



Reaping the benefits of a military regime

As a nation we're getting fatter and creating a health 'timebomb'. Exercise is one of the most important ways to boost our health and just 30 minutes a day cuts the risk of developing heart disease by half. And getting your 30 minutes can be lots of fun, as **Debbie Leigh** found out when she tried British Military Fitness



THE name conjures up images of a red-faced sergeant bellowing orders while terrified troops drag themselves round a

muddy assault course.

There might be plenty of mud and the odd order to "give me 20 press-ups" but that's where any similarities to training regimes in war movies end. Classes are designed to get the heart

pumping, but organisers are quick to emphasise that this is no boot camp. Yes there are serving and ex-soldiers running around in camouflage pants, carrying enormous rucksacks, but the only shouting is words of encouragement, not insults – to my relief.

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British Military Fitness (BMF) was set up in 1999 by Major Robin Cope, who served throughout the world with postings including Northern Ireland, the Gulf and time with the US Special Forces. He retired at the rank of Major in 1992 but back on 'civvy street' he was unimpressed by lengthy gym contracts and working out inside surrounded by mirrors and lycra-clad bodies. Utilising his Army qualifications as a unit fitness officer, he set up BMF. Its emphasis is on team spirit and genuine fitness achievement rather than inch loss – that's just a welcome bonus if that's what you're after. Major Cope said: "Our aim is to provide a range of physically challenging activities, which will dramatically improve participants' levels of fitness, self-confidence and give a sense of personal achievement. "You need two sets of motivation to go to the gym – one to get there and another to work out. Here you have the group and the instructor to get you going and motivate you. "BMF is a fitness company – no gadgets or gizmos, just pure fitness. If you regularly come along to BMF classes, you will get fitter."

The hour-long classes take place outside in more than 50 city parks around the country all year round, whatever the weather. BMF arrived in Leeds, in the stunning setting of Roundhay Park, in June. There are already more than 100 members, and newcomers or "triallists" turn up at every session. Ingeniously, your first class is free so you can decide whether you like it without even opening your wallet – and BMF boast that 70 per cent of people sign up after their trial class. First you have to declare your fitness level, then put on the appropriately-coloured bib. Beginners wear blue, intermediates wear red and the super-fit wear green. On my trial session the warm up started with everyone jogging round in a huge circle, doing various exercises as we ran – from punching forwards, upwards and sideways, then changing running direction, following whatever instructions are shouted out. "Feet" means you have to lie on the ground with your feet in the air then get back up again as quickly as possible. "Up" means jump on the back of the person in front.

It was fun but it was pretty tiring in itself and I was starting to worry I was going to be in for a real shock when the actual training session started. Every so often we had to link arms with a certain number of people and sprint round one or two of the instructors as fast as we could. Then we had to pair up with someone of a similar size and do exercises using our partner for resistance – including one where you each hold the other's left wrist then try to slap their face and another where you have to wipe mud on their forehead. It's impossible not to laugh and make friends when you're asked to do such silly things. After around 15 minutes the group was split into green, red and blue bib wearers and the reds were divided again into more manageable sections – around 20 per instructor. Classes are almost half men and half women, and include all abilities and ages. When I arrived I was a bit intimidated as everyone seemed to know at least one other person but the sense of camaraderie means it's only a few minutes before you feel right at home. I have always enjoyed going to the gym but it can become so boring, doing the same exercises on your own and often not really seeing results. Exercising outside, in such a vast open space and in the fresh air with a group of like-minded people is unbeatable. You have to accept that when it rains you're going to get muddy and when it gets really cold I imagine we'll just wear a few more layers. I've been to sessions in the rain and done sit-ups lying in the mud but the "roughing-it" element only adds to the appeal and the sense that you're doing something different and exciting. As for the approaching dark nights, Mark Donaldson – BMF northern area manager – said instructors would have torches and military-style glow sticks but after around 20 minutes your eyes get used to the dark.

The classes include a combination of circuit type exercises, many of which are authentic Army training moves or slightly adapted ones, with plenty of sprinting and energetic team games thrown in. You're generally in pairs, working for each other's benefit, so while your partner runs, you do something tough like squats, then you run and they do star jumps. The quicker you run the less time they have to spend doing the killer exercises. And you never know what's coming next. When you least expect it you get told to sprint round trees 100m away and return as fast as you can. There's no standing around wondering which exercise to do next or taking a break for a few minutes. It's an intense workout and the instructors, all fully-qualified army physical training instructors, ensure you never waste a minute. They constantly motivate and encourage you and no two classes are ever the same as the instructors take different sections each week. So although you know it's going to be tough you never know exactly how tough. They combine being friendly and funny with a firmness that means you always do as you're told. The end result is that BMF manages what I would have previously thought impossible, to be really, really good fun while making you work harder than you actually thought you could. It brings out your competitive spirit but you can still work at a pace that suits you, while having others around is an incentive to make you try your hardest. The fact that you can't help but make new friends is also a great motivator compared to solo gym workouts, as if you've told your pals you'll be there you're less likely to skip a session. It's like having a personal trainer – but for a fraction of the price – as all you have to do is turn up, do as you're told and you're pretty much guaranteed results. After five sessions my trousers are already looser round the waist and I feel fitter. I've finished every session seriously exhausted but beaming from ear to ear,

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exclaiming how great it is and immediately looking forward to the next class. BMF is a world away from the monotony of the treadmill, cross-trainer and weights bench, and having set days and times to attend means you go the extra mile to ensure you can be there. Give it a go and tear up that gym membership. I have.

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What's so good about BMF?

- A challenging workout with a motivational instructor
- Exercising outside in the fresh air with other people
- It's cost and time-effective – and fun
- It's environmentally friendly, safe and socially-interactive.

BMF factfile

- The first trial session is free.
- Monthly fee is £32. This includes unlimited classes per month anywhere in the UK.
- There is also a corporate rate of £28 a month for unlimited classes (NHS, teachers, public sector workers, full time charity workers and staff of firms in the corporate scheme). The under-21s and over-60s rate is £20 a month for unlimited classes.
- Leeds classes are held in Roundhay Park, meeting just off Prince's Avenue and Lidgett Park Road. Classes take place on Saturdays from 10am to 11am and Mondays and Wednesdays from 7pm to 8pm.
- British Military Fitness classes also run in parks around the country – log on to www.britmilfit.com for venues and more information.

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WARM UP:
Sessions begin with a group jog



NO GADGETS: British Military Fitness classes are gizmo-free

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THOROUGH WORKOUT: Army physical training instructors ensure you never waste a minute of their fitness sessions