

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Athena Lark: “Survival of the Fittest”

Athena Lark · Friday, November 12th, 2021

*An excerpt from **Sailor Girl: a Memoir** by Athena Lark*

\*\*\*

The cage was just big enough for me to sit in. On both sides of me in a neat line, sat twenty identical cages holding my fellow comrades. The screaming over the loudspeakers above us drowned out the cries and prayers of those among us, who bordered on the edge of insanity. I was one of those people. The anti-American propaganda had been playing for three days straight. In those three days, we were given just a few hours of sleep a day. They called it sleep deprivation and it was all part of the process. Even while sleeping, I could hear the sounds of gunshots, crying babies and foreigners chanting “Kill the Americans.”

As I stooped over the Folgers coffee can to use the bathroom, I wondered aloud how I had ended up there? I was living like an animal and being treated even worse. We were being held in a secret location, somewhere in the high desert of Southern California.

It all began on a Navy base on Coronado Island, just outside of San Diego.

“Petty Officer Strouble, I have an assignment for you,” my boss, Chief Bradley, said with a smirk on his face.

“I’m up for whatever you have for me,” I said. The Chief was one of my favorite supervisors. He was old school Navy, with a short crew cut and a thousand tattoos. There weren’t many people that understood me, but he did. I was not the typical sailor. I made my own decisions based on my personal beliefs not because someone told me to do something. If I felt something was wrong, I was the first person to say so. I had been labeled an “S/trouble maker” from my beginning days in boot camp. I loved the Navy and worked hard, but I also had dreams far beyond the Navy. I had been in for fourteen years, and I was already counting down to retirement.

“What is it you want me to do sir?” I asked the Chief.

“Well, I’m not sure you have the fortitude to complete this assignment, Strouble. You will be one of the first women to experience it,” he said.

“You know I’m always up for a challenge,” I said.

“I thought you would be that’s why you came to mind when they announced this morning that

there was an opening for survival school.”

“Survival school? You mean the one they send combat pilots and the Seals to? When did they open it up to women?” I asked.

“They just opened it up to everyone in classified communications, and like I said you would be one of the first on this coast. Do you think you can handle it? I don’t think you realize how hard it is.”

“Of course I can handle it. It’s just five days in the desert. I can do that with my eyes closed. Bring it on, sir!” I said laughing.

The first indication that I was getting into some really deep stuff was the extensive psychological examination that they took me through, to see if I was a good candidate for the school. It was the type of testing where I had to identify and classify certain images and phases. There seemed to be times when the same question was asked in three different ways. I couldn’t tell if they were checking to see if I was crazy, or just crazy enough to be volunteering. Somehow, they assumed I was sane and stable enough to complete the “real life” training.

My second indication that I might be over my head was when they told me what I could bring to survival school. Absolutely nothing, just the desert camouflage uniform I would be wearing. Well, I finally reasoned, I could handle that, after all, it wouldn’t be survival school if I could bring my Louis Vuitton overnight bag.

Before they transported us to the desert, they paired us up. The Chief was right, out of the twenty of us, I was the only woman, and the only person that wasn’t a Seal. I was comfortable working with the Seals since I was stationed at the Mobile Communication Team in Coronado. When they were in the field, the MCT was the Seals lifeline to get them in and out of enemy territory.

I looked over the men I would be spending more than five days with. They all looked the same; handsome and well built. I didn’t get any warm and fuzzies from them. The Seals I knew were typical egomaniacs. I expected some resistance, as time had shown me, they didn’t like anyone but other Seals. They especially didn’t like women like me who thought they could do what they did.

The time of reckoning began when they decided to put us in buddy teams. The leaders picked the person they wanted to be paired up with. Like in gym class in high school, I was the last person to be picked. The handsome, broad shouldered young man that picked me appeared extremely disappointed that I was going to be his partner for such an important mission.

After all, we would have to depend on each other, and since he was a Seal, and I obviously wasn’t, the odds were I would hold him back. I gave Seaman Kennedy a weak smile and tried to assure him that I was much stronger than I looked. His weak smile in return, spoke volumes. He knew damn well I would be a handful.

