

SO SOLLY FROGMAN , by LT James Cahill as told to his brother Bob Cahill
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In the years between 1945 and 1951, I participated in one of the most grueling physical and mental training programs ever devised by man. My capabilities and limitations were tested to the utmost as my companions and I were driven, time and time again, to the near-breaking point. Many of the men I was with became so overburdened by the training that they either momentarily lost their senses, or dropped from total exhaustion. This torturous training, however prepared me for a lifetime of excitement and adventure, and for the opportunity to become a pioneer in the exploration of a new world - the world beneath the sea. But in looking back on my adventures I can honestly say that my greatest satisfaction came not in helping to pave the way, but in knowing and working with the courageous men who first penetrated the deeper regions of the sea, willing and eager to challenge the depths, no matter what the odds.

The Japanese had set up hedgehogs, thick iron rails set in concrete and projecting in all directions. They were placed in shallow water all along the coast line of Tarawa Beach, barely visible from the surface. The first wave of American landing craft hit the obstacles. The Marines, crowded together on board were perfect targets for the enemy machine gunners. The fourth and fifth wave of Marines got through, but before they hit the beach they had to wade through thousands of dead countrymen. After the bloody battle of Tarawa, the Navy was determined such a disaster would not occur again. Pre-invasion units to aid landing operations were obviously needed, and the Navy hurriedly organized what is known today as UDT - Underwater Demolition Teams.

Volunteers for these top-secret teams were recruited from the Navy Construction Battalions and formed into units of five enlisted men and one officer. The mission of the UDT was to swim into the enemy beach ahead of ground troops, to gather detailed information concerning underwater coral formations, depth of water, underwater slope and beach approaches. But most important of all, they were to determine the locations of enemy mines in the inshore area, and if possible, remove them. Dressed in bathing trunks, and wearing foot fins and face mask, UDT teams made their way to the shallow waters off Guam, Iwo Jima, Borneo, Tinian and Normandy. They took depth soundings, cleared the beaches and offshore waters of obstacles, and mapped out safe routes for invading forces. This was extremely dangerous work, and during the Normandy Campaign, 60% of the UDT men were wounded or killed. At Guam, where the fatality percentage almost equaled Normandy's, frogmen greeted the first wave of American Marines with a sign reading: "Marines, welcome to Guam Beach, open courtesy of UDT - U. S. O. two blocks to the right."

During the latter part of WWII, I was a Midshipman at Fort Schuyler, New York. I had just received my commission as a Naval Ensign when I learned that the Navy Secret Service wanted volunteers for their cloak-and-dagger outfit called "Scouts and Raiders". I knew this unit was part of the Underwater Demolition Teams, and without a moment's hesitation, I volunteered. Two months later I was in Perry, Virginia, one of the frogman training stations. Only a few hours after I arrived at the camp, I was told to remove my Ensign bars and to keep them off during the entire training period.

"There's no distinction between officers and enlisted men in this outfit," stated the instructor. "There's only men and boys, and we'll weed out the boys."

Moldy green warehouses of ancient vintage were our sleeping quarters, but we didn't see them much. Each day was twelve hours long, and by the time night came, you didn't care where you slept. In the morning we'd wallow in mud, and in the afternoon we'd wash it off with a six mile swim. Explosions filled the air we breathed and muddy swamp water was part of our daily diet. To terminate this hellish routine, all one had to do was raise his hand. The impulse to make this simple gesture of defeat came upon me frequently, but always during moments when the raising of my arm would have taken my last ounce of strength. Any man who panicked under this stress and strain was washed out immediately.

One of the initial 27 weeks of training was aptly called "Hell Week" - I shall never forget it. During this week, if we were lucky, we could expect approximately five hours of sleep each night. In between this sack

time, we would be running, swimming, crawling through swamps, climbing over obstacles, or dodging explosives. We were up at 5 a.m. each morning. To work up an appetite for breakfast, we would take a mile swim and spend an hour doing calisthenics. After Breakfast, we worked off the meal with a five mile hike and run. Then came assault problems, obstacle courses and mock sneak attacks which lasted well up to the bewitching hour. Sleep was a cherished luxury. During Hell Week, the initials UDT stood for "Unusually Damn Tough", but the last of these six days, which the instructors called SO SOLLTY DAY, was the toughest of all.

