



# Edge Of Endurance

## HOW THE SAS PICKS ITS PEOPLE

PHOTO: MAX PAGE, ARMY NEWS

BY JUDITH MARTIN

Infantryman Neil Jones is striving for what many consider the pinnacle of soldiering – membership of the SAS. He and 18 others are trudging through paddocks and creeks, over endless sprawling hills, and past narrow-eyed SAS staff monitoring the handful of men who may ultimately join their ranks. And it will be just a handful – within two weeks at least two-thirds of these SAS aspirants will have pulled, or been pulled, out of what at times will seem an almost unbearably gruelling test. Our assistant editor *Judith Martin* went along to watch.

**D**etermination is etched into the young soldier's gaunt face. He is on a mission that has barely started, and his every move is under scrutiny as he

wends his way through eight kilometres of undulating Waikato farmland.

The next 14 days will see pain, gritty self-discipline, triumph and crushing disappointment as the reality of SAS selection takes shape.

Today is the beginning of what is known as pre-selection, the period where staff make sure candidates have the required navigation skills needed to attempt selection. They can ask for help, though few do, and the aim is to take the best route to specified points along the way.

As Jones heads into the distance, the SAS corporals – “staff” as they must be addressed by the candidates – scan their own maps, their gaze flickering over the rugged landscape. Jones, they agree, has got it sussed. “But so he should, he’s been in the Army long enough. But these sailors coming over the ridge there, now they’re another story. ...”

Back at Hobsonville Air Base, a private chunk of which the SAS call home, the unit’s training warrant officer sits at an orderly desk and mulls over what this is all about.

The candidates have volunteered for selection, some for the second time, and all are aware, he says, that even if they pass the physical tests, they cannot automatically assume they have gained entry to the SAS. "They must prove to us that they want to be part of the team. And if they are selected, they must also complete nine months of training. They can be sent back to their unit at any time during that nine months if they don't make the grade."

SAS selection is open to all three services, and on this course there are four sailors as well as 15 soldiers, two-thirds of them Maori.

The attrition rate on the selection course is high – about 70 percent. The reasons for dropping out – or being asked to leave – vary, although mostly it's because a candidate doesn't meet the required standard for an individual activity. Sometimes an old injury plays up. If it can be verified by a medic they

are given another chance next year, but some gradually realise they are just not up to it. Candidates seldom get another chance at selection if they withdraw voluntarily.

"Most of them pull themselves out because they realise they're not making the grade. We don't influence their decision – it's up to them."

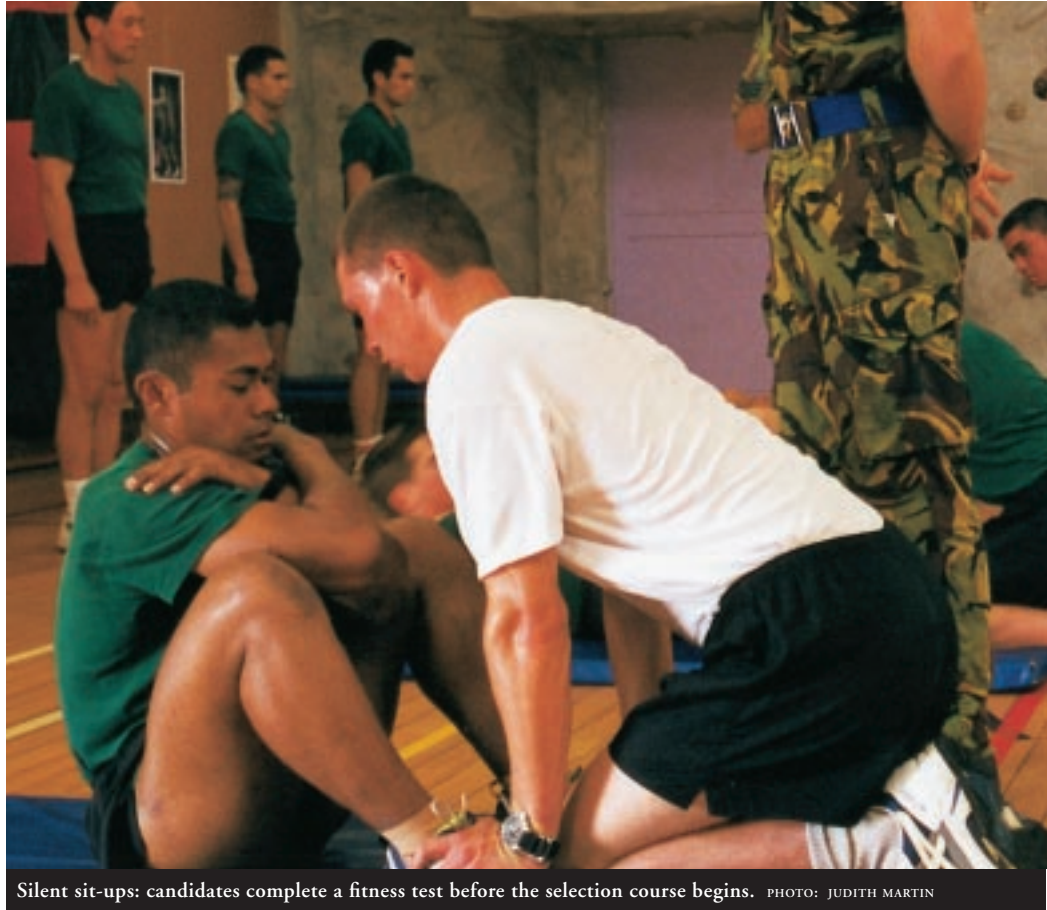
To an outsider who knows nothing of their backgrounds the 19 candidates are marked by their ordinariness. They are solemn, alert, and there is none of the noise usually generated by clutches of young men grouped together. Most look fit and wiry, all look nervous.

