

[REDACTED]

*Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.*

[REDACTED]

“Pilot down, we’ve got a pilot down in enemy territory... Request immediate rescue...” My team embarked on the rescue mission, running through the enemy-occupied village to locate the pilot while avoiding enemy contact and clearing hostile buildings when necessary.

That was one of the missions during our final test at our Urban Counter Insurgency (UCOIN) Training last summer. Our motto was “One Team, One Mission, Total Success.” This training was a challenging experience, even after my three years in the United States Naval Sea Cadet Corps (USNSCC). The previous programs I completed, including a 3-week Expeditionary Warfare training, could not compare to UCOIN’s rigor. Only 16 of the most qualified cadets in the USNSCC were selected after passing grueling testing, including a timed 10-mile 40-pound rucksack run.

As I departed [REDACTED] for UCOIN in Indiana, I recalled stories of previous trainees who were hospitalized and sent home. My feelings alternated between confidence and apprehension. I arrived at the Camp Atterbury Joint Maneuver Training Center much later than most of my fellow trainees, many of whom were asleep by 1 AM. I stayed up almost all night setting up the given tactical kit. Even before formal training began, my endurance was being challenged. I accepted that a maximum of 2-3 hours of sleep per night and one 1,100-calorie MRE per day would be my new normal during the training, as would be my assigned “battle buddy,” who was bunked across the room.

At 5 AM we formed in “full battle rattle” in the main training barracks, eagerly waiting to meet the cadre of former and active duty SEAL, MARSOC, and Army Special Forces operators. I was mentally and physically tested by my first full day of training, which included “taking a boat ride” by lifting a 300-pound Zodiac boat overhead with fellow cadets for hours and enduring the creative, scorching A-to-Z insults from the operators. One of our cadets collapsed and we had to find a way to carry him and his 50-plus pounds of gear while being yelled at by instructors. When I ran ahead to keep up with the time requirements during one of the evolutions on the first day, I was berated far more than the cadets lagging behind. I quickly learned cooperation is vital to success, and helping your partners is what makes a team operational.

I came to realize that physical pain and misery was not always the purpose of the training. To “embrace the suck” is to give 100 percent – not for yourself, but for the team – and to give each of the continuous evolutions your total focus. The purpose of the training was to teach the importance of sacrifice and leaving your comfort zone. This was a time in my life when the “push your limits” slogan genuinely applied both physically and mentally. We used with night vision; engaged in tactical shooting with live M-4s and M-9s; trained in close quarters combat; and learned about land navigation, reconnaissance, radios, IED avoidance, and tactical combat casualty care. When we finally approached the 200-pound “downed pilot,” we had no stretchers; we had to construct one out of parachute chord and metal pieces from a rusted helicopter at the “crash site.”

By the end of the training, I learned two important lessons: joint goals are more powerful than individual ones, and teamwork is absolutely essential. Even though mental

toughness and self-discipline were important to get through the training, I learned that in a military environment, they are not the focus – they are attributes that are naturally developed when you focus on team goals. This is not always what we're taught in our society, which emphasizes individual success.

This experience marked my transition from childhood to adulthood. It instilled a sense of character in me I would have never acquired so quickly without the training. The instructors, who voluntarily gave up their July holiday break to train us, were absolutely correct when they declared, "We're not doing this to break you down; we're doing this to build you up."