



ARMY TIPS
AND
TRICKS

SURVIVAL TIPS AND TRICKS FROM AN OLD ARMY VET

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SURVIVAL TIPS AND TRICKS FROM AN OLD ARMY VET

I was a soldier for more than twenty years. Starting out with the Officer Training Corps when I was at university, moving on to a Territorial Army reserve infantry company after I got my degree, then finally spending 14 years as a Regular, my military journey was a long and varied one, and there were plenty moments of high tension and drama along the way. That's okay though; I survived it.

Soldiers think about survival a lot. From the day you begin training, you think of the task as surviving everything the brutal, sadistic, and inhuman

instructors throw at you. Later you find out that they were actually thoughtful, dedicated professionals who care deeply about their recruits, and the weeks of beatings and outrageous demands were designed to prepare you for times when surviving meant something much more literal.

Being in the Army creates a lot of challenges to your survival. The enemy wants to kill you; that one's obvious. But the environment can be dangerous too, and soldiers spend a lot of time out in it. That exposes them to the whole range of weather conditions, from blizzards to the desert sun, and they just have to get on with it. A civilian hiker can abandon their trip and go home; even in a SHTF situation, you can usually find shelter and wait it out. A soldier has to overcome the environment and carry on with their mission. Surviving isn't even your priority; it's just something you need to deal with while you get on with doing your job.

A soldier usually can't become a survival specialist. There are exceptions of course. Some units are focused on warfare in a single environment—the

Arctic, for example—and it makes sense for them to become experts on surviving there. But mostly you need to be prepared to deal with a whole range of situations. I once came back from a winter tour in Kosovo, where I'd been spending long hours out in freezing conditions, and moved to a new unit, which promptly deployed me to Iraq. Suddenly hypothermia and frostbite weren't the dangers; heatstroke and sunburn were. Sunburn's a serious issue, by the way. It's funny when one of your friends spends too long at the beach and is glowing red in the bar that night. It's not so funny when you have fifty pounds of kit grinding down on burned shoulders. And if you're burned badly enough to cause blisters, you can lose serious amounts of fluid, which is life threatening in the desert.

The Army tries to prepare you for each new environment, but the pace of military life means you usually just get a couple of lectures on the climate from a harassed medic then have to get on with it yourself. That means you focus on the basics, the things that will help you in any environment.

And of course it's not just the weather and landscape you have to worry about. As a soldier, it doesn't really matter where you are; somebody wants to kill you. Their identity and the level of threat they present varies. It might be a few angry leftist students who'd quite like to give a soldier a kicking but don't have the courage to actually do anything about it, but it might also be a terrorist cell planning an attack on your base, or local insurgents digging an IED into your patrol route. In the worst-case scenario, it might be a Russian tank division with attack helicopters, heavy armor, and enough artillery to make the sky fall in on you, backed up by tactical bombers and nuclear-armed battlefield missiles. Staying safe from your enemies might just be a matter of looking fit, alert, and confident as you walk down the street—but it also might mean having chemical protective gear and the expertise to use it properly.

A lot of hikers, hunters, and farmers probably know more about surviving in one specific environment than most soldiers do. An Alaskan Inuit, Peruvian Bora,

Omani Bedouin, or Kalahari Bushman definitely does—only a few special forces units can match the survival skills of these native peoples in their own homelands. But soldiers are generalists with a set of skills and attitudes that improve their chances of surviving *anywhere*. A soldier isn't as good as a Bora hunter at surviving in the Amazon rainforest, but he's better than a Bora at surviving in the desert, up a snow-covered Scottish mountain, or on the streets of a big city.

In the modern world, we get around a lot. Cheap international travel, urbanization, and the popularity of outdoor sports mean that most of us experience far more environments than our grandparents, and even our parents, ever did. My mother has traveled to nine countries that I know of, all of them in Europe. I've been to nearly 50 on four continents. I've worried about staying alive in crowded, tense Arab streets and on lonely Highland ridges with snow blowing around my ears. If you're reasonably active and mobile, you'll probably face a wide variety of situations yourself – and you need to be able to survive in any of them. That's one thing a lot of people

overlook. You get street-smart guys who have no idea how to start a fire in the woods, and you get experienced hunters who're completely at home in the woods but wouldn't know how to react to an armed—and probably drug-crazed—Afghan policeman demanding a bribe.

Most of us won't find ourselves in survival situations very often. Many will never face one at all. The odds go up if you spend a lot of time doing outdoor sports or traveling, but generally, they're still not high. But when your survival *is* threatened, things are likely to happen fast. It's vital that you have the skills and habits you need to cope without needing to think it through, because you're probably not going to have that time. The Army does its best to make sure soldiers can do that.