The Beach Master, a surly, barrel-chested individual with a voice like a foghorn, broke into the barracks at 4 a.m. He was a solid mass of meanness. "Okay you sons of *#@#*, get your #@*#'s outa that sack and get into the street. On the double!" It took a lot of will power to refrain from throwing a muddy boot at the snarling Beach Master, but if anyone showed the slightest sign of disrespect, or hesitated at following an order, he was dropped from the team. I rolled my aching and bruised body out of the bunk. Some of the men who could actually sleep through the Beach Master's annoying bellow, had to be physically flogged out of their slumber. As each man opened his eyes, you could note a strained expression on his face as he realized he hell that awaited him. The Beach Master was a half hour earlier in waking us this morning, a sign to all that this day would be one we'd never forget.

Once on the street, we were marched down to the water's edge and ordered to swim to the opposite bank and back. The opposite bank was over a mile away. We splashed in, and the cool waters immediately erased all feelings of drowsiness. The over-hand swimming stroke was taboo at UDT school, so we had to frogkick the distance, "without making a wave." One hundred and sixty men silently bobbed along the surface, trying desperately to make as few ripples as possible. when we reached the opposite shore, we slid our tired bodies up onto the wet sand, paused there for a few seconds, then slipped into the water and headed back to the Beach Master who was impatiently grinding his foot in the sand. As soon as we crawled ashore, he growled his commands, and with hardly a minute to put on our shoes, we found ourselves jogging down the road to the physical training area. Here, with stomachs grumbling, we spent an hour doing pull-ups, push-ups, squat-jumps and every other type of self-torturous exercises. With the messhall conveniently located over a mile from the physical training area, it was inevitable that when the Beach Master stated, "Okay you flunkies, chow time. You've got one hour for breakfast," everyone would double-time to the chow hall to be first in line and have time for a second helping. After breakfast, came an hour lecture on demolition. This seemed like a good time to catch a little shut-eye, but when the instructor said, "Remember this men, one mistake could mean death," all the drowsers were jolted awake. At the end of the lecture the instructor lined us up to take our picture. We all stood smiling, and the instructor clicked the lens shutter, which set off a demolition charge directly behind us. As we hit the dirt, and sand sprinkled down from the heavens, the instructor smiled and thanked us for our attention.

At 10 a.m. we hoisted seven-man rubber rafts to our backs and hiked the half mile back to the beach area. Shoving off from the beach we commenced an hour's strenuous row, during which time each "boat" competed in a race with the others. As we swiftly paddled into the beach over huge breakers, the instructors on shore shouted and waved us on. Many of the boats capsized, and over the roar of the surf we could hear the Beach Master laughing. After landing the boats, the instructors organized a game called "King of the Boat." The object of the game was for each man in the seven-man raft to try and throw the other six men out of the craft. In other words, it was a free-for-all, and it continued for over thirty minutes. No one ever won the game, for when one man took possession of the raft, the other six would gang up on him. When it was over, everyone was dripping with sweat and blood, but this rough game wasn't instigated to cause injuries; it was devised to test each man's mettle. The instructors took notes on each trainee's performance as the fighting progressed.

Wearing our swim fins and mask, we were carried back out to sea in an APD landing craft, and dropped 4000 yards off shore. We floated immobile approximately forty yards from each other as a rubber raft was lowered from the APD and tied securely to her port side. George Grantham, a muscular trainee, climbed into the raft and was handed a thick loop of rope. Then the APD circled the trainees, the raft skipping along beside here. After making the wide arc, she changed course and came barreling towards us. From the

rubber raft, Grantham extended the rope loop. As the boat passed at top speed, each trainee thrust his elbow through the loop and came tumbling aboard the raft, then climbed into the APD. This was the typical method of picking up frogmen after a beach reconnaissance.

