FINDING THE SILVER LINING IN LOCKDOWN

Ollie Ollerton reflects on time well spent.

BY SAMANTHA REA

Matthew ‘Ollie’ Ollerton is a former Special Forces operative whose missions included hostage rescue, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism and homeland security. His autobiography Break Point is a Sunday Times best-seller, and he’s best known for putting contestants through their paces on Channel 4’s SAS: Who Dares Wins.

Q: How have you been coping in lockdown?

A bit too easily! Anyone who’s been in the military will have coped more easily in lockdown, but I relate to what people are going through because when you leave the military, you lose the structure of your working week, and the framework of your everyday. You’re no longer connected to your support network of friends, and you’re left with a void. That’s exactly what people have been going through.

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I actually put myself into isolation, in my own boot camp, in 2015. I had no money and a lot of issues, so I could’ve gone, ‘Oh, my life’s terrible,’ and been a victim, but instead I went, ‘This is amazing! I’ve got the opportunity to sit here for two and a half months, with no distractions, and focus on myself?’ It’s about finding the silver lining. That’s the position people have been in with lockdown. What’s important is not to dwell on the things you can’t control, but to focus on what you can control: and that’s you.

There’ll be people who’ve spent lockdown hitting the snooze button all morning, allowing life to pass them by, but it’s important to have structure in place, so you are in control of the day, rather than the day controlling you.

The systems I put in place during that isolation boot camp changed my life – that’s why I put it into words in my book Battle Ready so everyone can learn from it.
Q: What military techniques are useful for coping with lockdown?

Goal setting. It could be related to work, fitness, a relationship: anything, but it should make you think: ‘I don’t know if I can do that!’ Then you break it down into smaller goals that equate to the bigger goal.

Some people think, ‘I don’t have any goals: I’m happy.’ But your subconscious is a goal-getting machine and it will focus on your dominant thoughts, so if you haven’t set a goal, and you’re constantly thinking negatively, you’ll be attracted to exactly that.

In the military, the mission is the goal, and regardless of what happened on the journey to the goal, the goal always overwhelmed our circumstances. So when something went wrong, we didn’t focus on that – we always focused on achieving our goal. If you don’t have a goal, you become a victim of your circumstances and that’s where people are currently at. They haven’t got a goal beyond their circumstances, so they’re caught in their current situation.

It’s important to project forward – to think about where you want to be and make the best of the circumstances. The beauty of a Special Forces soldier is that regardless of the circumstances, we get to where we are, we appreciate where we’re at, and then we look for the opportunities. And that’s what people have to do in these circumstances as well.

Q: What inspired you to join the Marines?

I was attacked by a chimp when I was nine, and I’ve recently questioned whether I’d have joined the military if it hadn’t been for that attack, because it set me off on a path of destruction and mayhem. I lost interest in school at 14 and made the decision to join the Marines because they’re one of the hardest military units in the UK. I wanted the hardest challenge, but when I got there, I felt it wasn’t enough for me, so I went into the Special Forces. For me, it was never about learning a trade – it was about fighting. I felt at ease in stressful situations and I wanted to be in danger. I chased death all over the world.

Q: How was being in the Special Forces different to being in the Marines?

When I was in the Royal Marines, I felt I was cannon fodder. I was just a number – but in the Special Forces you have more specialist skills. The training is more complex, you have more responsibility, and anything you do is more dangerous. I was one of five out of 50 that passed the Special Forces course and that self-kudos is phenomenal. You feel invincible, and special – and when the pass rate is that low, you rightly should.

Q: What was most rewarding about your time in the Special Forces?

You’re so highly trained that the most satisfying thing was carrying out successful missions, because you’re seeing it all come together, with the camaraderie and the teamwork. My first mission stands out because it meant doing the job for real. I was part of the counter terrorism team in the SBS [Special Boat Service] and my pager went off. I saw from the code that it was real, rather than a drill, and I had 30 minutes to get back to camp. Shortly afterwards, we were in helicopters going to smash a target just off the British coastline. It was a drug ship coming into British waters and we attacked at dawn, just as the sun was coming up. I felt like, ‘Wow, now I feel like I’m a Special Forces soldier.’ I thrived off doing the job – I wanted to be on the front line, day in and day out, so the hardest times for me were when I wasn’t on operations. I couldn’t handle peace time soldiering – that was mentally challenging for me.

