

FEATURE

# WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

GRID SENDS THREE OF ITS PROMISING YOUNG MEMBERS TO SURVIVAL BOOT CAMP.  
**NINA UNLAY** COMES BACK WITH BLOOD ON HER HANDS







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## BOLO KNIVES ARE REQUIRED BEFORE ENTERING THE JUNGLE. NO BOLO, NO TRAINING. THE ONE THEY GAVE ME LOOKED AND FELT LIKE IT WAS USED FREQUENTLY.

Secured around my waist with blue nylon rope, someone had doodled the crest of the JEST school onto its wooden case. The blade was a dark gray, about a foot long, curved on one edge, straight on the blunt side. They met in a sharp tip that made me appreciative of the case that stopped me from accidentally stabbing myself.

I felt pretty cool. After trekking into the wild for a good thirty minutes into our 72-hour bootcamp, that goodwill disappeared. I hadn't so much as touched the bolo, and it started to weigh awkwardly on my side.

There were five of us, but it may as well have been just the two of them—instructors Ed Tolentino and Nomer Tolentino Dimain—effortlessly hacking their way into a trail. Everyone stopped for a rest. Thank god, thought the least athletic person in our group (it was me). The instructors disappeared easily into a little pocket of bamboo in their green camouflage uniforms, and came out hoisting several bamboo poles.

"The smallest species of bat in the Philippines," Ed said. "Dinner. We can grill these." Inside the bamboo poles live Lesser Bamboo Bats. They can be found thanks to the small slits they make in the bamboo. Nomer opens the slits a little wider so that we can take a closer look, and some of the bats try to fly away. They are no bigger than the circumference of the circle I make with my forefinger and thumb. There are at least ten, Nomer says.

We are literally picking up food along the way to our first campsite, like

our makeshift trail is also a long grocery lane of fallen goods. By the time we reach the first campsite, we have some camote, a papaya, and the main entree trapped in its own bamboo home. "Bat-BQ for dinner!" Ed makes the first joke of the expedition, what I would soon identify as jungle humor, and we resume.

The JEST school formally calls its 72-hour training program "Survival

Bootcamp," and it is also known as one of the toughest training programs in the Philippines. Survival Bootcamp comes with a complete package: a welcome orientation, safety precautions, tent rental (optional), bolo knife rental (unless you have your own), and even a jungle-survival certification.

When I told people that I was going to "jungle camp," it was received with a lot of confusion, disbelief and some very







justified snickers. I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. Jungle camp became a little block of fear in the pit of my stomach, but it also felt like a challenge.

#### **IN THE COMPANY OF HARD MEN**

Eduardo Tolentino, 48, trained to be an instructor for the JEST program in 1988. Back then, JEST, or Jungle Environment Survival Training school, existed to train U.S. military men to survive long wilderness expeditions, and they taught different programs: a 9-hour training program for pilots, 24-hour program for the U.S. Navy, and the 72-hour program for U.S. Marines.

So we were a team of five: the veterans, Ed and Nomer, were there to teach; and then there was us—Chaz, who was doing very well with the hike, but who confided that the past

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five months or so sitting in front of a computer screen (at his day job as web director) didn't help; Rennell, assigned to photograph us, and who didn't know that we would be camping, and therefore had three bags worth of equipment; and then there was me. I had no camping experience and my biggest fear was that I would trip and roll off the mountain.

"I underwent training from my grandfather," Ed says. "It wasn't compulsory, pero gusto ko matuto. In less than two months, I was trained. It's free. Especially for those with the blood

of Aeta. Basta willing ka, madali lang mag-adapt sa tinuturo nila."

All of the current instructors are Aetas, most of them related to the original fifteen instructors when the program was founded—Ed is the grandson of Iking Bulatao; Nomer is a great-grandson of the man. "Mas madali ka mag-adapt sa skills kung related ka na sa isang instructor. Sa ciudad na rin ako lumaki. Dito talaga sa mga senior ako natuto."

Today, the bootcamp takes in all kinds of people, from true survivalists





to people on corporate team-building sessions. (Our little group of three could be the poster kids for the trainers' willingness to accept even the softest of city kids.) And yet, the nature of the "bootcamp" helps camouflage the original purpose of the 72-hour training program: survival, plain and simple.