Because most military survival skills are designed to be useful everywhere, they're not actually taught on a specialist survival course. These courses do exist, but mostly they're for special forces and aircrew. Standard survival techniques are learned in basic training and through regular exercises—and just

through everyday military life. It all comes down to simple principles that can be adapted to just about any situation. Here are the basics that all other survival skills are built on:

Embrace Reality

You could face danger at any time. Some places are much safer than others, but nowhere is *completely* safe. Lots of people don't really grasp this, which is understandable. If you're stuck outdoors in a blizzard or shopping in town when the zombie apocalypse strikes, it's easy to recognize the risks. When you're relaxing at home, it's natural to be less prepared. Well, guess what? A lot more people are injured in accidents at home than in blizzards. When you're outdoors, you should always know where your first aid kit is stashed in your gear so you can get to it quickly in an emergency. Exactly the same applies at home. You probably won't have an emergency there, but if you do, you need to be ready.

Be Fit to Survive

If you're out of shape, survival is going to be more difficult in any situation. You'll struggle to move fast when necessary or to keep going long enough to escape a danger area. Poor fitness makes you more vulnerable to infections and to the effects of the cold. If you go into a survival situation at a disadvantage, your chances of coming out on the other end instantly go way down. You don't need to put yourself through a special forces fitness program, but make an effort to keep in condition. If you need something from a neighborhood store, walk there instead of taking the car. Walk the dog yourself instead of getting the kids to do it—and if they insist on doing it, go with them. Just staying active will get you most of the way to where you need to be.

Carry the Basics

There's a growing trend for everyday carry, or EDC, bags. These are loaded with stuff that will help you

get through any day-to-day emergencies. If you feel like carrying one, that's great—but even if you don't, there's a bare minimum you should have with you at all times. These are some sort of cutting edge, a way to start a fire, and a light source. The best way to make sure you always have them with you is to put them on your keyring, which means they need to be small, but that's easy enough to do. The cutting edge can be a small folding knife, if that's legal where you live; if it isn't, you can find a whole range of compact survival tools that include an edge but don't count as knives. Add a small butane lighter and a small LED flashlight, and that's the basics covered.

Keep it Simple

The more complicated your basic survival gear, the more likely it is to go wrong. Good quality, simple items might have fewer features, but you can rely on the ones they do have working when you need them. I have a survival tool on my keyring. It's a tiny piece of bent titanium that fits over a key, but it includes a

bottle opener, cutting edge, and several screwdrivers. It has no moving parts, so it will never go wrong. The same goes for your other stuff. A simple flashlight powered by one AA cell is all you need. You can always find AAs, but you might not be able to recharge a lithium battery. Standard butane cigarette lighters are cheap and light enough that you can carry a couple of them, and they're very reliable.

Be Alert

The more time you have to react to a problem, the better. To give yourself the maximum possible warning, maintain your situational awareness. Pay attention to what's happening around you. If you're in a strange city, don't walk around with your iPod plugged in; keep your eyes and ears open. If something seems to be happening near you, pay attention and make a mental note of anyone who starts to look familiar—they could be following you. Good situational awareness will let you avoid a lot of

problems altogether so that you can start reacting to others in time to really improve your odds of surviving.

Know Your Environment

Situational awareness will keep you updated on everything close enough to see and hear, but that gives you quite a small bubble. Expand it by getting to know the place you're in. Before you travel somewhere, do some research; read local news headlines and reviews by other visitors. Make a mental note of any areas that are best avoided, but also remember places that might be useful to you. If you'll be staying in a hotel, find out where the nearest police station, hospital, and bank are. Check their opening hours. Locate a taxi rank near the hotel too. If you need to leave in a hurry, that's the best way to do it.

The Rule of Seven Ps

Proper Planning & Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance. There's a politer version that only has six Ps, but I learned it in the Army, and soldiers are rude. Anyway, you can't plan for everything because life is unpredictable, but plan for what you *can* predict. What will you do if you wake up at three a.m. and your bedroom is filling with smoke? If your car gets stuck in deep snow, are you going to stay with it or try to find shelter? (Hint: Stay with it.) If you're traveling and the local news announces that *El Presidente* has just been overthrown by a military coup, what's the quickest and safest way to leave the country? Keep your plans as general as possible so they can be quickly adapted to different situations.