That morning they dropped us off in the high desert, miles away from San Diego, with just the clothes on our backs. The summertime temperature topped one hundred degrees. Within just a matter of minutes, I realized what a fool I was for volunteering. As usual with the Navy, I had miscalculated what I was made of. I had made outlandish goals since boot camp. Nothing ever came easy for me, everything I wanted or desired required digging deep, and pulling out that superwoman strength, I held inside of me.

It had only been a few hours and I was already exhausted. As the scorching sun burned my skin, I thought about how survival school would be something that would either make me or break me. I didn’t have a clue just how much inner strength I would need to survive and not die in the desert.

It was all new terrain for me. I was hot and sticky. My team members acted like it was just another day at work for them.



In just a matter of minutes, the sun turned into a rainstorm. The rain didn't stop us from moving forward. I was soaked all the way down to my underwear. My boots were full of water. As soon as the last drop of rain fell, the scorching sun came back out. I was miserable and began to feel really irritated. Because of the rain and the sun, within a matter of hours, my hair went from a nice pageboy cut, to fuzzy dreadlocks.

Under normal circumstances looking like Bob Marley would have bothered me. I didn't care a bit how I was looking by then, I was only concerned with ending the day so I could sit down and rest.

I tried to keep up with Seaman Kennedy, but as the day wore on, I began to lag further and further behind.

"Come on Strouble, just a few more miles to go before we set up camp for the night," he said.

"I'm trying, just go ahead I'll catch up with you," I said.

"You know I can't leave you, so come on, you have to keep up with me."

"Alright, alright, I'm coming, stop sweating me!" I shouted. I was no longer feeling irritable, I was moving into full on bitch mode.

I was in my first day of training and I was already tired and dirty. I had wanted to use the bathroom a couple hours into our hike but I was too embarrassed to go in the bushes. Finally, I found a large sage bush where Kennedy couldn't see me.

With no toilet paper, I used leaves to wipe myself the best I could. I wasn't trained like a Seal, so I hadn't prepared my body before going to the desert. They fasted days before any mission, so there wouldn't be any waste in their system. Too bad no one decided to tell me what to do. I had all kinds of waste in my system.

To survive in the desert we were given only one item, a parachute. We had to use that parachute for multiple purposes. During the day, while resting we used it like a canopy, to shield us from the sun.

That first night, Kennedy and I used our parachute to make a tent. I laid down on the ground right beside him. I detest anything that crawls, and fear anything that slithers. So sleeping on the desert floor wasn't something I put on my top ten things to do before I die list. I frantically looked around for the spiders and scorpions I assumed were in our tent.

I felt really stupid. What I had in mind for survival school I can't say. Surely, sleeping on the ground in the elements should have been something I expected.

I had made a vow to myself when Kennedy was forced to pick me as his partner, that I would be the best damn partner he ever had. I would do as I was told, push forward, and not complain. That lasted about eight hours. By the time we settled in for the night, I was a complaining fool.

Thankfully, by then I had won his heart. His rough exterior relaxed as he looked after me, patiently guiding me along. He may have looked like a kid but he seemed to have a high level of maturity. I was his buddy, his partner and he didn't take that responsibility lightly.

With no city lights to interfere with the desert sky at night, it was like a blanket of stars was thrown across us. Being a girl from the big city, I had never seen so many stars at one time. We laid there together picking out the big dipper, and watched as one falling star after another dropped from the sky.

Kennedy smiled and joked with me, showing me his deep dimples. "Just my luck I would get the only woman on the mission," he laughed.

"Yeah, and just my luck I would get a Seal, straight out of high school," I said.

He elbowed me playfully in my side. Then I felt something crawling down my back.

"I feel something on me. Get it off!" I screamed.

He laughed hard as he watched me run around the camp, trying to get the imaginary bug off me.

"How long have you been in the Navy?" he asked. "Is this your first time out in the field, Strouble?"

"I've been in since you were in diapers," I joked. "And, yeah this is my first time. But, this is not like any field exercise I know of. In the field, you get toilet paper, food to eat, bug spray, real tents and sleeping bags."

"You'll be alright kiddo. Just be glad you have me with you, and not one of those other guys. They thought you wouldn't last the first day," he said.

"Really, well look at me now."

"No one, including me, thinks you will make it the whole five days." "Well, I'll just have to prove them wrong, won't I?" I said.

