

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Monster Mash

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After nearly a year assigned to Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron-41/AIMD, I began to sense a restlessness among the assigned Marines and sailors. Cynicism and complacency were setting in. Their respective influences were eroding morale within our organization. We needed a vehicle that contradicted the normal, more accepted types of physical fitness (and problem solving). I felt that only an unconventional approach would reinforce the bonds of teamwork, solidify trust, foster responsibility, and rebuild individual/team accountability. The Monster Mash (a program introduced to me in college by a Navy SEAL) was the prescription.

I sent out Warning Orders, “invitations” so to speak, hand-selecting most of the participants initially. By design, I didn’t make the training convenient. Drills commenced on Friday afternoons after everyone had gone home or to the local watering hole for happy hour. Response at first was a bit sketchy, but there was at least some interest. So, on a cold, rainy afternoon, our first Monster Mash began. Dressed in utility uniforms and boots, the drills ranged from heavy bouts of calisthenics to crawling through a muddy trench numerous times. We also implemented martial arts techniques and as the afternoon wore on, most of the lads wore out.

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Monster Mash (continued...)



Yet something else was going on. After a demanding session with volunteer participants, their sense of accomplishment easily outweighed their physical exhaustion. The Marines and sailors loved it. Talk of the training spread through the ranks like wildfire. Many people would ask all about the training, and my response was, “Come see for yourself”. I mandated that each participant speak of the Monster Mash only to each other. In turn, they answered inquiries vaguely if at all, and not as diplomatically as I did (bless their hearts).

Prior to training, the participants were uninformed as to the actual sequence, frequency, and intensity of the drills. By design, surprise was a major element of the Monster Mash. For some of the participants, surprise was a major point of contention. Conversely, several of the lads actually liked the unknown, thriving in the constant whirlwind of uncertainty. Once again, it was interesting to witness how each Marine and/or sailor reacted in this environment. History is replete with uncertain situations which were dominated by friction, and I felt that the participants

would benefit from such challenges (I know I did). Each week offered new dimensions of uncertainty, both mentally and physically. It was fascinating to observe how each participant handled adversity, particularly when they were physically and mentally fatigued. Simple tasks often took great concentration for those who were not as physically or mentally strong.

As the weeks progressed, the tasks became increasingly difficult. Modifications in intensity, duration, and type of training kept the evolutions from becoming stagnant or too predictable. Further sessions

ranged from pugil stick fighting to boxing, wrestling, and combat conditioning drills prescribed by the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (several of the participants were certified Marine Corps Martial Arts Program Instructors). We adopted the Navy SEAL approach to pain: The more familiar it becomes, the easier it is to manage.

The training was never repetitive—I chose a different location and emphasized different exercises each time. Long range training runs, sprints, hundreds of



Monster Mash (continued...)



At the end of each day, results were measured in “intangibles” (number of sprained ankles acquired during training, number of times a participant vomits during a run, broken noses, amount of blood spilled during combat hitting/boxing drills). These “metrics” didn’t ensure the smartest or safest way to train, but definitely offered an opportunity to boast a bit.

repetitions of calisthenics, rope climbing and swimming in freezing water were just some of the “enjoyable” diversions. Each training session gave the participants an opportunity to capitalize on their strengths, while eventually finding a physical weakness in everyone. It was readily apparent that the increasing performance expectations led to more difficult training, and yielded greater degrees of accomplishment.

One of the more memorable afternoons was highlighted by the performance of a young Marine named Corporal Spitzenberger. Recalled to active duty from the Reserve ranks after September 11, Spitzenberger had made tremendous strides in recent weeks, and was transforming his big frame into a muscled machine. That day’s events consisted of rope climbs, multiple sets of 50 squats paired with accompanying sets of push-ups. We had already run 2 miles in full utility uniforms with flak vests, and “warmed up” with several bouts of calisthenics. As most crossfitters know, climbing a rope after multiple sets of upper and lower body work can be extremely taxing. Corporal Spitzenberger was about 6’1” and weighed at least 225 lbs. Try as he might, he could not get up the rope in between the other prescribed drills. Again and again he attempted to climb, eventually falling off the rope and severely spraining an ankle which began to swell immediately. Refusing to quit, he finished his squat and pushup repetitions, and re-assumed a climbing position on the rope. With tears of determination in his eyes, and more than an adequate dose of ankle pain, he attempted to climb yet again. Spitzenberger never made it up the rope that day, but his refusal to quit or let his teammates down was wonderful to behold.

The bottom line was that the participants were able to cultivate positive attitudes and healthy behavior while simultaneously embracing uncertainty. Though generally of average skill and physical ability, they proved to themselves and to each other that their commitment was unequaled anywhere on the entire installation. They influenced their fellow sailors and Marines by infusing a fresh perspective and dedication to their respective duties. Physical fitness test scores skyrocketed, while military bearing and uniform appearance improved. Technical skill and attention to details improved in each of the members’ primary military specialties.

Most importantly, I believe the Mash equipped these young Marines and sailors with skills that they can use throughout their lives. Their willingness to step beyond themselves for the improvement of the team enabled them to grasp the importance of selfless service, and their hard work, enthusiasm, and sense of adventure surpassed any physical limitations they may have had. I am proud to have had the opportunity to lead them.

