

It was a kind of feverish build up of excitement that was bubbling over as the South West contingent of the squad flowed down the M4 towards our rendezvous at the Runnymede Hotel. Teammates slowly filtered through the double doors as the adults sat down for their morning coffee. We then shifted our baggage onto the coach (after a passport check) and I sat down with my usual friends from the South West squad. By the time we reached the port the various M/W14s had started to mingle a bit more and we chatted happily as we floated out into the English channel.

We got back on the road from Calais and after a long drive we pulled up at Dunkirk youth hostel for our first night. The M14s settled down in a comfortable room and attempted to go to sleep. But it was not to be... It was a sleepover in all but name: pillows were thrown, Yorkshire tea drinking technique discussed and insults about northerners and southerners thrown around. Until finally at 11:30pm, much to the joy of the M16s next door, we fell back on our mattresses and went to sleep.

It was a rude awakening for some next morning as I turned on the bathroom light and subsequently the fan at 6:00am. We grumbled and lumbered out of bed and downstairs to collect a very delicious breakfast (I am not allowed coco pops at home), and then the moment came... We collected our England kit! I now basically live in my England jumper, In fact I'm wearing it at the time of writing. We then jumped back on the coach and drove to Lommel with a short stop at a local town on the way to gorge ourselves on delicious belgian chocolates. We arrived at Lommel sports centre and I rushed off to start my model event. I had already decided to run slowly so as to get a feel for the vegetation and subtle 2.5m contours. The terrain contained small patches of contour detailed, sandy woodland interspersed with the urban complex of the sports centre. At first I was confused with the lack of allocated road crossings until I realised that, unlike back home, everyone wasn't trying to run me over. After downloading I went up to my room to try and get a good night's sleep.

We woke up the next day and ate breakfast under a spell of nervous excitement and concentration. After a short drive to the assembly I walked down to the start with my teammates. There we had our photos taken and warmed up. I waved my friends off and then finally it was time to run. I was confident in my ability to navigate well through the sand dune-like woodlands and I ran hard through the first section of my course. The problems were apparent early on however. The planners had their controls tucked away in very tricky locations and once I was in the control circle this was costing me 5-10 seconds per control, This adds up over a whole course. My only real mistake was number 11 where I was dragged off of my bearing to check a wrong control in a nearby depression costing me 30-45 secs. I was still very happy overall as I was top M14 England runner and I was only beaten by two local Flemish boys who were on their home turf. After a long journey and a fish and chips on the ferry I arrived home and rapidly fell asleep.

I would like to thank SWOA and their treasurer Steve Robertson who were very generous in helping cover part of the costs of the trip and handled my grant quickly and effectively. I would certainly recommend applying for their grant if you ever had an opportunity like this. I would also like to thank John Rye and the England orienteering team for their brilliant support and expert handling of the logistics of this trip. It Truly was a brilliant experience and one that orienteers of all age groups should strive to be a part of.
Marcus Perry.