Q: Why did you leave the Special Forces?

I’d had enough. The wages weren’t great and I knew there was more money to be earned in the big wide world. From looking at other people who’d been in the job longer, I could see my path – and I wanted to create my own path.

There was something missing, and I didn’t know what it was, but I left, thinking that would be the answer. When you’re in the military, you feel invincible, and you think, ‘I’m going to go out on civilian street and I’m going to smash it!’ But when I came out, there was a massive void. I started drinking heavily, and I ended up doing a six week on, six week off routine in and out of Baghdad as a contractor, for six years, which isn’t good for your mental state.

Q: What was missing?

A purpose. I’d been chasing this dream of being a Special Forces soldier – but it was the image I was chasing. At the time, I didn’t know what was wrong, and I was looking externally for something to make me happy, when I had to look within. Once I started to invest in myself, in my health, my fitness, my life, my mind, I stumbled over something amazing – and that was rescuing kids from slavery and prostitution in Thailand. That’s when I found purpose – in helping others. It’s so rewarding and that’s the backbone of how I started Break-Point. Now my purpose is helping veterans. All the money I earn from books and my TV career goes into Break-Point Academy (break-point.co.uk/theacademy) which is a career transition facility for veterans. We offer training, then line up jobs with external companies. The power of helping other people is phenomenal.

Q: As a society, it’s only recently that we’ve started talking about mental health, but I think many men in particular are suffering silently. You’ve talked about the importance of mental health – what would you say to men who are struggling to admit they’re having problems coping?

Everyone is living in the shadow of someone they think they’re supposed to be. There’s this concept that we have to be alpha males, looking hard, and not showing emotion. When I was in the military, if you showed any kind of emotion, it was seen as weakness, and it was extinguished with stern language, a load of beer, or both. Many men link emotion with weakness, but they’re not connected. When the lads off SAS: Who Dares Wins show it’s OK to show emotions, and it’s OK to talk, I think that gets noticed across the whole of society.

We have a duty of care, a responsibility, and a voice – and it needs to echo the sentiment that it’s OK to show emotion. Someone who’s pretending to the outside world to be someone they’re not will end up with serious mental health issues and that’s no help to anyone. If you bottle it up and think you can hide it away and be the person you think everyone else is expecting you to be, you’ll be less reliable and end up self-imploding – it’s like a pressure cooker. The stigma is slowly coming down, and the more people talk about it, the better.

Q: Will your fitness app Battle Ready 360 get us all Special Forces fit?

Absolutely! Me and Foxy [Ollie’s SAS: Who Dares Wins]
co-star Jason Fox] do all the workouts. It covers mind, body and nutrition – you need to cover all three to get results, otherwise you’ll keep going on the same old rollercoaster. It’s unique because we have a character assessment tool based on neuroscience, so you know your strengths and weaknesses, what you’ll struggle with and what you won’t, and that helps you prepare for the journey ahead.

Q: You’ve set out to make your Break-Point events the most realistic Special Forces simulation in the country. If someone wants to get a taste of the training you’ve done, and experience the benefits of that kind of teamwork, can they get that from going on one of your weekends?

Yes, people come to Break-Point as individuals, and they meet people who become a new family. They do things they’d never have expected themselves to do, because we break down internal limitations. It’s about the state of mind we put people into. We take them outside their comfort zones, and that’s where you start to build camaraderie and character, because that’s where the ego walks out. When people are faced with an uncomfortable circumstance, and they’re asked to do something they wouldn’t normally choose to do, their feelings, actions, reactions and emotions become extremely organic. It’s the first time they’ve seen their true character in a long time, and it’s a hard pill to swallow, but it’s life changing.

Sunday Times bestseller Battle Ready by Ollie Ollerton is available in paperback and on audio CD.

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