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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Pepper Spray and Shooting Stars

By Annie Xue

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Many of the fears we face in day-to-day life are created by our own minds. When you start to understand the mind, you start to see reality. In April 2016 in Zurich, I participated in a company event where I met a group of former U.K. soldiers from an organization called Break-Point (<http://break-point.com>). One thing led to another, and here is my story, as well as the life lessons it taught me.

The moment I heard Break-Point's interrogation story, I knew that I wanted that experience. Right after I returned to the United States, I started my search. I found a survival school with instructors who are former special forces soldiers. So I

emailed them. A few days later, I got a response. Apparently, it would cost me a fortune to get a private torture session.

I was given a more cost-effective alternative: their seven-day Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) course. In addition to the interrogation, I would get to experience all sorts of other fun stuff. I paid right away, because I knew that if I thought about it too hard, I would never actually do it.

My flight landed in Springfield, Missouri, a city that I probably would never otherwise have visited. I was picked up by a tall black SUV. As I looked around at the four tough-looking men sitting next to me, I started to chuckle—what did I get myself into?

We were dropped off in the woods. I found out that most students have military backgrounds. Just looking at the tools and weapons with which they were equipped, I was pretty sure they already knew a thing or two about survival.

That week redefined the term “what a day” in my dictionary.

We learned wilderness survival from fire-making to shelter-building. We learned urban skills from knife-fighting to disarming opponents. We were dropped off at different locations in the city and required to get food and shelter, and to complete missions in two days with no money. And in the best part of the course, we got some flavor of an actual kidnapping, with an opportunity to apply what we had learned to endure the interrogation and escape.



Here I would like to share with you a few things I realized through this journey.

YOUR PERCEPTION IS YOUR REALITY

As part of the camouflage class, we needed to dip our heads into baskets filled with mud. Before this, I was the type who wouldn't even sit on slightly wet grass.

The mud was absolutely gross to look at, let alone the idea of putting it on my face. I teamed up with a guy so we could learn to combine different shades of mud for a better camo look. As he started to put mud on my face, I began to laugh, and I could not stop. It felt just like the expensive clay face mask I have at home!

NO-JUDGMENT ZONE IS A GOOD ZONE

The moment I got into that SUV, I noticed that this group tended to say and do whatever they wanted. The air feels lighter when you can just be you and do what feels right. And it is funny how when you stop feeling offended, nothing in this world can offend you.

I remember during one of our urban missions, I walked into the restroom of a Subway restaurant. I realized that I had not washed my hair for days. So naturally I just dipped my head into the sink and start washing it. I was laughing so hard as I dried my hair under the hand dryer. I just could not believe I was doing what I was doing.

BUILD A TEAM WITH TRUST

One of our instructors was a bounty hunter. It was so cool to learn surveillance and anti-surveillance from him. We were put into several vehicles and teamed up to perform surveillance missions. At any typical moment only one or two teams had vision on the target and the rest had to have absolute trust in those teams as they pulled into other locations to cover possible exits.

Yes, there were times when things fell apart and people yelled at each other, but we all learned a great deal, including the value of trust.

Talking on the radio is another art—always short, frequent and clear communications. I think people in the business world can really learn a thing or two from that.

WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

In lots of situations, I just had to admit that I was absolutely useless. It would take me 10 minutes to saw one-quarter of a small tree and a few seconds for someone else to finish up the rest. I could hardly pull the bow drill while others could use it to start a fire in a minute. But I was an expert in making an

improvised camo look, since it is very similar to knitting and flower arrangement.

When we were on the urban mission, some people had to sleep in the graveyard. I don't know how I did it, but I was offered free rides and food without even asking. That night our team slept in a luxury hotel room with a Jacuzzi tub. I even won a round in the knife-fighting battle!

TAKE ONE BREATH AT A TIME

I always assumed the interrogation exercise could not be so bad until I saw two men from the first group choose to tap out only minutes after the torture started. And those were two of the strongest people I had ever seen in my life! One guy came to our truck as our team was about to take off and told us to make sure to take one breath at a time.

The four of us were driven deeper into the woods, and all of a sudden we heard loud gunshots. We were thrown onto the ground by a few kidnappers, and right away were being repetitively treated with pepper spray. The effects can be disturbing. Let's just say that I've learned there are things that can wipe out your mental strength within seconds.

That moment I understood what that person meant by "take one breath at a time." It is not about worrying if you will survive the next minute; it is about clearly understanding that right at this moment, you are still alive, and being able to act accordingly. A few of us made it through the torture, and were handcuffed on the trees.

During the interrogation phase we had a storyline to establish. Each member of the team had to ensure the consistency of that story. My insurance knowledge did come in handy, as I was able to explain kidnap and ransom insurance to the kidnapper. After that we were given a small window to escape. We had to pick the handcuff and return to the safe zone on top of the hill, while still mostly blinded from the pepper spray.

Outside the camp, there was a large open field. At nighttime we would lie on the ground and look up at the sky. There was the bright Milky Way and shooting stars here and there. Just like any journey, it is always about the people you meet along the way. We talked about the universe, and we talked about this one human life. I felt so much love and energy through this experience, and coming out of it, I feel like I am a different person. ■



Annie Xue, FSA, MAAA, CERA, is a vice president at Swiss Re. Her career goal is to make the world a simpler, safer and happier place through work as an actuary. She can be reached at annie_xu@swissre.com.