

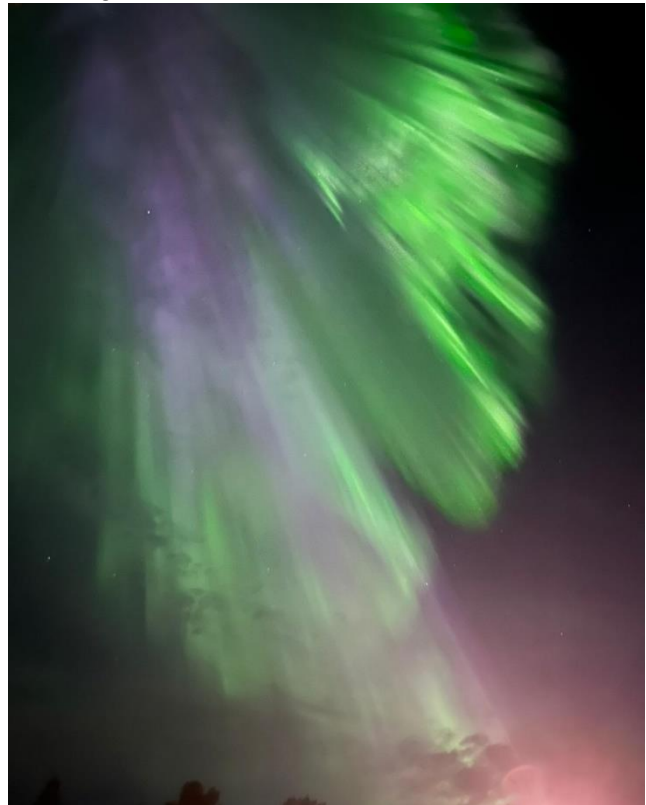
UNIVERSITY AIR SQUADRONS - EXPEDITION HARKAN FIRE

LOCATION: SWEDEN

DATE: 30th AUG – 20th SEP 2024

SERIAL 1: 30 Aug – 6 Sep 24. University of Birmingham Air Squadron

On the 30th of August, 12 University of Birmingham Air Squadron students set off for a week-long expedition of canoeing and wild camping to Sweden. It was an early start for the students, leaving their Squadron at 07:00 to make sure they made their flight from Gatwick with plenty of time before flying into Trondheim, Norway and catching a bus across the border into Sweden to their main campsite in Lit, Sweden. It was a long 3-hour bus ride, but students were already taken aback by the beautiful Scandinavian countryside and architecture and were treated with a stunning sunset. Once they arrived at camp, they all gathered around the fire, savouring their last bought meal, knowing they would have to fend for themselves for the rest of the week. That evening they got the privilege of seeing bright pink and green streaks decorating the night sky; the northern lights welcomed them on the first night in this foreign land. It was the perfect start of many more surreal experiences to come.



The next day, Saturday 31st, after being well-rested in their cabins and beds the students were given a morning brief of the basics and expectations of the expedition. This included the rules of the land in Sweden, wherever they were to go, they would have to ensure to leave it how it was, if not better. The brief also showed the group all the equipment needed for the week, this included a pairs kit for each canoe and a shared kit. Food provisions were also shown, these were the basic rations for the week that the students would then bulk out with group money in a quick dash to the nearby supermarket. On their return, the packing began. To the amusement of the instructors, this was also where some of them soon realised that they would not be able to bring quite as many clothes as they anticipated. Once all kits and canoes were loaded onto trailers, the 12 students and their 2 instructors set off in the minivans and were driven upstream to their starting destination for the expedition. With the canoes ready to go and the students quickly taught how to tie down their equipment, they all set off on the Hårkan River to their next destination. It was a rocky start, with the wind going against the students for most of the paddle that day, but thankfully the distance was not far, and all made it to the island they'd be staying at safely and, most importantly, dry. On the island, the twelve were divided into groups of four. One was

taught how to set up hammocks and bivies (single-man tents), the next was keen to start a fire and the other two were to cook and clean up after the meal. Some of these tasks were new skills for the students, so they had to adapt and learn quickly on the job as the light soon beginning to fade. The rest of the night was sat around the campfire drinking hot chocolate, making a great opportunity to chat and get to know each other a little more.



The morning of the 1st of September, the students got to work on their morning tasks of starting a fire and taking down the camp ready to leave, with some students waking up extra early so they could go for a morning dip and brave the cold Swedish water. Once all were ready, the morning brief consisted of what was called: MY ABCDE.