A few minutes later, I heard Kennedy snoring beside me. I was exhausted, but too frightened to fall asleep. The sounds of crickets filled the air. Desert animals roamed around the periphery of our camp. I heard a coyote howl at the moon. Finally, I fell asleep from sheer worry and exhaustion.

After just a few hours of sleep, they woke us up early the next morning before the sun was up. My whole body was sore from sleeping on the ground. With no soap, toothpaste, comb, or anything to groom myself, I looked like a hot mess. My hair was all over my head, with dirt and pieces of leaves stuck in it. My clothes were dirty and wrinkled.

Strangely, I didn't care about any of that; all I could think about was getting something to eat, and smoking a cigarette. It had been over twenty-four hours with nothing to eat, and I was starving. Since it was all about surviving on the land, there was no food for us, except a couple of apples our trainers decided to give us. I ate my apple like it was a Porterhouse steak. Never had an apple tasted so good. One of the Seals who looked just like Brad Pitt, found leaves off a desert plant that I chewed on, to cure my nicotine craving.

Our second day went by in a blur. During the day, we trekked across the desert, at night we would find somewhere to lay our tired bodies down. Because it was so hot we could only go so far during the day, but that didn't stop them from pushing us harder to advance forward. By the third day all the hiking, lack of sleep, food and added stress caused me to come on my period. Why? Why Me? Why now? Is all I thought about when I first saw the blood.

By then, I was in full survival mode. I tore the bottom of my brown t-shirt off into a long strip, and used it for a pad. Then I buried my stained panties in the ground, behind a Joshua tree. As if on cue, I was hit with some really bad cramps. I still kept moving forward, even though Kennedy and I lagged behind the other teams. I had been in the same clothes for three days, with no hygiene. I stopped caring about how bad I smelled. It was horrific. Collectively, we smelled like bums living on the streets of skid row.

That third night, as we set up camp to get a couple hours of sleep, our trainers came to the camp with food. Rather, they came to the camp with three live rabbits. Holding them by the ears, they put us in a circle to show us how to first kill the rabbits, and then skin them.

“You take their necks, like this,” the trainer said. I didn’t see what he’d done next, because I quickly looked away. Always an animal lover, I didn’t see the rabbits as a source of food, all I saw were three pet rabbits.

“I’m not going to watch this,” I said to Kennedy.

“This is all about survival, you have to learn how to live off the land,” he said.

They forced me to watch as they skinned the rabbits. A huge pot of water with chunks of potatoes in it boiled on the campfire. Finally, after watching them slaughter Bugs Bunny and his friends, the rabbit stew filled the desert air with a delicious smell.

“I’m not eating that,” I said, halfway out of my mind by then.

“You have to eat it. We are at the end of our third day. Tomorrow is supposed to get ten times harder than it has been so far. We will go into the evasion phase then, where we have to hide from the enemy.”

“I don’t care. I can’t eat those bunny rabbits,” I stubbornly repeated.

“You need to eat for energy. Now stop being stupid, eat the damn stew,” he said.

“No. You can have mine.”

“Ok, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

His patience with me was starting to wear thin. Once my period came on, I became a Seal’s worst enemy in the field, a grouchy, whining, and complaining woman.

Not eating the stew was one of the worst mistakes I made in my life.

On our fourth day I was damn near delirious. I only had a strip of my t-shirt left, covering my chest. I began to worry about what I would use next, to stop myself from bleeding all over my clothes.

Our survival phase ended as soon as the evasion phase kicked in. It was time for us to hide from our enemies as they tried to catch us. I was bone tired, starving and sick. I had been adequately sleep deprived and food deprived, so I was ripe to be captured. Most of the day, Kennedy and I stayed just a step ahead of the enemy.

“Come on move it, move it, I can hear them,” he whispered as we kneeled in the thick brush. Every now and then you could hear someone screaming, which scared the shit out of me.

“What are they doing?” I asked Kennedy.

“Well, no telling what happens when they catch you. You signed a waiver you know, that they can do as they please. They can hit you, push you, and kick you. I suspect whatever a real captor would do, when they catch you, is what they are doing,” he said.

