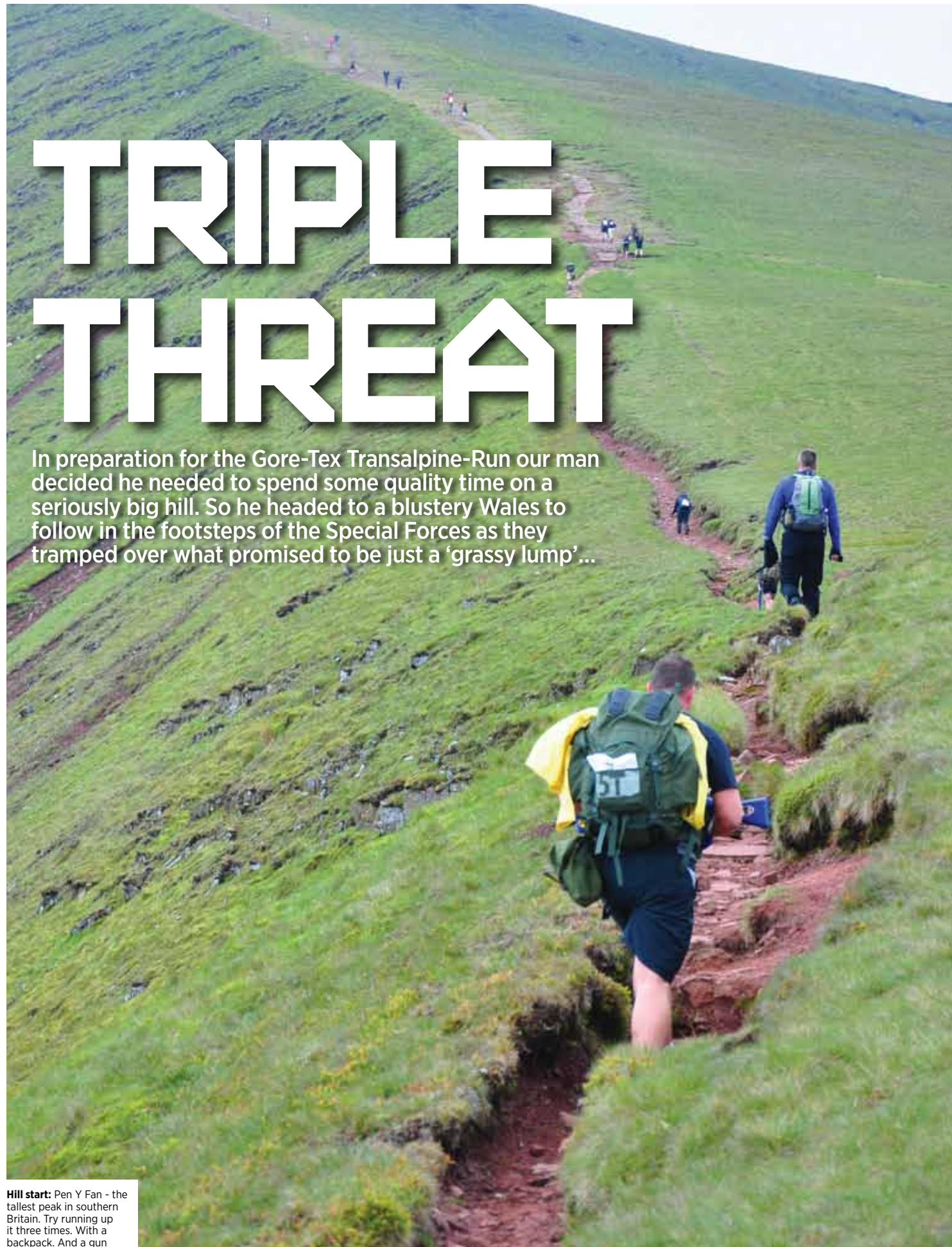


# TRIPLE THREAT

In preparation for the Gore-Tex Transalpine-Run our man decided he needed to spend some quality time on a seriously big hill. So he headed to a blustery Wales to follow in the footsteps of the Special Forces as they tramped over what promised to be just a 'grassy lump'...



**Hill start:** Pen Y Fan - the tallest peak in southern Britain. Try running up it three times. With a backpack. And a gun



When it comes to running, I suffer from what can only be termed extreme naïveté. I try to trick myself into thinking a deep-seated fearlessness drives my say-yes-ask-questions-later approach; others mistake it for bravado. Unfortunately, it is neither.

Which is how I found myself lining up alongside 60 other competitors, in a

that the mountain in question, Pen Y Fan, was, "just a grassy lump". The more salient point I'd missed altogether; that the race is based on part of the British Special Forces selection process that tests recruits' fitness and navigation by having them run to the summit, descend, then repeat two more times. That's three, yes, three, ascents of Pen Y Fan in the space of a few hours.

