



# ARMED TO THE TEETH

**HOW DO BRITISH SOLDIERS PREPARE TO FIGHT THE TALIBAN?  
THEY JUMP INTO THE OCEAN AND SWIM WITH SHARKS**

**W**hen soldiers want to hone vital military skills such as courage, teamwork and decision making they go on training courses. But these courses are not always in the classroom. Sometimes they involve scaling massive mountains, sometimes abseiling down sheer cliff faces, while others swap their combats for wetsuits to swim with some of the most feared predators on the planet: sharks.

All these activities are part of what the Army calls adventurous training. One soldier who's had more than his fair share of adventurous training is diving-mad Major Andy Reid who leads soldiers on scuba diving trips around the world. From the balmy coasts of Pacific islands to the chilly waters of the north Atlantic he's gone swimming with pretty much every sea creature on the planet.

"The Army uses adventurous training to teach soldiers how to stay calm and combat their fears when they are faced with the unknown," explains Andy. "It puts soldiers in positions they haven't been in before where they must face, and learn to manage, elements of risk."

Last year Andy supervised a team of junior soldiers on Exercise Close Encounter in the Bahamas, where they stretched their training to the absolute limits by diving with hammerhead and tiger sharks. For some their only previous diving experience was on a training course.

Tiger sharks have an awesome reputation – they are considered second only to great whites when it comes to danger to humans. They can grow to 7.5 metres long, weigh more than 900kg and swim at an average speed >>

Soldiers swim alongside huge tiger sharks with only plastic poles for protection

# "THE SHARKS ARE IN FEEDING MODE AT NIGHT, SO THEY MOVE FASTER AND CAN BE MORE AGGRESSIVE. EVEN I WAS A BIT NERVOUS"



» of about 20mph. Their rows of triangular, serrated teeth can easily bite through bone. Diving with tiger sharks is risky enough at the best of times but Andy's team dived at night, when these massive fish feed and are at their most frisky.

This activity appears so dangerous that more people have climbed to the top of Mount Everest than have taken nocturnal dives with tiger sharks – while more than 2000 people have stood at the world's highest point just over 100, Andy's team included, have taken a dip in the dark with a tiger shark. Andy admits they were pushing the boundaries, even by Army standards.

"The sharks are in feeding mode at night, so they move faster and can be more aggressive. Even I was a bit nervous," he says.

## Sharks are scared of bubbles

But Andy doesn't just drop newly qualified divers into an ocean full of sharks and leave them to it – there's always a carefully considered element of control in these seemingly risky situations.

"Certain rules apply when diving with sharks," explains Andy. "Divers are usually completely safe because sharks are afraid of the bubbles made by a diver's breathing apparatus." But you can never be too careful and there are a few things divers must not do. "They must never touch the bait used to attract the sharks because they will then smell like food, and they must always, always maintain eye contact with a shark," he says.

Andy allows his troops to get close enough to the sharks to see the whites of their teeth, but he never lets them forget they are dealing with wild animals. The soldiers dive with plastic poles for protection – it's not the most obvious defence from a fearsome fish with a mouth full of thousands of razor-sharp teeth, but it might just be enough to distract them if they show too much interest.

"In the Bahamas we dived with a group of sharks we nicknamed



'Supermodels' strike a pose for Andy (far left) and his team in the Bahamas...

'the Supermodels'. They were familiar with divers so we could get really close to them but even though they were pretty docile they could still be unpredictable," says Andy. "When a shark wants to find out what something is, it bumps with its nose first. If it decides you're something it wants to investigate further it will come back for another look, but this time it might do the investigating with its teeth!" If that happens there's obviously no point in trying to swim for it. That's when the plastic poles (and crossed fingers) come in handy.

But the trusty pole is no use whatsoever when diving with the largest and most feared shark in the ocean: the great white. "We dived with great whites in South Africa a few years ago," says Andy. "We were completely safe in the cages but we still had to get from the cage to the boat. The water was very murky which made it very difficult to see, let alone keep eye contact with the sharks. As soon as we lost sight of them we felt at risk." The reason he felt at risk was that Andy knows exactly how great whites like to attack.

"Far from being fearless predators, great whites don't want to get hurt when they attack so they use the element of surprise. If they

## A SHARK ATE MY HOMEWORK!

From their strange eating habits to their razor-sharp super-senses, there's more to sharks than big jaws and a bone-chilling soundtrack...



GREAT WHITE SHARK  
Length 6m, Weight 2250kg

DIVING CAGE (ESSENTIAL)  
Fully welded anodised aluminium

- Tiger sharks will get their teeth around anything. Among the many things found inside tiger sharks have been beer bottles, bags of potatoes, coal, dogs, school books, overcoats, cow's hooves, deer antlers and a chicken coop, complete with feathers and bones
- Two-thirds of a shark's brain is dedicated to its keenest sense – smell. But like Darth Vader, they can also 'feel' the presence of their prey, thanks to a sensory organ called the 'ampullae of Lorenzini', which detects the electrical field of other animals
- Sharks can have from five to 15 rows of teeth in each jaw, and some can use over 20,000 teeth in a lifetime
- Sharks have been swimming the seas for about 400 million years – that's long before dinosaurs walked the Earth
- The largest great white ever caught was 11 metres long and weighed over 10,886kg – that's as big as a bus!
- More people are killed by dogs than by sharks each year. In 2007 only one person died as a result of a shark attack – in contrast 40 million sharks are killed by humans each year
- Some of the largest sharks (like the basking shark, whale shark and the fantastically-named megamouth shark) are the least dangerous



...while hammerhead sharks are anything but supermodel material!

DETAILS >>>

decide to attack because they have mistaken you for food they'll dive down deep and then come up at you like a Polaris missile!"

It's in situations like this that Andy's Army training comes to the fore. "When any sharks are around we keep calm and stay together. When the time comes to leave the water each soldier swims to the surface individually, keeping movement to a minimum, and we never take our eyes off the sharks. To do that would be very unwise!

"But that's what soldiers learn through these adventurous training trips – how to hone the correct skills and remember the rules. We want the lessons they learn here to stay with them on operations – if your operational skills get slack when you're fighting the enemy you can find yourself in a lot of trouble very quickly!"

## How to make a splash in the Army

Soldiers can learn to dive in the Army either as part of their job – the Royal Engineers use divers to carry out tasks such as underwater demolition or construction – or as a sport. Soldiers are given time off to earn their diving qualifications and the courses, which on civvy street could cost hundreds of pounds, are free.

"The opportunities available in the Army are huge," says Andy. "The great thing for young soldiers is that once they've learned the skills, they can go on these fantastic trips. It helps with promotion too – because they've put themselves forward to do something out of the ordinary they get singled out as being a bit special."

But experiences such as this don't come out of the blue.

"You only get out of life what you put in and it's the same in the Army," says Andy. "If you think someone is just going to give you the opportunity to dive with sharks you're wrong. You have to decide you want to do it, then go and get it. Almost anything is possible in the Army, I tell soldiers to grab every opportunity and they'll have experiences to remember for the rest of their lives." ■