



The last Bank Holiday weekend, August 1st-3rd, was certainly not your average holiday weekend for three Defence Forces teams that took part in the Beast of Ballyhoura adventure race. The 36-hour, non-stop race, incorporating many different disciplines, took place in the Galtee and Knockmealdown mountains, stretching through Waterford, Tipperary, Cork and Limerick, and the Ballyhoura Hills on the Cork/Limerick border, covering over 260km, with an estimated height climbed of over 6,000 metres.

Now in its third year, the Beast of Ballyhoura has grown in size and number of participants since its inception in 2007. This year saw 56 competitors take part, making up 14 separate teams of four (three males and one female). The event also incorporates the Inter-Services Challenge, now in its fourth year, which is contested by teams from An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces and the emergency services.

The rules of the race are easy to follow, particularly for military personnel. Teams are handed a list of points to visit in a particular order. A grid reference is provided for each point as well as written instructions, describing exactly what teams are looking for. The list also contains further information about where kayaks, bikes and ropes can or cannot be used.

Both the start and finish points for the Beast of Ballyhoura are located at Blackwater Castle, a beautiful 15th Century castle set on 15 acres along the banks of the Awbeg River in the village of Castletownroche.

The teams gathered in the castle courtyard on the Friday evening where they pitched tents and established their bases for the race. At 8pm that evening the event began with a lengthy brief setting out the race rules, the equipment each participant could carry and a basic description of the race itself.

The race proper began at 5am on the Saturday with a treasure hunt type event around the castle grounds and Castletownroche village. (I hope the villagers had been warned of the mayhem and chaos that was to befall their nice little village.) This event ended with a 25m abseil down the walls of the castle. A very easy task.....unless you're afraid of heights!

From there it was down to the river and into kayaks for a 25k leg that took competitors down the Awbeg and onto the Blackwater, travelling through Ballyhooly and Fermoy. The weir at Fermoy provided onlookers with some very interesting sights, as teams endeavoured to negotiate the drop and the fast water without getting too wet. This stage concluded with a kilometre-and-a-half upstream stretch that required all but the very strongest of paddlers to vacate their boats and porter them upstream.



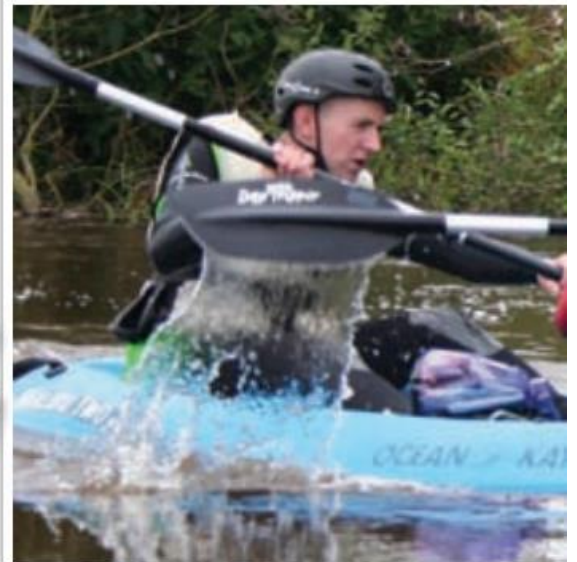
Competitors then switched to mountain bikes for a road cycle to Kilsheshkin Wood, on the edge of Kilworth Ranges, where they were required to complete a 10k orienteering event on foot. It was then back to the bikes and across to Mountain Barracks for a second orienteering event. After the orienteering, competitors returned to their bikes and travelled along the Avondale Way to the base of the Knockmealdowns.

The next activity encountered was described on the race clues as a 'secret discipline'. In previous years this was usually a codeword for some form of shooting, either clay pigeon or pistol; obviously a strong point for the military teams. However, this year to our surprise the 'shooting' turned out to be archery. Each team member had six arrows to fire at a target, with 10 minutes in bonus time awarded for every point scored. This meant there was four hours of bonus time available in a matter of a few minutes!

This type of scoring system is a feature of the Beast of Ballyhoura. It is not just a simple race from point A to point B; there are many decisions to be made en route, which either gain or cost time. For example, for each of the mandatory controls a team missed an hour in penalties was incurred, while the orienteering had a ten-minute penalty per marker. Frequently throughout the race teams were faced with the decision to get the marker or take the penalty. This gave teams a lot to think about. For instance, as our team found, you could spend 110 minutes getting 14 orienteering markers, which only held a penalty of 140 minutes if missed. This meant gaining as little as 30 minutes at the cost of a lot of expended energy.

