

Friday 18th September 2009

NOBODY DOES IT BETTER!.....



An Extract From Thelma's Diary
7.09am

I am waiting at Haus Meer station to pick up Johannes Hammerstein who is one of the people attending the Army Day today. I don't know what he looks like but I mentioned to him to look out for an English car. Shouldn't be many of those around at that time in Meerbusch I thought. My car was packed up to the brim with pictures, bric a brac and washing all destined for the UK. That was my destination for Saturday morning (a 5.00 am start to get to Calais) but today we are on route to Rheindahlen for our Executive Stretch Day with The British Army. I manage to squeeze Johannes into the front seat of the car and we set off on our way. I was really looking forward to the day especially after having a hectic 2 weeks which had encompassed 2 days in Paris, a night out on the tiles with a friend before Paris, a really bad bout of flu, a few days in Hamburg and also supporting our British Days event the weekend before at Burg Linn in Krefeld which was a total sell out.....

7.40am

My Handi rings.....Johannes takes the initiative and tries to steer my car whilst I am talking to somebody who has arrived at the wrong entrance to HQ. Does nobody read my instructions I thought.....?? "We are at Bravo gate" they said whilst Johannes and I got into a tangle as to whose foot was on the pedal, whose hand was on the gear stick and who was taking care of the steering wheel. I decide to stop the car. "Please head towards the main gate I tell them which is along Queens Road. If you do not get here in 5 minutes then call again....." although I noticed that my Handi had ran out of juice and promptly switches off. They manage to tell me that they are in a silver car.....(very useful information I thought as 5 silver cars pass me in the next 5 minutes.....).

7.45am

We show our passports to the soldier on the gate, say the magic password and are led to a convoy where another soldier registers us, and provides a map of our next destination (the gymnasium).

8.00am

I ask the soldier if a silver car containing the All Logistics party had arrived. "They are not ticked off " he said so they have not come pass me..... I ask every silver or nearly silver car in our convoy if they are from All Logistics. Eventually one car says yes..... "How did you get past security I ask without being registered"? They confirm that they did give their Executive Stretch pass to some soldier but not THE soldier. Hm..... I thought.....

8.05am

All our numbers now reconcile and we head towards the gymnasium where we are greeted by Major Rimmington and Captain Darren Walker who are responsible for organising the event this year. We are first given an introductory talk from Darren who mentions that it is going to be a physical day. I sink my teeth into a delicious bacon sandwich (breakfast is included in the price!), sign my indemnity form and provide my next of kin in case of death or injury.

8.30am

I confirm the numbers of people who have paid to Major Rimmington but he tells me we are 1 person short. We both count again..... .Yes we have an unreconciled position of 1..... Where has this person got to I ask myself? 2 minutes later an attendee emerges from the gents pale as a sheet and looking very shaken. He mentions that he thought the day was going to be in a classroom and would not be as physical as an Army day..... Does anybody read my instructions I thought.....? I try and persuade him to stay but he becomes paler and decides to head back all the way to Frankfurt. It is the first time ever that somebody has showed up, paid and then become a no show..... I reflect on our numbers of final attendees for the Executive Stretch Day. Initially I had received many

confirmations but in the days leading up to the event people had dropped out for various reasons but we still had reached the magic number. This must be like the real army where people sign up but only the people with real stamina survive the course.....! I look around at the numbers who have survived the day so far and felt really proud that we still had a lot of attendees. We are then assigned into teams by Captain Darren Walker, given a colour bib and a dark green uniform to put on (it felt tighter this year- I definitely need to lose weight for the next one.....) and we are finally on our way to Elmpt barracks.

9.15am

We are led into the forest where we are given a demonstration how to make a poncho (not the Mexican version!) but this is the name given to a piece of material which is tied to 4 trees and is the home to a soldier for the night when they are on the move. We are also shown our lunch(a ration pack) which we have to cook ourselves later on. Not so physical so far I thought.....