“I don’t give a shit about a waiver, no one better put a hand on me,” I said.

“What did you think you were signing up for? This is survival training.”

“Whatever. Like I said, I wish somebody would put a finger on me.”

As the other teams were captured one by one, the screaming and yelling continued all around us. It was more than enough motivation to keep me moving. I was so scared, for once Kennedy had to struggle to keep up with me. It was not in my nature to tolerate combat.

Later that evening, we were the last team to be caught. Out of nowhere, a large man in a strange looking uniform grabbed Kennedy and pushed him so hard he went reeling backwards. I looked in horror. They wouldn’t, no they couldn’t hit me. I didn’t have time to think when another man grabbed me by my collar and pushed me down to my knees. He then pulled both my arms behind me. I looked around me and noticed where all the screaming was coming from.



There were about five or six men beating my fellow teammates. I could not believe what I was seeing in front of me. In a matter of minutes, it seemed we were running from our “fake” enemies. Then we were transported to what appeared to me to be some sort of hell. There was a tall stone building with rows of barbed wire around it and some platforms where they beat the men at.

The man pulled tightly on the thick rope he tied around my wrists. I was shaking, crying, and moaning. I looked at his boots, then up and saw he was dressed in a very strange looking uniform.

I think it was at that precise moment when my mind went from being sane, to being highly unstable. I was delirious by then. My mind was dark and my feelings and emotions were struggling to make sense of it all.

Then the strange looking man stood in front of me. I looked directly into his eyes. I saw pure hate. I screamed expecting the hit I thought was coming. He must have seen something in my eyes that told him it would not be wise to hit me. I believe what he saw was the real fear inside of me. Or, he may have recognized my mental instability. Everyone else around me was being kicked, pushed, or slapped.

I sat there in shock. This is too real, I thought. They were going too far with their real life training. My mind couldn’t wrap itself around what was happening. The man left me alone and went over to Kennedy who was being held up by another man. Then he hit him again. The man then pulled me up and took me to a clearing, pushing me roughly back down to my knees. I looked over to the right and saw some of my fellow comrades on their knees as well.

Another man went down the line, kicking everyone on their backs. He got to me, and reached back to hit me.

“Keep your fucking hands off of me!” I shouted at the man. My mind was going in so many directions at once. Somehow, from somewhere inside of me, the girl from Newark, NJ came out and she wasn’t taking any bullshit.

“Shut the fuck up, bitch,” he said. He went on to the next guy and kicked him. Another man then went up to him and asked him why wasn’t he hitting me? I couldn’t hear his response, but the other man came over to me, pulled me up and pushed me hard against a wall. I think I took him out of our real life role-playing when he got directly in my face and said in some foreign accent, “What makes you think we won’t beat the shit out of you? You think because you are a woman we are not going to hurt you?” He pushed me again, hard enough to knock me off my feet. I got really scared, and thought it best I not say anything more. He decided to give me a little mercy, and took me back to where everyone else was.

Four men stood guard with assault rifles over the men that were still on their knees facing the wall. I still couldn’t figure out who the men were that captured us. Their uniforms looked like a mixture between the Russian Army and Star Trek. They spoke broken English as well, with a foreign accent. They were so good; I totally forgot they were soldiers who were also actors.

After beating everyone except me senseless, we were put into a single line and told to start walking. I stumbled along. My body was sore and the rope around my hands was so tight, I thought my wrists would start to bleed. All I could think about was if I made it out alive, somebody would get their ass kicked for allowing them to hurt us like they did. I didn’t know it, but the days ahead would be worse than I could ever imagine.

They pushed and prodded us along the hot desert until we came to a large compound, which was surrounded with barbed wire.

Once inside a building they told everyone to take off their clothes. They did as they were told. A very large manly looking woman took me in a room alone and demanded I strip so she could search me.

“OK, that’s it, you guys are going too far,” I said to her

“Shut up, and take your clothes off,” she said.

“No. I’m not taking my clothes off. I have been on my period for three days, I have no underwear, and I’m stinking and dirty. Please don’t make me,” I begged.

“All you have to say is I quit,” she said. “Then you will be transported back to San Diego.”