Almost fifty years ago, in the late 1960s, and long before Subic Bay was converted into an economic zone, the U.S. Naval Base in Subic Bay was an active military facility, a port for U.S. forces coming to Southeast Asia. The base had been alive and used by the Americans for hundreds of years for varying purposes, but at that particular period of time it was serving as a strategic military tool in the Vietnam and Korean Wars. There is a story that circulates the JEST camp: They say that the Americans vouched for the legitimacy of jungle training because it was what allowed them to survive when they were stranded on an expedition in the Vietnam forests.

## CHANGE BEGAN WITH THE STORY OF ONE MAN: IKING BULATAO, WHO BELONGED TO THE AETA PEOPLE OF ZAMBALES, HIRED TO BE A GUIDE FOR THE U.S. MARINES.

The original groups explored the thick forests of Subic Bay in groups in their mission to learn warfare tactics and strategy. While patrolling the forests, the soldiers did as they knew, and brought their supplies with them, including water, food, materials for shelter—they brought materials for survival as they understood it, heavy rations and aggressively meticulous preparations, no potential problems unprepared for.

Change began with the story of one man: Iking Bulatao, who belonged to the Aeta people of Zambales, hired to be a guide for the U.S. Marines. While the Marines were packing with them entire campsites, Iking guided them through

trails he knew with only his bolo knife. "Itak lang! Ang shelter niya, bamboo. Pagkain niya, fruits at vegetables. Doon sila nagsimula, at pagkatapos nagdala na sila ng barko-barko ng mga Amerikano," proudly recounts Louie Bulatao, Iking's nephew, who is now the chief instructor for the JEST program.

Iking guided the Americans through the forest as only the indigenous people knew how; the forest provided him all his resources. That first group of soldiers asked him to teach them what he knew, and eventually he started working on call, taking groups of around fifteen soldiers at a time into the forest and sharing his expertise on botany, medicinal plants, fire-starting.



It became compulsory for American soldiers to train with the Aetas. They grew to have fifteen local guides. Every guide could handle fifteen American soldiers. Training grew to the hundreds. In time, the U.S. Special Forces built the guides a kubo to call their base camp, and then later on an entire training area. New recruits came in every year to take their required training and learned that jungle warfare was less about preparation and more about survival.

Today, local pilots, the PNP, and military men still come in groups of hundreds to train. When the Philippines

**Opposite page:** Instructor

Ed Tolentino is a grandson of one of the founders of the program.

**This page:** Vintage photo of the original JEST instructors

## STAYING ALIVE

**Water.** A matter of life and death in the wild. Secure a piece of bamboo filled with water for boiling is over a fire with a pronged stick to sanitize.

**Water vines.** Besides life-giving water, these vines are as sticky as Velcro. Can also be used to make rope.

**Fire and shelter.** Once you find a good camping area, set up camp and fire. Travel with a lighter; if you don't have one, quickly scout for dry bamboo. Dilit tree produces

flammable sap that catches light easily from a flame and burns like petroleum. A few drops make a great accelerant to get a fire started.

**Salt.** Never run out of salt. Salt is vital to keep the body working correctly.

**Food.** Setting traps is great but gathering food is better; find a stream for shrimps, frogs and fish; or on the trail watch for papaya, sour leaves, camote, fiddlehead fern; gather as you cover ground.

**Bolo knife.** Never cut anything against a rock, as chipping your bolo knife could leave you in bad shape.

**Hygiene.** Gugo is great for washing—not for vanity, but because staying clean keeps you healthy and alert.

**Going Number 1.**

Don't pee directly in the stream; go elsewhere where vegetation can absorb it. You're not an animal, and you don't want your friends brushing their teeth in pee water downstream.







**Jungle provisions:**  
Bamboo is used as a  
makeshift cooking vessel  
for rice and cassava.

asked the American military to pull out of the country in 1992, the Americans left the naval base and stopped financing the JEST program. For a time, what had become the JEST school closed down, until the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority had it reopened, and subsequently widened its doors to locals, tourists, and people intrigued by the idea of a Survival Bootcamp.

Trainees are specifically instructed not to bring in high-tech camp equipment, or any kind of pre-cooked food—essentially and ideally, the 72-hour Survival Bootcamp has evolved into an eight-kilometer trek into the wild with nothing to help you but your bolo knife. And if you're well-equipped with the knowledge of know-how and when to use it, that bolo really will be all you'll need. I wasn't one of those well-informed and skilled people, so I struggled for the first 72 hours.

