



SERE fire circle: Remaining mobile through the mountains

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

Standing atop one of the highest peaks in the Colville National Forest, looking down on the clouds and grey sky, one can't help but feel a certain sense of peace and connection to nature.

This is especially true for the 42 Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape students who have spent the past six days trekking through the mountainous terrain with not much more than a compass, a map and a 50-pound ruck sack.

"The best part is the view from the top," said Airman 1st Class Benjamin Domian, SERE student. "We've been on the training ground for six days. We've only been on this peak for two hours. Every day we wake up at the break of dawn, have our cutting tools inspected, then the instructors tell us where we're going, we plot out the course, then we ruck up and leave."

The students were required to travel '60 clicks (kilometers) as the crow flies,' or about 40 miles, through the forest in six days, triangulating their positions and plotting their courses each day based on a topographical map and a compass.

"Right now we're doing triangulations, so we pick out a point, pick out a distinct feature in the terrain, describe it, estimate distance on that point and we look at the map, see if we can identify it," said Tech. Sgt. Patrick Cozad, SERE student. "Once we think we have the point identified, we take a heading off the compass and plot it on the map, draw it back to where we think we might be and go from there."

The class is broken down into 10 elements for this phase, with four to five students per element. Instructors accompany the students on their journey through the mountains, providing training and advice, but also stepping back and letting the students learn from their mistakes.

"The whole purpose of this phase is to learn navigational techniques," said Master Sgt. Alan Price, SERE commandant. "That's why we walked across five training areas - from the top of their map to the bottom. Once they get to the point where they're doing route selection, if they decide to walk a click past their point, the instructors allow them to, depending on the weather, what time it is and how smoked the students are. Usually the students stop themselves and identify if they've gone too far."

Every day there is an objective for the students to get them to a general area and bed down for the night. The students and instructors stay together for safety reasons.

"At the beginning, the instructors kind of figure things out for the students [such as general directions and bed down points]," Sergeant Price said. "By the end of mobile, they're making their own route selections and getting to established bed down points on their own."

Along with physical factors such as fatigue and blisters, the students also have to contend with the mental stresses of being in this training environment.



Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape students pack their gear before hiking down a mountain during the Mobile phase of SERE training. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Jocelyn Guthrie)

"Mentally it's definitely a strainer," said Airman 1st Class Anthony Fischer, SERE candidate. "You're finding out something about yourself - seeing what you're made of and what you can do. You can get down on yourself sometimes. But I learned a lot about myself, I learned I can go a lot farther than I thought I could. It is relentless - everything about it. You get done trekking through the mountains and then 'oh sure let's do a split wood fire craft, or maybe a shelter and go really fast' and when you don't have any energy left, all you want to do is be in your sleeping bag, but there is always so much more to do."

While learning to survive the wilderness and terrain themselves, the students are also asked to learn how to take care of another person in the event they become isolated.

"Over the past six days we've been going all over our training area from point-to-point learning basic land navigation skills, triangulation skills, night navigation - essentially the skills we need to someday teach an aircrew member the types of things they'll need if they ever became an isolated person," said Airman 1st Class Randall Prill, SERE student. "This is definitely a memorable experience to get out in nature and see the training area. It has been amazing. We've climbed a lot of cool peaks, seen a lot of things, and we're up here on the highest peak in the training area. Not everyone gets to do this. I like this because I wanted to join SERE to do something bigger than myself; I'm learning how to help people learn necessary skills that might save their lives someday. It has been a good time."

Although some students enjoy their experience rucking through the forest, it was not an easy time for all of them.

"For some of the students this is just overwhelming," said Senior Airman Ryan Reinhold, SERE instructor. "We've been losing students left and right, one out of my element and a total of five so far. This is probably the hardest thing they've done in their lives. The weather has been bad and as we go through it, it gets worse. It rained the whole time, and it hailed on day four. On one of the days we had to vector a helicopter it stormed, so that was interesting."

The weather was a big factor for some of the students.

"The most challenging thing this whole time has been the weather," Airman Prill said. "A lot of the cadre has been talking about how this is the worst weather for summer mobile they've ever been on. I was doing a vector on a mountainside in a hailstorm with a poncho on - pretty intense."

The struggles of the climate, fatigue, mental stress and physical brokenness all seemed to dissipate when they reached the top of Calispell Peak on the final day of Mobile training.

Looking down on the surrounding training area knowing they had accomplished the mission, the students agreed the view from the top was, by far, the most rewarding aspect of Mobile.

During the Mobile phase of training, SERE had five students drop out. The 42 remaining students of the 61 that started will move on to the Desert portion of the curriculum, heading to the Columbia River Basin to be covered in the next installation of the SERE series.