Survival – An Overview

Survival in its most basic form means maintaining the will to live. Once you have the basic will to live, there are then the fundamental elements to address which will keep you alive. These are building a shelter, creating a fire, collecting water and hunting. As humans, we have been surviving for millions of years, so these skills are nothing new.

As a young lad, I was lucky enough to grow up in the countryside. Many people don't get this opportunity, so I feel very privileged to have done so. Over the years, I have learnt about my natural surroundings, and have had the opportunity to master a range of survival skills. You are always learning with this subject, but as long as you know enough to get yourself out of trouble, then that's fine.

In airsoft, there are numerous scenarios which could involve utilising survival skills. These could include skirmishes with an escape and evasion element, or undertaking team training in your own time. Of course, also having a knowledge of survival will help you to deal with any real life survival emergency you may face.

The Survival Kit

Just as you carry (or should do anyway) a basic first aid kit as part of your equipment, a survival kit can also be carried. The kit is normally contained inside a tobacco tin which is small enough to fit inside a smock pocket. The contents of the survival kit will enable you to cut, make fire, purify water, trap food and signal for help. There are various types of pre-made kits available commercially from companies such as BCB, Highlander, Web-tex and numerous others. Serious enthusiasts and professionals tend to build their own survival kits, selecting each individual item to suit their needs. Just remember though, the larger the kit, the less likely you will carry it on you all the time.

The contents of a custom built survival kit carried in a tobacco tin. The items, although basic, will address your survival priorities

A purchased survival kit. This one comes in a large wallet style pouch

Contents of a survival kit

Survival kits vary from containing only basic items, to being more comprehensive and including a wider range of survival tools. Survival kits should also be suitable for your area of operations, so it may need to be adjusted if you are travelling to different parts of the world.
The basic items normally included in a survival kit are:

Tin which contains the survival kit (use for boiling water in)
Steel and flint
Matches
Tampon / cotton wool (for use as tinder)
Candle
Knife
Commando saw
Paracord
Whistle
Heliograph
Button Compass
Water purification tablets
Condom or plastic bag (for carrying water)
Snare wire
Fishing kit
Sewing kit
Wound closures / plasters

Additional items you may wish to include are:

Local currency to the country of operations
Surgical tubing (for extracting water from hard to reach places)
Hexamine block
Small torch / mini cyalume

Arrowheads / flights
Large clear plastic bag (for use as transpiration bag)
Strips of rubber (for fire lighting in wet conditions)
Alcohol pre-injection swabs (wound cleaning and fire lighting)

If captured as part of an escape and evasion scenario, you will lose all of your equipment – including your survival kit. This is when you find out that less is certainly more, as survival items can be concealed in all kinds of imaginative places on your person. Fishing line used to sew on buttons, and fishing hooks sewn inside seams of clothing may go undetected during a search (be very careful not to get a hook stuck into you – cover in cardboard first). A small button compass, some tinder material (waterproofed) and perhaps a small piece of flint from a fire steel set, can all be cunningly hidden somewhere. However, I do not advise anybody trying to conceal items of kit inside their body, either by swallowing or inserting as it could lead to serious injury and will certainly raise a few eyebrows when you end up in A&E!

The Priorities of Survival

Whether simulated or real, all survival situations should be approached in the same methodical way. This is achieved by having tasks prioritised in order of importance. So, the priorities of survival are:

1. **Shelter**
2. **Fire**
3. **Water**
4. **Food**

Shelter

Protection from the elements is your first priority. When choosing a location for a shelter, find somewhere safe and out of the wind. Your shelter should be near to a water source but far enough away from any risk of flooding. So, firstly look around to see what natural shelter is available. This could range from a low overhanging branch thick with foliage, to an earth bank with some overhead cover. Once a natural shelter has been found, it can be improved by adding extra found materials to keep the weather out and to provide ground insulation. Avoid sheltering at the bottom of cliffs due to the risk of rock falls. Also, don't decide to settle down on an animal trail, otherwise you may get an unexpected visitor during the night.

Nature will provide – This bush may not look inviting but by adding extra natural material, it can offer reasonable protection from the elements

Man made structures will also provide you with shelter. Buildings, underneath bridges and abandoned vehicles can all offer protection from the elements. However, if you are on the run from a hunter force, then obvious places such as these will be searched. In this case, these locations should be avoided.

Man-made structures such as this shed will provide a nice and easy place to shelter – but avoid these locations if you are trying to evade capture as they will certainly be searched by the enemy.

If no pre-existing form of shelter is available, then if time and resources allow, consider constructing a basic shelter. Again, think about the chosen location in relation to wind direction, signalling for help (or avoiding detection if evading) and natural resources such as building materials, fire wood and water sources.

There are many choices of shelter design, ranging from a basic structure to more elaborate types. Factors influencing what type of shelter to build include climate, terrain, materials available, any tactical considerations, personnel numbers and injuries / physical state. For a short term survival situation, a basic shelter will be adequate.

Placing fallen branches at an angle against a tree trunk will provide a quick and easy shelter.