In fact, the very thing they will teach you at JEST camp is how to hold your bolo knife: always forty-five degrees away from your body. The instructors have perfected the use of their equipment, so that it seemed like any problem we encountered could be solved with a bolo, and maybe some bamboo. "Huwag masyadong malapit!" cried out Rennell when Ed used his bolo knife about a foot away from his leg.

Ed chuckled. "Ang layo!"

### GREEN GROCERY

The Subic jungle surroundings are made of foliage so thick and green, it's hard to feel like you are out in the wild, and easier to feel like you are in a strange, small room. There are bugs everywhere, but you care more about them more than they care about you.

Every day begins with a trek, and ends at a new campsite, where trainees source water, food and shelter. The first day of Survival Bootcamp is heavily focused on identifying medicinal and

WHEN IT CAME TO RESOURCE-HUNTING, BAMBOO WAS ALWAYS AT THE TOP OF THE GROCERY LIST. SHELTER, FIRE, FOOD, AND WATER ALL HAD TO BE ACCOUNTED FOR, AND THEY WERE ALL MADE EASIER WITH BAMBOO.

edible plants. During the trek, Ed or Nomer would occasionally point to a plant and ask, "edible or not?" (which to me sounded like a very dangerous game of I Spy, survival edition.) Before introducing the plant's proper name, they give its purpose: water, or maybe, medicine, even shampoo.

It's difficult to crash-course an entire jungle of plants' scientific names, but less so to memorize a list of things you might need. They would show us a vine, split it in half and then let the liquid drip into their mouths: "Water vine." Shampoo vine, rope vine, plate leaf, sour leaf. The jungle is a wild marketplace of plants with purpose. And that's how things were presented to us, or imprinted us. Everything's purpose first, and then the means of getting it, our naming formula. Just into the first day, when my water levels had nearly depleted, I would think, "man, I could go for a water vine."

Water can be sourced from different places in the jungle; creek water can be boiled in bamboo, or water can be collected from plants like "water tree." Ed took his knife and made a cut on the trunk, then inserted a small leaf directly above the cut so that the sap and water mixture that came out of the cut would first collect on the leaf, before it dripped down in one line. He placed an empty bamboo pole beneath it. "In an hour, there will be no more sap and the water will be clear. By midnight, it will be full."

When it came to resource-hunting,

bamboo was always at the top of the grocery list. Shelter, fire, food, and water all had to be accounted for, and they were all made easier with bamboo. We brought at least two bundles back to camp, and Ed and Nomer quickly went to work on them. They would take their bolos, place them right at the center of each old, brown pole and split them into two. They took those halves and alternated them on top of one another so that the ends of each half would meet the middle of another. This made a roof for our campfire. The live bamboo they used for cutlery. Those bundles of bamboo turned into the source of almost every random thing we could conceivably need.

"It's like we're in a video game," Chaz decides. Drenched in sweat and enthusiasm, we went on a quick sidequest for a water vine, and we joked that if we found it we'd score x number of bolo points and level up. We didn't find the water vine, but we did find a vine conveniently shaped like a hanging chair, and we took our time trying it out. I had to ask Ed help us. At this point, we had just set up camp and Rennell was enjoying the newly set-up hammock, and Nomer was making Chaz a leaf-hat that resembled Peter Pan's to match his bamboo cup and spoon set. "Do you think this feels like a vacation for them?" Chaz asked me, referring to two instructors training three city kids instead of the probably-more-usual three hundred policemen in uniform.





## PACK RATS

The one true essential is your bolo knife. But if you have more time to prepare for jungle survival, here's what to pack.

- A bag to store your goods (comfortable to carry and to sleep on as a pillow)
- Rice to supplement your finds as hunter/gatherer
- Flashlight/headlamp
- Pairs of pants
- Shorts or swim trunks
- Long-sleeved shirt
- Short-sleeved shirt
- Sturdy footwear (boots are recommended, but as long as your shoes are comfortable for long-distance treks; I survived with quick-drying running shoes.)
- A few pairs of socks, thick
- A few pairs of underwear
- Big poncho for rain (could also be used as shelter)

## OPTIONAL

- Lighter
- Quick dry towel
- A hat (for sun and rain)
- Toothbrush and paste
- Toilet paper
- Salt!

## LUXURY

- Bug spray
- Water purifier (charcoal water bottle or purification tablets)
- Writing supplies (for notes)
- Basic toiletries (if gugo just doesn't cut it)
- Some chili or ginger to liven up your food
- First aid kit
- Plastic bags
- Mobile phone

We weren't sure. But in moments like those, it felt like a vacation for us.

