



the HEPPNER GAZETTE TIMES

50¢

VOL. 140 NO. 12 10 Pages Wednesday, March 24, 2021 Morrow County, Heppner, Oregon

Survival training and life in a POW camp

Local man recalls Vietnam S.E.R.E.*

*Editor's note: In 1969 before his first tour in Vietnam, Gazette-Times Publisher David Sykes was sent to S.E.R.E. training (*Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape). Following is an article he wrote for a University of Oregon Journalism class in 1975 telling of that experience. We are reprinting it here in recognition of National Vietnam War Veterans Day March 29. Hope you think of the Vietnam Veterans on Monday and enjoy this article about one person's training for that war.*

By David Sykes

Prior to going to Vietnam in 1969 I was sent to three weeks of specialized training on survival, evasion, resistance, and escape, or S.E.R.E. This preparation was for people headed "in country" who might someday find themselves in a survival or capture situation. Both physically and mentally it would prove to be the toughest experience of my life. I was 18 years old.

While in the military I had always enjoyed being in new places and seeing new things and going to Little Creek, Virginia, where SERE training was held, was no different. The weather and people were different and interesting, and I had never been to the southern part of the United States before. Little did I know just how "new and different" this experience would prove to be.

The school was three weeks long with the first two spent mostly in classrooms and on weapons training. I was taught how to load, breakdown, clean, and reassemble the 50 caliber and M60 machine guns, and of course the ubiquitous Vietnam era M16 rifle.

My days were also spent in the classroom learning about the terrible things waiting for me in the war zone. In very matter of fact ways, much like taking classes back at Reed-sport High School, I learned through pictures, movies, and mockups, of the nasty booby traps, snakes and diseases awaiting me. I was also given graphic descriptions of the torture and humiliation the enemy would inflict upon me if captured. Looking back, I should have been questioning my sanity for volunteering to go there, after all, everyone I knew was trying to stay out of Vietnam. I, on the other hand, had resigned my secure position as a nuclear weapons technician student at Sandia Labs in Albuquerque, NM, and volunteered. But I just had to find out what was going on and see for myself what everyone was talking about.

Out to The Field

After two weeks of classroom and weapons instruction, we were then

sent out for a week of training in "the field." In the nearby swamps and forests of Virginia we would learn to live off the land, evade the enemy and survive if captured. Little did I know the disparate experience that awaited me.

On the morning of departure, the company was up before dawn, loaded into Army trucks and driven out to the forest. We were divided into seven-man platoons with each group given salt tablets, a compass, canteens of water, knives for each man and one live chicken. That was it.

We spent the first day learning how to make traps, catch small animals and build shelters. None of us caught any of the rabbits or squirrels the instructors said were running around the woods, although a couple of guys did manage to catch a

fish or two out of a lake. Using safety pins and grasshoppers they got fish hooked, however mine kept slipping off because of no barbs on the safety pins. One guy got so hungry I watched him eat a raw frog. Just popped it in his mouth, chewed it up and swallowed. Not me!

That night we built a lean-to, and all piled in to get some sleep. I found it too crowded and ended up sleeping outside on the ground. It would be the last rest any of us got for quite some time. In the morning we awoke to find our chicken, which we tied to a tree with string, had laid an egg. We proceeded to kill, pluck, and boil that scrawny little bird along with its egg, and throwing in a few salt tablets for seasoning, seven hungry guys divided up one rubbery chicken for breakfast. We were all still hungry, but it was time to move on.

Getting hungrier, we learned later that day to eat a plant resembling spinach, which wasn't too bad. Years later when I heard a song called "Poke Salad Annie" about a poor girl in the south who gathered the wild poke weed for her family to eat, I realized that's what we had been eating.

We were not just out there to find stuff to eat, however, we were there to "evade the enemy." Given checkpoints across the Virginia forests and swamps we were ordered to march, and with our compass we headed off to the first checkpoint. We were also told to watch out for the enemy, who would be out looking for us.

Our platoon, and the others too, set off with a point man looking at his compass, guiding the rest of the team, and keeping them all on course. A lieutenant was in command, and during the day he led us across the countryside.



When the sun went down however, he relinquished the point, giving it to me that first night. It was very dark, so I had the illuminated compass in front of me guiding the men through the pitch-black forest on a course to the next checkpoint. I was worried about falling into a ditch or bog, so I got a long pole and poking it out in front of me felt for sinkholes and drop offs in the dark. In the pitch blackness each man at times placed his hand on the shoulder of the one in front, and we marched through the woods that way.

