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## SERE fire circle: Learning to teach the art of survival

Posted 12/4/2009 Updated 1/13/2010 [Email story](#) [Print story](#)by Senior Airman Emerald Ralston  
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12/4/2009 - FAIRCHILD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash. -- *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 six of an eight-part series following the phases of the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape tech school.*

Having tackled extreme conditions in forest, desert, tropical and coastal environments, Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape Specialist candidates are now taking on a very important phase of training - Teaching Techniques.

Teaching Techniques is the students' final test as to what they will be doing through the rest of their careers in SERE. Upon graduation, they will be SERE Specialists - teaching aircrew and high-risk personnel the art of surviving in the event they become isolated.

"This is their job," said Senior Airman Ryan Reinhold, SERE instructor. "If they can't teach and pass this phase, it doesn't matter if they're great at everything else - they won't be able to do their job."

Students are required to develop lesson plans and speak in front of an audience. They receive classroom training on how to teach and evaluate, then they are assigned topics to develop lesson plans. The students start off with 20-minute lessons, then move to 40-minute lessons with a demonstration. After the classroom training and practice, they go out to the field and give one- to two- hour lessons to their fellow classmates.

One of the biggest challenges in this phase is one that many people struggle with - public speaking.

"It is hard for the students to be comfortable," said Senior Airman Matthew Ralston, SERE instructor. "It's their own classmates in front of them but it's still hard to have the lesson in front of you and instructors in the back grading you - it can be kind of nerve wracking. Instead of preaching the information, they have to teach and make sure the students understand it."

There have been some students who didn't know the ultimate goal is to perform instructor duties - these are the students who tend to struggle most with this phase.

"Some people don't realize they're going to be instructors when they join SERE," Airman Ralston said. "We've had people quit just because they didn't know they were going to be teaching. This phase is important because it kind of helps give them a foot in the door. Now they're teaching, not worrying about themselves; they're worrying about their students. All the phases up to this were individual and team building in the environments, now they know the environment, they've been there before, and they have to teach other people to survive in it."

Some of the topics the students get assigned to teach for their 20-minute lessons include shelters, camouflage and other basic survival techniques. When they move on to 40-minute lessons the students involve a demonstration and can cover such topics as ax sharpening, knot tying, radio usage and other hands-on instruction.

"This phase has certainly been a lot different than the previous phases," said Airman 1st Class David Owens, SERE student. "All of a sudden we went from being in field training to a classroom setting. It's a lot like being in school - lots of homework and lots of practicing. So far I've done lessons on hygiene and sanitation, reading coordinates and I'm currently working on an improvised pack lesson. Since these are the same lessons we'll be giving in S-V80, we have to meet the same objectives we would if we were teaching those students." The S-V80 he refers to is the Basic Combat Survival course taught to all Air Force aircrew members here at Fairchild.

Repetition is one of the aspects of this phase some students have found challenging.

"The hardest thing for me is having to redo the lessons," Airman Owens said. "If you don't meet the standard you have to do it over. After the 10th time of speaking about the same thing, it's hard to stay enthusiastic and engage the students. Maintaining enthusiasm for the student helps them learn - it's a lot easier to learn when you go to a class where the teacher is fun or interesting."

Getting in front of other people remains a challenge even for the most energetic students.

"I'm a really energetic guy, and I always need something to do, so when they hand me something to just talk about I start going really fast and choking up," said Airman 1st Class Antony Pinque. "When they have me show people how to do things, though, it really helps me out a lot. I can slow down and actually learn how to teach, so the demonstration lessons were really good for me."

But regardless of the personal difficulties the students have with different aspects, they realize the importance of the information they will be conveying to their students in the future.

"This phase is all about learning to teach and actually display the information to the students," Airman Pinque said. "Throughout the phase the lessons get progressively harder, then we move to the field and put it all together. This is one of the most important phases because it really doesn't matter if you can survive in any environment; we are no use to the student if we can't actually pass on the information. Being able to teach is key in this career field."

*During the Teaching Techniques phase of training, four students dropped out. The 31 remaining students of the 61 that started will next move on to the Integrated portion of the curriculum to be covered in the next installment of the SERE series.*

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### Photos

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Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape instructors evaluate SERE students' lesson plans during the Teaching Techniques phase of training. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Emerald Ralston)

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