By laying branches at an angle along a fallen tree, and covering them in a thick layer of leaves / foliage will give you a basic shelter.

By simply leaning lots of fallen branches angled against features such as standing or fallen tree trunks, or walls and hedges will start to provide you with shelter. As I have mentioned, you do need to select your shelter site so that it is out of the wind. Also consider rain water drain off, to ensure that your shelter does not flood. In addition to the roof, the floor inside the shelter needs to be covered with leaves or other found materials for insulation against the cold and damp ground.

A lean-to shelter constructed for two people. Note the foliage bedding and fire reflector in front of the shelter. This shelter requires more time and effort to build, but is more of a long term structure.

A more involved shelter to build is the lean-to. A two person sized lean-to can take several hours to prepare and construct. However, your efforts will be worth it as the shelter will last you longer if required. A lean-to is constructed by securing a strong cross bar horizontally between two trees. Then a slopping roof is built on the side facing the prevailing weather, by placing solid poles at an angle on the chosen side between the cross bar and the ground. Just make sure the wood used for the cross bar and roof is not rotten and will support the weight. Once the roof is on, cover with leaves and other thatching material to help keep the weather out. As with the other types of shelter, insulate yourself from the ground.

Fire

Now you are inside your nice and cosy shelter, your situation can be further improved by lighting a fire. Building a fire brings the following benefits.

1. Provides warmth
2. A means to cook food

3. Boil collected water
4. Signal to rescuers
5. Detracts animals and insects
6. Used to construct tools and weapons
7. Drying out your soaked kit

A fire is great for improving moral. There is something magical about sitting around a fire, watching the flames dance around. It also helps you to relax and unwind. But before building a fire, you need to consider a few things. When not in a genuine survival emergency, always get permission from the land owner before you light one. Also be aware of the risk of causing a wild fire. Lighting a fire on a forest floor covered in a thick layer of pine needles is an inferno waiting to happen. So is fire lighting during very hot and dry weather when everything around is tinder dry. Don't light a fire on uneven ground, and don't light one too close to the shelter entrance. Also be aware of the dangers of smoke inhalation, so do not light fires in confined spaces. The fumes given off from burning plastics and other man made materials can be toxic, so be warned. And one last caution, never leave a fire unattended.

Fire lighting is an art form which takes a considerable amount of practice to master. The skill of lighting a fire seems to be disappearing. In days gone, the open fire used to be the hub of every household. Providing heating, hot water and a means to cook, it was an essential skill for everybody to learn. But with the development of modern housing and central heating, new houses often don't have open fire places and chimneys, so not as many people need to light fires in their homes. As a result, I feel that the number of people who are equipped with this skill is on the decline.

Method

To successfully light a fire, you need three things;
Fuel
Oxygen
Heat

If any one of these elements are absent, then the fire will not light, so it is all down to the initial preparation. I have managed to light fires in the most appalling weather, using just a spark from my steel and flint, but it does take quite a bit of practice, so you need patience. First of all, select dead standing wood rather than branches lying on the saturated ground. The wood should be graded into different sizes, from small to large. Collect all of your wood **BEFORE** you attempt to light the fire. Start with your tinder material which is fine, dry and fibrous such as the cotton wool contained in your survival kit. Next collect at least two hands full of dry, dead small twigs which are about the thickness of a match. Then continue to gather bundles of twigs roughly of a pencil thickness, then finger thickness, thumb size and then larger fuel.

Lying on the ground, saturated, this piece of wood is no good for getting a fire going

Tinder and kindling arranged into size order ready to be lit

Once all the fire lighting material has been gathered, clear the ground on and around your chosen spot of all leaf litter. Also make sure that you are not lighting the fire next to trees, on top of exposed tree roots, peat, beds of pine needles or anything else that could ignite. Lay some sticks down on the ground as a base for the initial fire. Remember, one of the three elements needed to create fire is heat, so just like humans, a fire needs to be insulated from the cold and wet ground. By lighting the fire on a wooden base, it insulates the early flame from the cold surface and reflects the needed heat back into the fire.

When ready, get the tinder material, fluff it up and place onto the wooden base. Now with your steel and flint, lighter or match, light the tinder. Once the tinder is burning, start to add the smallest size of the kindling – the match thick twigs. Carefully place pieces of the small kindling over the burning tinder, making sure that the flame is not smothered by adding too much small kindling too soon. So, now the fire has heat, fuel to burn, and by not smothering the flame, an adequate oxygen supply. Continue to add the kindling, working the way up through to the largest size. A successful fire will soon consume all of the kindling, so make sure that you have enough.

Using a steel and flint to light cotton wool tinder

Small kindling carefully added to the burning tinder to build up the flame

The end product – a welcome sight when cold and wet

Water

With the issues of shelter and fire addressed, the next priority is water collection. I have learned over the years that any water source other than rain water which you have collected, should be considered contaminated and treated as such. The last thing that you need when out in the wilderness is diarrhoea and vomiting caused by drinking untreated water. Even the water collected from the apparently fresh moorland stream will need treating. You may think that you are collecting fresh drinking water from the stream, but have possibly failed to notice that just up the stream is a dead sheep carcass lying in the water. Further up the stream from the carcass, is an area where cattle have been grazing, with the resulting urine and faeces ending up in the water that you are just about to collect and drink! Try to selected a water source that is fast flowing, but easy and safe to reach. If possible, collect white water that is flowing over rocks. Making the water safe to drink involves two processes – filtering followed by purification.

