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## **'SAS' - 11 DAYS IN A HELL CALLED 'PARADISE'** by **GARY ROBERTSON**

### **Synopsis**

Ever wondered what the elite SAS Regiment's Selection training really felt like? Gary Robertson did, and along with twenty-eight other members of the public he put himself forward to be tested by ex-SAS members in the explosive BBC 2 Reality TV series - 'SAS: Are You Tough Enough?'

This honest first-hand account will tear you away from the comfort-zone of your armchair and propel you through a nerve-racking, adrenaline-filled journey, where physical exhaustion and extreme mental stress must be overcome in order to succeed.

### **Chapter One**

#### **What If ...?**

Working away as usual on the factory line, another New Year had not long past when I found myself asking that post-Celebration question 'What will this year bring?' It had only been a few days since our hillwalking club had been off on its monthly adventure, scaling some of the snow and ice-clad peaks away over in the West of Scotland in a beautiful area called Glen Etive. Conditions had been absolutely perfect for walking and climbing with the big drop in temperatures creating a landscape of frozen beauty. Rivers and waterfalls flowed no more as the prolonged cold snap took a grip. It was an absolutely amazing sight to witness.

We left the factory car park in Dundee as usual on the Friday evening and headed off in high spirits on our merry way, with 'merry' being the appropriate word. Some Friday journeys have turned into full-scale parties with large amounts of alcohol taking the place of common sense and next days' expeditions being worked around thumping hangovers - but that's another story!

We grabbed a few beers in the Kingshouse Hotel near Glencoe and laid plans for the Saturday climb. I say climb because really, in winter, the game is mountaineering and a simple walk can have serious danger attached to it due to conditions. About seven or eight years ago I slipped on a mountain which was in great winter condition and very nearly killed myself due to negligence. I stupidly thought I could get up the hills without using crampons

and very nearly paid the ultimate price. Some of the lads do go in for the serious stuff with ropes and jangly bits but they are a different breed altogether. Probably 'nuts' is a better description! Anyway, the banter was flowing as good as the Guinness and some of the old stories were retold for the tenth time but still just as funny. All too soon the drivers had given us the shout and we were on our way to the 'Smiddy', which we'd hired for the weekend. The setting for this club hut is outstanding to say the least. From the front door the view down Loch Etive is stunning and all around massive peaks soar to the sky from the water's edge. Of course, that's when you can see the damn things and they are not covered in mist and cloud and driving rain or snow, but the challenge beckons for everyone who dares to explore them.

Saturday dawned and it was time to get breakfast and a brew on and get the gear together for what was shaping up to be a beautiful morning. The sun blazed over snow-clad peaks as far as the eye could see with a bright blue cloudless sky up above and a fresh, frosty nip in the air, which felt very refreshing as it filled the lungs. Various groups split up for different hills to 'bag' and were rewarded with a cracking day, although the weather did close in later on. You learn to take the good with the bad and enjoy it all the same. Bad weather has never bothered me either in the mountains or when going out for a run, as I love the challenge and hardship it brings. That feeling of rain or sleet being driven into the body by a biting wind is invigorating. Saturday night brought the usual 'crack' with songs, stories, plenty of laughs and a whisky or two to wash it all down. Then there was Sunday morning. A few heads were sore and the liquid being consumed had now turned to water and Irn' Bru. A quick look outside confirmed the dismissal of any thoughts of a venture into the hills. Rain was lashing in at low level, which meant blizzards higher up, and the magnetic lure of a cosy sleeping bag was always going to win 'hands down'. Sorted. I know I said I didn't mind bad weather but sometimes a hangover and a bit of common sense make sound judgement. We were back home for early afternoon and the kids made short work of tiring me out properly. They wouldn't care if I'd just climbed Everest – playing was top of their agenda and quite rightly so.