Quitting wasn’t an option for me at that point. I was representing every woman that would ever attend survival school. It was all about being treated equally, even if it meant they would beat me just like a man. I had never quit anything I set my mind to do while in the Navy.

It began seventeen years before in boot camp where I had doubts I wouldn’t make it, but somehow found that inner strength to keep going. After watching the movie Private Benjamin I thought they had stolen my Navy experience. A former teen beauty queen I wasn’t prepared for the ten pound boots, excessive exercise or people screaming in my face. There was definitely nothing that could prepare me for the strange looking woman, with her piercing eyes, demanding I take my clothes off in a dark and dirty room.

I stripped naked, as she put on latex gloves and roughly searched my body cavities. I had no idea what she was looking for, as we weren’t even allowed to bring a toothbrush with us to the desert.

I felt degraded as I stood in front of her, bleeding and dirty. I felt truly violated as she continued to search me. I was in the most vulnerable situation I had ever been in.

After she effectively searched me and found no contraband, she threw my clothes at me.

“Put those back on,” she said. “You stink.”

That first night in the camp, they pushed us with the butts of their rifles into our individual cages. The cages were too small to stand or lay in. There was barely enough room to sit straight up.

I looked next to me and saw Kennedy curled up in his cage. He was in pretty bad shape, they had beaten him a couple of times since we were captured.

I sat in my cage and was transformed into the prisoner I had become. Within a matter of hours, my tired mind had forgotten that I was in a simulated Prisoner of War camp. It had become very real to me. Too real.

A mean looking guard with a rifle, paced back and forth in front of us. We weren't allowed to talk. Most of us were so traumatized we probably would not have talked to each other anyway.

Crouching in my cage, I began to feel the worst cramps I had ever felt in my life. I called the guard over and asked to speak with someone.

“Who you want to speak to, you stupid woman?” he said.

“I want to see the nurse. I want to see the nurse,” I screamed, over and over again.

Finally, the same manly looking woman unlocked my cage, pulled me out by my arm, and pushed me into another dark and filthy room.

“I have cramps, I want a Tylenol,” I said to her.

“Hell no! If this were real life, you would have to suck it up. So suck it up,” she said.

“This isn't fucking real life,” I said.

“Like I told you, all you have to do is say I quit, and you'll be out of here.”

“I'm not quitting, just give me a damn Tylenol.” She looked at me like I was shit underneath her boot. Like I was letting the female species down.

They were using me like a lab rat, I realized. They didn't seem to have any idea how the excessive stress would affect a woman's body.

“OK, I'm going to give you one Tylenol,” if you bother me again, you will be kicked out,” she said.

“Fine,” I said, as I took the pill and swallowed it.

She took me back to my cage and pushed me inside with her foot.

“Bitch,” I said under my breath.

That first night in the camp was horrific. The camp was set up like it was real. If it were a movie, they would have won an academy award. It was 1995, but it looked like we were in the early fifties. I saw an old black and white film once, about a Korean POW camp and everything was the same.



For twenty-four hours straight they blasted propaganda over the loudspeakers. “Americans are evil. Americans kill babies. Americans are evil,” a tape played over and over again. Every now and then, I could hear people screaming.

The constant noise kept me from sleeping. But, severely sleep deprived, I finally fell asleep sitting up in my cage with the Folgers coffee can beside me full of my waste.

I woke up still forgetting I was playing a war game. They had indoctrinated me so well, that my mind went in and out of believing it was real and knowing it was fake. Then one by one, they led us into a small room.

First, there were the constant verbal assaults. One man held us in a room for hours and lectured us on how America hated black people and why would we want to fight for a country that hated us and treated us so bad? They had a point, but it would take much more for me to crack. Since I was the only black person in the bunch I figured his speech must have been directed at me.

Then they burned a huge American flag in front of us. A couple of my comrades looked like it really pained them to see the flag burn. I was so mentally out of it at that point, that it was just a piece of fabric as far as I was concerned.

When they took me into the interrogation room, I was expecting the worst.

As soon as I stepped in the room, the guard pushed me hard down to the ground. I fell to the floor in pain.

“Where do you work?” the man demanded.

Doing as I had been trained since boot camp, I said, “My name is Petty Officer Athena Strouble, my service number is 139-48-6442.”