As the boat plowed in towards me, a sickening knot gripped my stomach and my adam's apple throbbed with nervous tension. I stared at the loop as it came skimming along the surface. My body was braced and my arm cocked. In an unconscious moment, I was flipped into the air, and with a combination of the boat's forward momentum and Grantham's muscles, I was slammed belly down on the thick rubber. As I hoisted myself over the rail into the APD, I glanced back at Grantham who was quickly preparing for the next catch. "That's quite a jolt," I muttered. "You should have my job," he snapped in reply.

We were tossed back into the water like unwanted fish. The pick-up boat increased its speed. Again we were retrieved and again returned to the water. The instructors were hauling in the rubber raft, which meant that we would not be picked up this time. Instead, we would have to swim four miles back to shore. Two of the trainees looked at the pencil-line of land in the distance, thought of the long swim and told one of the instructors that they didn't think that they could make it back to shore. They were immediately washed out of the program. The rest of us swam the distance slowly, the APD putting along beside us. The water was choppy, and as we bobbed along, the salt spray whipped at our faces. White caps periodically swallowed a trainee's head. "If everyone else is as tired as I am," I thought, "someone will surely drown." Three men did raise their hands and had to be picked up by the boat. One suffered from cramps and the other two were just plain exhausted. I never saw them again.

As I was lifted to the peak of each swell, I'd raise my head to get a look at the shore line. At times it seemed as though I was making no progress at all. When I finally did crawl onto the warm wet sand, I was completely waterlogged and my body had taken on the color of a Navy peacoat. "Well, what are you waiting for?", the Beach Master shouted at the panting crew. "Chow's on, and if you want some, you'd better get to the chow hall on the double." Fins slung over my shoulder, and mask bouncing on my forehead, I started jogging barefooted over the hot dirt road. Everyone's lips were quivering, and as we hurriedly tiptoed along, the littlest of pebbles dug into the bottoms of our water wrinkled feet. By the time we completed the half mile to the messhall, everyone had lost the chills and was dripping with sweat.

An hour later, a wonderful steak dinner was sloshing around in our stomachs as we began a fifteen mile obstacle course run. This is where almost one-fourth of my fellow trainees dropped out of UDT. All of us were numbed with fatigue when this phase of the training began, and some were close to nervous collapse. The instructors took advantage of this by jarring our nerves with unexpected explosions. Each demolition charge had been placed far enough away not to hurt anyone, but close enough to splatter us with mud. The mud quickly found ways of plugging up our nostrils, and breathing at times became difficult. I tried to set a running pace as we headed into the mushy swamps, but this was impossible. When we came to mud ponds, we'd have to swing across them on hanging vines, and crawl with our faces in the swamp water to get under the wire entanglements. In the process, many trainees upchucked their magnificent steak dinners.

We climbed over high walls which were purposely placed in our path, and half way up over one forty foot wall, I slipped and fell back into a mud hole. I inhaled a mouthful of muck and spit it out. The oozy substance pinned me down, and for a moment I thought I would be swallowed up in it. I was so exhausted that I could barely lift my arms. But, if I raised my hand or shouted for assistance, I knew I would be dropped from UDT. I thought I was going to drown, but even at that crucial moment, I was determined not to give the instructors the satisfaction of pulling me out. Catching my breath, I swam slowly through the mud. If I fought the substance, I would surely go under. After ten minutes of wallowing and pushing towards the banking, I lifted myself out. Dripping from head to toe with smelly muck, I stumbled on.