Right, where was I? Oh yes, the BBC. My mate Cammy, who set up a website for our hillwalking club was passing in the work and stopped for a chat. He asked how the weekender had gone and continued talking for a few minutes more, then casually threw in - 'I've had an email from the BBC asking if anyone would be interested in taking part in a programme about the SAS.' I nearly fell away. He said 'I'll get the email for you later and you can have a look, see what you think.' I was thinking 'Cammy, get it now, get it yesterday, I need to see it.' I was absolutely bursting with excitement but managed to hold out till the next day when he handed me that magic sheet of paper. The gauntlet was thrown down in front of me. 'Are you tough enough? Do you have what it takes to pass SAS selection?'

They were looking for thirty very fit individuals from the public to take part in endurance marches, interrogation, escape and evasion, abseiling and climbing, counter terrorism and more. It was to take place in the month of May over two weeks (in the Brecon Beacons) and was designed so that only one person would complete and win the prize which was to be confirmed later. I couldn't contain my excitement. A chance to have a go at probably the toughest military selection course in the world involving things I would just love doing. I read it and re-read it the whole day wondering what sort of things were going to be in the course, what fitness level would be required, what kind of person would take part. It would have to be some kind of nutter and that nutter couldn't wait for that final bell to ring at three o'clock in order to get home and ring the contact number. My adrenaline was at the overflowing level as I paced back and forth in my bedroom, looking at the phone and

wondering what to say. 'Right, here goes.' I phoned Seb Illis at the BBC inquiring about the forthcoming programme which he explained would be very tough, both mentally and physically, describing all the things that were on the email and also the chance if you progressed further, to do a parachute jump. A parachute jump is something I have always wanted to do and had never got around to doing. It just sounded fantastic. I told Seb, 'I've got to be on this programme.' I would have paid to get an opportunity like this.

My application was on its way, and an adventure to beat all adventures. Even before the application arrived, I thought about the training, which might be suited to the task ahead, and the best way to go about it. Usually my training consists of a wide variety of activities ranging from martial arts, boxing, hillwalking, running and fitness work. The hill work could stay. From the books I had already read, initial selection involved some serious tabs (marches) over hilly terrain carrying anything from a fridge freezer up to a small caravan on your back while time was ticking against you. The sparring would have to be knocked on the head for a while. Injuries were something I could do without and they were unavoidable with the training I was doing at the time. Along with my mates Billy, Derek, Craig, Jim and Jerry we'd put on fencing helmets, gloves, a groin protector and sometimes knee pads and proceed to knock the shit out of each other stickfighting. We conjured up these weapons from cut down chimney sweeping brushes, which were made of hard plastic and covered with pipe lagging. These were then taped up tightly and very compact. They did the job perfectly, not enough to kill you but bloody sore enough to let you know you'd been whacked. The idea was to take our training to a more realistic level, although if you took a head shot you acknowledged you would have been finished. We applied the same realistic methods to the grappling training and submission fighting but as I said, injuries were common and trying to run after receiving two dead legs from Thai boxing was near impossible.

Billy and the guys are still training away and the knowledge and friendship I have gained from them is fantastic. I kept up the boxing training just for the sheer intensity, which it offered – a good honest workout. I don't believe there is a harder arena on the planet than the boxing gym and my friend and coach, Brian Healy always drove a Spartan regime, pushing himself to the limits. A great inspiration to myself, and also to all the young lads who turn up to be put through their paces week in, week out. With Brian's brother Graham coaching/training, the guys do a sound job in the boxing gym. Although I wasn't even on the programme, my philosophy from the start was totally geared towards being there, just in case I did get the nod.

The application form arrived within a day or two and was a fairly intense affair, asking all sorts of questions regarding fitness regime, motivation, the hardest thing you've ever done, family thoughts and so on. I tried to answer as enthusiastically as possible, and let the producer know that I wanted to be on the show at all costs. One chance is all you get. Off it went in the post with all my hopes and wishes attached to it. I spoke to my wife Sue, about the possibility of taking part, and she was very supportive, as it would involve me having to take two weeks' holiday from my work. 'Go for it', she said. 'If you want to do it, then do it.' What a gem of a person, and my best friend too! Here was me, if I was accepted, going to take two weeks of family holiday time, and Sue saying 'O.K'. I promised myself, that if I were lucky enough to get on the programme, we would have a wee holiday in October whatever the outcome.

