

Marines race through Florida

Air Traffic Control Marine kayaks, bikes, treks 300 miles

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Reality has a way of snapping into focus after the time for decision-making has passed. Ask the Green Bay Packers fan buried under comforters and sipping chicken noodle soup the morning after attending a play-off game with only a beer gut for insulation against the cold. Ask the kid with his tongue stuck to the telephone pole on a cold morning.

For Mark Rosenthal, a Marine at Cherry Point, enlightenment came in the muck of the Everglades during Memorial Day Weekend.

"You're out there paddling, and you're thinking, what the hell am I doing out here?" he said.

Rosenthal and three other East Coast Marines each paid more than \$1,000 to subject themselves to a marathon of sleep deprivation, blisters and physical exhaustion while the rest of America cooked hamburgers, drank a variety of high-carbohydrate beverages and watched television.

Rosenthal and company make up Team Hornet, one of 33 four-man adventure race teams to kayak, trek and bike from Sarasots, Fla., to Key Largo, Fla. Team Hornet placed tenth in the Florida Coast to Coast Adventure Race, covering more than 300 miles, in 72 hours and 30 minutes, on approximately three hours of sleep, said Rosenthal.

"We build this safe life for ourselves," remarked Rosenthal, an Air Traffic Control Marine at the Air Station. "You can't possibly get hurt. So I just wanted to get outside of that, where you're not really sure. You're paddling, and if you flip over, an alligator's going to eat you. You don't know what's around the next bend. It's a little dangerous."

According to a message posted by the system administrator of the race's official Web site, adventurousconcepts.com, the contestants covered "swamps, grasslands, mangroves, pinelands, hardwood hammocks, oak meadows and spring-fed lakes, where alligators, alligators, panthers, dolphins, snakes, black bear and numerous species of birds reside."

In the Web site's message forum, a visitor with the handle of Mannyar described the wildlife he saw during the race.

"Rebecca and I kept ourselves entertained by counting the alligators we saw," he wrote. "I got bored at 35. We must have seen upward of 50."

Rosenthal came across several alligators. He has a picture of one lying almost invisible in the mud and a vivid memory of his teammates paddling into another.

"(The alligator) splashed them, knocked all this water

on them and knocked their boat up," recalled Rosenthal.

Rosenthal's features lit up when describing one of his team's funniest encounters. For a moment, as his words and hearty laugh tangled together and tumbled out, the shaved-headed, thick-muscled, 6-foot, 3-inch first lieutenant sounded like a high school senior joking with his friends in homeroom about the class prank.

"This raccoon, he was walking down the trail in front of us," said Rosenthal. "We were walking behind him, shining flashlights on him, and he looked over his shoulder and just kept on walking. So, we kept on trying to scare him off the trail, and he turned around and, like, blows up on us and gets all mad and starts hissing at us. We eventually scared him away."

But Rosenthal said moments of excitement didn't come often. The overriding sensation, he said, was a completely unfamiliar kind of fatigue.

"I don't really think there's anything you can compare it to," he said, so quickly and mechanically that it seemed as though he'd thought about the question and come to a conclusion years before. "It's kind of an overall exhaustion feeling."

The race was broken up into four to eight-hour legs of kayaking, mountain biking and trekking. The longest bike leg was 61 miles, and there was a 21-mile hike.

By the second trek, Rosenthal was in pain.

"We got huge blisters on our feet on the first one," he said. "On mile two, we had to walk through all (this) water,

my shoes were just soaked, and then we had to walk like 18 more miles. I'd never gotten blisters before in (Officer Candidate's School) or (The Basic School), so I didn't know how to deal with it."

"Everything is sharp and pointy," he added, referring to the plants they came across on a hike through part of the Everglades. "You have to use the trail. Trying to get through the woods is not fun."

"Some of the biking was fun," he admitted. "We were on one bike ride where it was like 95 degrees out, and there was a huge thunderstorm. It rolled in, and then it was like 60 (degrees). We were pedaling through all these puddles, and it was just kind of fun."

More often though, Rosenthal's account of trip went something like this:

"One of the longest bike legs we had to do on railroad tracks," he said. "There were 15 to 20 old, rusted box cars on the tracks, and you had to ride around them on the side."



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Team Hornet treks through the Everglades during the Florida Coast to Coast Adventure Race, which took place Memorial Day weekend.

The Florida climate and the physical demands of the race made hydration a matter of grave importance for the teams.

"I would say the most dangerous part of the trip was the heat," said Rosenthal. "A lot of the teams dropped out because some of their team members got heat exhaustion or heat stroke. You can easily avoid that by chugging water."

One problem that Team Hornet couldn't avoid was sleep deprivation. Patience grew thin as hours of traveling without rest wore on the team. Rosenthal remembers getting angry at a teammate who led the group slightly off course. The mistake, which cost the team 45 minutes, is typical in an adventure race.

"You would just brush it off, except for the fact that you're already tired and cranky," he said.

But Team Hornet didn't become one of the 11 teams to drop out of the race. They called upon their training and a little bit of help from other teams to reach Key Largo faster than 23 other teams.

Because the teams were competing for cash prizes, \$15,000 went to the top five finishers, Rosenthal said he was surprised at how friendly they were.

"If you're out on the course people will always stop to help you with gear," he said. "We busted a pedal on one of our bikes, and one of the teams had an extra pedal. They took a pedal off their bike and gave it to us."

Along with Team Hornet, Rosenthal rolled into Key Largo on the morning of May 29, exhausted but pleased.

"I didn't expect us to come in last, but I didn't expect us to come in first," he said. "We actually finished better than I expected."

After the race, Rosenthal took a shower and slept approximately nine hours, a normal sleep for him. He said he was surprised to recover as quickly as he did.

And, despite his misgivings, he said he'll probably enter the race again next year, just like the cheesehead will paint "#4 Brett Favre" on his bare chest again, and more children will cry tears with their tongues stuck to telephone poles.



Traveling coast to coast

What: Florida Coast to Coast Adventure Race

When: May 27 - 29

Start: Sarasota, Fla.

Finish: Key Largo, Fla.

Distance: more than 300 miles

Methods of Travel: trekking, biking, kayaking

Cash Prizes: \$15,000 to top five finishers

Results: Team Hornet placed 10th out of 33 teams