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Surviving Alaska

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Each year Coast Guardsmen and their families report to duty stations serving America's last frontier. Alaska is a unique and untamed land filled with vast expanses of forest, thousands of uninhabited islands, glaciers and pristine snow capped mountains. This offers unmatched opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts and experiences of a lifetime for those who prefer the picturesque scenery from their living room window.

This last frontier also presents a unique challenge for everyone living in Alaska, outdoorsman and

homemaker alike. Its deep forests can be disorienting, its weather unpredictable and its tolerance for mistakes unforgiving. Each year individuals are killed by the environment of Alaska, often during recreational or day to day activities. The Coast Guard is no exception to this statistic, having lost several Coast Guardsmen and family members in past years.



KODIAK, Alaska (Nov. 28, 2006) Petty Officer 3rd class Alex Torres, left, and Petty Officer 3rd class Abram Heller stand in front of their shelter during the last survival class November 28 – December 1, 2006.

For this reason a five day survival class is required of all new arrivals to Air Station Kodiak. In the past, survival training was tailored to pilots and air crews who, by the nature of their mission in Alaska, fly long distances in hazardous conditions. But as history has shown it is during off duty time when individuals find themselves in life threatening situations which can lead to injury or death. The class is based on the seven steps of survival which can be used in any situation, from fixing a flat tire to surviving on a remote island after a maritime accident. Although the situations vary greatly, the fundamentals of staying alive are the same for everyone.



KODIAK, Alaska (Nov. 28, 2006) A student holds chitons, one of many edible animals that can be found in tide pools on Kodiak Island.

Recognition: The first and most important step is to realize that you are in a life threatening situation. But what is a survival situation?

“A Survival Situation is when you have to take action to save yourself or prevent yourself from further injury, or worse,” explained Petty Officer 1st Class Wil Milam, lead survival school instructor.

There are several classes each year taught by Air Station Kodiak instructors. The curriculum begins with the very important ability to stop, gather your thoughts and identify that you are in a survival situation. A good example is a flat tire.



KODIAK, Alaska (Nov. 28, 2006) Students sit on rocks near tide pools during the outdoor portion of the survival training.

If your tire goes flat in a city, finding help shouldn't be an issue, Milam said. Now have that same blowout on a remote Alaskan road 40 miles from the nearest town in winter.

“If you don't recognize you're in trouble that's when things are going to get worse,” Milam stressed. “That's why you have to realize when something is wrong.”

Inventory: After the realization that you are in trouble, identify what you have on hand that could improve your situation. A cell phone would be a welcome means to call for help and quickly rectify the situation. Milam noted that a person may not use all of the seven steps before the situation comes to an end. However in a situation where there is no easy conclusion inventory becomes ever more important.

“Everything might have a use,” Milam said. “As ridiculous as something might seem, don't get rid of it.”

To emphasize the importance of limited resources, students in the survival class were given a one quart plastic bag which they could fill with anything they wanted; the exception being that only one eighth of the bag could contain food. What the bag contained would hopefully help them when they entered the two days of field training somewhere on Kodiak Island.

Shelter: If the situation does not allow for an easy conclusion it may be necessary to seek shelter, or build it for yourself.

But before piling logs and branches, students learned that their primary shelter is the clothing they already have on. Regardless of the cold temperatures students were only allowed to wear three layers of clothing during the field exercise, none of which could be cotton. The inability of cotton to resist moisture and dry quickly robs the body of heat. This can quickly lead to hypothermia and death.

Building a physical shelter was the student's secondary means of protection. Digging a snow cave, building a shelter from branches or even your vehicle can be suitable shelters, Milam explained. The important thing for people to remember is that they need to be protected from the elements and retain as much heat as possible. While fire may seem like a suitable alternative at this point, Milam noted that it is not one of the seven steps of survival.

"People have died in a survival situation trying to get a fire started, rather than getting out of the elements," he said. "Granted fire is nice, but if you don't get one started it's a real morale killer."

Fire is not a necessity and students were not allowed to start one during their first night in the woods. Only on one occasion was a class allowed a fire on the first night when temperatures dipped to -9 degrees and winds reached 45 mph. Students are given advance warning by instructors that they will be cold, damp and hungry during the outdoor portion of the survival training.

"If you're warm, dry and comfortable you're on a camping trip," he added about the weather during the class. "The important thing they need to understand is that the longer you survive, the better your chances are of being found alive."

Signals: "During the class we go over the best ways to signal people," Milam said. "The single best signal device in this state is the satellite phone."

Cell phones, VHF radios, personal emergency position indicating radio beacons, flares and fire are all effective ways of signaling for help. In addition to requiring that all air station personnel take the survival class, the operations center has VHF radios and emergency position indicating radio beacons that can be checked out by service members heading out on long and/or remote trips. Milam added that having the means to contact someone for help adds an increased comfort level. If you get in trouble why not call someone if you have the means.

Water: From the time someone finds themselves in a survival situation a deadly clock starts running. The human body can only survive for three days without water, Milam explained. In comparison, the body can function for three weeks without food. Finding water, although seemingly abundant, is not an easy task. Much of the accessible water in Alaska is not suitable for drinking either due to bacterial contamination, salt content, or in the case of the winter, it's completely frozen, Milam explained. To ensure students can survive for more than three days, the class focuses on this important aspect of survival. Students learn how to purify water either by boiling or chemical treatment. They also learn where to find water where there may seem to be none.

Food: On Kodiak you are never far from the ocean and a suitable source of food. The variety of marine life and plants that inhabit tide pools can provide a substantial amount of nutrition, Milam explained. After spending one night in the woods, instructors lead the students to the tide pools where they had to locate one of each item they learned about in class. They are then required to eat one of each.

Play: Once the first six steps have been completed it is important to keep busy. This can be in the form of playing games with others or taking on a project such as reinforcing your shelter. The average life expectancy of someone stranded alone is three months. If in a group or alone, games, projects and play can improve your mental situation and combat feelings of boredom, depression and hopelessness.

The situation of having to survive is not something to look forward to, but it should not discourage individuals from enjoying everything Alaska's outdoors have to offer. Milam stresses preparedness as the key to getting out of a potentially bad situation unscathed, or preventing one altogether. As an insurance measure, Milam first recommends that everyone let someone know where they are going and when they plan to return. If you find yourself in trouble and expect someone to come looking for you, don't move unless absolutely necessary, Milam added. Secondly, individuals should have access to appropriate clothing and materials in the event they find themselves in trouble. Preparedness can be as simple as an auto

survival kit containing items such as extra clothes, water and flares. Numerous sources of information on the seven steps to survival or creating an auto survival kit can be found on the internet.

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