Some days passed before a letter dropped through my letterbox, with a BBC heading on it. Maybe the dream was over. Maybe I had just been getting carried away. When I had first phoned the BBC, I had sort of tongue-in-cheek, sort of serious, said to Sue 'I'll be on that

programme,' and now it looked to be happening. The letter informed me that I had made it to the last one hundred contestants and should make my way to London near the end of March to take part in a fitness test. I was over the moon to say the least but kept the lid on it for the time being. Sue was extremely happy for me and kept saying, 'What if?' Even the kids were starting to get a bit excited. I'd mentioned it to a few of the lads in the work and they'd taken great delight in ripping the shit out of me. 'Thanks for the support lads.' The banter in a factory is always top quality and someone's always getting it in the neck. It's no place for the faint hearted at times.

Together with the application, I'd sent a video of myself training, which included Billy and me knocking the hell out of each other with the sticks on a freezing cold February morning in the local park. Some footage running up the Law Hill in Dundee with a 45-pound rucksack was thrown in too. I wondered if the video had helped my cause, imagining a viewing panel to be saying something like, 'We've got to have this headcase on the show!' It seemed a bit better than a plain old photo.

The fitness test was to be a fairly straightforward affair, consisting of a stint on a running machine, a cycling machine and a rowing machine and would last no more than an hour. I have to admit I was very surprised at the choice of exercises and the duration they would last. I thought we would be heaving a small elephant in a rucksack, over the Brecon Beacons for maybe half a day at least. I would have to get on my bike again after ditching it in favour of running and hill work. As far as rowing was concerned, well, three or four times a year at the local pond with my children just wasn't going to get me into the same class as Sir Steve Redgrave. I managed to get a loan of a rowing machine from a mate in the work and packed in a few mini-triathlon sessions into the two or three weeks before the test. March had been a bad month for getting into the hills as the Foot and Mouth crisis took a grip of the country and many outdoor pursuits were knocked on the head for the time being. In Scotland, we fared much better than our neighbours South of the border in England and Wales where the disease had really taken a hold. We had been very lucky in the North, where cases were restricted to the Borders region. It still meant I couldn't go into my beloved hills for now, but by the very end of March, some estates were opening their gates with precautions being taken. I adopted a very selfish view at this point thinking, the more I could visit the mountains here, the more I would have an advantage over contestants from down South, who would have to travel a long way if they wanted to get any hill training in. I kept this thought process going throughout, even though I hadn't been accepted yet. Better to be prepared than not. As the date for the fitness test approached, Sue and I decided to make a weekend of it and stay at my Mum's aunt Cathy and uncle Ted's home in Bushey Heath near Watford. We'd decided to fly down on the Friday night, arriving at Luton airport where Ted was going to pick us up around 11.30p.m. The plan was to have a good chat, catch up on all the news and then jump on the tube in the morning in plenty of time for the fitness test at 2.30p.m. That'll do nicely. Wrong! We were delayed for some time so we grabbed a coffee and settled down with many other passengers to watch the Graham Norton Show which we watch every week. Everyone was chuckling away at the antics, (which can be quite crude at times) and munching away on snacks, when the part of the show where he contacts someone on the Internet smacked everyone in the face. Some people had been trying not to watch, as the content was below the belt at times. They were soon to be blown away as the star of the website proceeded to play 'God Save The Queen' on a penny whistle using only her vagina! It was absolute class. People were fidgeting and trying to ignore it while the rest of us were falling off our seats. It was to get worse when we were moved downstairs ready to board the plane and were delayed further. People naturally gathered round the TV to ease the boredom and were treated to a classic Joan

Collins film with plenty of shagging. Cheers Joan, I nearly pissed my pants as people got up (excuse the pun) and walked away uncomfortably to go and read the uninspiring adverts adorning the walls or have a go at counting all the floor tiles in the building. It was the best delay ever!

