

Chapter 58

ROLE OF THE SURVIVAL, EVASION, RESISTANCE, AND ESCAPE SCHOOL PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT

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Introduction

The Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape level C (SERE-C) school is a 3-week course held at Fort Rucker, Alabama, and Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The SERE school physician assistant (PA) serves at Fort Rucker; there is no designated PA position at the Fort Bragg SERE school. The SERE-C school is a full-spectrum course that encompasses in-depth teachings about survival methods, evasion tactics, means of resistance, and methods of escape that align with the values of the Code of Conduct for Members of the United States Armed Forces.¹ The Code of Conduct was established by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1955 through Executive Order 10631.² It is used as a guide for all service members if they may find themselves as isolated personnel in situations that result in confinement or detention against their will by adversaries.

The Six Articles of the Code of Conduct

Article 1—I am an American, fighting in the forces that guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

Article 2—I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command, I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.

Article 3—If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and to aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.

Article 4—If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

Article 5—When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies.

Article 6—I will never forget that I am an American fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.^{3(p3-5)}

History

The first Army SERE course was developed and led by Colonel James “Nick” Rowe in 1986.⁴ Colonel Rowe was a Special Forces detachment commander taken as a prisoner of war (POW) by the Viet Cong while conducting operations in Vietnam in 1963.⁴ He was held in captivity for 5 years and endured extreme hardship in the form of physical abuse, starvation, and mental anguish. While in captivity, Colonel Rowe kept a diary, which helped keep his mind sharp and became a tool to stay engaged and never give up hope. In 1968, while being moved to a different location by his captors, the group was attacked by American helicopters, and Colonel Rowe fled his captors and escaped. When Colonel Rowe created the SERE school at Fort Bragg 18 years later, he used his experience as a POW to develop tools and education for future Special Forces operators in similar situations.⁵

Currently, the Department of Defense has three levels of required SERE training for military personnel.¹ SERE-A is the basic requirement for all military personnel. SERE-B is required for personnel whose position places them at a moderate risk of capture and exploitation. SERE-C is for personnel whose job places them at an increased risk for capture or exploitation in both wartime and peacetime, such as Special Operations forces and aviation personnel.¹ In 2007, the Army created a second SERE-C school at Fort Rucker and made it a mandatory part of flight school for future aviators.⁶

Unit Structure

Fort Rucker is predominantly a US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) installation, which is headed by a two-star command at the US Army Aviation Center of Excellence (USAACE). Within USAACE, the SERE detachment falls under the 1st Aviation Brigade, 1-145th Aviation Regiment. The commander of the SERE detachment at Fort Rucker is a major (O-4). The SERE detachment employs a variety of active duty personnel, civilian contractors, and government service employees. For rating purposes, the SERE commander serves as the rater of the SERE school physician assistant (PA), their senior rater is the 1-145th Aviation Regiment commander, and the intermediate rater is the supervising physician at Lyster Army Health Clinic (LAHC). The SERE PA obtains credentialing and privileges and maintains their clinical hours at LAHC. As a qualified aeromedical PA, they work in the LAHC aviation medicine clinic, employing the skills and knowledge obtained in the Flight Surgeon Course.

Roles and Responsibilities

The SERE PA serves as the officer-in-charge of the SERE medical section and is responsible for providing acute, urgent, and emergent medical care for over 2,200 joint service members and civilian contractors annually. The PA provides medical training, leadership, and mentorship for a medic team with up to 10 personnel. The PA acts as an advisor to the SERE commander and course chief on all matters involving health, occupational, and environmental risks to students and cadre. Their role in risk mitigation helps minimize lost training time due to medical injury and illness. Daily duties and responsibilities are as follows:

- Conduct daily sick call operations while students are in the academic portion of training. During field training, the PA and unit medics conduct health and welfare checks at various stages. Direct patient care is documented on a Standard Form 600, which is reviewed and signed by the PA, then sent to LAHC patient administration for upload into the service member's electronic medical record.

