

Twenty years ago **Alex Wade** had a miserable time at an army training camp in Cornwall. Last weekend, he returned to Perranporth to face his demons (and a wall of six-foot breakers) at the resort's surf triathlon

Lie on your backs, wave your arms and legs in the air and shout 'Potato!' The madness of the instruction and the velocity with which it was delivered came flooding back. Twenty years ago, as a 17-year-old, reluctant, member of my army cadet corps, I had been sent on a long and character-diminishing weekend at Penhale army barracks, on the north Cornwall coast. Screaming "Potato!" And simultaneously writhing around like an inverted woodlouse, I realised at this moment that I would never, ever join the army.

I have revisited Perranporth, the seaside village a few miles west of Penhale; many times since, but memories of that lost weekend had been consigned deep within my "do not disinter" drawer. Then last month I received a letter from a friend in Perranporth, Andy, enclosing "a little tempter": an entry form for the Perranporth Triathlon on 14th September an annual event organised by the local surf life saving club. It starts with an 800m swim, continues with a 38km cycle ride, and finishes with a 7.5km run.

Simple enough, for anyone reasonably fit, you would think, but there's a catch. The swim is in the sea, and this, at Perranporth, can be huge. The cycle ride is up, and rarely down, the surrounding Cornish hills. And the run is on strength-sapping wet sand, along Perranporth beach - to Penhale and back.

I was tempted. Sure, there would only be a few weeks to train for the event, but I had always wanted to do a triathlon, and why not start with a beast? So, with the kind of preparation that barely deserves the word - 'amateur', I arrived in Perranporth the night before the event.

their yellow hats and black wetsuits.

If the swim was tiring, the run up the beach to the transition zone nearly did for me.

The cheers of the spectators and the voice of Karen urging me on gave me a boost, though; I stripped off my wetsuit leapt on my bike, and was soon struggling up St George's Hill out of Perranporth, in T-shirt and board shorts. The hill seemed to go on forever, but finally there was a flat section, where I could relax and take in the spectacular views. Heading back into Perranporth I nearly lost it on one corner, and then had to summon reserves I didn't know I had to cycle the circuit all over again.

Back at the transition zone again, I set off to run down to Penhale and back, I the sand sapped all the strength from my ankles, and both Achilles tendons began playing up; Up ahead, I saw Andy, a much better swimmer but someone I should beat on a run. I tried to catch him, but it was no good. There was nothing left, I wanted to walk the rest of the course.

Suddenly, at the far end of the beach beneath Penhale army camp, the memory of being made to scream "Potato!" came back. No, I 'wasn't going to walk. Maybe I could still catch Andy. I ran faster, and overtook a couple of runners. He was now three places ahead, but it just wasn't going to happen. The swim and cycle ride had reduced me to a stumbling shadow of the runner that I can be. Andy crossed the line 110th I was nearly a minute behind him in 113th, in a time of 2:29:31. The race was won by Great Britain triathlete Julian Jenkinson, competing for one of the sponsors, Snugg wetsuits, in 1:46:29, while the first woman home was Anne Buckley, 24th overall in 2:02:03.

Afterwards, I learned that the lifeguards had

rescued 15 people from the swim. This is not your average triathlon. It attracts elite athletes from around the country; including Richard Hobson; last year's winner, who was second this time. Hobson, a performance coach for the British Triathlon Association, said: "When I stood at the water's edge, I felt scared, if that's how I feel what about everyone else? This is an extremely hard event; you've got to be strong for it".

Strong? Or just a touch eccentric? whatever, it beats lying on your back and shouting "Potato!" Penhale holds some better memories for me now.

Perranporth Surf Life Saving Club:
www.perranporthslsc.org.uk