

Exercise Hudson Gap began Friday night with the journey from Catford, London down to Weymouth. Once down in Weymouth the junior ranks got into the accommodation to get our heads down ready for the challenges of the weekend.

After traveling to Weymouth Hard we had the brief for the weekend and any safety precautions. We were split into two sections; 1 Section went off to learn the history of building, types of bridging and knots and lashings. 2 Section were off to practice for their timed run for an MGOB (Medium Girder Over Bridge) build.

Learning and improving bridge building skills is an essential part of being an Army Reservist in the Royal Engineers, allowing us to play an increasingly important role for defence in the future and integrate with our Regular counterparts.

As part of 1 Section, we started the day having a lesson from Sgt Rowe on the history and make up of bridging, a very insightful and knowledgeable lesson allowing us to understand the task ahead. We then went off to do a knots and lashings lesson conducted by Cpl Margett. This lesson was great to improve already known skills making our section ready for Sunday (more on that later).

The afternoon saw 1 Section move onto the MGOB build. We were given the time previously set by 2 Section of 11 minutes, so the target was set. One practice build, here we go; 'hands on lift up'. As the saying goes nothing survives first contact and 32 minutes later the practice run hadn't gone very well. However having a section made up of soldiers who hadn't built a MGOB before together and some fresh sappers out of Phase 1 training this was an amazing insight and despite the learning curve for all of us working together as a team, we improved our communications, ready to go again. With the bridge dismantle, 1 Section was keen for a second attempt:

"Stopwatch at the ready!"

"Hands on lift up!"

"Lower"

"Pin in"

"Hands on lift up"

"Up at the rear"

"Pin In"

It was important that our communication was clear and with that, the MGOB was completed in 13 minutes – half the time taken in practice. This proves how vital these weekends are for us reservists. It allows us to find each other's strengths and weaknesses and come together as a team so that we can get the task done. We may not have as much time as our Regular counterparts to learn such skills, but we make up for it with our determination and enthusiasm and often still have a huge amount to offer the Army.

With a good run under our belt confidence was high. This put us in good position for the final run. Each lifting signal was on point, each component was fitting like a glove but then disaster struck when one of the section was made a casualty by the directing staff to add to the challenge... Time lost!

We didn't let this get in the way with everyone back on the bridge still motivated to beat the time; bridge finished 11 minutes. Job done.

The end result turned out to be a draw between both sections.

During the Covid period it was a real struggle to do any collective physical exercise so a few of us went out for a steady state 10km run together that evening. Being able to do both physical training and physical exercise after lockdown was great for both physical and mental wellbeing.

The Sunday saw both sections move down to the hard. Another brief and another challenge. As sections we would have to build 2 rafts with the objective to retrieve an item from across the water and bring the item back.

All equipment laid out: Barrels, Rope, Wooden planks, Life jackets, Helmets, Oars.

Stopwatch goes! Rafts are under construction; The knots and lashings lessons from the day before are now being put into the practice. Making the knots neat, tight, and beating the lashing in place.

2 Section got in the water first but 1 Section wasn't far behind. Once we were in the water, we started rowing. The communication we had improved on Saturday came into its own when paddling; everyone was in sync. The added obstacle of a Combat Support Boat (CSB) cruising past and creating huge waves was a real test of how strong our rafts were.

Both sections picked up their objectives and started the return leg. 2 Section were back at the hard with 1 Section not far behind. We then landed at the hard. Troopy and I were on the back of the raft and got off to help pull the raft in, however the water was so deep that we fell all the way under. We scrambled to get back to the raft and up the hard as the race was far from over; we frantically dismantled the raft to complete the challenge with 2 Section taking the win!

This was our first exercise back since the Covid lockdown and a fantastic weekend at that! It was great to return to physical training and have an opportunity to socialise again. It underlined the importance of collective training and has got us back up to speed with bridging, a critical skill for any combat engineer, so that if we did need to deploy on operations or UK taskings, we would be ready to do so.