Two are doing the course for the second time. So what's the appeal? "I have always wanted to be in the SAS. To me, it is the top of where you can get in the military. It's a challenge and a chance to learn new things," says one.

The warrant officer agrees some of the qualities he is searching for are intangible. First impressions, he admits, count. "The first time you see a candidate, see his bearing, his demeanour, know a bit about his background, what he's done, you often get a good idea of how he will do. But in the end, it's up to him."

## NO SECOND CHANCE

It's a standard military fitness test, but as candidates line up after a 2.4 km run around the base, the tension is palpable. They stand to attention as a SAS sergeant barks out their times. One darts away and vomits in the gutter.



Silent sit-ups: candidates complete a fitness test before the selection course begins. PHOTO: JUDITH MARTIN

There are two stragglers, one of whom is just one second over the required 10 minutes the run should take. They are both out, no second chances. The pair, one of them a naval rating, are made to stand to attention outside the gymnasium while the remainder leap fully-kitted over walls and across ditches, complete 50 situps and climb a vertical rope.

Everything is completed in silence, and as small groups finish they stand to attention while others take their place on the ropes.

The knack of inching his way to the ceiling of the gymnasium eludes one candidate who constantly gets just metres off the ground before thudding to the floor. The corporal supervising the test orders the rest of the group to face the wall while he gives the candidate one more chance. The young man's face shines with sweat and frustration as his fingers clutch just a few centimetres higher ... and he fails again. He's out. "I knew he was failing so I

**H**is morale has plummeted, he can't focus his mind properly and all he sees is a barrier he feels is impossible to pass.





Candidates lug full jerry cans through the Kaipara sand dunes. PHOTO: MAX PAGE, ARMY NEWS

turned the others around. There is no point in humiliating someone,” the corporal will say later.

Such glimmers of compassion are few and far between, and the sailors, still novices at packing a kit quickly and neatly, constantly seem to catch the eye of the burly sergeant. “Did I tell you to pack your kit like a load of sh..? Then why does it look like a load of sh..?” he intones through gritted teeth.

He is the archetypal haranguing NCO at every opportunity, but the gruffness hides a witty, gentle personality.

Ask Captain Sam Hunter what the point of all this blood, sweat and tears is and he puts it this way: “There is a built-in, unseen barrier in the SAS selection process that gets rid of the clay. The men who can get themselves past that barrier are usually the men we want – the men we will turn into SAS soldiers.”

Hunter knows exactly what he is looking for. “I am

## THE MEN WE WANT

looking for self-discipline, self-motivation, a bit of ruthlessness, an even temperament, an average to above average intellect, innovation, someone who is physically and mentally tough, and a humble man.”