When we came back from the jungle, people asked us what kind of activities we did. "Activities?" Chaz laughed, "Well, catching food, setting up camp, you know... survival, that kind of thing." But if we think about it now, it was pretty fun wearing the Peter Pan hat and not worrying about much more than dinner.

At night, the jungle is pitch black. The thick plant and insect life that you see in the daylight disappears, but you know that it's still there, along with any traps or holes you can step on. Nomer decided to go hunting at the creek. The dark allows for crab and shrimp hunting. Prey can be found by shining a light into the river and spotting the reflections from their eyes. The only light we had came from our flashlights and—because we had followed the instructions about not bringing camp gear—our cellphones.

"Safety precaution," Nomer warned. "May iba pang predators dito, hindi lang tayo. So before you move, always look left, right, up and down." Nomer told us an anecdote about a policeman, bitten by a viper because it was too dark for him to see it when he placed his hand on a tree for support. "Pero di naman yun mangyayari sa'yo!"

Despite his reassurance, we walked significantly slower after that. For some reason, it is common JEST logic to believe that accidents are the exception. With the thousands of guests they receive, one unlucky policeman and one unhappy viper probably is. But as you're lighting a dark, wet path with your cellphone lights, talking about the predators of the wild, it's a little bit harder to believe.

By the end of the night, we had a fish net full of crabs and shrimps. "Mas mura kaysa sa dampa!" Nomer laughed. Jungle humor.

## GOING NATIVE

The second trek took us deeper into the jungle, and we run off trail. It's hard to discern being on and off trail, but the plants obscure our view from the rest of the jungle so entirely that Ed and Nomer have to cut vibes just above our heads. "Look, nesting grounds for wild boars," they point out casually.

At some point the trail becomes too thick and difficult to cross that they forge ahead looking for a better path. It's hot and humid. I pluck out two leaves the size of my palm from the plants next to me. "Fan leaves," I tell Chaz, and cool myself off.

On slow days, JEST instructors navigate the jungles they've familiarized themselves with so many times before, cleaning up after campers and maintaining the trails. There are six of them, a small team compared to the original fifteen.

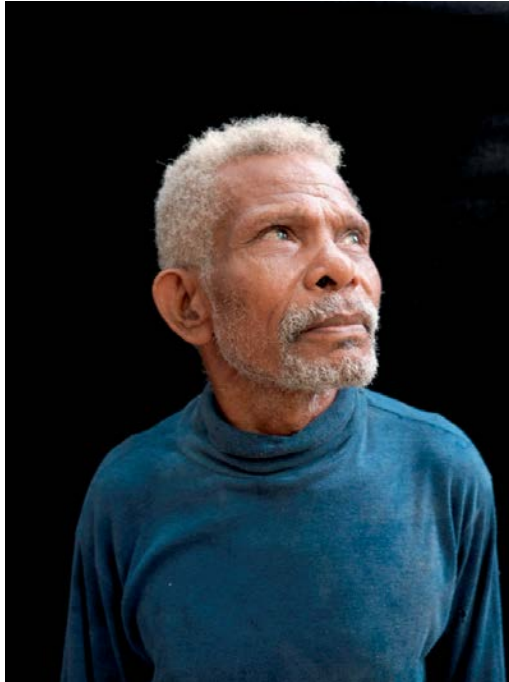
The trails on the second day are messy. A tree has landed right in the middle of the trail so that trainees have to climb over. When the rains and winds come, it takes the JEST team time to cover the entire area of the Subic jungle.

We take the second-largest of five campsites in the JEST grounds, next to more beaten trails, and a river that ends in a small dam. Some kilometers away, across the river, Nomer points out the Aeta village.

"Inside the Subic Bay Freeport, there's the Aeta village. This family, the one that lives by the river, is special. They own the jungle. It's their ancestral domain," Ed says. He's referring to the family of Antonio Liwanag, an elder from the Aeta tribe, and his wife Zenaida. Later, Zenaida comes by, walking through the bridge that connects ancestral land to the rest of the jungle, balancing a gallon of water on her head for the three campers who succumbed to rations of shame.