The team dynamic is also something very familiar to the military mind. The team requires many skills to complete the race; an ability to navigate by day and night, on foot, in kayak and on bike, as well as an ability to fix bikes when things go wrong.....and they do go wrong! Basic medical skills are also essential, as is a good administrator to organise the team's equipment, preventing duplication while ensuring the team has everything it needs. Teams also require each member to have a minimum of competency across all of the disciplines. (How often have you heard that a team is only as strong as its weakest link?)

Adventure racing is a lesson in teamwork. All competitors can testify to having highs and lows, good moments and bad. Even the pace the team sets throughout the race must be considered; if the team is to be successful, the pace must be one that all members of the team can sustain for long enough to complete the race. It basically comes down to knowing your own capability and the capability of your



In August, three Defence Forces teams took part in a tough adventure race through the mountains and hills of Cork, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford. Capt Ollie Clear (DFHQ) outlines how they got on...

taming the **BEAST**



team-mates and planning accordingly.

By the time the teams made their way out of the Knockmealdowns darkness had fallen. Ahead of the competitors at this stage was a long road-cycle to the next marker, which was located in the Mitchelstown Caves. After collecting this marker the competitors were required to negotiate a hazel-hedged maze, also located at the caves. Darkness coupled with tiredness combined to make this a very interesting experience. Once the marker was found and teams had extricated themselves from the maze, it was off to Labbamolagga Community Centre.

Our visit to the Community Centre provided one of the most surreal moments of the race. Not only was it hosting a transition for the race, where competitors got access to spare kit and food, but it was also hosting a fancy dress party. (One of the competitors recounts being allowed to jump the queue for the toilet by Ali G!) I think both groups were equally bemused and amused by each other and it certainly helped to raise the spirits of the adventure racers.

The race continued with an on-foot section which took teams over Carrigeenamronety and Coolfree mountains to the head of the mountain-bike trail in Ballyhoura. From here teams were back on the mountain-bikes to complete a 65k loop of the Ballyhoura bike trails, followed by an orienteering event, again on mountain-bikes, around Coolfree Mountain.

At this stage of the race the end was nearly in sight: all that remained was a road cycle and five more markers to be collected en route. But as everyone who has ever participated in an adventure race designed by Greg Clarke knows, it is never that simple! True to form, rivers had to be negotiated on tiny

bridges, others had to be waded carrying bikes, and fiendishly placed markers had to be found. Having said all that, it was an exhilarating feeling to be on the way home: a feeling matched only by entering Blackwater Castle courtyard and the realisation that you had completed the race.

Once you pass the finish line you immediately look around to see which teams have finished before you. Having said that, adventure racing can be a cruel sport as your finishing position may have no bearing on the overall result. Teams may have missed markers or completed bonus loops, leaving the outcome of the race to be determined by a quite complicated set of calculations; much too complicated for teams to even attempt after 36 hours of exertion. Therefore, once you finish the race you begin a waiting game to see how you have done.

This year's results were announced at an after-race banquet held in the Dino Museum in Castletownroche on Sunday. To our delight, the Defence Forces teams finished second, third and fourth in the overall race and first, second and third in the Inter-Services Challenge.

Adventure races such as the Beast of Ballyhoura are very much about taking part and having a go, and the style of race tends to favour the military mindset. Military fitness and organisation coupled with very limited equipment (mountain bike, climbing harness and helmet) is all that is required to take part.

For further information on the race, talk to any of this year's military competitors, who would be delighted to advise anyone interested in taking part. It is not a bad way to spend a weekend and see the countryside, albeit from a different perspective. ■

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Our teams comprised:-

Team 1: Capt Donal Burke, Lt Nicki Ni Caba, Sgt Mick Horgan and Lt Kieran Wolfe.

Team 2: (2009 Inter-Services Champions) Lts Maeve O'Grady, Dan Morrough, Owen Carton and Diarmuid Collins.

Team 3: Capts Ollie Clear and Orla Jennings, Lt Kevin O'Reilly and Pte Colm Hill.

Credit:

https://www.dfmagazine.ie/dfmag_pdfs/2000_2009/Vol_69_2009/07_Sep/Vol_69_No_7_Sept_2009.pdf

See also:

Irish Times Article

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tackling-the-beast-in-the-ballyhoura-hills-1.712593>

Beast of Ballyhoura Promo Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCqgQTma6Ik>

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