

Preparing to serve Queen and country

DESPITE the best of intentions, unfortunately my efforts to become the first RCVS-registered specialist in Veterinary Cryptozoology had not been proceeding well.

Despite criss-crossing a large portion of the Swiss Alps, and painfully climbing the highest mountains in Europe, the closest I had come to locating a yeti – let alone one requiring veterinary attention – had been a shaggy mountain stag that led me in circles, and a large footprint in the mud of a mountain lakeshore (*Veterinary Practice*, January and February 2010). Unfortunately, however, detailed scrutiny revealed a disturbing resemblance to my own bootprint.

And despite scaling remote, rugged cliffs, and searching the depths of ancient castles in Olde Ireland, I'd failed to locate any sign of a leprechaun or, indeed, any unusual beasts at all, in that supposedly enchanted land (*Veterinary Practice*, July 2010).

Gloomily, I was forced to face the depressing possibility that I just might not be cut out for a life healing the injuries and ailments of our rare and mythical creatures. In particular, there appeared to be little I could do to overcome their frustrating shyness.

Leprechauns are irresistibly attracted to gold, for example, but unfortunately as a practising veterinarian I'm also possessed of an infallible ability not to accumulate any. Perhaps, I wondered, it was time to consider an altogether different veterinary specialisation?

And that's when it struck me! Veterinarians meet a wide range of people in our day-to-day work, and

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A desirable location to train and put newly-acquired skills into practice: the mushroom rock at James Bond Island [photo by courtesy Wikipedia.]

dispense an endless stream of small parcels. We're skilled at deciphering mysterious messages in practices with hand-written clinical notes. We're trained in feats of endurance – especially those unable to avoid being on-call.

With years of experience staying awake during lectures (particularly those on meat quality and veterinary law), we have a certain natural resistance to torture. And finally, we have the perfect excuse to travel widely, to satisfy our continuing education obligations – which I always take most seriously. In short, we possess the ideal natural skill set of a secret agent, or “case officer”, as the Secret Intelligence Service

(MI6) prefers.

Initial research unearthed a 2006 BBC Radio 1 interview with two MI6 officers, who described the lifestyle as “quite glamorous and very varied, with plenty of overseas travel and adventure”.

The MI6 website confirmed that I would have the chance to develop a “long and varied career at the very heart of international affairs”. As an ex-pat Australian most definitely un-adapted to UK winters, this was clearly the job for me!

Stiff competition

Furthermore, it appeared that my veterinary experience would stand me in good stead: I would need to be able to “understand and interpret information from a variety of sources, draw conclusions and make an informed decision/recommendation”.

Competition for case officer positions would doubtless be stiff. To guard against the unlikely event that my veterinary experience alone would prove sufficiently competitive, I decided to obtain some relevant prior experience. I

soon found the ideal introductory course at the Spy Academy (www.spy-games.com) in Singleborough, Buckinghamshire.

The morning of the course dawned bright and clear. From the



The author in action in the sniper class at the academy.

Bletchley train station I hailed a cab, whose driver had no idea of the Academy's existence or whereabouts. I considered this an auspicious start, given the necessity of concealment for such an institution.

His Tom-Tom appeared less confused, however, and led us on an interesting tour of the English countryside, down a succession of ever-narrower country lanes, until we finally reached a gate leading to an apparently empty field.

A few carefully thrown pebbles unfortunately eliminated the possibility that the Academy had been rendered invisible through Advanced Concealment Technologies, and we were forced to backtrack. Shortly after our original turn-off, a sign exclaiming “Spy School” in large letters appeared on the main highway, in front of a converted World War II aircraft hanger and a few modern outbuildings.

I keenly took my place in the front row of wooden benches, amongst a diverse group of men and women from across the UK. A very interesting demonstration lecture on surveillance devices soon followed. It was amazing to witness the literally pinhead-sized state-of-the-art cameras and microphones in operation!

Next, it was time to develop our teamwork, leadership and communication skills. Once again I was confident my veterinary experience would place me in good stead. And so, after charging our laser rifles, we headed to the outdoor obstacle range, to bring about the demise of “red” team, in a blaze of skilfully co-ordinated efficiency.

Unfortunately, however, within milliseconds the field somehow degenerated into an ugly free-for-all. After jumping a pile of old tyres, I attempted to hide in the mud and long grass until most of my opponents had been “killed”.

More unfortunately, however, my helmet kept “bleeping” as unknown assailants – probably from my own team – scored multiple

direct hits. My nine lives were rapidly exhausted, and I was forced ignominiously to exit the field.

Perhaps we would do better on the AK47 Close Quarter Battle range. As the most widely used assault rifle worldwide, and regularly used by terrorist organisations, skilful proficiency with this infamous weapon would be essential in my new career.

Instruction missed

And so I concentrated hard when my turn came. So hard, in fact, that I missed a vital instruction to “halt!” and became the only student to attack a clearly menacing six foot hedge – exhausting my pellet ammunition and eliciting peals of laughter from my instructor and the watching crowd, which I considered rather unkind.

Fortunately, I did better in the knife-disarming and pistol quick-draw classes, where the main focus was on style and potential camera angles – given the key secondary roles for British agents in James Bond-type movies. I then cruised through sniper school, but was brought up hard against the reality of my lack of upper body strength during axe-throwing class, when all three of my axes bounced straight off my wooden “terrorists”.

Nevertheless, I cannot help but conclude that the day was a success, and as an experienced veterinarian, I believe I have considerable case officer potential. I'm prepared to travel anywhere within the Hawaii Islands, the Caribbean, Bali, the Maldives, the Seychelles, Palau, the Canary Islands, Mauritius, Micronesia, Polynesia, the Galapagos or Whitsunday Islands, in the defence of UK security; and can pack in under 30 minutes. I hope to receive a call from MI6 soon.

Essential equipment – a selection of bugging devices and miniature cameras.

