

After graduating from the US Military Academy at West Point, Craig Mullaney (co-author of “The road to digital leadership,” Page 61) attended US Army’s Ranger School, a course legendary for testing soldiers’ mental and physical limits. The following excerpt is from his best-selling memoir of his experiences as a student.

The Unforgiving Minute

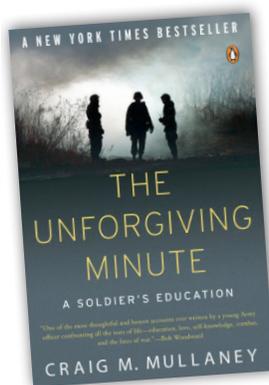
“NOT FOR THE WEAK OR FAINTHEARTED.” THE BLACK and gold sign at the entrance to Ranger School read like an insurance waiver. One more step with my bald head and stuffed duffel bags was like a signature confirming I understood the risks. A few dozen of us huddled by a nondescript chain-link fence in the pitch-dark. Finding Camp Rogers had been its own reconnaissance exercise. It lay hidden in a dismal corner of Fort Benning’s tangled forests, well beyond view of Airborne School’s 250-foot towers. A friend dropped me off at 4:30 a.m.

“I hope I don’t hear from you,” he said as he waved me off. “If I do, that means you either got kicked out, died, or quit”...

Ranger school was established during the Korean War. Every year nearly three thousand officers and enlisted soldiers, screened and trained in advance by their units, churned through Ranger School’s meat grinder. The Army designed the course to build combat leaders, mimicking the stresses of combat through severe food and sleep deprivation. Between mock ambushes and raids testing tactical knowledge, students marched insane distances under heavy rucksacks in order to test their stamina and will. By one student’s count, we would march as many miles as the distance between Boston and Philadelphia.

Ranger School consisted of three successive phases – Darby, Mountain, and Swamp – each building on the foundation set in the previous phase. Those who weren’t successful in a particular phase were either dropped from the course or allowed to repeat the phase as “recycles.” For the small minority who passed straight through without recycling, the course took nearly nine weeks. In the end, fewer than half the class typically earned the right to wear a two-inch black and gold Ranger tab on their left shoulder...

For an hour the Ranger Instructors (RIs) had us on our backs doing flutter kicks until our abdominal muscles cramped. Then they turned us



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CRAIG MULLANEY

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over to exhaust our legs with mountain climbers. Then back to flutter kicks. Then over to mountain climbers. The point was to exhaust us before we even dipped a boot in the water.

“Move, move, move!”

We rushed into the fenced-off pool area swarming with RIs. We lined the edges of the pool and observed an RI demonstrating several aquatic skills we needed to imitate successfully. The first event was a fifteen-yard swim in full combat gear.

“Rangers demonstrating undue fear will receive a no-go.”

What about “due” fear?

When it was my turn, I jumped in and began paddling with one arm while suspending a rifle above the water with the other. At the tenth yard I began to look like a candidate for a lifeguard rescue. My boots were like concrete blocks, and my uniform dragged through the water like a parachute.

“Ranger, you are not authorized to drown,” shouted the instructor who escorted me from poolside with a giant hook poised to snatch me from the bottom.

“No excuse, Sergeant,” I gurgled between bobs.

THE TEMPERATURE PEAKED IN THE NINETIES AS our bus returned to Camp Rogers. We rushed into the barracks to change into dry uniforms and formed up by the dining hall. A half-dozen pull-up bars signified the dining ritual we would perform as an ablution before every meal at Ranger School. Just like a Catholic with rosary beads, the Ranger student recites the six verses of the Ranger Creed in a strangely rhythmic intonation before performing pull-ups at the dining hall entrance...

Three hours of supervised pain immediately followed dinner. We sprinted on full stomachs to retrieve our duffel bags and lined up “on the rocks,” a formation area lined with jagged gravel. We spread our bags twenty yards away from our positions, dumped the contents, and began a “layout,” a time-tested haze that served the purpose of screening our luggage for “contraband,” the actual term used to describe an unauthorized item that might give a Ranger student an unfair advantage. Punishable items included Tylenol and civilian long underwear... By the time we finished, it was nearly midnight. I fell asleep on my plastic mattress before the filaments cooled in the lightbulbs.

The second day began three hours after the first ended.