile environment is paramount to giving the students the well-rounded knowledge of their career field.

On the last night of this phase, the students tear down their shelters and gather their equipment. They then locate a pond based on the green vegetation surrounding the water. Trekking from a low-lying area to the top of a cliff, travelling through the sand, up sand dunes and scaling cliffs, the students make it to higher ground - a much better setting for triangulating their position and finding a potential body of water.

As the students navigate to the pond, anticipation grows as they move closer and closer to the green vegetation. Once they reach it, they jump in the cool soothing water, clean themselves off and relax for a little while. After they dry off and get their gear back together, they spend more time taking turns teaching each other and learning in the cool of the evening.

As the night grows darker, the students then pick up and move toward a central location, being asked by the instructors to navigate to where they think the instructor camp might be, having been there a mere five days earlier. The students do their best, finding scorpions and snakes along the way to add to their collection, and every so often stopping for a lesson.

Once the students of one element get nearer to their final location and begin seeing students from other elements, a light rain began to fall, bringing the Desert phase of training to a refreshing end.

*During the Desert phase of training, no students dropped out. The 42 remaining students of the 61 that started will next move on to the Tropics portion of the curriculum, heading to the rainforest of western Washington to be covered in the next installation of the SERE series.*