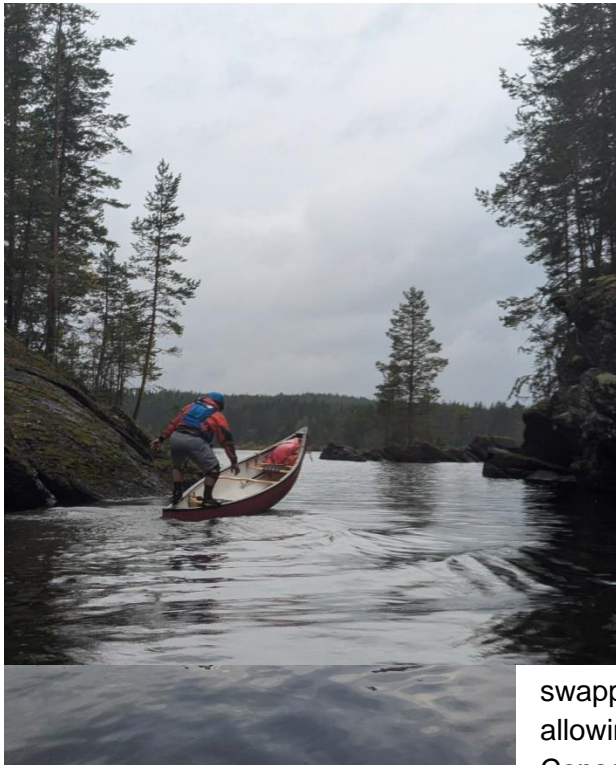
- Me: where the instructor properly introduced himself.
- You: where everyone introduced themselves to the instructor.
- Area and access: assessing the route and conditions of the days travel.
- Boats and equipment: both to be checked before setting off, including making sure everyone had their helmets, paddles, and buoyancy aids.
- Communication: river signals, used by hands or the paddles
- Doctors: checking any medical issues or health worries.
- Emergency: what to do in an emergency.

The ABCDE protocol was to be checked every morning for the rest of the week along with a quick warm up to get everyone stretched out for the physical canoeing to come. Then students underwent a confidence test on the water, including games about stability and what to do when the water gets rocky as well as becoming more comfortable paddling and staying in the boat. However, this also led to the first victims of the Hårkan River where one boat capsized after one student tried to climb the through legs of the other and tipped the boat, gifting them a second dip of the day. Dried off and the kit back in the boats, the group set off on their first long paddle of the trip. Here students kept morale high with many songs being sung throughout and constant chatter between all the boats. This was important as it was the first time the group had paddled for this long and against challenging conditions it could have been a lot harder had morale dropped early. Unfortunately, this also meant that the local wildlife was more quiet than usual... After paddling for about 2 hours, students stopped off at a small cove where they started another fire and cooked a range of foods including mini pizzas, soup, and sandwiches. Here they also were taught how to fish, which thereafter allowed them to try and catch a meal as they paddled throughout the day. Sadly, this did not materialise despite their best efforts with no fish being caught. After a few more hours of paddling the students arrived at a dam where they'd spend their next 2 nights.

The day at the dam allowed students to develop many skills. This included whittling, log chopping, fish gutting and filleting, as well as bread making. Due to the harsh white water made from the dam the students also spent time developing their canoeing skills against faster water. It was tough at first, really pushing students out of their comfort zones and making them trust their partner even more in the boat. However, all students tackled the rapids and developed their teamwork and communication skills tremendously. The rest of the day was spent testing new confidence skills on the canoes in a small lagoon area, sitting on the end of them to get the front high in the air, and many people falling off and splashing about. Back at the camp, they also tried out their whittling capabilities, with one student attempting to make a recorder out of wood using just



a small screw and fire embers.



The next day was the toughest, with the longest amount of distance being covered, the wind against us and rain coming down throughout, the students had to dig deep to get through. Upon hitting a large open water section of the river, the waves got much larger, and the wind got a lot stronger, this meant students had to really work together and use their strength, stamina, and grit to get through it. Arriving at the lunch stop, students were cold, wet, and exhausted but the group didn't keep their heads down, quickly starting a fire to warm up. As they thawed, the group were back to their normal chatty selves and ready to tackle the Hårkan River once more. With careful consideration, the pairs were

swapped around to balance the boats out more, allowing everyone to stay as a group better.

Consequently, this created 'The Log Game'. The Log

Game made by the students was where a small log would be passed around the canoes throughout the day and the last pair to have it in their boat at the end of the day had to be dunked in the river. It kept everyone entertained, kept the group together and made the tougher parts slightly more enjoyable. That night the students got to camp and set up quickly as they were getting better and better at these new skills, meaning they had more downtime to relax. Some students once again tried to fish but to no avail, unlike the one lucky instructor who caught two that day... This seemed to be a running theme throughout the trip. After cooking up the two lonely fish in the light of another spectacular sunset, everyone relaxed. Illuminated by

the glow of the fire, more camp stories and a handful of awful jokes were shared, marshmallows were toasted and burnt, and the evening ended early as everyone prepared for the final long stretch the following day.