For some unknown reason, as I mill around the crowd on the start line and despite the military connection, the

Not being able to see more than a few hundred metres up ahead masks my first and most immediate problem - it's steep. I'd brought my Alpine poles to practise on the ascent and am surprised to be using them early on, as I plough on as quickly as I can to my first summit.

If thrice-summiting isn't enough of a challenge, a number of competitors go full military on our asses; hauling a 30lb backpack and British Army replica rifle up the mountain with them. Despite setting off at a decent clip, some of the foresaid elite pass me going up the hill. Talk about emasculating...

I finally reach the summit and the severity of the challenge is perfectly crystallised and my earlier assessment of the Brecon Beacons' highest peak shattered. Pen Y Fan is the tallest peak in southern Britain at 2,907 feet (886 metres) and standing at the top, it feels like it.

The speed at which runners are

## A NUMBER OF COMPETITORS WERE HAULING 30LB BACKPACKS AND REPLICA RIFLES UP THE MOUNTAIN

cold, wet campsite at the foot of a mountain for Extreme Energy's Fan Dance 2012 race. For some reason my mind was focusing on a comment my hill-trekking father-in-law once made

severity of the task is somehow lost on me. Hell, it's so misty I can't even see the mountain and 15 miles isn't that far, is it?

When the race starts, us runners delve into the fog hanging on the mountain.



**Gunning for glory:**  
The intervening years  
hadn't been kind to  
John Rambo



pouring down off the summit to the next checkpoint has me trying to catch up by tripping down the slope haphazardly and, somewhat inevitably, I end up taking a spill. That I don't suffer a more serious injury is a miracle and after

runner worryingly asks, while another chips in with, "Is this the way to the Storey Arms?" (He's really in trouble - that's not even the first checkpoint.) With my trusty compass, I play mother and we're at the first checkpoint and

## NAVIGATION IS A MAJOR PART OF THE CHALLENGE AND THERE ARE NO RULES ON THE ROUTE YOU TAKE

brushing it off, I'm down at the bottom where a group of runners are struggling with directions.

"Which way's north on the map?" one

back in no time preparing for a second ascent of the mountain. Out come the poles again and I'm grinding up the path, running where it's flat and pushing on to

my second summit. In what seems like an eternity, I arrive.

Navigation is a major part of the challenge and there are no prescribed rules on the route you take, just that checkpoints are tackled in order. A little strategy comes in useful so I go for broke and take a more direct route to the next checkpoint.

On the drop down from the summit it's clear that the foremost challenge of the race is turning out to be the weather with mist reducing visibility dramatically and making navigation tricky. On a clear, sunny day the Pen Y Fan is easily navigable; swamped in mist and wet

underfoot it's a serious place to be. Runners are scattering in all directions, not unlike lemmings looking for a cliff to launch themselves from.

With the seemingly steep ascents, the downhill sections should be a nice chance to open up and run. Yet the thumping tightness of my calves is matched by the severe pounding my quads are now receiving as I struggle to find a rhythm.

Halfway down, I plunge out of the mist to find myself on a winding path down the side of the mountain, filled with dog walkers, couples and a large number of inexplicably large German tourists - but not another runner in sight. It's not until I've hit the checkpoint and turn to go

## DISASTER IS ONLY JUST AVERTED WHEN, IN MY FATIGUED STATE, I GO AND TAKE A WRONG TURN

back up the mountain that I meet some fellow competitors.

Any plans about running the final ascent are scotched as quickly as the spasms shuddering through my legs, so I return to my trusty pole-propulsion system to catapult my weary body as quickly up the hill as I can.

At this stage, I'm not in the mood for witty banter so I'm not my usual friendly self when one mouthy hill walker barks at me, "Is it your third time?" I answer in the affirmative, struggling past him as quickly as I can before I hear his helpful taunts of, "You'd better hurry up, there's a girl in front of you."

When I reach the summit for the third and final time, I'm done. I've got nothing left in the tank and let gravity pull me down the path towards the finish as quickly as I can. Disaster is only just averted when, in my fatigued state, I take a wrong turn but a quick scramble back up to the path sets me right. As I descend closer to the campsite, I'm happy that I can finally stretch those legs out and finish strongly.

Never before has a 15-mile 'run' been such an endurance test and I clock a final time of just over five hours. Five hours to run 15 miles seems ridiculous, particularly as the Special Forces trek



has a four-hour cut off time. It's not helped when one of the runners lugging a rucksack and replica gun just pips me to the finish.

However, as I sit sipping a cup of tea at the finish, there is no question over the sense of achievement I feel. It takes some serious cojones to take on The Fan Dance

that tests endurance, navigation and mental fortitude.

Those who decide to follow in the footsteps of the Special Forces must be prepared to dig deep to motivate themselves not once, not twice, but three times up the most challenging 'grassy lump' I've ever set foot on.