A scary incident occurred the next day when our platoon ran across a nest of copperheads, and for some reason ordered not to avoid, but to kill them. We threw all our knives at the four snakes without harming or killing one. When all the knives were in the nest and we could not get them back, everyone wondered what to do. We found a long branch with a forked end, and reaching into the nest, put the fork on each snake's neck, killing them one by one. I had been catching snakes this way since I was young, but just garter snakes around my home in Gardiner. Anyway, that simple forked stick technique from the backyards of Gardiner came in handy 3,000 miles away in the swamps of Virginia.

We marched night and day going from one checkpoint to the next without sleep. When arriving at a checkpoint we were given sugar cubes and water to fill our canteens. We had no food or sleep during this whole time marching and evading the enemy forces, which I learned later were Navy SEALs.

In one encounter, our company had to cross from one wooded area to another across a dirt road. Not wanting to get caught by the enemy patrolling in jeeps, we waited until a jeep went by then one man at a time ran across the road. Just then another jeep came down the road and caught one guy out in the open. "One caught all caught" was the rule, so our whole platoon was brought out of hiding onto the road. As punishment for getting caught the enemy had us take off our clothes and roll around in the muddy, sandy roadway. We put everything back on and I remember how the sand and dirt irritated me when hiking. That discomfort made me not want to get caught again.

Lesson learned in hiding from the enemy

Later, after we had made all our checkpoints, we moved on, still without sleep and now on our third day, for training in "camouflage and hiding from the enemy."

We were taken to a large tract of land which I remember had lots of wild turkeys running around. We were told to camouflage ourselves and hide from the advancing enemy forces. Going into the wooded area I watched guys climb trees, get behind stumps and all kinds of stuff. I found a patch of thorny nasty bushes and thinking that the enemy would not want to come in there looking for anyone, I decided to hide in there. It was a good idea, but later because of my stupid curiosity, I blew it.

Crawling into the middle of the briar patch I dug a shallow hole in the ground the length of my body. Then I lay down on my stomach and reaching around to throw branches and leaves up over my back, camouflaged myself. I lay there with my face in the dirt and waited. I heard the enemy advancing through the woods. They were shooting guns and I heard guys running, yelling, and getting captured. The enemy was speaking some sort of strange dialect, which later I learned was made up by the SEALs just to be intimidating. They also spoke English and were cursing and beating the captured men. In an attempt to throw off the enemy soldiers, one enlisted man offered to be a decoy for our lieutenant, but to no avail; they caught both quickly.

How was I doing in my little briar patch hideout? Just fine. That is until I got stupid. Soldiers were walking close by and had no idea I was inside that prickly patch. So of course, I had to go and make a big mistake, and one I will always remember. I heard all the action going on around me. The shooting. The yelling.

-See POW CAMP/PAGE EIGHT

Heppner starts big street rehab project



Backhoes began tearing up and removing the pavement on Chase Street last week in preparation for the new street to be put in. -Photo by Tripp Finch



Things will be a little rough on some streets in Heppner for the next several weeks as the city completes a badly needed rehabilitation project. -Photo by David Sykes

City residents who use Gale and Church Streets often will be finding their route a little rougher for the next few weeks as the City of Heppner completes a rehabilitation project that will see these streets and several others in the area completely torn up and redone with new asphalt, curbs, gutters and sidewalks. Church,

Center and May streets will also be done. The project is expected to be completed by November. Premiere Excavation is the lead contractor on the project. "Please have patience and feel free to contact me at city hall, 541-676-9618, with questions," City Manager Kraig Cutsforth said.

Heppner cemetery before and after



In keeping with the historical news items recently published in the G-T, a historic photo of the Heppner cemetery was submitted by a reader. G-T employee, Giselle Moses was able to reproduce the same section in a current photo to show how it looks now compared to way back then.



Pastors invited to submit Easter messages

Area pastors are invited to submit Easter messages to the Heppner Gazette-Times for publication in the March 31 newspaper. Deadline for submission is 5 p.m. Monday, March 29. Messages may be emailed to editor@rapid-

serve.net, mailed to Gazette-Times at P.O. Box 337, Heppner, OR 97836, faxed to 541-676-9211, uploaded to the website, Heppner.net or brought into the Gazette-Times office, 188 W. Willow in Heppner.

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