THE NAVY:
Torture Camp

Naval officers and cadets have whispered about it for years—the beatings by Asian-accented guards, the "tiger cages," the starvation and exotic water tortures. The source of all this cruel and unusual punishment is not a foreign prison camp, but the U.S. Navy's own hard-nosed school for survival, evasion, resistance and escape (SERE). Designed to train servicemen to survive the rigors of POW life, the Navy's two SERE programs, one at Warner Springs near San Diego and another in northwestern Maine, have long been kept secret, officially as a precaution against "tipping off the enemy"—or forewarning prospective students. Last week, however, much of the secrecy surrounding the camp was suddenly stripped away when an embittered SERE graduate filed a $15 million assault-and-battery suit against Navy personnel. As a result, many of the "horrors" of the camps have been confirmed—including the death of two Navy men during SERE training.

The suit was filed by Lt. Wendell Richard Young, a pilot who had a sparkling service record and hopes of an airline career—until, he claims, his back was broken during SERE training a year ago. Rejecting the bid for secrecy urged upon each student, Young told tales of fetid tiger cages, beatings and jar-runguado flies by instructors he called "gorillas," and a torture device called the "water board." Young also charged, though not in his suit, that students have been tortured into spitting, urinating and defecating on the American flag, masturbating before guards and, on one occasion, engaging in sex with an instructor.

The Navy denied Young's unsubstantiated charges of sexual abuse, but it did acknowledge the use of water torture and physical punishment in the camps. A Navy spokesman, Cmdr. William Collins, insisted that those activities were mostly "illusions of reality" that were not as dangerous as they seemed. Collins did admit that they were real enough for the two Navy men who did not survive SERE: an enlisted man who suffocated in one of the cages in 1961 (they have since been enlarged), and another sailor who died of a heart attack in 1967 during one of the course's cross-country hikes.

Lizards: Young, an unassuming 28-year-old, says he was forced to take the program on threat of disciplinary action. By his account, the five-day survival course begins with lectures and scavenging expeditions in the desert where students are forced to eat whatever they can find, including lizards. Later in the week, the students are sent out on a hilly evasion course through patrols of "aggressors" shooting and shouting in Russian and Vietnamese accents. Upon capture, the "POW's" are roughly up and given their first taste of the dread water board: they are strapped head down onto an inclined board, with a towel placed over their faces and cold water poured onto it. They choke, gag, retch and gurgle—and it is dangerous enough that a Navy doctor must stand by at all times to prevent the students from accidentally drowning.

Their captors then hood their "prisoners" and herd them off for the "resistance laboratory phase" of the course, 22 hours in a Vietnam-style prisoner's compound. There, they are bombarded with Vietnamese music and the sound of machine-gun fire and kept in 16-cubic-foot tiger cage boxes—with a coffee can for their excrement. The prisoners are called several times into an interrogation room where, if they displease their captors, they may be slapped around, thrown into an iron fence, or subjected to the water board. Young claims his back was broken by several judo flips (despite a yellow tag on his wrist warning of his bad back) after he had tried, as an officer, to overrule a guard's orders to an enlisted prisoner. "I remember freezing in the box, thinking, 'This is an insane asylum,' " Young recalls. "I could hear the gurgling screams of people on the water board, you could hear people being smashed into walls. The pain was just too real—I displayed it.

'Dachau:' Even though the Navy has generally confirmed most of Young's description of SERE, his lawsuit for personal damages stands little chance of success. U.S. law prohibits a serviceman on active duty from suing the Federal government on medical grounds. As a result, Young has appealed to California's Sen. Alan Cranston for intervention, calling the Warner Springs camp "a modern-day Dachau," but the senator has turned him down because the case is already being taken to court. In addition, the Navy has given Young psychiatric tests, and it may attempt to prove that Young's pain is all in his head.

Young's challenge, however, has shed some light on a practice that has been both praised and damned by those who have to endure it. "Many returning POW's believe that SERE gave them increased willpower and the ability to survive," says one Navy official in Washington. Other Navy officers are not so sure. Notes one flyer: "I don't think you learn anything from physical abuse except that you're not going to win any battle as a POW by resisting physically. The only way to resist is psychologically." The price for learning this lesson at SERE, he feels, is too high. "I did not walk away from there with any feeling of self-improvement. It was terribly degrading, demoralizing and dehumanizing."

—DENNIS A. WILLIAMS with MARTIN KASINDORF in San Diego

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