Lessons from Survival School

By: Bulldog6

In the summer of 1997, I participated in a 2 week outdoor survival course conducted in the mountains of Southern Utah. It was something I had wanted to do for a decade, and finally made the time for. Looking back on it, there were a lot of good lessons to be learned from my experiences, and the experiences of others in the course.

The course started on a Saturday afternoon. The instructors sorted and checked our gear. As a wilderness survival course, the equipment we had was very limited. For the first part of the course, we carried only some extra clothes, a knife or two, a cup, a water purification method, and some sunscreen, all carried in our fanny pack. That's it. We started late that afternoon, walking into the wilderness until after dark. The instructor just picked a spot and said sleep here. We donned our extra clothes, and tried to make ourselves comfortable. Some students huddled next to each other for warmth, others slept alone the first night. By the second night, staying warm was more important, and everyone huddled together.

The first 48 hours of the course was intended to be as much of a shock as possible, so it was lots of walking up and down hills. Without our canteens, we just had to drink water when we found it. Some of it was less than appetizing. One of the first water spots was a tiny trickle emptying into a mossy, algae covered puddle. Another was a water pocket in a sandstone canyon, that must have been safe, because there were all sorts of things living in it. We strained it through a handkerchief, but it was still quite green. Surprisingly, it tasted fine, almost like pure clear water.

During this phase, one of the students displayed the courage and strength that all survivalists need. Her body was not adapting well to the conditions. She was weak, and couldn't keep liquids down, throwing up several times. But she didn't give up, didn't even complain. The other students helped her out, and the instructors, worried about her condition, gave her some rehydration mix (gatorade?). She vomitted that too, but kept on going. By the second morning, she was ok, and never had a problem again.

After 48 hours, the impact phase was over, and we were reunited with the rest of our gear. This consisted of a wool blanket, poncho, canteens, and other small gear. We also got our group gear, which consisted of a cooking pot and some basic food stuffs.

The clothing I chose to wear was all tan BDUs in cotton ripstop, Army desert boots, and a boonie hat. I also had a poly pro sweater, wool sweater, and wool cap. The clothing worked well. I was able to keep myself protected not only from the sun, but also from the cold nights. I could add or take off layes as needed to keep myself comfortable. Some of the people were not as well prepared. One in particular, would foolishly wear a tank top shirt during the day. Within a couple of days she was horribly sunburnt.

We were required to start our fires with the bow and drill method. I think everyone finally started a fire this way, but it took some a long time to get it. I was the first to start a fire this way. I attribute my success to having done this before as a teenager (buddy teamed it with a friend.) Just the experience of knowing what signs to look for, and how to cut the notch, made all the difference.

With our blankets and ponchos, we could now make a decent shelter. We made beds out of dry pine needles, which were very abundant in that terrain. I used my ponch to make a giant bag, filled it with needles from under the trees and hauled it to my camp site. A foot thick bed of needles only took 15 minutes to collect, and made for comfortable, warm sleeping. I rigged up my poncho as a small lean to. I staked down all four corners, leaving slack in one of the long sides. I then tied the center of that side up to a tree, and also tied the hood to the tree. This opened up the inside nicely, so that I could even sit up inside it.

The food we had was simple: rice, lentils, boullion, oatmeal, flour, and raisan-peanut mix. Dinner was rice and lentils with a boullion cube. Breakfast was oatmeal with some brown sugar. Lunch was raisans and peanuts. We used the flour to make ash cakes. We just mixed the flour with a little water to make a thick dough, and then placed in the hot ashes of our campfire. We got creative, and added raisans. These made good lunch "biscuits." By liberally dusting the cakes with flour before cooking, most of the ashes didn't stick to the cake.

The instructors recommend using the aerobic oxygen drops for water purifiction. They claimed it was effective against bacteria and worked almost instantly. They did tell us that it would not work against viruses and amoebas, like giardia. They reassured us that giardia was very rare in those areas. Well, I didn't trust that. I had a cheap water filter (Basic Designs) which I wanted to try out. It worked but just barely. The instructors warned that it would clog quickly if we had to purify muddy water. Because the water filter was awkward to use, I used iodine tablets. The taste was better than I expected, but not great. I found the way to drink water that way was to, without breathing, gulp down as much as I could at one time. The bad taste hit afterwards, so it wasn't that bad. By the way, no one got sick from the water during the entire course.

One of the things I found interesting was how many of the students ended up cutting themselves with their knives. These were all people who had seldom used a knife outside of the kitchen. Obviously, experience using your gear will show itself.

We had one potentially deadly moment, and it happened in the strangest way. We were all sitting around processing meat from a sheep. I had just set my knife down on a piece of wood, when a man sitting next to me stood up. Well, he apparently was a little dehydrated, because a moment later, I found him falling on top of my knife. Luckily, the knife was lying flat, and he didn't cut himself, but a Ka-bar in the belly could have ruined his whole day.

One of the things we could not take was toilet paper. Yeah, we all said "ugh", but it wasn't that bad. The sage brush that was prevalent worked well as a substitute. They had mentioned using dry sand, and daubing with it, but I didn't feel like trying that method. If there is a trick to going without toilet paper, its make the exit of the waste as clean as possible. Don't tighten up and pinch it off until its ALL out.

We used our blankets to make a rudimentary pack. We layed them out on the ground, assembled the gear in a tight bundle near one edge, then folded the blanket tightly around the gear. Some 550 cord was used to tie everything together, and then a nylon strap attached to make shoulder straps. With the light loads we had, it worked pretty well. The rest of our gear was carried in our fanny packs. I carried two canteens. The more water I had the better, especially since we didn't really know when the next water hole or stream would be found.

For those that hand never done it before, land navigation was a real challenge. Trying to understand what all the squigly lines on the map meant on the real ground takes some experience. Route planning became critical as we tried to avoid doing too much up and down hiking in the mountainous terrain.

One event that sticks out in my mind the most was the 2 day solo camp. The instructors lead us along this thin trail, designating camp sites for each individual student. They were given an area of ground and told to stay with in their areas, and not have contact with the other students. Well, I was one of the last to get dropped off. About 20 minutes later I heard a girl who had been dropped off just before me start screaming out and calling for the instructor. I came running down to see what was wrong. She said she was ok...but had just panicked when she realized she was all "alone" out there. Everyone has certain fears, and this girl just had to face her own.

The last event was a long day and night hike. The day part was about 20 miles long, mostly down hill. It was a long day, but not a big deal. The night time part was a little different. They took us up to a road, and told us to start walking. They wouldn't tell us how far it was to the end point. We were all rather tired already. We walked at our own pace, some even choosing to jog some of the distance. Its a strange mind game not knowing how far you have to go. I just focused on putting one foot in front of the other, and told myself I could keep this up all night long if that's what it took. When we finally did reach the end point, they asked us how for we thought we had walked. I was thinking about 6 or 7 miles, and it turned out to be about 10. But it sure was nice to see the end point illuminated in the dark.

Like we always say, there is no substitute for actually getting out there and doing it.