9.45am

I am running with my team members to various pick up points in the forest where we have to locate our ration packs and shelter equipment. I feel very unfit as I try and keep up with a young soldier who has been assigned to our team to look after us. A good idea I thought especially when 1 team got completely lost last year and the Army had to send a search party out to find them. Our team splits up into front runners, planners (including myself) and people to carry the heavy equipment. The runners go straight past point number 5. I notice this and call the runners back so they can log into 5 with the electronic key. More points for us!.....

10.45am

We are the first to arrive back to base.....I run the last bit of the waya good strategy I thought.

11.00am

I have a rifle in my hand and am crawling along an open field in search of the enemy. Johannes Hammerstein has been assigned to be Commander for this task but none of us are able to hear him because we have ear plugs in..... We were given a demo for this task by some members of the Intelligence CorpsWe surge forward shooting at the enemy then crawl again along our stomachs. This is a tough task..... down and up ...down and up..... I get told off by Major Rimmington for using my rifle to stand up with (he can shout!)..... I shoot at the enemy we only have blanks in our rifles for this task but I forget we only have 20 rounds and I run out of bullets.

We get to the enemy and I shout to somebody to "make sure he is dead....." We were given some feedback on our performance and we all came to the conclusion that we would all be dead if this was a real life situation.

11.45am

I am now firing real bullets with a pistol into a target. I really like this gun and score 24 points. I feel really pleased.....

13.15pm

We pause for lunch in the forest the ration packs are actually quite delicious and the tea tasted far better than what I had at home. I finished off with a Yorkie Bar which had on the label ..." Only to be eaten by Soldiers....." Not sure what this meant but decided to take the risk.....

14.00pm

The assault course! We are given a demonstration by members from the Physical Corps. God this was really tough-crawling through a net, jumping in and out of tyres and running in between bollards after a warm up exercise.

Then we have to drag a body back through the assault course. This is what happens in real life. The British Army never leaves its dead behind but it is very tough and in the wake of enemy fire I reflect that ALL our soldiers are extremely brave and must be the fittest of the fittest. I get to the end of the course absolutely knackered but felt good that I had endured the assault course and survived in temperatures of 28 degrees Celsius. We were given positive coaching by the various soldiers which I also thought was very good.

I have the opportunity to talk to some of the soldiers at the stand. One soldier tells me his background of coming from a broken home with a violent dad. He joined the Army to make something of himself-it took him a number of goes to get selected but he persevered, got through and was also awarded the Queens Warrant. I feel really proud of him. He must be one of the fittest men on the planet I thought.....

14.15pm

Our final task for the day, the Command Task where we are given gas masks to wear by a very handsome soldier..... We then enter a building which is full of "sulphide" gas.....we find the nuts for the wheel of the land rover , fix the wheel and then head towards the second part of the task. This involved a mental task of getting tyres in the right order from one hoop to another. For the final part our team had to get a number of benches across a river without touching the river.

17.00pm

Major General Nick Caplin is giving us a talk about leadership. He has recently taken over from Mungo Melvin and he provides us with an excellent insight into his time in Kosovo with examples of leadership which included communication, empowerment and identifying the centre gravity point in a problem. I asked him a few questions including what went wrong in Afghanistan and what were his two greatest leaders of all time. The Q & A session is always my favourite part of a speech because the speaker has to be able to think on their feet.....

17.45pm

The winning team received a trophy and all team members received a certificate, a CD of all the photos taken during the day and a T-Shirt with the logo Survivor on it.

I thanked Major General Caplin , Lt Colonel Bedding, Major Rimmington and also Captain Darren Walker for ensuring that we had a perfect day. The day was excellently organised especially by Captain Walker who only had 4 weeks to pull everything together. After an afternoon tea with sandwiches and cakes we were on our way home.

22.30pm

I am in bed and read a few chapters of Chris Ryan's book- Ultimate Weapon but quickly fall into a deep slumber.....I start dreaming about the Army Day and all the soldiers I have met during the day. Maybe I did indeed meet one or two people in the elite forces today just like Chris Ryan.....Who knows??.....and I conclude that Nobody Does It Better than The British Army.....

Theлма Matuk
Chairman & Board Member
BCCG NRW Region