The flight was a trifle hairy, as thick mist had descended on the country and made flying conditions quite nasty. The pilot did a fantastic job landing the plane. I don't know how he managed to see the runway in conditions, which nearly had us diverted to Stansted airport. My underpants were starting to go a shade of brown. We finally collected our bags and waited patiently for Ted who had kindly offered to come and collect us. We told him we could grab a taxi but he would hear nothing of it and travelled the thirty-minute journey through dense fog to greet us with a lovely smile. Safely back at home there was much news and stories swapped then it was time to hit the sack. The Grandfather clock chimed like a smaller version of Big Ben. It was 03.00 a.m. I was feeling totally knackered and mentally drained when my head hit the spongy soft pillow but struggled to get to 'slumberland' due to the probable anticipation of tomorrow's events. Ted and Cath gave us a wake up call at 08.00a.m. delivering piping hot tea and biscuits. I was instantly alert, like the times as a child when you have a birthday or other special event and excitement rushes through your body like an express train. Tiredness was instantly forgotten. Breakfast became a battle of wits with Aunt Cath, as more food was offered up to follow the load I'd just managed to shovel in. 'You'll need a good breakfast inside you,' she enthused. My late Gran Bett who was Cath's sister, was exactly the same. Just when you thought you couldn't fit any more grub into an already packed stomach bursting at the seams, Gran would say 'Go on, have another piece of toast, or cake.'

'Thanks Gran but I've already had a half loaf and a good go at relieving Mr. Kipling of some excess in his cake department'. What is it with Grandmothers? They seem to think we are not fed at home and persist in offloading some of their food mountain on to us and won't take 'No' for an answer. Bless them. Love is what they enjoy giving most.

I packed my training gear into the holdall, re-checked it, then Ted ran us to the tube station. Ten minutes later we were on our way to White City in London. I tried to relax but was fighting a constant battle with my inner opponent. 'You're not good enough. What if everyone's better than you? What if you make an ass of yourself?' 'Bring it on' I thought. Negative thoughts have to be destroyed with positive energy and a highly motivated mind. I'd learned a lot from top martial artist and author, Geoff Thompson whose books on fear, stress and positive thinking are a great read for anyone wishing to break out of their comfort zone and dive into various kinds of adversity. We'd arranged to meet Sue's brother Gordon (who'd driven down from Swindon,) outside the BBC buildings. After locating the venue where the test was to be held we decided to go for a cuppa and some dinner in nearby Shepherd's Bush as we had some time to kill. Sue jumped in the front of her brother's little van, leaving me to sprawl in the back over tools, pieces of machinery and other junk, which lay scattered around. Gordon drove like Nigel Mansell, which is par for the course - or race track as it was at this moment in time! No one has a second to spare and road rage seems to simmer near the surface of even the meekest of old grannies. I remember being hunched up in the back as we darted in from one lane to another and spotting a car number plate quite by accident which had the letters SAS at the end of it. I thought to myself 'Maybe it's a sign, today might just be my day.' The thought was gone as quickly as it had entered, there being the more pressing need of holding on for dear life as Gordon hammered on in the merry-go-round that was more like a scene from the 'Wacky Races.' I was thinking sarcastically, 'This is great preparation. A nice relaxing drive through the centre of London with a set of spanners sticking in my kidneys and a large screwdriver trying to skewer me in

unmentionable places.' After a bit of dodgy parking we strolled into an upmarket bar with welcoming surroundings and browsed over the menu. I wasn't really in the mood for eating, (especially after Cath's forced feed) with a stomach going like a washing machine on full spin, so I settled for an orange juice and let Sue and Gordon get on with devouring their lunch. The conversation was passing me by as my mind wandered through a maze of thoughts. Sue kept reassuring me, 'Look, you'll be fine. You've done so well getting this far, be proud and give it your best shot.' She was right. There was probably hundreds of people who'd applied and would love to be in the position I was in so I thought 'Yeah. C'mon, let's do it!'