Humble? “Humility is very important. An SAS soldier doesn’t stick out in a crowd, but has the skills, ability and leadership to take control of any situation. An SAS soldier’s potential work environment can include the most dangerous and arduous conditions,

“It’s about the only time in the SAS that we growl,” he chuckles quietly, out of earshot of the candidates.

“In the unit you find there is never any need to beast anyone because self-motivation is strong and personal standards are high. Here though, we have to keep up the tension, push these guys to their limits. We know when to stop. Believe me, we’ve got a long way to go.”

### NAVIGATING SOLO

The next task sees the candidates back in the Waikato, navigating the same rolling

countryside as last week. But for the next three days they are on their own, returning to camp only at night. They are given checkpoint grid references on a map, and must walk an average three km per hour to get where they need to be within the prescribed time. If they are behind on the second and third days they must make up the time, and if they come in too late, they’re out.

By day three Neil Jones is getting used to the hunger – breakfast, eaten in silence in the mess was a spoon of baked beans, a small sausage and a drink, and dinner will be soup

with no support. That is why we choose the best, and train them the way we do.”

The psychological picture Army psychologist Captain Rachael Stott paints of each candidate is extremely useful to the selection process, says Hunter. “We look at what they can do now, but the psych sees what they are long-term.”

Stott assesses candidates with questionnaires and interviews at the beginning of the course, then observes them as they go through the different exercises. The questions probe, among other things, their anxiety levels and coping abilities, emotional stability and interpersonal skills, impulsiveness, drive and personal vigour.

The psychologists can accurately predict most of those who will be successful.

“The ideal interpersonal profile is someone who is tolerant, trusting, not too gregarious but not a loner,” says Stott. “We look for a steady medium ... a whole meshing together of a mix of characteristics.”

Hunter: “Sure, we ask for a lot on selection. But it is achievable.”



"Worth it in the end." PHOTO: MAX PAGE, ARMY NEWS





The final hurdle, a 60 km trek through Woodhill Forest. PHOTO: JUDITH MARTIN

and bread. It is not knowing how much behind he is that causes the niggling, constant pressure. Should he run part of the way but risk exhaustion and confusion? Take the long way around a hill, follow the stream? His clothing is saturated in sweat, mud flicked up in the misty rain smears his hands.

**The candidates ... have been awake for more than 24 hours. Their first hot meal for three days – an egg, spaghetti and a sausage – is gulped silently before they are thrown into an escape and evasion exercise.**

It is around about now, according to a SAS corporal, that doubts start tugging at a candidate's mind. Mix hunger and fatigue with the knowledge that things are going to get much harder and, depending on the person, resolve can quickly weaken. "Some of them think 'Nah, blow this, it's not for me.' But others just sort of switch off and tell themselves it will be worth it in the end."

Meanwhile, Jones swigs from his water bottle, and is confident he is on the right track. But it is only when he sees the final checkpoint he realises he has, at least for now, made it. The terrain has taken its toll – one candidate has wrenched his knee out of joint on uneven ground, and is pulled out. Two, despite making good time, have decided life in the SAS is not for

them. A fourth gets lost and is so far behind time he is withdrawn.

### JERRY-CAN TEST

A new day, and a new activity that has loomed large in the minds of all candidates. The rugged beauty of the Kaipara sand dunes can easily escape a man when he has to lug a 25 kg jerry-can full of water up and down the rippling, never-ending escarpments until his hands are numb, and pain bites into every muscle.

The candidates move slowly, mostly in single-file. There are six cans between five men, and every now and then they stop briefly to take turns at carrying two. SAS staff



Push-ups in the mud: "We have to keep up the tension." PHOTO: JUDITH MARTIN

monitoring the dunes tell the men to walk in one direction, and half an hour later, to head off another way. None of the candidates know where they are walking to, when they will get a break, or if the exercise will end as night falls. It doesn't end, and, with only dim torchlight to guide them, they trudge on.

Midway, one decides he has had enough. It is his second attempt at SAS selection, and he was pulled off the dunes last time when he became hypoglycaemic. His morale has plummeted, he can't focus his mind properly and all he sees is a barrier he feels is impossible to pass. The rest of his team, however, refuse to let him give up. Searching for some non-existent support for his decision, he carries on. As dawn breaks the end is finally signalled.