Collect white water that is fast flowing over rocks

The collected river water might look clean, but it will still need filtering and purifying

Filtering

This is the process of removing large objects such as grit, plant debris and insects or bugs from the water which has been collected. The basic method to achieve this is by pouring the water through a piece of tightly woven material. The foreign objects are then caught by the material, allowing the filtered water to flow through into a clean container. Another method is to use a purpose made filter such as the military Milbank bag. Shaped like a sock, the Milbank bag is soaked in water and then suspended. Fill the bag with the unfiltered water and allow the water level to drain down to the black line that is printed on the side of the bag. Then place a container underneath to collect the filtered water.

The Milbank bag set up with mess tin to collect the filtered water

Purification

Once filtered of large particles, the water then needs to be purified. Purification helps to kill any nasty bacteria and diseases that are present in your collected water. There are two methods of purifying water – by boiling, and with chemicals. To boil water, simply pour into a mess tin or similar, place the mess tin on a stove or open fire and bring to the boil. Once boiling with big bubbles, the water is then safe to drink.

Bring water to the boil to purify it

If you have no fire, then use chemical purification

Chemical purification is used in place of boiling, as it may not always be possible to light a fire. The water still needs to be filtered first. The chemical is then added to the water in its container. The most common form of chemical used is the good old chlorine water purification tablet (also known as puri-tabs). As a general rule, one tablet is placed into one litre of water, and left for thirty minutes before drinking. Two tablets are used to treat one litre of heavily contaminated water, but always follow the manufacturer instructions. As a final word of warning – do not drink sea water or urine.

Food

Dehydration kills long before starvation will, so the last item on the list to address is food. I am no nutritionist, but you need nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates and protein to stay fit and active. These are found in food. The kinds of food available to you during a survival situation can vary greatly in relation to where you are, the time of year and the weather. The easiest sources of food are the food items that you are carrying. Take stock of any food supplies and ration them. I do not wish to encourage theft or trespass, but in a real life situation, foods can be found in buildings and in fields growing as crops. As a caution though, if escaping from a hunter force, people will notice any slight disturbances to their own surroundings and they could alert the local authorities.

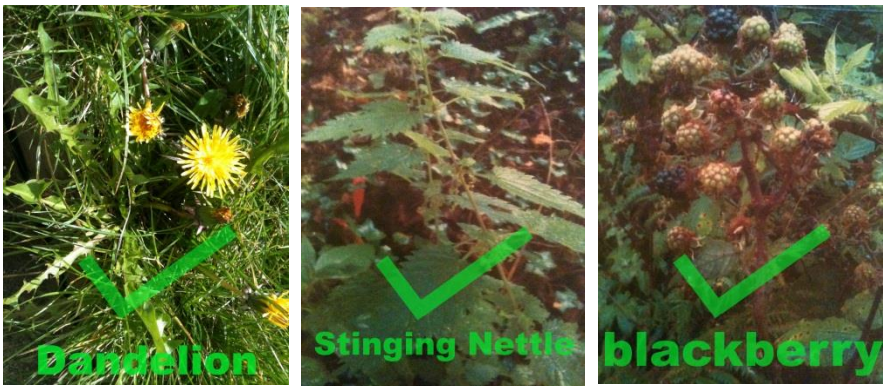
Another way to get food is by hunting and trapping animals. Rabbits are always a good start, as they can be snared. Pigeon is also on the menu, as are squirrels. Fish can be caught with improvised hooks and lines (some fishing methods are illegal in the UK, so check first). Weapons can be improvised for hunting such as bows and arrows (illegal to hunt with in the UK).

Foraging for wild foods is another option. Meadows and hedgerows can be a rich source of food, but what is available does depend on the time of year. Winter months can be restrictive on what is growing, but the months of spring, summer and autumn will give you a good harvest. Having an existing knowledge on what wild foods are edible would be an advantage. As well as edible plants, there are many plants, or parts of plants that are extremely poisonous in the UK, so learn which is which and don't take risks. As for mushrooms, unless you know what you are doing, then leave well alone. There are some deadly ones growing here in Britain, so the mushroom needs to be positively identified before eating. I would advise anybody serious about foraging for wild foods, to purchase

some good field guides on the subject, and then get out into the country side and start learning. To get you going, I have listed a few edible and poisonous plants.

Edible

1. Dandelion
2. Stinging nettle
3. Blackberry



Poisonous

1. Foxglove
2. Hemlock water dropwort
3. Ragwort

I hope this has given you a useful insight into the topic of survival. If you practice and develop the survival skills which I have talked about, then, when the situation gets tough, you can live off the land.