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We are invited to visit their house, settled across the small river. Right next to their home was campground, big enough for 300 people, possibly more, with benches, tables and makeshift shelters already put together. Aling Zenaida and Elder Liwanag lived in a cozy house, a space much smaller than the campgrounds they lived by, with three dogs, and sometimes their nephew, who climbed trees and smoked out bees. They offered to show us an Aeta “magic trick.” “How we pass time,” Elder Liwanag joked. He took out a small Coke bottle, a tiny pebble and a piece of bamboo (of course it involved bamboo). He took a thin bamboo strip and connected the ends to make a circle. Carefully, he placed the bamboo circle on top of the bottle, and then balanced the tiny pebble at the very top. “Watch carefully,” he said.

He counted to three, and then with his index finger pushed the bamboo circle out of the way, so that the pebble shot directly into the bottle. The magic here seemed to be that, whenever anyone else attempted to do the same thing, we would invariably fail. He repeated the trick three times; Chaz, Rennell and I each failed at it a few times more. We were completely absorbed.

In just the space of a couple of days, this had happened to us. We had become the kind of people for whom trying to get a stone to fall into a bottle was good entertainment. How did we get here? I thought back to the evening before, when we were given a list of lessons and tasks to hunt for our food. Besides the bats, we were taught how to spear prawns in the dark—this seemingly impossible task achieved by looking for the prawns’ eyes glowing reflectively in the glare of our flashlights, with half our attention directed to looking for snakes. In the beginning, we had hopped on the rocks, afraid of getting wet or of stepping into dark, shin-deep water. But then we spotted our first viper on the rocks,

where it may have also been waiting for food—and then suddenly being in the water didn’t seem to be such a bad thing after all.

And besides, we could keep better balance by slowly wading in the water. Chaz seemed to have mastered this hunt much better than any of us, having figured out that one had to “keep the spear super still,” because, as he explained, “when you release the rubber band, the spear needs to fly forward and pierce through the prawn, otherwise it might flap away when you try to grab it.”

None of us fared so well when it came to the frogs, whose legs we had to break. Chaz confessed later that he felt sorry for the frogs most of all, because their legs made them seem closer to humans than anything a prawn or a crab had. “I can’t survive in the jungle without my legs,” Chaz mused. “And neither would the frog.”

All these steps, big and small—and then you realize that, focusing on one lesson after another, you’ve come a long, long way in the course of a couple of days.

On our way back to start the trek home, we kept talking about Elder Liwanag’s magic trick. I thought I had failed because I wasn’t being precise enough with my aim, but Nomer finally told us that we weren’t watching carefully: Elder Liwanag had tricked us by pushing the bamboo circle out of the way from the inside, so that the pebble was actually following the curve like a path straight into the bottle’s mouth. The whole time I had thought that he was succeeding because he had exceptionally honed jungle instincts. It turns out that I was failing only because I wasn’t that clever.

On the last day, Chaz and I talked about whether or not we would miss the quiet of the jungle when we were back in the office, worrying about things other than what we would eat for dinner. Problems in the jungle were simple, and that was an idea that we

got attached to rather quickly.

The trek back was the longest trek of all. Out of fresh clothes, not-so-secret rations, and muscle strength, we packed up our tents and bamboo cups and left for the pick up point. The third day allows for a detour to the Boton Falls, as a prize for having made it this far. After three days of hard work and insects, the falls bath in the falls felt like the most luxurious bath of all time.

How were we going to cope with going back to civilization? Just a few days in, and everything outside of the jungle suddenly felt so foreign—the airconditioning, the showers, the running water. The ability to order food from a menu, or even to sit in a car. Would food ever taste the same way again after you’ve brought it to the table with your own hands?

On the last stretch to the pickup point, Ed handed me a walking stick that he fashioned out of some plant and sharpened with his bolo. I had never been so grateful for a stick, as we walked up what felt like hundreds of steps uphill. Rennell and I took turns sitting down every twenty steps or so, huffing and puffing.

Everyone is ahead of me. I am officially the last person on the trail. I plop down, and immediately to my right is a huge, rotting piece of unidentifiable orange fruit. I can smell it, and there are flies hovering above. It’s just me and the fruit flies on the trail, but I am too busy chugging down the last of the water to care about them.

Someone shouts that the car had arrived to pick us up. At this point it’s hard to distinguish whether what I’ve actually accomplished was a matter of survival, or just surrender—but it feels good.

We end with a total of a five-kilometer trek, up- and downhill. We didn’t complete the trail, but we finished at least more than half. How do the soldiers finish the entire trail, I ask. “Don’t worry,” Nomer says. “Sometimes they ask to be picked up, too.” 🌐