

Permanence, Perseverance and persistence in spite of all obstacles, discouragements, and impossibilities: It is this, that in all things distinguishes the strong soul from the weak.

- Thomas Carlyle

Friday night, the beach, and a group of new friends sounds like a good time, right? It would be the start of what would be the most challenging 24 hours I have had to endure...yet. We arrived, did quick introductions, roll call and were handed 2 heavy duty contractor bags to use for 'something special' later. We were given 2 minutes to stretch and then it was time for our first challenge, a 5 mile beach run. This was an individual event so everyone went at their own pace 2.5 miles up the beach and back. I have never done a beach run probably because I don't like running or beaches that much. Being that we are from cold Canada and it was near 30 degrees, heat was also a factor. As we were running up the beach in long pants and t-shirts, we were high fived and cheered on by kids building sandcastles and woohooed by the adults who thought we were military in training. I was thanked for my service and thumbed up by a retired army guy. I didn't have the time or breath to stop and tell them I wasn't military so I just smiled and waved and was happy for the motivation. I fell in step with one of the other guys in the group so we did a lot of the run together. Turns out this was his first ever GORUCK event, talk about go big or go home. He tried to stop running on our way back to the start point. I told him no, we're not done. So he kept running beside me and thanked me later because he would have quit it otherwise.

Once everyone got back from the run we were given a few minutes to fix ourselves up, Kevin already had a couple big blisters, and then it was on to the next evolution. But first we had to give up all our food. Say what?! Yep, not allowed any food until Cadre says so. This is not uncommon during a Heavy event and I expected it to happen. This particular event was in memorial of the Bataan Death March (google it for more info). So essentially we were prisoners of war (POW) and as prisoners, how much food do you think they would have had? Little to none.

Up next was the 12 mile timed ruck. Also expected, it's a staple of a Heavy event. However we were thrown a curve ball and instead of it being another individual event like the run we were to do it as a team. Not only as a team but we had to do it lined up in single file holding onto the ruck in front of us the entire time. The prisoners of Bataan had to hold the shoulder in front of them when they marched. If they let go they were probably beaten or worse.

We had 3 and a half hours to complete this portion. We were to go up the beach 4 miles, come back and go out again. We set off, led by the American flag and a GORUCK flag. Everyone else lined up behind holding onto each other's rucks, the sun setting over the water beside us. It was a nice setting. There was a beach bar that we

had to walk by a little ways up the beach. It was packed with people sitting out watching the sunset. When they saw the American flag coming they started to clap and cheer. We got a standing ovation. How could that not make you feel good? It put a little pep in our step at least for a little while. After much sand castle and sand-hole dodging in the dark we finally finished the 12 miles. Three hours and 17 minutes. It was at this point we lost our first person. She had been having some nerve issues with her foot and didn't feel it was smart to continue so we went from 20 to 19. This girl has finished multiple HTLs previously, one just a few weeks ago and was upset to go. We were given 5 minutes to fill up on water which was supplied by the showers at the end of the beach. Still don't know if it was potable or not but that's what we had access to so that's what we used.

We didn't have any Cadre with us for the run or ruck so at this point Cadre Ragnar took charge of the event and gave us a speech on the steps of team building. Forming, Norming, Storming, Performing. We were also given a task prior to the event, we had to memorize the Ranger Creed. We had memorized it as a team, each person memorizing a small part to make it easier. He asked us to recite it, which we did with a few stumbles, and he related the lessons in it to the event/life scenarios. These bits are some of my favorite parts of doing GORUCK events.

Once break time was over it was time to get moving. We had done 17 miles between the 5 mile run and 12 mile ruck. Still a LONG way to go. A heavy event will cover at least 40 miles. At this point we picked up all our 'friends'. We still had the American and GORUCK flags and we now picked up 4 x 80# sandbags, 4 x 60# sandbags, 1 x 40# sandbag (I swear this was a 60#, I don't remember anything feeling as light as 40#), a 50# team weight which was a weighted PVC and awkward AF to carry in any manner, and finally a kit bag filled with all our food which was possibly the worst thing to carry out of all of it. That's 13 items to carry for 19 people. If you've done the math that's 650# plus whatever the food weighed which was quite a bit. All of this would follow us for most of the next 18-19 hours.

I have no idea where we went from this point. We were on a lot of streets and bridges. I don't recall anything specific. At one point we stopped and lost another person so we were down to 18. We almost lost another but convinced him to stay and he ended up doing the whole HTL. We were given some additional challenges throughout this movement to assist in our team building. Communication was an issue and so only the team leader and 2 squad leaders could speak for a while. At one point we had to link 4 sandbags together with carabiners to make a 280# worm. I'm not sure if this was better or worse than carrying a big tree. We then had to make a casualty out of the worm and put it in a litter that could only be carried by hand which was difficult to grip. This was a slow portion so after a while we had to make up time and were able to break everything apart. Next challenge was no one could speak. Not even the TL or squad leaders. Hand signals, claps, finger snaps and waves were all that could be used. I was the lucky one that got to be the squad leader for

this part. It was insanely hard. I knew everyone was hurting. The weight was getting heavy, feet were hurting and everyone wanted a break. I did the best I could arranging people switching off weights but there were so many weights the break was never enough. At this point I was really hurting, questioning my sanity and whether I could make it to 6pm the next day. Kevin's knee was not doing well, things were kind of falling apart and so I was somewhat happy to have a distraction looking after everyone else for a while.

