

OPERATION WARRIOR FORGE

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The fight against fear

JULY 30, 2012



A Cadet crosses the Log Walk at the water confidence course as the rest of their regiment watches. U.S. Army photo by Al Zdarsky

By Alexandra Kocik
U.S. Army Cadet Command Public Affairs

JOINT BASE LEWIS-McCHORD, Wash. – Thirty-five feet above the dark lake, a Cadet balances precariously on a 6-inch-wide beam by holding her arms out from her sides. As she steps gingerly down from a small block set in the center of the beam, she stumbles forward, falling to one knee. Her comrades below gasp as she grabs the ladder on the opposite side of the beam to avoid falling further. The Cadet bows her head and makes the sign of a cross before flashing a smile to the cheering crowd below. Slowly she ascends the ladder to the next challenge.

The water confidence course at the Leader Development and Assessment Course (LDAC) marks the final test before Cadets graduate. Retired 1st Sgt. Jorge Rivera is a member of the cadre overseeing this site, which has one important goal.

“The purpose of this course is to test Cadets’ personal courage and ability to overcome their fear of water, heights or both,” Rivera said. “Two of the activities here must be passed to graduate from LDAC, so a small percentage finds this site stressful because of their fears.

The Log Walk is a balance beam suspended over water by two tall poles. A small block lies in the center of the board that Cadets must step onto and then over. The first ladder leads Cadets from the ground up to the beam and the second directs them even higher to the Rope Drop. After shimmying to the middle of the horizontal rope, Cadets must hang from it long enough to state where they are from before letting go to fall into the water below. Cadets must pass this portion of the site in order to graduate.

This was a challenge to Cadet Jennifer Anderson, who said she is afraid of both water and heights.

“I was scared at first but since I’m not wearing my glasses, it made it easier to go across without actually seeing how far up I was,” Anderson said with a smile.

The second portion of the site, called the Slide For Life, also involves water and altitude. Cadets hang from a pulley to descend down a zipline four stories high. This is often difficult for those with slick hands from the LogWalk/Rope Drop. Cadet Alex Marquez was most worried about losing his grip on the Slide For Life and opted to start with this activity.

“Climbing up the ladder to that platform was the worst part, but it was easy once I stepped off,” Marquez said.

The Leader Development and Assessment Course, also known as Operation Warrior Forge, is the capstone exercise on the way to becoming a U.S. Army lieutenant.

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The third challenge for Cadets at the water confidence course is the Zodiac Assault Course. For this event, Cadets work in teams of 9 to 13 people on a Zodiac assault raft and navigate obstacles through a timed course.

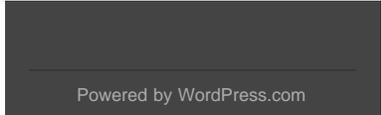
“The goal for this course is to move the fastest with no penalties, not compete against each other,” Rivera said. “It’s really to test their ability to work as a team, which is important.”

Cadre who are licensed lifeguards wear bright white shirts and carefully watch Cadets from the moment they arrive to the time they walk soaking wet onto shore. They are available in case any emergency arises, such as an unprepared Cadet losing their footing or a life vest making it difficult to get back on dry land.

Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Gary Fortunato is another cadre member who oversees the water confidence course and said safety is at the forefront of this exercise.

“We ensure Cadets are inspected after every course to avoid any injuries, so they see medics at least three times while out here” Fortunato said. “That way we catch old and new injuries to ensure Cadets can graduate.”

Cadets walk onto the parade field for graduation only after overcoming their fears of water and heights.



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