

SOT APPRAISAL DAY

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The Army NCO permitted himself a small joke.

"It's going to be a little bit wet and a little bit muddy," the training sergeant said, looking fondly at the sodden obstacle course on an occasionally rainswept wintry Canberra hillside.

Nineteen AFP officers were being put through the annual AFP Special Operations Team appraisal course ... with "Platypus" along for the ride.

0800. The gymnasium, Weston College, July 6.

"We only get one day to select them for the three week SOT training course and if we make the wrong decision here we make a rod for our own backs."

The speaker is Sergeant Ron Learmonth who, together with First Constable Marc Donohue, forms the full-time SOT core.

"There are 35 men in the SOT, all volunteers, and being part of the unit is additional to their normal duty," he said.

"There is natural attrition each year, and we need to keep our numbers up."

Attrition of a different kind was already in evidence on the gym floor with vigorous chin-ups, press ups and sit ups. The selectors expect to pick only 12 out of the 19 men taking the appraisal course.

"We may have lost some already," was the only comment one instructor would make when asked to hazard a guess on how many would make it through to the end of the day.



Army Sergeant Steve Prigg warms up the SOT hopefuls.

0855. The run

"We don't want the gung-ho type," the SOT Operational Commander, Detective Chief Inspector Ric Ninness, said as the candidates left for a 2.4 kilometre run. "SOT members need common sense and discipline and the ability to work in a team."

"As the day goes on you will see them developing a rapport," he said.

"Safety is the biggest thing these men learn from the SOT course. You can't have 20 people in a suburban street, armed the way these officers can be, if they haven't been rigorously drilled first in safety," he said.

And his remark on the runners' performance as they returned? "That was the easy bit!"

0920 The firing range, Weston.

"People are becoming more aware of fitness and the level of fitness of recruits seems to be getting higher," First Constable Wayne Comyn (tactical training instructor) commented, appraising the volunteers as they received their weapons for the next part of the test.

"The people we're getting through Weston now seem to be more aware of what smoking and booze can do to them," he said.

And the selectors' views on the performances so far?

Sergeant Learmonth: "We certainly have a mixture here, with some guys shining as athletes and some guys who can't shoot for nuts. But I've no doubt we'll get our 12 starters."

"This is probably the fittest bunch I've seen in the last three years. A lot of it has to do with the standard of recruit going through the College. On average the people we're trying out today have only been in the job two years. That high level of fitness found in people only freshly out of College tends to drop off with the demands of the job."

Revolver shooting was held under the watchful eye of the officer-in-charge of firearms training, Sergeant David Ford. He appeared satisfied, apart from the

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Constables Mick Gordon, Victor Kucharzewski and Marcel Kors (L. to R.) approach breaking point during the chin up test.

occasional curt command to the odd over-eager shooter to follow the safety rules and not confuse his own foot with the target.

01145 The obstacle course, Duntroon.

Three times around the course left the AFP members exhausted, dirty and wet but unbowed — and the two Army sergeant instructors said they had not disgraced their force.

“They’ve done well without a lot of conditional training,” they said of the AFP men who had climbed ropes, clambered up walls, scrambled up nets and slithered through icy water under barbed wire in their quest for SOT membership.

The casualties consisted of two course members who were forced to drop out — one with a twisted knee and one with a twisted arm.

Detective Chief Inspector Ninness summed up the effect of such iron-hard exertion: “Endurance courses such as this squash the gung-ho, macho rubbish out of them. We’re looking for common sense and the ability to work together as teams. The men here have certainly shown that commitment to each other and to working together as teams.”

1400. The abseiling, Mount Ainslie

While a rainbow stood against the leaden sky the AFP volunteers were put through their paces down the cliff by Sergeant Learmonth and Senior Sergeant Alan Stewart. “Platypus” used the time to ask about the attraction of the SOT. The general response was that the SOT is “where the action is”.

“It’s the sort of police work that gets the adrenalin pumping,” one volunteer said. “It’s a logical extension of our daily police work,” said another, adding that “you really feel part of a team.”



A few extra kilos of mud didn't make the rope obstacle any easier.

1550 The tear gas

Real life took over from training at the last event of the day. Exposing the volunteers to tear gas had to be cut short when Sergeant Learmonth and First Constable Donohue were called away to organise the SOT presence at a seige which had suddenly erupted at the Australian Institute of Sport. The interruption brought home much better than any training exercise the 24 hour nature of any volunteer's commitment to the SOT, and the essential nature of the Team's role.

Weston College two weeks later.

“The final selection of 12 from the group for SOT training was very difficult because their standard was so high and we had another four volunteers to put through the wringer later that week,” Sergeant Learmonth said.

“Fitness proved to be the big telling point. The men selected are pretty much



Sen. Const. Wayne Buick pauses to consider whether his career prospects are down the drain.



on a par for fitness. Those who didn't make it this time around displayed a much wider variation of fitness standards.”

But Sergeant Learmonth said he wanted to stress that neither he nor Detective Chief Inspector Ninness had any problem with the volunteers in other areas.

“We are both very pleased with the calibre of the men who applied and we would certainly be very happy if they worked on their fitness levels and tried out again,” he said.

So far, the SOT doesn't have any women in its ranks. “Platypus” can only assume it's because none of the fairer sex have yet cared to try out!

First Const. Gary Wood leads the group under the wire — and into the mud.

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