



## SERE fire circle: Undercurrent of pride, respect swells through Coastal phase

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

On a bright orange life raft, incessantly bobbing up and down to the waves of the ocean, sit 42 Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape students.

Some sit calmly on the raft, while others lean over the edge, nauseous - this is one of the SERE students' primary introductions to the ocean environment in the Coastal phase of training.

Back at their campsite on the Oregon coast, students complete the tasks they have been required to do in every phase thus far, such as personal protection, shelter, fire, signaling, recovery, procuring food and water, traveling in the environment and meeting their basic health needs; only this time, on the beach.

"This phase isn't the most challenging, usually," said Senior Airman Robert Miner, SERE instructor. "The open ocean can be very challenging, but the coastal environment is easy. We build shelter and fire and it's kind of like being a professional beach bum for a week. The best part about Coastal is the food - it's plentiful and easy to procure so they have lots to eat."

Some days in the Coastal phase begin with clam digging. As the morning sunlight breaches the mountainside, students can be found littered throughout the expansive shoreline during low tide, elbows deep in the sand gathering a portion of the day's food.

Rather than having food provided, or tirelessly searching their environment for sustenance, the availability of food in the coastal environment made life much easier for the students.

"Food isn't as big of a deal out here," said Staff Sgt. Patrick McGrath, SERE instructor. "Usually they only have a tough time with fires - finding good wood for them and also the wind. Maintaining their equipment can also be difficult, since it can be wet and sandy, their stuff will get rusty and dirty. But the best part of this phase is getting to live on the beach for a week - they live out here in these conditions, we teach them how to float and signal if they ever find themselves in an open sea environment and they learn how to maintain life on the life rafts."

Students spend time in the bay near their camps learning the basics of water survival. They are taught how to use 20-, seven- and one-man life rafts and are sent out on the bay, simulating what it would be like if their plane went down on the ocean. SERE instructors demonstrate parachute jumps into the water, then the students scatter through the water and are individually picked up by a helicopter to practice being hoisted out.

These exercises are in preparation for the students' first day on the open ocean, where they get the first-hand experience of survival on the ocean.

In coordination with the Coast Guard, students are taken out on the Pacific on boats, then instructed to evacuate the boat, inflate their life rafts and spend several hours on the ocean - enduring the sun, salt water and seven-foot surface waves. While instructors and Coast Guard members circle the area for the hours the students are in the rafts, this event gives the students experience to become subject matter experts on basic skills to survive



SERE instructors wait on a life raft before demonstrating water survival techniques to SERE students during the Coastal phase of training on the Oregon coast. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Emerald Ralston)

the ocean environment and introduces them to the psychological effects of being stranded on the open ocean. After spending several hours on the water, students are lifted out of the water by a helicopter and returned to shore.

Along with the open ocean training and other ocean and coastal survival techniques, students also receive surf penetration training, where they take individual rafts and maneuver to shore after evacuating a boat.

Students tended to agree, even after their first day of Coastal, that this was their favorite phase.

"The water was cold, but the open ocean was a good experience," said Airman 1st Class Alan Charity, SERE student. "I've always thought everyone should know how to survive in different environments and take care of themselves without having to go to the store - that's primarily what we are, someone who can survive in nature. That's what I like about it. I like learning these lessons because I'll be able to instruct other people in ways to save their lives if they are in an airplane that is forced down over water or they are isolated in a coastal environment."

The ability to speak confidently about coastal conditions and ocean survival are imperative to the curriculum, as it is an important part of what the students will be teaching aircrew members when they become instructors.

"This phase is important because we have so many individuals traveling throughout the world, who knows when they're going to go down, especially if they're flying to or from the war zone - they might end up in a coastal environment," said Sergeant McGrath.

Overall, Coastal exposed the students to yet another environment and better prepared them to become instructors and deliver this message to high-risk personnel.

"We had a lot of fun out here," said Airman David Scarlett, SERE student. "Things are different and it's a different environment but we're doing what we're trained to do to adapt to it. I wanted to join SERE so I could help others. Obviously, it's always fun to better yourself, but having the opportunity to better yourself and use the things you learned to help other people accomplish their mission; it's the most rewarding thing you can think of."

In the Coastal phase of training, an undercurrent of pride and respect for the SERE career field was apparent in each student. As they have progressed through the environmental phases, from their first days in the Colville National Forest all the way out to the coast of Oregon, their knowledge, confidence and reverence for the field have steadily increased as they come one step closer to donning the sage beret.

During the Coastal phase of training, one student dropped out. The 41 remaining students of the 61 that started will next move on to the Evasion portion of the curriculum, then back to Fairchild for teaching techniques, to be covered in the next installation of the SERE series.