Eventually we met up with Cadre Dustin. For Heavy events Cadre often team up so they don't have to run the whole 24 hours by themselves. Cadre Ragnar would head off for a break and Cadre Dustin would take us on the next leg of the event.

Sweet relief when we were told we could each have 1 food item from the kit bag. We weren't given a lot of time though so it was reach in and grab something, doesn't mean it'll be something you brought. We're all a team so we share. I thought not having food would bother me more than it did. We kept moving so much it didn't really become an issue. We were also allowed to have an electrolyte chew or something similar so we could stay hydrated in the hot temperatures. A few of us were put into pairs and broke off to look around the area for a water source. We found a hose on a building and used that to fill everyone's water. We took the opportunity of a little longer break to change socks and take care of blisters of which there were many. Every step was painful. Blisters and feet hurt, knees were paining, and hips were taking a hit. Kevin's knee and IT band were really becoming an issue for him. It was hard to see him on the injured list when he's used to pulling the heavy weight. I knew it was bothering him but we had to keep him healthy enough to hopefully finish the event.

Once everyone was back in their shoes we picked up all the weight and headed off again. It was still dark and we had no idea what time it was or how far we had gone. We were allowed to talk though so we were able to chat and try to keep each other's minds off of what was hurting. An undetermined amount of time later we came up on a pond. Now if you know Cadre Dustin you know he likes any type of water so I thought for sure we were going to get wet. We didn't! We did stop at the pond though and at that point the sun was starting to come up. Dustin talked to us for a little while about getting through the rest of the event and asked us once again to recite the Ranger Creed. If we could do it we could take our food back. This was awesome for 2 reasons, we get to eat whenever we want and no one had to carry that god awful kit bag anymore. Well, we still had to carry the bag but it wasn't heavy and full of food.

Cadre Dustin asked Kevin to lead everyone through stretching for 5 minutes. So we did a Samson complex at sunrise by the pond. It was a nice break. We were then given a 'game' to play. We could dump one of the 80# sandbags but we had to 'pay' for it somehow. The team gathered and we decided we'd offer to do 80 4-count flutter

kicks in payment to ditch the 80# sandbag. 80 for 80. Our deal was accepted. We did our flutter kicks and happily dumped 80# of weight. Dustin was worried about Kevin's knee and offered to stop at a CVS along the way to our next stopping point so we could look for a knee brace to get him through the rest of the event. The sun was just coming up, that meant it was about 7am and we still had to go until 6pm.

We made it to CVS. Everyone was allowed to go in to use the bathroom or buy Gatorade/snacks. We found a decent knee brace for Kevin and he felt a little better after putting it on and getting some pain meds. Motrin all around! #pleasepassthemotrin Seriously. Cadre Dustin had bought a huge bottle and it was passed around like candy.

On to the next evolution! We went from CVS to a marina. When we got there we did laps the same way we did the 12 mile march, holding onto the ruck in front, no extra weight just with our rucks and the flags. We did this because we were told that if we did more miles here we'd have less to do later. I'm not sure it worked out that way but we did about 5 miles of loops at the marina. Every loop was about a mile and they all went very slow as we were all hurting. I was in a dark place by this point and had people carry my ruck for a while so I could recoup. Along this loop there was a street curb we had to go over. It felt like the biggest step of life. Getting over that was a challenge every loop.

We also did our service project here and cleaned up the area with some of our extra garbage bags we were given at the beginning. At one point I bent down to pick up what I thought was a bottle cap but turned out to be a painted happiness rock that had a happy face on it and said smile. I stuck it in Kevin's ruck to take home.

Being at a marina we were obviously surrounded by water, it was just a matter of time before we got in it. Cadre Ragnar came back and brought Cadre Darrell with him. Great! More Cadre eyes. We were taught how to waterproof everything in our rucks and fill them with air so that they would help us float. Quite neat really, it floated with minimal air even with all the weight in it. Next task was to jump off the dock and trust your ruck to help float you to shore. I hate water. HATE it. I especially hate jumping in it but off I go after some thinking about it. Yep, ruck floats, now get me out! Once everyone was good and wet we did this jump once more slick (no ruck). Even better.

We were taken over to a small field and lined up in pairs with someone about the same weight/height as us. Each pair was given a sandbag or weight. Our job was the take our buddy and carry them out to a tree in the distance, maybe 100m or so away. Put them down, run back and grab our weight, take it to another point, do 10 burpees, run a little further with it and do 10 more burpees then go get our buddy and buddy drag them back to the start. Despite everything hurting it was actually something I was good at. I forgot how much everything hurt for 5 minutes while I was running and carrying my buddy.

