

By Sgt. John R. Lawson III, HEADQUARTERS MARINE CORPS, Washington

▼ **MOAB, Utah** - Teams arrive at camp after dark in the freezing weather of stage one of the Land Rover G4 Challenge. Temperatures dropped as low as minus 20 degrees during this stage—a severe test for the competitors.

Photo courtesy of Land Rover G4 Challenge

Marine Travels the **Globe**
in **Challenging** Competition

ADVENTURE ADDICT **G4**

CHALLENGE

As if being a Marine isn't challenge enough, 30-year-old Capt. Nancy Olson has made a career of pushing herself to the limits in her free time. From a 250-mile race across the Alaskan frontier in the 2002 Armed Forces Eco-Challenge to her latest venture, the 2003 Land Rover G4 Challenge, it might be safe to say Olson is addicted to challenge.

"Maybe I am an adventure junkie, I don't know. True addicts don't realize they have a problem, right?" the 5-foot, 8-inch Southlake, Texas, native said. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do than have an adventure."

Olson spent the bulk of April competing in G4 Challenge's monthlong series of



ADVENTURE ADDICT **G4** LAND-ROVER CHALLENGE



◀ **NEW YORK** - Olson, the United States representative for the monthlong Land Rover G4 Challenge, is all smiles on day one of the event.

Photo courtesy of Land Rover G4 Challenge.

▼ **AUSTRALIA** - Paul McCarthy, from Ireland, and Olson drive to another stage of the competition in Australia. The Australian portion of the challenge included cycling, kayaking, and dragging the kayak between bodies of water.

Photo courtesy of Land Rover G4 Challenge.

*Captain Nancy Olson
Journal Entry - Karijini National Park
April 16, 03*

The three-hour Maximizer course (a race for points that kicked off and ended each leg of the Land Rover G4 Challenge) through the gorges of the Karijini National Park in western Australia was designed to test team strategy and stamina. Early Wednesday morning, we were presented with the route and had to choose one of two available options, both of which concluded at the foot of Joffre Falls. Each pair had to decide which team-mate would complete which option, and we picked based on our strengths and weaknesses.

Apparently I chose wrong. One choice had a longer bike leg, and the other had a shorter bike ride, a run, and a "swim." Each choice ended with what they said would be an extensive a kayak and portaging section through the gorge. Because Paul McCarthy of Ireland, my partner for this Australian leg, was a stronger biker, and because I like to run, I chose the latter. That was a big mistake. The kayaks were staged for us in the gorge, where each competitor was to arrive after finishing either the long bike leg or the bike/run/scramble/swim leg. Those who had chosen the bike leg arrived fairly fresh, while the others, like myself, were worn out from slogging through scree fields, swimming huge pools of water, and slipping over ice-slick, mossy boulders. We were already worn out before the hard part even began.

We picked up the kayaks to begin what deceptively appeared to be a simple paddle up the river gorge. Around the first bend, though, we realized the water ended. A portage was in order. And that's how it would be for the next several hours. Kayak for a couple of minutes of fun, then walk the boat over large expanses of dry, boulder-strewn land. Kayak, carry,

adventure sports that took her from New York to South Africa to Australia to Moab, Utah. She represented the United States in the competition. Under normal circumstances, Olson works at the Pentagon as the Deputy Head of Community Relations at Headquarters Marine Corps.

As Olson and her fellow competitors moved from place to place, they experienced many climates, and every season. During the first stage of the competition, held in the northern United States, competitors bundled up against the cold for snowboarding and other winter sports. One week later, Olson and her rivals were in the tropical climes of South Africa swimming through waterfalls, climbing in caves, and paddling kayaks.

The next week found them in Australia, where the intense heat resulted in "one of the more cruel" events, Olson said. The five-hour saga was one part cycling, one part kayaking, and one part dragging the kayak between bodies of water.

Finally, the competition concluded in the deserts of the western United States. Throughout, there was plenty of running, mountain biking, rappelling, and orienteering.