When darkness set in, we were still on the obstacle course. All around us pre-set explosives periodically lit the sky. When one went off, everyone automatically fell to the ground and lay motionless until the sky was dark again. On one such occasion I heard a young trainee shout, "I'm hit, I'm hit." I crawled over to him. He was rolling in the mud, crying hysterically. "You're not hit," I whispered, "Now calm yourself before

an instructor hears you.” “Yes I am,” he blurted out, “my leg, my leg.” Tears streamed down his muddy cheeks as I felt for his leg. It was curled up under him, and when I touched it, he shrieked with pain. Sensing what the trouble was, I pulled his leg out from under him and dug my fingers into the muscle. The trainee doubled his fist and was ready to swing at me, but before he could do so, the pain in his leg subsided. “Only a cramp,” I whispered. “Really?” he whimpered, tears still flooding his eyes, “I’ll be damned.”

The young trainee and I moved on. After traveling a few hundred yards, we heard a strange noise, barely audible between explosions. This “clip, clip sound became more distinct as we approached a trainee who was crawling along close to the boundary of the obstacle course. It was George Grantham. He had the foresight to bring along a pair of wire cutters, and was proceeding to snip the trip wires that set off the flares and explosives. “Stick with me, pals,” he said, “and you won’t be bothered with any more ringing in your ears.” The words were but out of his mouth when two instructors leaped out of the underbrush to meet us in physical combat and to snatch the clippers from the muscular Grantham. With seemingly just enough energy to lunge forward, I met one of the attackers with a flying tackle. He stepped out of the way and I fell on my face. “You’ll never fight off an enemy that way,” snarled the burly instructor. “C’mon, let’s see you fight.” I jumped to my feet with a ball of mud clutched in my hand. He started towards me, crouching like a wrestler...When he came well within range, I hit him square between the eyes with the mud ball, turned, and ran into the darkness. The young trainee had already made his retreat, and Grantham had beaten off his assailant and disappeared into the underbrush, but he had lost the clippers.

As explosion after explosion went off, I hit the dirt quickly to avoid the wrath of the other instructors. However, to lie on the ground too long was dangerous, for the temptation to go to sleep was almost overpowering. When the sky wasn’t lit up, instructors would run through the swamps screaming and yelling in an attempt to draw reactions from us. The belligerent instructors, the continual and deafening ring in the ears, the aching muscles and the smarting eyes, was only part of the pain. In addition, I began to feel a gnawing and persistent hunger. On previous evening maneuvers, around 8 p.m., we had adjourned to the messhall for a well deserved supper. But on the evening of SO SOLL Y DAY, there was only a clearing with a large sign reading Time Out Station. In the middle of the clearing was a stack of canned food and a few benches to sit on. Like most of the other trainees, I rushed in, grabbed a can of beans and an opener and sat down on a bench to rest my weary bones. As I took my first mouthful, a demolition charge exploded a few feet away, and I found myself swallowing down spoonfuls of cold beans mixed with warm mud. Then another explosion went off right next to the stack of can goods. Everyone ran, some still gobbling from a can as they retreated into the swamp.

The last three miles were the toughest, for along this thickly vegetated stretch of swamp land, instructors attempted to capture us. Some of the men waded through the swamp water to avoid detection, others plodded through the high grass where the mud was knee deep. I just kept running straight ahead through the slimy bogs, knowing that only a short distance ahead was the end of the obstacle course and sleep. Two instructors spotted me and made chase shouting at me to stop, but I kept going. When another jumped out of the underbrush directly in my path, I dodged around him and sped on. My two years as a scatback at college had come in handy.

The lights were blazing as I came staggering into the clearing. I flopped down on the dirt road and my head started to spin. A stern faced instructor approached and ordered me to stand at attention. “Don’t you like UDT?” he bellowed. “I couldn’t live without it,” I stated whimsically. The instructor handed me a cup of coffee and I resumed my position on the dirt road. “Well, you made it,” he said, but I could barely hear him...I was drifting off into another world. Trucks were waiting to drive us back to the barracks. The ordeal was over, but only 65 of the 160 men who began Hell Week remained. Some were in the hospital, but most simply couldn’t take it; sometimes I wonder how any of us did. Those who were left standing at the end of the sixth day, SO SOLL Y DAY, were truly entitled to the honored name of frogman.