A 05:30 wake-up on the 4th of September for the group on the final day allowed the warm sun to break through the trees as they packed up, a sight very warmly welcomed by all after the horrid weather the day before. The group set off with around 20km to paddle. With The Log Game in full swing, students were really getting the hang of the paddling, allowing them to take in more of the stunning scenery around them. A couple hours in, the group took a small detour down a side river to try and see if they could see some beavers as the instructors had previously seen some there on previous trips but sadly none were seen, only the remnants of chewed sticks were left for us to look at. As the day went on, the group reached a large rapid section of the river. Most of the students opted to lift their boats along the side of river, however, 4 students decided to

brave the rapids and see how well they had developed their week-taught skills. With the instructors leading the way the boats moved down the fast river with water and themselves with it being thrown everywhere. The noise of the rushing water and the hectic shouts from the students on which way to paddle could be heard by the rest of the group who walked alongside, happy to be dry for once. One boat made it through despite the large amount of water it now held. As the two



students looked back on all they had been through, they saw a singular paddle sailing down the river, but not canoe or canoers... The other boat had sunk. After emptying their boat of water and getting a spare paddle the second boat went again and this time bolted it down the rapids, clearly developing on their mistakes from earlier. Once the divided group met up again it was now just 8km before reaching the home campsite, and with spirits high and the sun shining they made light work of it making it back to camp with plenty of time to pack up their kit and have a well-deserved warm shower.

Overall, the whole expedition was a huge success and a valuable experience for all who went. The trip to the Hårkan River allowed for the opportunity to see how those involved worked under new forms of pressure by going outside their comfort zone in a plethora of ways. From the physical drive and endurance of canoeing long distances daily to working together to effectively set up every camp in their teams. One Officer Cadet said: "It was great to see everyone learning from and looking out for each other. With everything we had to do each day, it was clearly not for the faint of heart. But it truly showed what we were all capable of when it came down to it. The morale was high and working as a team, we got through it together. It is definitely one to experience once in your life, if not a second time over!" Whether it was powering through a long day with aching arms or persevering when a fire wouldn't start due to it being soaked, the students never gave up and never let their heads drop. It was a unique experience that the students felt privileged to have the opportunity to take part in and develop skills in an environment that they had never been used to. The Ulysses Trust helped massively by making this trip happen, by granting money off for the students meaning it was easier for them to attend as well as meaning they now have the opportunity to try something new in the future. The expedition to the Hårkan River has made fond memories shared by everyone who went; an experience that will indefinitely be cherished by all.



SERIAL 2: 6 – 13 Sep 24. Universities of Wales Air Squadron

From September 6-13th 2024, 12 Officer Cadets from the University of Wales Air Squadron (UWAS), underwent an expedition along the river Hårkan in Sweden. The expedition consisted of a 5-day Canoeing journey, heading downstream on the river Hårkan.

During the expedition, Officer Cadets would secure their canoes to appropriate land and camp overnight in the Swedish forests. The purpose of this training exercise was to develop many skills such as resilience, teamwork and leadership. The expedition was fun for all, however, there were moments of adversity that would push the Officer Cadets to develop their skills and abilities further.

On the 6th of September, the Officer Cadets departed from Gatwick Airport at 1430 to arrive at Trondheim Airport at 1700. Soon after the arrival at Trondheim, a 3-hour coach journey was taken to Lits campsite in Sweden. Upon arrival at Lits campsite, Officer Cadets were introduced to the Sergeant King, who would instruct and train them throughout the expedition with Sergeant Roberts.

The next day, all participants on the expedition, loaded up the canoe barrels with camping, cooking, fire-starting, and fishing equipment along with enough food for 5 days. Vans, which were loaded with barrels and canoes, then escorted the Officer Cadets 60 km up along the river Hårkan, so that the Officer Cadets would canoe downstream back to Lits campsite. The vans were then unloaded by the team at a suitable camping area by the River Harkan. The 12 Officer cadets were split into 3 groups of 4 and were each assigned a set of tasks. One group to fire duties, which involved gathering firewood and starting a fire for the cooking team to use, as well as a source of light and warmth for all. Another group was assigned to cooking meals for everyone. The last group was assigned to erecting tarps, hammocks, and bivies for all team members, along with doing the washing of all cooking equipment. Initially, progress in all teams was slow, as many team members had no experience with skills such as fire starting or building shelters with tarps. However, this improved and Officer Cadets were able to pass on their knowledge in their assigned task to the next group who would undertake that different task the next day. The team slept overnight in the camp and managed to remain safe from the mosquitos in their bivies and hammocks.