The candidates – there are now only seven left – have been awake for more than 24 hours. Their first hot meal for three days – bread, an egg, spaghetti and a sausage – is gulped silently before they are thrown into an escape and evasion exercise. With a hunter force of SAS staff pursuing them, they must navigate their way through dense forest, keeping within a set area. If they are caught outside of the area they are taken back 10 km, held for an hour, and sent off again. The run, dubbed “hares and hounds”, must be completed within a set time and the men must be able to pass on a message they have been given.

The thought of sleep and “getting there, just finishing” will be foremost on each candidate's mind, say SAS staff. “They're worn out, they know they still have a long way to go, and the ones that get through this will just push themselves that little bit further to meet the criteria, so they can get their head down.”

The run takes a couple of days, with the candidates dossing down under bushes as soon as darkness falls and moving at first light. Two are caught walking too close

to the road and are back-tracked as punishment; one is spotted but gets away. As light showers fall, all five candidates eventually emerge from the forest cover. Sleep, Jones says quietly, has never been so welcome.



Tucking in: a candidate's first hot meal in three days.



Waiting in silence for the next command. PHOTOS: JUDITH MARTIN



## Back to Von Tempisky

**S**AS troops are the most highly trained combat soldiers in the Army, but for security reasons they keep a low profile. They are skilled in counter-terrorist techniques, close-quarter combat, intelligence gathering, tracking, parachuting, high-level alpine operations, water and boat work, and the use of explosives.

The New Zealand SAS can trace its roots back to Von Tempisky's Forest Rangers of the Land Wars of the 1860s, although the unit's modern day equivalent was formed in 1954 to operate with the British 22 SAS Regiment in Malaya.

The group was disbanded in 1957 but re-activated two years later and went on to serve in Thailand, where it worked with US special forces. Borneo followed in the 1960s, where the SAS supplied forward reconnaissance for ready-reaction forces and was involved in "hearts and minds" missions with indigenous tribes. In Vietnam it specialised in intelligence-gathering and offensive operations.

A unit returned from the Gulf earlier this year as part of New Zealand's contribution to the multi-national coalition enforcing sanctions against Iraq.

The final hurdle is a 60 km trek through Woodhill Forest. It is, the five men will all say later, the hardest part of the selection course. They can hear the slap of waves on rugged Muriwai Beach to their left, and see nothing but pine trees and endless, stretching road. Seventeen hours later the last man gingerly hobbles in on blistered feet and aching legs.

### THE LAST DAY:

The five candidates line up nervously outside the CO's office to await his decision. Despite having finished the course there is still no guarantee they will be accepted into the SAS – they may be considered too immature, or their psychological profile may not fit. The CO makes his decision after consulting training staff and the psychologist.

They are called in one by one. About five minutes later Jones emerges from the room eyes wide and grinning broadly, the pain and exhaustion of the last two

weeks replaced by euphoria. He has passed, as have the others, and can begin training with the unit.

The SAS corporals and sergeants who ran the course, all of whom have seen young men emerge from the CO's office shattered by rejection, shake hands and congratulate the candidates.

Jones has lost eight kilos and his uniform hangs on his gangly frame. Relaxing in the sunshine, he recalls his lowest moments.

"I thought I was lost (in the forest) and that I had ruined my chances, that I had really stuffed up. I had estimated there were about six km between each checkpoint, but after the last one it felt like I had walked about 10 km. I had been dozing off, and I was sure I had taken the wrong turn."

"There were trees on both sides of me, and both ways looked the same. I could hear the sea on one side and traffic in the distance on the other, but they both started to sound the same. I had to keep checking and rechecking my compass. I was really disoriented and started to panic."

Jones says he was about to call up on his radio and admit defeat when he rounded a corner and found the checkpoint.



Where to now? Navigational skills are put to the test.



PHOTOS: JUDITH MARTIN

"All I felt was pure relief that I could finally get off my feet and sleep. It didn't really sink in until this morning that I had finished. I knew in my heart I could do it. It was the hardest thing I have ever done, but I got there. And I'm proud of that."

(Neil Jones is a pseudonym). ©