Now what happened next was really cool and kudos to the Cadre for somehow making this happen. We were told to put all the weights and flags in the back of Cadre Dustin's truck, including our rucks. A small boat pulled up to the dock. This was our POW (prisoner of war) transport. At the end of the Bataan Death March they were loaded into rail cars and transported to their work camps. We didn't have a rail car but we had a boat which was not meant for 18 people so we crammed into that butt to balls (we were a really close team by this point). A leisurely boat ride across the bay from St Pete to Tampa would sound nice on a normal day but on this day there were super high winds and ridiculously big waves. Our little boat was rocked all across the bay. We were bounced up a couple inches every time we hit hard over a wave. At one point we were almost completely sideways, I thought for sure we were going over. We passed another small boat that had been thrown up against the rocks along shore and was being towed out by a rescue boat. After what seemed like a long time we made it to calmer waters in an inlet. A dock appeared but as it turns out we were not going to dock. We were going to anchor out away from land and were told that we had to jump off the boat and swim in. Which was fine for everyone but me because I don't swim and jumping off a boat is NOT something I'm ok with. Once everyone else was off and swimming across Kevin jumped in and waited for me. Cadre Dustin took me to the side and said he would jump in with me and swim me to shore. I had my own personal Cadre life preserver. Kevin and Dustin each took one of my hands and towed me in. I appreciate them for being patient and getting me through it.

Now soaking wet and exhausted we knew that once we made it to this side of the bay we were almost done based on where we were told the end point was. Cadre Ragnar conveniently showed up with Dustin's truck and all our gear so we rucked up, grabbed all the bloody sandbags and set off again at a snail's pace. We could only go as fast as the blisters and sore joints/muscles would allow. It was also mid-day and HOT. After a while Cadre Ragnar stopped us in a shady spot and allowed us to drop all our rucks and bags. He had us shake out our shoulders and talked to us about how our teamwork has progressed. Then he asked if anyone wanted to quit. No one said anything. He said well then, you guys have 5 miles left and you're all going to finish it. Now I know that in the grand scheme of things 5 miles seems like an easy day but when he said 5 miles it felt soul crushing. That was 5 more slow agonizing miles. At the pace we were moving it would probably take close to 2 hours or more.

Step by painful step we trudged 5 more miles without stopping. All I wanted to do was stop for 2 minutes to get a rest but we were not told to stop. We had to keep moving if we were going to finish this by 6pm. The most painful movement in all this was when we needed to cross a road. None of us were moving with any great speed so when we were crossing a road and could see the seconds counting down on the walk sign it didn't feel like crossing the street in 15 seconds was a remote possibility. Shuffling as fast as we could and stepping up and down over the curbs was challenging.

After a while of walking along Bayshore Blvd we could see a park up ahead. And Cadre Dustin's truck. Sweet Jesus we made it. We were going to finish this. We formed up in the park dropped all the rucks and bags and waited to be patched. Before we could get our patches though we had to finish telling everyone about our SOF members. Cadre Dustin always has everyone in his classes find a fallen Special Operations Forces member that was killed in action within 3 days pre-post of the event date. You have to print and laminate a photo and story of this person and attach it to the outside of your ruck for the duration of the event. Throughout the day/night, when we'd stop, a few people would tell the stories about their SOF member. These guys made the ultimate sacrifice and they should not be forgotten. Yes, our feet hurt and these events are painful but at least we can feel pain, we can cry, we can live to tell the stories they can no longer tell. When things get hard all you have to do is look at the ruck in front of you. The person on that ruck died so you can be here. It's a sobering thought. And so we finished telling the stories of our SOF members and then we got our patches.

This event was mentally the hardest thing I've done to date. We have done other events with more PT and more Cadre yelling in our faces but at least they ended shortly after the sun came up. Kevin joked at one point when I was feeling down and out that climbing Katahdin twice in a day doesn't seem so bad or 300 thrusters would be an easy day. The trick to doing these things is all in your head. Sure, there are physical requirements but it's your mind that will give up before your body. Cadre Dustin often tells me to get out of my head. I'm still guilty of letting it get the best of me sometimes. Building mental toughness is a process; it doesn't happen overnight. Start by telling yourself to do one more rep when you really don't feel like it. Then another one and another one. Force yourself to get uncomfortable and be ok with it. You are capable of so much more than you think you are. I am thankful we discovered GORUCK events, the Cadre and experiences we've had have helped me grow so much.

After the Heavy we sat out the Tough. Kevin went back and did the Light. So our HTL dreams are still out there. I'm not sure I'm meant to have that patch, we'll have to wait and see. I'll need to forget the level of pain I pushed through first. I'd like to think I could do it but more planning and training would be required. I will keep doing GORUCK events though because of the experiences and the people. We have met many friends from all over doing these silly things and the team is part of what gets you through the hard times. The bonds formed in suffering are strong. Till next time, Canada out.

-Joanna Wood