The 8th of September was an early start, with all groups swinging into action at 0700. The fire team managed to get the fire going much quicker than last night and all other teams were much more efficient in getting their tasks done. Officer cadets were paired up, with each pair given one canoe each. Due to their being level 2 rapids, that are unsuitable conditions for fully loaded canoes, the barrels were carried alongside the river to a more convenient location. The team then walked back to the canoes, where Sergeant Roberts taught the officer cadets the correct canoeing techniques and survival swimming in rapids. Armed with this new knowledge, the officer cadets confidently paddled into the rapids. Unfortunately, a canoe capsized in the rapids with two officer cadets submerged in the cold waters. Thankfully, they were able to recover from their disastrous position and continue with the team to collect the barrels at the shore. With the barrels loaded on the canoes, the



team valiantly paddled against the wind, making good progress. When arriving at the next camping spot, the group duties had been rotated among the groups, so that each group had a chance to practice different skills e.g. the fire group was now the tarp team and the tarp team was now the cooking team. The officer cadets displayed great ability in passing on their knowledge and skills to other officer cadets.

The following morning, Sergeant Roberts had the team reflect on their performance so far in the expedition. The team knew that they needed to be more proactive, with regards to doing tasks quickly and efficiently as they arise, rather than letting a whole inbox of tasks accumulate and having to do them later. Being proactive is an essential skill within the RAF. The team continued canoeing down the river while managing to get in fishing practice from the canoes. Later in the evening, Sergeant King demonstrated how to gut a fish to the team. The group duties had been rotated again amongst the groups.

The next morning, at 0800, the canoeing pairs were shuffled, so that other Officer Cadets who were new to the squadron could get a chance to know some of their fellow teammates. This day was challenging for certain Officer Cadets, as the team had to paddle down a level 3 rapid. The entire team successfully made it down the rapids with no capsizes.



The most distance that was travelled in a single day was on the 11th of September when the officer cadets managed to do 30 km, against heavy wind.



The final stretch of canoeing was done on the 12th of September. The final few miles were easily achieved by the team. As soon as the canoes arrived on the shore of Lits campsite, the team immediately unpacked and cleaned all the kit and returned it in good condition. Afterwards, the team had a memorable group photo. All team members then had a chance to have their first warm shower in 5 days, shortly followed by their first meal back in civilization.

A memorable moment was when the team were able to see the iconic northern lights.



In summary, the twelve officer cadets from UWAS, had a fantastic and memorable time on Ex Harkan Fire, leaving them eager to participate in further AT and FD activities. All participants developed a myriad of transferable skills which are invaluable to the majority of the team's ambition of joining the RAF in the future. Some found the expedition challenging at times, however, everyone came away with more knowledge and skill than they had before. This was a very successful expedition of which everyone was very grateful to be a part of.

SERIAL 3: 13 - 20 Sep 24. Universities of Wales Air Squadron

A group of officer cadets from Bristol University Air Squadron deployed on Ex Harkan Fire, canoeing 80km down the river Hårkan, in Lit, Sweden, on the 13th of September. This expedition fully submerged the group in developing ground training competencies in more isolated environments. Travelling down the river, the officer cadets tackled large stretches of canoeing each day, bringing back a fish on three occasions for dinner. Once the canoes had been docked, the distribution of tasks was rotated around the group, which allowed individuals to demonstrate leadership in areas which they had more confidence. These activities primarily consisted of setting up camp and keeping the equipment clean and accounted for, as well as building and cooking over a fire.



As the expedition progressed, the officer cadets grew in confidence, engaging in bushcraft activities and exploring the Swedish wilderness. Challenges from the chilly Swedish weather, tackling long portages and tricky rapids were met with resilience and teamwork. Morale was high throughout the expedition, with the group supporting each other, creating innovative ways to dry wet clothing and provide a variety of (mostly-edible) replenishing meals which catered to different dietary requirements.



In addition to the development of these qualities, which will no doubt provide valuable experiences that feed back into the conduct of potential future careers in the RAF and workplace, the expedition stood out for many further reasons too. **One officer cadet reflects, 'I feel stronger and more resilient after getting through river rapids and living in self-sustaining conditions this week. I have learnt how to prepare a fish caught from the river for tea, built fires and formed strong friendships with other people in my group - all with the added bonus of seeing shooting stars, an osprey nest and the northern lights!'** It is clear that this expedition had a great impact on all those who attended, and many thanks to the Ulysses Trust for supporting this expedition, it is greatly appreciated.



