

SUFFER NOW OR SUFFER LATER

Cage Rath stepped off the bus, his heart racing.

It was dark.

No signs to tell him where he was.

His phone was taken immediately, so there was no way for him to contact home. And a man in a wide-brimmed brush cap began to yell at him and the hundreds of young men and women who stood at the bus stop which kicked off basic training.

"I felt like I was on a deserted island," Rath said. "I didn't know anybody there and I couldn't call home."

He was allowed one final phone call his first night, so he called his mom.

She didn't answer.

Upset, he left her a message, and as he was talking, she called back. But Rath was not allowed to answer.

"The drill sergeant screamed in my face to hurry my phone call up and I started to get emotional because all I wanted was to hear her voice one last time before they took my phone away for two weeks."

Throughout his time at Fort Leonard Wood in St. Robert, Missouri, Rath struggled with many changes. Getting up at 4 a.m. every day wasn't exactly a norm for him, nor was the bland food the army provided.

"We eventually were allowed to put hot sauce on our food. I immediately grabbed it and dumped it on everything I ate because I was sick and tired of how tasteless the meals were."

Another change Rath had to adapt to was the mental challenge of basic training. He quickly realized that he was completely alone. The first couple of days were nerve-wracking, being in a new environment having to adapt to whatever was thrown at him.

"Right when I entered the gates in the back of my head I was saying 'you have no one else but yourself to depend on.'"

Rath soon adopted a new mentality. He realized that he couldn't take the easy way out anymore.

He had to embrace the suck.

"I think it was the second week of my training when I realized that I have to embrace this stuff now so I can move on with every day to make my

experience somewhat easier. One motto I began to live by was 'either suffer now and enjoy later or enjoy now and suffer later.' I know it's harsh, but it did help to keep me pushing through my time there."

That everyday experience revolved around a variety of new activities. One of which was learning to operate a weapon. Some days, they spent the entire day at the range.

"I would hear someone from the control tower yell 'weapons free!' which is when everyone started to shoot. The air would get thick with smoke and the smell was awful. One thing that took me a while to get used to was the kickback from the gun that hit me in the shoulder."

Towards the end of his training Rath endured perhaps his most difficult experience: The Forge, which lasted three nights and four days outside.

But they had to get there first.

Rath and the rest of his fellow trainees marched 10 miles with 40-pound rucks on their backs to reach their campsite, a march many did not finish, opting to drop out.

But not Rath.

"I just had to continue to stay in the moment and keep my head in the game. If I didn't, I could've been like any of those guys that dropped out during the Forge."

Rath and others from his platoon were forced to get up in the middle of the night when it was 50 degrees for fire guard.

"We would clutch our weapons and try not to fall asleep just pacing back and forth and talking to each other. It was my least favorite part of The Forge."

Home now, Rath is appreciative of his experience at basic training. From camp, he learned valuable lessons about discipline, maintaining a strong mentality and punctuality. He now visits the National Guard once every month to continue his training.

"Having everything stripped away to the bare minimum, you begin to be appreciative of all that you have. I've learned not to take things for granted and I'm really thankful for my opportunity at basic training."

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