

The Long Drag.

The long drag didn't get its alternative nickname because of the twenty-four hours you have to complete it. Nor because of its forty-mile length and it was certainly not attributed to the fifty-five-pound pack that had to be carried throughout. In Special Air Service parlance, the long drag got its other moniker because of the twenty check points you had to pass through on route.

Private Nathan Nash stomped some blood back into his size twelve hairy Hobbit feet. His army boots squelched to the quick with Brecon Beacons' finest, despite copious application of dubbin, spit and polish.

An ineffectual Sirocco burst from his lips in the general direction of his fingers. Blue veined digits that cradled his rifle and poked worm like out of the casts of his fingerless mitts. Conversely, steam and sweat streamed, a lenticular cloud formed above his forehead and his spine experienced more downfall than a tourist trekking around Brecon's cascades. This was his moment; to complete 'selection'. The cumulation of teenage promises and an Army career pathway. If his big brother could do it, so, could he.

The inclement Welsh weather was a godsend. At least he wasn't going to boil to death like the poor sod on last year's selection, when temperatures were well over the ton. What was it now, five degrees? Funny how you still used old school when it got hot but reverted to metric as the snow still beckoned on Pen y Fan, the top of this place.

'Nash five-three-four.' He flashed his ID at the DS. Directing staff nah, more BS but Nathan had no lungs to spare that thought. Checkpoint nineteen completed. With a short but proficient glance at the compacted contours on his map, he winced, then dialled up his inner compass. The DS was left behind ticking off five-three-four from his list with a feigned distain. Everyone applying to join the regiment knew the score, no help, no encouragement, all down to you and yours.

When did a hill become a mountain? Wasn't there some mad Englishman who carried tons of rocks up someplace and dumped them just to manipulate a geographical feature on a map?

'Keep the faith bruv.' Nathan channelled his older sibling's energy as he raced up the concave incline. Damn! Did he need to elevate his hill to a mountain? The weight of his Bergan had become personal; Sisyphus's rock. When he summited, Nathan envisioned his Bergan tearing asunder and its contents all avalanching back down to checkpoint nineteen. That was not an option.

Nathan split his thoughts. The army had taught him well. A third of an eye on the navigation, uphill all the way; pretty damn obvious. A third of his mind set on placing one foot in front of the other and ignoring the aches and hurts that tortured his

shoulders and calves. The last cerebral third, pushing, cajoling and plumbing the depths of his endurance.

Motivational melodies filled his conscious periphery. Their tunes danced on the wind as the path led onwards and upwards. Here and there the track strayed a bit close to the edge and those notes tumbled down the truncated scarp slope to the sodden valley floor.

'One, two. Keep it tight. Onwards, upwards,' Nathan hit the summit. With no pause, he kept on trucking and glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes till the last checkpoint closed. He could see it at the head of the valley. Two miles away - all downhill.

Mental maths chalked the breeze. Ten-minute miles. This would be close. Normally Nathan could yomp eight-minute miles but he'd been on the go for nigh on two whole days. Dehydration, low sugar levels and cramp, were.... Not going to affect him. He had his eyes on the prize.

Nathan's senses went into super-scan mode. Every moss strewn pebble, slippery stone, polished rock and ice bound boulder on the descent was analysed as hostile. The terrain was so slippery that one wrong step would take him out of the equation. Again, not an option.

The DS reception team were camped out at checkpoint twenty. Feet nonchalantly perched on their Bergan's, sipping tea from mess-tins. A kettle on solid fuel stove popped and gurgled a mushroom of steam into the already sodden air.

'Nash five-three-four reporting for duty.' Nathan threw up a salute, half to the officer half to himself. The long drag completed. Ding-dong. Chuffed to bits. Next stop Belize; jungle training.

The officer sidled up. 'Nash, I ran ops in Hellmund with your brother, he was a good bloke, tragic loss. Only twenty, would have gone all the way. He'd be proud of what you've just completed. I know you won't let him down. Go grab some nosebag.'

Nathan flushed. A raindrop, or was it a tear, slipped down his cheek.