Have a Harbor

In the British Army, a patrol harbor is a safe location where troops, usually in platoon strength, can operate from. A harbor is a place to rest, take care of yourself

and your equipment, and plan what you're going to do next. In the military context, it's normally a triangular defensive position discreetly located in the woods or somewhere else with natural cover and guarded by constantly manned sentry positions—but what matters is that it's relatively safe and gives you a base to work from. If you're constantly on the move, you'll be more vulnerable to attackers and the climate, so whenever you can, find yourself an inconspicuous base. Depending on the situation, it could be your own home, a concealed shelter in the forest, or an anonymous hotel room, just as long as it's a place where you can rest.

Know Where You Are

This sounds obvious, but it's an easy one to forget. Wherever you are, make sure you can always put your finger on a map and say, "I am here." In an unfamiliar city, carry a street map, and check it regularly. If you can't find your location on it, **stop** and work out where you are. Only move on when you're

sure of that. This way you'll always be able to make your way back to your hotel, to the train station, or wherever else you decide you need to be. It's the same when you're hiking or hunting. You should never go into the wilds without at least a map and compass, even if you're familiar with the area. Always check the next stage of your route on the map, note the things you should expect to be seeing, and if you *don't* see them, stop and work out what's gone wrong.

Stay Flexible

Whatever you're doing, be ready to change it at a moment's notice. It's easy to assess a situation, decide what to do, then focus on it. It's also a mistake. You need to stay alert and regularly reassess what's going on. Otherwise, you'll be concentrating so hard on dealing with one problem that another one might take you by surprise. Also be ready to admit that something's not working. Don't keep plugging away in the hope that your tenth attempt will do better than the other nine. Stop for a moment, and consider if there's

another way to do it. Maybe there isn't; if not, then go right ahead and try again. But if there is, try that instead. The effort you put into your first solution doesn't matter just as long as you come up with something that works.

These basic tips are the foundation of all military survival skills. Put them into practice and you'll be halfway to getting through any crisis that comes up. Now let's look at some more specific ideas.

Most of us spend the majority of our time in an urban environment. These days it's the same for most soldiers on operations. In the OTC, we trained for a war against an enemy that apparently was mainly interested in capturing spruce plantations and sheep; all our exercises were done in damp forests and rough, hilly moorland. A few years later I deployed on my first operational tour to Bosnia, and suddenly the countryside was just something we had to drive through to get between towns. Almost all our operations were urban. Luckily, our basic skills got us through the first few weeks, but we soon started picking up a lot of useful extra experience.

Plan Your Routes

It's always a good idea to know a few alternative routes between your home and the places you visit. That helps out in day-to-day life—roadwork can block your usual route, and knowing a backup will help you get to work on time. It's an even better idea to vary your route randomly. We used to do that when the IRA terror threat was at its height, but it's a sensible tactic for anyone. The IRA probably aren't planning to ambush you, but you could be targeted by others—robbers or, in some parts of the world, even business rivals. Varying routes means anyone planning to ambush you has a much harder job. You should also plan routes in advance to avoid driving into a dead end where you could be blocked and trapped.

Control Exits

When soldiers move into an urban area, like a market square, the first thing they do is drop off a detachment to control the exit. That way, if it all goes pear shaped,

their way out will be open. You can't do that, but there are steps you can take to help keep escape routes open and reduce the threat of entrances. When you're in a bar or restaurant, always pick a spot where you can see the door. That way you'll know who's coming in and out. If you're sitting near the door, make sure you don't have your back to it. If you think a situation is developing, make sure it isn't between you and the only available exit. Don't get focused on the front door either. If you're spending any length of time in a place, make sure you know where *all* the exits are.

Think 3D

Humans evolved on the African veldt, and we tend to think in two dimensions. We're used to being at ground level and watching for threats at ground level. One of the reasons urban combat creates such horrific casualty rates is that this model breaks down—badly. You might be at ground level, but threats could be watching you from an upstairs window or moving beneath your feet in tunnels and

even sewers. Be wary when walking under bridges; muggers have been known to drop things on victims below then descend to rob them. But also be ready to use bridges, underpasses, and even roofs as a way to move around potential trouble spots. If you're in a city and riots break out, often your best bet is to get to an underground transit system as fast as possible and jump on a train heading for the suburbs.