“We know you have a top secret clearance, now tell us where you work!” he said, grabbing me by my clothes and shaking me real hard.

“My name is Petty Officer Athena Strouble, my service number is 139-48-6442,” I repeated.

“You will talk, you little black bitch,” he said, as he grabbed me by my hair and pulled me across the room.

He continued to drag me across the compound to the cage where Kennedy sat. Another guard pulled him out of his cage and pushed him down on his knees beside me.

The man then put a 9mm gun to my head. I was terrified. All I could think about at the time was my dead mother. She had died months before and I didn’t allow myself to grieve. The pain and severe sadness I felt losing her was just below the surface and for some reason the man holding the gun to my head brought it all out of me. I really thought I was going to lose my mind.

“Tell us where you work and your secrets or I kill her,” the man said to Kennedy.

“My name is Seaman Josh Kennedy, my service number is 278-30-5586,” he mumbled.

The guard took the gun away from my head and hit Kennedy across his head. Growing tired of us, they shoved us back into our cages for the rest of the night.

I dozed off, and was woken up by Kennedy.

“We’re going to escape tonight when the guards change,” he whispered. “Are you coming with us?”

“No, don’t do it Kennedy, they will kill you if you get caught,” I said.

“You have to come, we have to escape, it’s all part of the training,” he pleaded with me.

“What training?” I said. I was too far gone to reason with. I had crossed that abyss. It was no longer simulated training; it was real life to me. I was confused and very, very tired. All I wanted at that time was my mother. My head was in a terrible place. All the physical, mental, and verbal abuse had taken its toll.

“OK, we’ll be leaving in a few hours, you can stay here if you want to and continue to get your ass beat,” he said.

After five long hard days, Kennedy had decided to give up on me.

With the full moon shining brightly, I watched one of my comrades pick the lock on his cage. He then opened up all the cages including mine. I sat petrified, too scared to move as they ran towards the fence where a hole was already dug and crawled under it.

Watching them run in the darkness, I could hear gunshots and more screaming. I knew I had made the right choice to stay. I was the only one left behind. The guards ran around the camp frantically, speaking a language I never quite figured out.

Even with all the commotion going on, it didn’t faze me. I was having flashbacks to my mother’s last days. She had been terminally ill for over a year, yet I wasn’t prepared when she finally died. I remembered in her morphine induced state her telling me I hadn’t done enough to help her. I had done all a daughter could do for her dying mother. But, even in the end I felt like a failure to her.

She was gone and she was all I had. Because of all the trauma I had been in, it felt like she had just died. I could feel her spirit with me in the cage but it wasn’t a good spirit, it felt like a disappointing one.

Watching the guards running around the compound, I sat in my open cage, too terrified to move. I closed my eyes, wishing for the nightmare to end. When I opened them, there stood Kennedy with an assault rifle.

“Move Strouble, now!” he shouted. “I’m getting you out of here.”

He led me out of the camp, into a clearing where the rest of our team members stood, along with the trainers that dropped us off in the desert. Our captors were nowhere in sight. It was over. I had made it to the end. Only it didn’t feel like the end to me. It would take a lot more than someone just saying “game over” for me to come to grips with what I had been through.

The men seemed to have fared much better than I had. They looked a little dazed but still seemed to have it together. We were past dirty, we were filthy. None of us had any basic hygiene while in the desert. I can’t describe the smell I had all over me.

It was over, but I didn’t know what to feel. It felt like I had lived a nightmare. I was feeling too many emotions at one time. I believe I felt a sense of relief, but I was still in a state of shock that would take days to get out of.

We boarded a bus back to San Diego. It was a long way back. No one spoke for the entire ride. It

---

had been five days of hell for all of us.

I had made it through survival school. If I could make it through that, then I could survive anything. I thought I would feel triumphed, but I didn't have a good feeling anywhere inside of my body.

During the ride home I went in and out of sleep. While awake all I could think about was how much therapy I would need. I would need to see someone about the things I saw, the things I felt and my reactions to everything I encountered. I was hit with a double whammy, since the experience also brought out the intense grief I felt for my mother. It would take a lot for me to get myself together. Survival school would change me forever.

This entry was posted on Friday, November 12th, 2021 at 7:50 am and is filed under [Prose](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.