



## SERE fire circle: Students meet exotic locale in tropics phase of training

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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 four of an ongoing series following the phases of the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape tech school.*



A SERE instructor shows students how to create a fire using bamboo in the Tropics phase of the SERE tech school.

More than 500 miles away from Fairchild, just miles from the Pacific coast, lies a tropical rainforest in the Olympic National Forest. The moisture in the air permeates your clothes and gear, and, as you trek through the rain and mud, it's almost as if it seeps through the skin to the bone.

This is where Tropics, the fourth phase of Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape technical school, takes place. Beneath the natural, lush green canopy provided by the overgrown trees and moss rests the iconic parachute canopy of the SERE fire circle in the middle of the rainforest.

The instructors initially immerse the SERE students within the deepest, thickest part of the rainforest so they can see what they're up against. They set up a static camp and are required to construct natural shelters. Due to the wet conditions, students make an elevated platform using fern, moss and tree branches and make a natural roof using the same materials. Once they construct their shelters and make them as waterproof as possible, they take care of food, water and signaling. For this, they travel to the Sol Duc or Hoh River where they will practice navigating the waterways.

Since waterways are the primary means of travel in such a location, and since pilots typically navigate via waterways, students spend most of their time in this phase near or on the rivers, learning how to navigate and signal from them.

The students learn to float with just their bodies, and then learn a variety of improvised floats, according to Senior Airman Clifton Cleveland, SERE instructor. They improvise floats using bamboo, balsa wood and saplings to make a device to transfer gear across the river. They also learn how to ferry with a seven-man life raft and a line.

Students learn basic raft commands on how to run a river in the seven-man life raft, as well as how to navigate if they were alone on a one-man raft and safely avoid obstacles.

"The students have a pretty good time on the river, then we come back into camp and they figure out the 'suck factor'," Airman Cleveland said. "They aren't used to this type of environment. They're used to starting a fire with coniferous trees and this area only has deciduous trees. It can be difficult if they don't incorporate the principles they have learned up to this point."

Training, up until this point, has taken place much closer to home, in the Colville National Forest and Columbia River Basin training areas. Out near the coast, in such drastically different conditions and a much moister climate, the students face a brand new set of challenges.

"We've come out here to try to overcome some of the challenges this wet environment has to offer," said Staff Sgt. Timothy Henry, SERE student. "We had all gotten pretty used to making fires in the Colville Forest and we've all gotten pretty efficient - this threw a pretty good curve into that. Finding dry material is incredibly difficult, even if you think you have a good tree and you bring it down it doesn't break up as well as you wish it would. It's been a pretty humbling experience but it has shown me a different perspective on doing a lot more with a lot less."

Students and instructors agreed fire craft was one of the most difficult aspects of this training. Another challenge was keeping their gear clean, sharp and dry.

"I, personally, have done very poorly in care and use - as in keeping my tools clean and sharp," said Airman Luke Obanion, SERE student. "It is so wet and the water gets on everything and rusts out all your tools. You need to keep your stuff dry, by keeping it in plastic bags and using oil. The oil will coat the metal and repel the water."

Difficulties the students faced were apparent around the fire circle at the instructor camp. As the rain bounced off the parachute and a fire flickered within the circle, much talk was to be had about the Commanders Awareness Program. CAP puts students on a higher level of visibility to Lt. Col. Christopher Tacheny, 66th Training Squadron commander, and the SERE commandant, Master Sgt. Alan Price, showing they are failing to make progress in their training.

As the instructors evaluate their students, nothing goes unnoticed. Every action these students make is tirelessly scrutinized. Their attitude, their ambition and their attempts at correcting mistakes - all is taken into consideration at this point.

Instructors grade their students daily. If they fail a day, they get counseled. If they fail two days, they're counseled by someone higher in the chain of command. Beyond that, students are placed on CAP and watched closely until they improve. When placed on CAP, students are generally required to do extra work with the instructors until they get a handle on whatever they've been doing poorly. The cadre dedicates additional time to get them up to speed between phases.

Regardless of the obstacles the students have been facing, the Tropics phase of training has its up-side as well.

"Tropics has been an experience," said Staff Sgt. Mitchell Harkley, SERE student. "Fire craft is very hard in this environment, but I believe I excelled on the river portion. We went on the river for two days straight. I got to go rafting for the first time. That was fun."

On the river, students take turns leading the raft and learning river navigation techniques.

"Rafting was definitely really fun," said Airman Obanion. "We took a one-man life raft you might get in an aircraft and combated the rapids. That taught us what a survivor would have to deal with if they were ever in that situation. We also did the seven-man life raft and learned rafting commands. It's a lot of stress on the person who is leading a raft. I learned a lot about running a group and a lot about A-type males, which you're probably going to run into in the course of instructing - it's really interesting. I have a lot more respect for any kind of leader now."

Along with the river portion, the food in this phase has been a different experience for the students. They get a variety of tropical foods such as avocados, star fruit, sugar cane, tilapia and pig, along with instruction on how to procure and cook these foods. Students learn how to make a rock oven in the ground to prepare food and how to coat fish in mud before putting it on a fire to bake.

Overall, the idea behind Tropics is giving the students exposure to this type of exotic locale - one their future students will likely encounter.

"We obviously can't create all the environments they have to become subject matter experts on at Fairchild," said Senior Airman Ryan Reinhold, SERE instructor. "Therefore, we have to take them to certain areas to get that type of environment so they can actually relay that information to [their future students]."

Giving the students first-hand experience is also important because our Air Force operates on a global level.

"Tropics is important because we're going to be sending them to be SERE instructors in the 22nd Training Group," said Airman Cleveland. "Our military is operating in any type of environment in this day and age. If we do not teach this, they are not going to have a heads up on what to teach the air crew members and the war fighters in the 22nd that could be operating in these conditions. That is why Tropics is important."

Despite the ups and downs that come with training and learning in the tropical setting, SERE students breathe a sigh of relief at the end of the day and remind themselves that it is all worthwhile in the long run.

"SERE is just amazing," said Airman Obanion. "Sometimes when you're out here and you're miserable and you're really tired and you don't want to keep doing this, I'll just stop and look up at the sky or look up at the stars and - it sounds really cheesy - but it gives me that reality check. I'm doing this - this is going to be my job one day. The kind of stuff we get to do in SERE really is amazing."

*During the Tropics phase of training, no students dropped out. The 42 remaining students of the 61 that started will next move on to the Coastal portion of the curriculum, heading to the Pacific coast near Tillamook, Ore., to be covered in the next installation of the SERE series.*