- Provide oversight and medical care during training labs and high-risk operations. This allows for monitoring the health status of students directly and indirectly; it also allows for oversight to ensure safety protocols are followed by all cadre.
- Reinforce survival medicine skills to students throughout training. Provide emphasis on skills taught and allow the students to take an active role in their medical needs where appropriate.
- Conduct first responder and basic life support training for all cadre and contractors assigned. This allows for immediate response to any potential emergent situations.
- Review medical packets for all course attendees prior to their arrival and ensure compliance with Army Regulation 40-501, *Standards of Medical Fitness*.⁷ The regulation contains SERE-specific requirements for course attendance.⁸
- Advise the battalion and brigade command teams on medical readiness for all personnel assigned to the 1st Aviation Brigade. The command teams will seek the opinion of the PA, as the only medical provider organic to the unit, on personnel and expected return-to-duty timelines, not only for SERE students, but for flight school students as well.
- Attend course revision and planning meetings in an effort to improve programs of instruction and mitigate risk. This helps the PA fully understand the desired outcome for each modification to training and provide pertinent medical input to reach that outcome without detriment to the student.
- Conduct medic (68W military occupational specialty) training in the areas of sick call, medications, urgent care, and emergent scenarios. Issues commonly encountered may be gastrointestinal (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration); dermatologic (rash, insect bites, poison ivy, tick bites); and orthopedic (sprains, strains, fractures) in nature.

Position Requirements

To hold this position, the PA must pass and maintain a Class 2 flight physical exam and must:

- be a graduate of an accredited PA program,
- have certification from the National Commission of Certification of Physician Assistants,

- be a graduate of the Army Flight Surgeon Course, and
- have the designated M3 (aeromedical PA) additional skill identifier.

Desired Skills and Attributes

Desired skills and attributes of the SERE PA include:

- prior operational experience as a PA,
- rank of captain,
- strong written and oral communication skills, and
- leadership experience.

Training

The Flight Surgeon Course educates health care providers in the area of aviation medicine and policies related to aviation personnel and their aeromedical qualification status.⁹ Prior to assuming the position, the PA must attend and complete SERE-C, which allows for a better understanding of what the students will experience, and provides insight into their mindset and condition throughout the course. The opportunity to attend other SERE courses is available; there are multiple SERE courses throughout the Army that further delve into the specifics of evasion and resistance techniques. PAs can attend conferences such as those held by the Wilderness Medical Society, which offer a fresh perspective on issues related to field and survival training, and provide student teaching opportunities to facilitate their learning objectives.

Lessons Learned

The SERE PA position is not a clinical position; it is a medical director position. The mission is split into three major areas: screening, medical direction, and prevention. Most of the PA's time is spent screening medical packets to ensure they meet all admittance criteria. The next most important tasking is to provide mentorship and medical standards for the medical team to operate with. A SERE standard medical operating guideline has been created, but it requires refinement and continual updating from one PA to the next to ensure preventive strategies and treatments stay current. The success of the SERE PA relies on their involvement with all aspects of the course. This includes

working with the course registrar to have all packets completed at least a week prior to course start date, and attending all areas of the course to maintain current knowledge on how each section is operating. Finally, the SERE PA must be proficient and knowledgeable in diagnosing and treating a variety of medical conditions, most commonly dermatologic and musculoskeletal conditions. They also must determine when the soldier can continue in the course and when to send them for further care, which may mean that the soldier must be disenrolled from the course.

Tips for Success

- The SERE PA must be prepared to be challenged, both mentally and physically. The course itself is tough and will push the PA out of their comfort zone.
- The SERE PA must be present throughout all aspects of training. They must directly observe students during various phases; this will give the PA a unique perspective on students' overall health status. Injuries or illness are often concealed by students to avoid being dropped from training for medical reasons. The SERE PA must be ready to make the tough call to remove students from training when necessary.
- The SERE PA must work closely with the safety officer. Safety and medical personnel often work closely together to mitigate risk to the students and ensure safe training.

Conclusion

The SERE position at Fort Rucker is an extremely rewarding position. It allows the PA to expand their knowledge of military operational processes as well as impart medical skills to the students. The SERE medical team is highly motivated and prides itself on accomplishment of the mission. The team's goal is to ensure that each and every student successfully completes SERE school with knowledge of the potential dangers to their health, the skills to mitigate that risk, and the ability to return to duty upon graduation, and ultimately "return with honor."

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