

Joint Venturing Crew and Scout Troop “Survive and Rescue” Exercise

Outing Summary

On the night of Thursday November 9, 2006 seven members of the Venturing Crew backpacked down Fraser Canyon in the Superstition Mountains. On Friday morning they set out as if going on a day hike up the adjacent Red Tanks and Randolph Canyons. They each carried two liters of water, no food (except a power bar or two), no matches, no lamp and no sleeping bag. Their day pack contained basics for a day hike and a survival kit of their choosing.

They then separated, as if lost on their day hike, and each went to a designated spot about 1 mile apart, where they had to establish a survival camp of their own. They stayed at this camp until Sunday morning. Their GPS coordinates were recorded for safety reasons. They were left alone throughout the 72-hour (3 days, 2 nights) exercise. Overnight temps dropped to about 50°F, and on Saturday night it splashed a little rain in the canyons.

On Saturday, the Scout Troop backpacked into the same area – a 4 - 5 miles hike down Coffee Flats trail and established a base camp at Dripping Springs.

On Saturday night, the Venturing Crew adults prepared a fantastic dinner of grilled chicken, corn-on-the-cob, bread rolls with home-mad brownies for dessert. Sunday breakfast was also provided by the Crew.

After breakfast the Scouts divided into three small groups and set out to locate two or three specific Crew members, simulating a search and rescue mission. Scouts hike up to 5 miles to find the missing Crew members.

Once the Scouts found each Crew member, the Crew member showed them around his survival camp, and made a 1-hour presentation on how he survived. Scouts and Crew then cleaned up the camp site (“leave-no-trace” policy) and returned to base camp where a good lunch was ready for them.

After lunch and site clean-up, they all made the hike back up Fraser Canyon to the cars.

Reflections upon the Success and Realism of the Exercise

The exercise had multiple purposes and objectives. It was meant to:

- Serve as a test of what the boys had already learned about survival
- Serve as a survival learning experience in and of itself
- Take the boys one step further toward completion of the Ranger award
- Promote family ties by bringing parents and crew members together
- Build community within the Crew family, by bringing Crew families together
- Give parents especially a rare glimpse into the Crew's world
- Increase community and connection between the Crew and Troop
- Enlarge the knowledge base and skill set of Troop Scouts
- Serve as a public relations and recruiting tool

I believe that the exercise accomplished all these objectives and more.

Spending 48 hours across three days and two nights alone in the wilderness, with very minimal equipment, is a profound, challenging and life changing experience.

Although the boys learned many "physical skills," the impact of the exercise of those skills reverberates across mental, emotional and even spiritual realms. Many training benefits of solo survival exercises are subtle, and often take some time, even years, to fully manifest themselves.

Moreover, the participation by the Troop and Crew Parents was a great success, including an on schedule arrival in base camp almost to the minute, an outstanding group dinner, an early morning breakfast and breaking of camp, the search and rescue, the hike back out, and great Leave No Trace expedition behavior.

However, even though I consider the event a great success, I believe that there is much that can be done to improve the exercise as the boys experienced it.

The boys told me that the overwhelming emotion that they experienced was "boredom."

I thought it would have been fear, or anxiety.

However, upon reflection, I understand why, and let me share with you what I told the boys.

First, rescue was a certainty. Indeed, the time for rescue was even certain, to within an hour or two. So, there was no real "risk," or at least, perception of risk. There was no uncertainty. In a real survival situation, every moment before rescue would have been filled with anxious waiting, and every plane overhead would have given rise to hope for rescue. The whole time would have been a roller coaster of emotions.

The purpose of the exercise was to mimic the most common survival situation, in which someone is placed in a survival situation because they get lost or because of injury. Statistically, the vast majority of such people are rescued within 72 hours. The boys were taught that a survivor has 2 objectives: to make himself as “available” or “accessible to rescuers as possible; and to regulate his thermodynamics (keep his body at 98.6 degrees). Shelter, fire, water, food – all are merely tools to regulate one’s thermodynamic conditions.

The boys did exactly what they were taught to do to regulate their thermodynamic conditions, and those skills, which are easily taught, and also easily used, at least in the perfect weather conditions last weekend. So, once they had taken the proper steps to regulate their thermodynamics, there was not much to do except hang out. How boring!

In addition, the perception of risk was reduced even further because many of the boys knew the approximate locations of many of the other boys, and they were, in most cases, fairly close to each other. Again, there was little uncertainty.

Next, the perception of risk was reduced by what I call the “Familiarity Breeds Contempt” factor. The boys are all relatively experienced outdoorsmen now. We have taken some tough trips together. They have been taught how to handle virtually every problem that might occur, at least in AZ desert wilderness, and about the nature and real level of risk posed by a wide variety of dangers in such wilderness. (The chance of getting attacked by a mountain lion, for example, in that particular kind of terrain, is very slim).

They are already confident in their abilities, and they were well trained in basic wilderness survival skills in the desert. Of course, knowing about how to handle certain situations is a far cry from being able to actually handle them, and, as we all know, a certain level of knowledge leads inexorably to a false sense of confidence. We have all been there. So, with contempt born of a superficial familiarity, combined with the certainty of rescue and knowledge of one’s teammates close at hand, is it any wonder the boys did not feel as much fear and anxiety as I thought they might. This is a far cry from a broken leg, hours, even days, from the nearest trailhead, with rain, or worse, sleet and snow coming down hard.

There is probably no easy way to overcome these three particular factors in order to make the exercise more “interesting.”

However, a fourth factor was that the boys were not “required” to do anything other than the take care of the basics of thermoregulation. I did not require them to do any signaling exercises, or to forage for food, or take any number of other actions. One reason for this, of course, is that our main text – 98.6 Degrees: How to Keep Your Ass Alive – stresses that in a survival situation one should preserve energy and do only what is absolutely necessary, conserving water and calories until rescued. For example, since rescue usually occurs within 72 hours, foraging for food in particular is huge waste of precious energy.

The boys even joked beforehand that they were required to operate, as the book said, at 60%.

I have discussed the above with the boys. They agreed, indeed even suggested, that in the future, survivor candidates should be given a variety of tasks to complete during the exercise, even though in some circumstances those actions would be considered to be a waste of time.

I also told the boys, however, that boredom is a very common emotion in survival situations, and that it, like the emotion of fear, is one of the emotions that must be dealt with such situations. However, while I had spent a lot of time successfully training the boys in how to deal with fear, I had not trained them in how to deal with boredom. I know that they did feel fear and anxiety, but they had been trained to deal with it. They had not been “trained” in how to deal with boredom. So, that was what stood out in their minds.

I also told the boys that even though they felt that the exercise was relatively low risk, they should consider the exercise to be sort of like a vaccination. A vaccine inserts dead virus into the body as a way of provoking a preliminary immune system response. The risk of harm is very low, but the preliminary immune response generated by the dead virus enables the body to respond robustly against a real virus in the future.

Similarly, this exercise was relatively low risk. However, they learned and then practiced a whole host of skills, especially those related to thermoregulation. In a real survival situation, when they need to be really focused on signaling, or on taking care of themselves or someone else who is injured, they won't have to also be figuring out how to perform a whole host of other activities, and their overall response to the situation will be much more robust. Moreover, having experienced and lived through certain emotions, like the terror of spending a night alone in the wilderness (even though those emotions may have been somewhat muted because the boys were in most cases relatively near a neighbor), they have been “inoculated” against those emotions in the future, since they “know” that they can handle a night alone. This too will enable a more robust response in a real survival situation.