

It began in February 2001 when I read an article in The Warrior, a Soldier Systems Center publication, describing the challenges posed by the Vermont Army National Guard Mountain Warfare School (MWS). <http://www.natick.army.mil/warrior/01/janfeb/soldpers.htm>. The article, depicting the mental and physical demands of the course, appealed to my innate sense of adventure. Since I had previously participated in an Army "greening" program, I was especially captivated by one sentence describing the "greening" as a "walk in the park" compared to MWS. The "greening" program is a one-week course geared to expose civilians to military life by immersing them into the soldiers' environment. After reading the comparison, I felt inexorably drawn to participating in the challenges offered by MWS. After I passed the Army PT test, consisting of sit-ups, push-ups, and a two-mile run without difficulty, and had a medical screening, I was ready for the course, or so I naively thought.

Upon arrival at the school, I checked in and proceeded to a room for a height and weight check. I curtailed any self-conscious thoughts as soon as I heard my weight communicated, in what I perceived to be a thunderous roar in a room full of soldiers, to another individual who subsequently memorialized it on my official MWS record. I continued to the supply room to get the requisite gear for the next two weeks. The supplies included a rucksack, climbing gear consisting of a rope, numerous snaplinks, a Kevlar helmet, raingear, and canteens to carry at least four quarts of water. I reviewed the itinerary for the next 14 days, which revealed the course's demanding schedule. The training included a grueling 14-15 hour day without any days off. I also learned that, in a class of forty-four students, there were two civilians, including me, and I was the only female student.

The first day's schedule was characteristic of most. It started early with an optional visit to the medic at 0530, breakfast at 0600, a 3-5 kilometer mountain walk, a block of instruction with practical application, a 3-5 kilometer mountain walk back to the school, dinner, and study or class time ending between 2000 to 2100 hours.

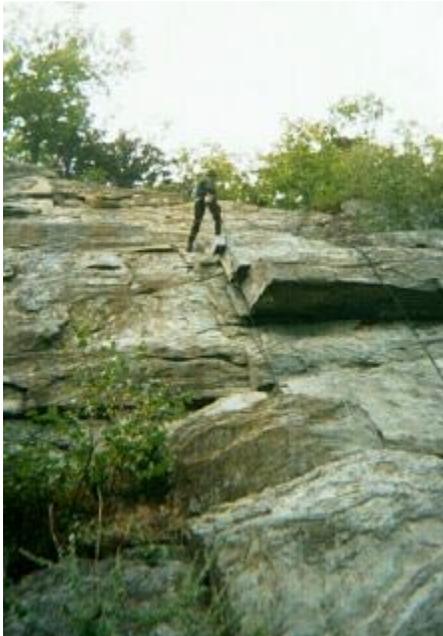


On that first day, we prepared the rucksack, weighing in at approximately sixty pounds, with all the requisite gear, water, and Meals, Ready-to-Eat (MRE). We were ready for what the school coined a "mountain walk" in its itinerary. In fact, this walk consisted of ascending and descending steep terrain at a rapid pace. As I hiked alongside soldiers, they wondered what types of trouble I instigated at work to cause my participation in this class. I explained I volunteered for the course and they reluctantly accepted my explanation. They were accustomed to civilians living what they recognized as a comfortable 9-5 lifestyle. I told them about Natick's capabilities and my work as a Procurement Attorney. They understood this was my opportunity to get hands on experience wearing the clothes and using the gear that I typically read about in a solicitation or contract and to better understand the needs of the ultimate users of that equipment. They shared their thoughts on improving existing capabilities including, placing the slit on the long side of a MRE rather than the short end for easier access to food, enclosing coffee packets in every MRE, and the universal comment to develop lighter equipment.

The instruction varied daily and included Altimeter Land Navigation, Cliff Evacuation, Mountaineering Safety, Climbing, and Map Reading/Interpretation. The instructors tested each day's lesson at some time during the two-week period. Each test counted for a certain number of points cumulatively leading to graduation, assuming you made it that far. The instructors also randomly conducted spot checks to ensure we had all our supplies, especially the water. In the past, soldiers carried all the gear but kept their water supply at a minimum to reduce the load of an already heavy rucksack. Although I empathized with this state of mind, I knew water is crucial to survival and appreciated the gravity of such an error.

One fundamental lesson included tying knots. We learned to tie eighteen knots including lesser-known knots such as the Bowline, Clove Hitch, and Prusik. The test for each knot consisted of tying it, stating all the checkpoints, and the purpose of the knot within two minutes. If a student neglected to mention or improperly stated a checkpoint or purpose, or did not tie the knot properly within the two-minute timeframe, the instructor/tester did not give any points for that knot. Once we proficiently tied all eighteen knots and passed the corresponding test, we applied this knowledge to building complicated rope systems including a Suspension Traverse, Vertical Haul Lines, and A-Frame Construction. These systems would eventually be the basis of team testing.

Another essential block of instruction included rock-climbing. The instructors reiterated the significance of tying knots properly since it is essential for safety. We learned the military climbing commands, various belaying techniques, and methods to tie harnesses with rope instead of donning a standard harness. We tested our climbing prowess by climbing a 70-120 foot vertical rock face at different grades of difficulty. The instructors taught various methods of rappelling, including rappelling at night, and belaying to enable soldiers to perform under any circumstances. For example, if you lost "necessary" gear, the soldiers could rappel or belay using an alternative method not requiring a belay or rappel device.



The instruction emphasized teamwork. If a team quarreled and it led to problems in their rope systems, both the team and consequently, the individuals in that team, would lose

points. One lesson emphasizing teamwork was known as, Cliff Evacuation. The instructors first taught us to configure a litter, or stretcher, from our climbing ropes. Afterwards, we used it to enable our assigned team, which varied from 6-10 individuals, to evacuate casualties from a cliff. My team practiced evacuating a log, known to us affectionately as, "Woody," from the side of a cliff. On a sad note, I must report Woody did not make it down the cliff in one piece. Practice makes perfect.

This course took place during September 2001. It was during this period the tragic events of September 11 transpired in New York City and Washington D.C. On September 11, the Commander called the group together to tell us about the events that were on going at that time. Despite the horrible

events of that day, the instruction went forward in full force. There was no rest, physically, mentally, or emotionally for the military under any circumstances.

By the second week, hiking with sixty pounds did get easier. Perhaps easier is not the correct terminology; in reality, it was not as difficult. My blistered feet and sore body adjusted to the additional weight after some time. After completion of the course and participation in the graduation ceremony, I felt euphoric from my accomplishment and thanked the instructors, an elite group of professionals who provided excellent instruction every step of the way. As a result of attending MWS, I am a better person, mountaineer, and lawyer for our soldiers. I reflected back to the moment I read the article in the Warrior and knew the comparative statement was accurate. But, I always liked walking in the park.