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By Phil Mitten

*“A soldier will fight long and hard for a piece of coloured ribbon.” - Napoleon*

My sodden combat assault boots pound the tarmac one by one like the sound of a war drum as I double through a seemingly airless, hazy country lane in the five-miles between me and the finish line back at the Commando Training Centre. I grimace with each step as the

buildup of lactic acid in my muscles burns as I move forward. My soul yearns for me to break into a walk and allow my heart and lungs to catch up. I despair at the impossibly thin air as I draw it in, hopelessly trying to satisfy my body's crushing demand for oxygen.

We'd set off in groups of three at the start point, and over the initial two miles of tunnels, mud obstacles, and water obstacles through woodland terrain, I managed to lose the other two in the distance to my rear. I'm alone in this fight and although it is an individual test, I looked at it as a race with these men. My overly competitive nature coursed through my veins once again. It's just the tarmac, me, my weapon, and the finish line from now on. One more barrier to overcome in my journey to earn the coveted green beret.

I'd prepared my kit well and my movement is quiet, other than my boots thumping the ground and my heart pounding in my ears. Life around me seemed muffled somehow. I know there are birds calling but I can not hear them. I know there are cars moving nearby but I do not see them. I focus on my task and desperately long for the finish line. Everything around me urges me to look inward and feel the burning pain within. I focus on the end of the road ahead trying to ignore my body with it's helpless yet persistent plea to ease this suffering.

Three miles to go. I glance at my weapon to ensure its positioning, knowing that I'd looked after it well enough through the mirky ponds and mud tunnels in order to achieve a pass in the marksmanship test at the end. This test wasn't just one of mental and physical endurance, I had to be switched on for the duration and arrive at my next checkpoint ready to carry out orders and shoot accurately. I'd kept my weapon well clear of the water as I carefully waded through dark, stinking pools. I stole some comfort in the knowledge that nearly all of the weighty water in my boots would continue to seep out through the covertly placed holes I drilled just above the soles in the days before I arrived at the centre.

With two miles to go, I try to ease myself away from my discomfort by attempting to

pinpoint some of the smells of the countryside so that I can mentally place myself somewhere, *anywhere* else. Yet, all I get is this earthy mud and old dust smell from my thick, nature-derived overgarment. This failure of my senses only serves to mentally propel me backwards to the ordeal that I had already overcome. My heart skips a beat and I instantly relinquish my feeble attempt at some form of grace from this hardship.

One mile to go. I maintain my forward momentum, and through my mind's eye, I look around me and see the blood, sweat, and tears of the ghosts of generations of personnel who attempted this test before me. I take deep pleasure in knowing the achievements of my forefathers began with completing this very same commando test and a deep rooted pride kicks in. From here, I up my pace in a cruel effort to justify my existence on a course such as this, and with that, my soul shudders at the thought of failure. Defeat is simply not an option, and for a brief moment the throbbing pain coursing through my body is alleviated while my mind is so dutifully bound to a fear of failure.

My energy levels are near-depleted as I run past the most inappropriate sign ever created, a cartoon image of an exhausted potential commando and the cruel words "it's only pain... 500 meters to go!" I curse at my body, if only the Directing Staff didn't *hate* us with every waking moment; if only they'd just eased off on the course up until now. We all know they simply wanted us to quit, day in day out. It didn't matter.

My body feels completely ruined, empty, broken. My lungs and throat are lava, my legs utterly hollow, and my boots impossibly heavy. I propel myself forward inch by inch, yard by yard, and I repeatedly tell myself to continue until I'm done. This is what I've been striving for, this very moment - reaching what I *think* is a limit, finding some compelling force previously unknown within, so that I can smash through it. At this moment, I learn that perceived physical limits are owned by the head, not a pleading and exasperated body.

And so, as the seconds count down, the sound of the war drum continues.

*Phil Mitten is a serving British Army Sergeant with operational experience in Afghanistan. A Military Ethos Instructor with a keen interest in the lived experience of personnel, much of his focus is on ground level leadership, followership, retention, and personnel development. During his sixteen years of service he has self-studied a Masters Degree in Education Leadership and Management, and an Honours Degree in History.*

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