Gordon dropped us off after first, taking us past Wormwood Scrubs, which I'd read about in various books on the Underworld. I thought about the masses of humanity locked up behind those cold intimidating walls, grinding out a hollow existence. We said goodbye to Gordon and headed for the main entrance to the BBC buildings. A terrorist bomb had recently gone off in White City and police messages on billboards were asking for any witnesses to come forward. A crazy thought came into my head. 'What if they were targeting the programme? Surely not.' I dismissed the notion and focused on what lay ahead. People were coming and going, some portraying that 'flushed' look of exertion. Natural instinct has you sizing them up. 'Never mind them. What are you gonna do?' I gave my name to a girl on the desk who met us with a broad smile and a friendly welcome, then walked into the changing facilities to get my gear on. A big Scouser named Jason was getting changed at the same time, so we chatted briefly and exchanged pleasantries then made our way to the sports hall. Contestants were already being put through their paces in groups of ten. Ours would be the last group of the day. Again the mind was checking out strong contenders. The good thing about the programme was that they wanted to see how women would fare in the tough environment of a usually male dominated area. I thought it was a great idea. Equal opportunities and all that! Some of us chatted about our sporting disciplines and interests then it was on to a quick briefing by BBC team members on what was expected.

First up, ten minutes at level 15 on the running machine. Three minutes break. Three minutes of sit-ups, another three-minute break. Ten minutes on the bike, three minutes rest then 2000m on the rowing machine in a time of eight minutes or better. 'Sounds o.k.' I thought. I glanced up at Sue, who was watching from behind the huge windows of the viewing area upstairs. Originally, I was going to London on my own but we then decided to make a weekend of it and right now I felt comforted by her presence. I took on board the 'Good luck' message coming from her lips. Seb Illis from the BBC assured us we weren't racing against each other and that it was as much to do with the content of our application forms as well as performance. So it was looking like a general measure of fitness, plus a small screen test by a BBC crew who were doing interviews while contestants did their stuff.

Ex-SAS man Barry Davies, who'd set the programme up for the BBC and Mike Stroud, who would be the doctor on board were also wandering around assessing. I'd read of Mike's exploits in a couple of his books and also read a couple of Barry's using one in particular as a kind of learning bible. It was an honour to be even under the same roof as these guys let alone be assessed by their watchful gaze.

First up the run, and we're off. If you couldn't hack the pace at level 15 you could bring it down to a more comfortable level but no way was I going to under perform. My lungs felt as though they were on fire through a combination of nerves, adrenaline and only a small warm-up. Getting the muscles and lungs ready before exercise is always very important as

it prepares the body to fire on all cylinders and right now I did not feel it. My heart rate and breathing recovered quickly and I began to feel good. The three minute rest was up and we're into the sit-ups with BBC members holding our feet for support and offering some encouragement. Over the years I've always included sit-ups for a strong stomach and this one, which wasn't included in the information sheet, possibly caught some people out. Sixty- five was the required amount during the three minutes, back to the floor then up, a full sit-up, no cheating. I heard others struggling and grunting all around as I pushed in a steady 115. Next up the cycle machines and as hard as you could pedal for ten minutes. Some were strong on this one where as I tried to keep an even pace and save some energy for the final discipline, which was the rowing. I remember being interviewed while on the cycle by a cameraman on various subjects, and trying to sound like I was cruising, while really I was breathing out my arse! He asked as a parting shot, 'Did I think I had what it takes to make it to the end of the course if selected?' 'Yes,' I answered no ifs, buts, or maybes. I needed to be involved in this programme.

Last up, and we're into the rowing. A couple of the guys next to me nearly rowed the machine down the hall and out into the street, they were going so well. I dug in and managed the distance, just inside the eight minutes, but felt I had done well enough and had given it my best shot. The lads all joined in some light-hearted banter when it was over, then everyone went their separate ways to contemplate and await the outcome. Sue came over and gave me a big hug. 'Let's just wait and see,' she said. I told her that three of the guys in my group - Jonathon, Jason, and Geraint would all be on the show, just from hearing of some of their achievements and the strong performances they had pushed in. The likes of the Everest marathon, Iron Man triathlon and other high-endurance events had me listening in awe. I also told Sue that we were probably looking at the winner in Geraint. This guy had won the infamous 'Tough Guy' event and looked totally un-ruffled by our little training stint. Sue said simply - 'I'm looking at the winner.'