Olson said being a Marine helped her in many ways, most notably with respect to keeping the proper frame of mind. "It gave me the confidence to know I could do this," she said. "It gave me the 'never-say-die' attitude that I needed to get through some of the events."

Even though everyone competed as an individual, for any given event each competitor had a partner.

Consequently, teamwork was always important. This is another way the Marine Corps helped her, she said.

"You have to know how to work with someone else, lead when you have to lead, and follow when you need to follow," she said.

Olson finished 15th out of 16, but simply qualifying was a distinction within itself, because only one person could represent each country.



ADVENTURE ADDICT G4 CHALLENGE

LAND-ROVER



▲ **WESTERN UNITED STATES** - Competitors determined their own routes and the checkpoints they would reach on each course. Strategy was a crucial planning element as each team wanted to get to as many checkpoints as possible within the time constraints for each event. Stage one teammates, Olson and Sergey Polyansky of Russia plot their course to maximize the number of checkpoints they will hit.

Photo courtesy of Land Rover G4 Challenge

◀ **NEW YORK** - Broadway is taken over for the start of the Land Rover G4 Challenge. The first urban event involved a specially designed 4x4 driving course.

Photo courtesy of Land Rover G4 Challenge

The former captain of the U.S. Naval Academy's track and cross-country teams had strong enough athletic credentials to distinguish herself in an initial pool of 450 American applicants.

She and 28 other American finalists went through a series of adventure sport competitions in Las Vegas. Thanks to her athletic prowess and her ability to project a strong public image, Olson finished in the top two. Then, in the final qualifying round, which was held in England, Land Rover selected Olson as the American representative for the 2003 G4 Challenge.

Olson has become an old hand at this type of challenge, having competed in variety of extreme competitions including the John F. Kennedy race, a 50-mile race; Odyssey Adventure Racing's one day odyssey; and two day Endorphin Fix, where her team won first place. She and a teammate once mountain biked 175 miles overnight, "because we figured it would be good training," she said.

"I don't really think of these competitions as 'extreme,' although I do realize others consider people like me a bit 'off,'" Olson said.

For someone who claims sleep is her favorite commodity, Olson is slated for a number of sleep-depriving competitions in the future. She leaves active duty in July and her plans for life after the Corps include two five to seven day races: the Eco Challenge North America in Canada in July and the

kayak, carry, carry, carry, kayak, lift, rest, curse, slip, push, drag, lift, kayak. Hefting the kayaks over the huge rocks along the expanses of dry riverbed was one of the most physically challenging things I have ever done. It was like dragging a dead Great Dane on a leash over boulders. The tubby kayakers we were using were very heavy, especially considering how tired we already were, and all our gear was quite cumbersome.

Honestly, for the first time in my life, I didn't know if I would finish or not. I take that back--I knew I would finish, I just didn't know if I would finish that same day! Giving up or failing was no option, so I just downed some Hammer Gel (a shot of carbs/energy) and kept going, hoping each portage would be my last. Finally, at the end of a beautiful kayak portion was a vertical wall that signaled the end of my by-then-inhospitable relationship with my boat. That was the drop-off point. I had never been so happy to leave gear behind. All that was left from there was one more swim, some scrambling, and a short run through shallow water. My final reward was a cool shower in a sparkling waterfall. Heck, I guess it wasn't so bad, after all. I mean, I don't remember ever getting to stand under a waterfall after humping a pack in the Marine Corps.

After finishing the Maximizer to trump all Maximizers, our convoy moved 120 miles northeast to the hottest town in Australia-Marble

Subaru Primal Quest on the West Coast in September. She is also set to begin a nine-monthlong trek around the world in Land Rovers, with nine other drivers, to benefit Parkinson's Disease, which her grandfather has.

While Olson regrets not winning the free Range Rover, which Land Rover put up as the grand prize for the winner of the G4 Challenge, she said simply being one of the few to participate in such an event was ample reward.

It was common to see sights that looked like "something out of National Geographic," she said. "The trip was the prize." **M**