



SERE fire circle: Getting familiar with survival

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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 one of an eight-part series following the phases of the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape tech school.

In the Calispell National Forest of Northern Washington after miles of gravel road and mountains, hidden from view and sometimes from each other, Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape students are learning the skills to survive in the wilderness.

This is the familiarization, or FAM, phase of SERE training. A class of SERE candidates is taken to the woods and instructed in the finer art of survival.

"FAM is a nine to ten day course," said Senior Airman Robert Miner, SERE instructor with the 66th Training Squadron. "We bring SERE candidates and teach them the basic nuts and bolts of survival -shelter; fire; how to procure and treat water; and how to procure and safely prepare food. We teach them how to use the materials in their environment to meet their needs."

From gathering supplies to learning how to start a fire, the students are exposed to many things they likely have never seen or done before. During the first few days of this training, students are taught what to do and how to do it. They are then sent out on their own without constant supervision to accomplish the tasks they have been taught in the previous days.

"I'm building an A-frame shelter," said Airman 1st Class James Long, SERE candidate, as he secured his parachute to a log, forming his shelter. Fatigue is an ever present challenge as the students are given "assignments" on a daily basis, often times the assignments require the students to work late into the night.

Operating on such little rest, these Airmen are required to build a shelter in the woods out of nothing but the gear they would have if they were required to eject or ditch an aircraft: a parachute, 550 cord, a knife and some basic tools. With these tools, they must carve out a means to survive. Care and use of this equipment is a foundational building block as you simply can't stop by the local hardware store if you lose your knife and compass.

Adapting to their environment is one thing SERE candidates must learn very quickly.

"By day three or four they start to figure it out," Master Sgt. Alan Price, commandant of the SERE tech school here, said.

"If they don't, they get no sleep. They get briefed on what they're expected to be doing, but the whole unknown factor is pretty powerful. They have to conquer their fear of the unknown, but also to pace themselves. They also have to mature pretty quickly, or they don't stay around."

On one of the final days of FAM, the students seem to have picked up on this sentiment.

"One thing I've learned is write everything down. Do it right the first time," said Staff Sgt. Timothy Henry, SERE candidate. "It might take you an extra hour to do it right the first time, but that's better than the nine hours it could take in the long run to fix the problem."

Another student commented that it takes heart to do this. "Don't stop, don't give up," he said.



A 66th Training Squadron instructor assesses a shelter constructed by a student during the Familiarization phase of training. Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape training is a six-month course that turns regular Airmen into SERE specialists and, eventually, instructors. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Emerald Ralston)

The students are instructed what is expected of them for any given task. They receive a task and a time standard and rush to accomplish the objective at hand. It is still a training environment, though, so the instructors are there to assist if they make mistakes along the way.

Preparing a fire or "fire craft" is an integral part of the training, and students are sent out to collect wood from the forest during the solo part of FAM.

"They'll [rush off] into the woods and start collecting branches and standing dead trees for fire wood," said Sergeant Price. "Sometimes they just have to use a bolt knife; sometimes we make them use natural tinder from the environment. The angle being no matter what the conditions are, if there is wood around, they'll be able to prepare a fire. When they're out there and the weather is nasty, they'll be able to take care of themselves and anyone else if someone goes hypothermic."

Hypothermia isn't so much of a concern with this class, but other medical conditions can come up in these conditions, such as dehydration, adverse reactions to bee stings, blisters, cuts and injuries received by making mistakes after too little sleep.

"A lot of these kids are tough, but this is the first time they've been asked to do this kind of stuff on a continuous basis," said Tech. Sgt. Thomas Ricketson, 336th Training Support Squadron medic. "There are a lot of blisters. In this phase there isn't a lot of walking, but in the Mobile phase, they'll have a lot more foot issues."

The medics have an ambulance near the camps, as well as four-wheelers for visiting the camps and taking basic medical supplies to the students in a quick and efficient manner.

"We don't have a commercial ambulance," Sergeant Ricketson said. "No stretcher, we don't use it as an emergency vehicle. It's more of a transport vehicle and a clinic on wheels. The quad behind the van is what we use to get to the camps quickly if needed." Each day in the morning, the medics visit every camp and ensure the students are still faring well.

"We get up in the morning and we'll go to different ends of the site," Sergeant Ricketson said. "We go to all the camps, walk in, see how the guys are doing, watch them, see if anyone has anything they need us to see. We'll kiss it, make it better and tell them to keep going. After that, we come back and do whatever needs to be done throughout the day."

A certified psychologist is also available to the students in the field. Maj. Arthur Miller, 336th TRSS psychologist, visits the students and helps with those going through a hard time.

"The students have benefited from him being out here," Sergeant Ricketson said. "Some students don't handle failure so well, and during the first few days of training when they aren't being graded, just instructed, and they get the feedback telling them what they've done wrong, they don't do so well with that. Doc Miller will sit down with them and just talk, get some background, try to figure out why they're struggling. One of our guys out in this class actually wanted to quit, but he stuck it out a few days after he talked to Doc Miller. He ended up quitting yesterday, though, but he wanted to stay and try because of Doc."

Taking on the physical, mental and emotional stress and still not giving up is a cornerstone of what it takes to be a SERE Specialist. All of the instructors agreed it takes a certain type of personality to make it. Perseverance, resilience and integrity were all listed as important attributes imperative to success in the career field.

"There are a lot of guys you know have the ability to do it, they just don't have the will," said Senior Airman Charles Scott, SERE instructor. "That's what is disappointing. You just can't pull that out of some people. I mean, I can give them the skills but I can't give them the drive to do certain things. It's disappointing but I realize this isn't a job anyone can do, I know they can go on and do something else in the Air Force that will be productive."

The instructors also cited the Air Force Core Values multiple times in describing what it takes to be in SERE.

"Having a thick skin is a good attribute," said Senior Airman Ryan Reinhold, SERE instructor. "Integrity is important too. They're going to be out there on their own and they are trusted to do what they're supposed to."

Senior Airman Christopher Hallet, SERE instructor, shared that idea.

"It takes a lot of different things to be a SERE Specialist," he said. "A good work ethic is important, as well as having good integrity. Having all the Air Force Core Values is very important. Everyone should have those values and if you're in the military you should live by those guidelines."

Of all the things these students are required to go through, all the hard work and harsh environment, one

instructor highlighted the importance of the overall mission of SERE.

"There are a lot of people who don't know a whole lot about what we do," Airman Scott said. "There is a lot more to it than being bug-eaters and chopping wood. That's what most people think. Yes you need the skills to help people survive, but the point of our job is mainly focused on ensuring the war fighter can return in a timely manner and with their honor intact. That carries a lot more weight than just being out in the woods."

Until they meet again beneath the SERE fire circle, the students will continue to be instructed in the classroom environment. Following this will be the Mobile phase of training.

During the FAM phase of training, SERE had only one student drop out, after others dropped out prior to even reaching FAM. The 47 remaining students of the 61 that started will move on to the Mobile portion of the curriculum, returning to the Colville National Forest to be covered in the next installation of the SERE series.