Don't Stand Out

In the world of social media and selfies, it sometimes seems like life is about attracting as much attention as possible. If your aim is survival, you might want to take a different approach. If trouble breaks out—whether the SHTF or there's a more localized riot—the last thing you want is to attract attention. Even at the best of times there's always a risk of being targeted by robbers, and standing out makes that risk go way up. Don't display valuables, because that makes you a target. If you don't *need* to carry valuables, don't. If you do need to carry them, do it

discreetly. Soldiers that carry gear that makes them a high-priority target do their best to hide it. Machineguns are carried in the same position as rifles, radios get tucked away inside packs, and the antenna is concealed as well as possible. No soldier wants to draw attention to himself, because it's a quick way to end up dead. The risk to you might be lower, but why take it at all?

Look Local

I did a couple of operational tours where I was working in civilian clothes, meeting locals to get information from them. There was another team in the city doing the same thing. They used to roar around in a convoy of three huge SUVs with blacked-out windows; when they dismounted, they were always wearing shades and earpieces with curly wires. All the locals knew who they were; nobody wanted to take the risk of talking to them. Meanwhile, we had a collection of cars that looked a lot more beat up than they really were, and we walked around in cheap

jeans and leather jackets bought from the local market. We didn't really look like locals, but we blended in well enough to stand up to a casual glance. If you're traveling, try not to look too foreign. Check out what the locals are wearing, and get as close as you can. If you're the wrong ethnicity, go for something neutral, like chinos and a shirt, instead of looking like either a tourist or the rich foreign businessman. Backpacking? If you're visiting countries where people have a problem with the USA, get a Canadian flag patch—that can ease a lot of tensions.

Stay Mobile

In a major emergency, public transit will be an early casualty, but it's a valuable resource in a lot of more routine crises. If you've been robbed, had a minor accident, or your plans have been upset in some way, public transport can be your best way of getting home or out of a problem area—as long as you have money for your fare of course. Any military operation has an

extraction plan—how to get everyone out if things go wrong. In a city, public transit is going to be your action plan. If your city has a prepay card system, like San Francisco's Clipper card, get a second one and load it with enough cash to cross the whole city at least twice. Then carry that card somewhere secure but not in your wallet. That way, if you lose your wallet, you can still get home.

Contain Your Curiosity

Sometimes the best extraction plan is to not get into a situation you need extracted from. Civil disorder is becoming part of urban life, and you never know when or where it's going to break out. If you see signs of something happening—lots of cop cars with their sirens going or groups of young men converging in one direction—don't head that way to see what's going on. You could get caught up in a riot and not be able to get yourself out of it and could fall victim to either the rioters or friendly fire from cops.

Prepare for Grid Failures

Your home and a military base have at least one thing in common: They're hooked up to a bunch of grids that make them inhabitable. Power, water, communications, sewerage—take those connections away and things can get pretty grim in a hurry. There are two solutions. One is to be mobile and self-contained. The other is to have a backup. If you're into renewable energy, solar panels or a mini turbine can help you with power, but a generator is a more reliable option. Unless you invest in expensive batteries, a solar array won't keep your lights on at night. Wells aren't usually an option in urban areas, but rainwater, after filtering, should be okay—so look at how you could collect it. Old-fashioned wired telephones keep working when the power's out, making them popular in areas that get a lot of earthquakes.

Good Neighbors Make Good Fences

On one of my Bosnia tours, I was part of a small team embedded in the local population. We had a house on the outskirts of a Serb town, and our neighbors were Bosnian Serb civilians. We could have ignored them, but we didn't. Instead, we helped them out with surplus rations, even fuel sometimes. We pitched in to help when they repaired the road. So when they were out drinking with all their Serb friends, if they heard rumors of anything that affected us, they'd have a quiet word next time we saw them. Your neighbors have their own social networks, and sometimes they'll hear things that you don't. Talking to them keeps you better informed about what's going on—and helping them when you can make them more likely to help you if you need it.

Be Ready to Leave

A good location isn't something you want to leave if you don't have to, but sometimes you *do* have to. Grimly hanging on to ground can end up with you being cut off and over-run. If you can't defend your location, it's usually better to get out of there with what you can carry rather than staying and losing everything. That's where your bug-out bag comes in. Soldiers keep their field gear fully packed and only take out what they need right now. Your bug-out bag is your field gear, so make sure it's ready to just pick up and go. You might not be planning on bugging out, but other people have plans too, and they can sometimes force you to change yours.

Urban survival is a major priority in the world today, but don't get *too* focused on it. If the SHTF, you're going to have to leave the city at some point. Resources will quickly run out. The power will go off, the water will get contaminated then stop flowing, and all the infrastructure that makes the city livable will break down in a matter of days. Grocery stores will be looted; in the first hours of a social breakdown, they'll

be plundered for alcohol and cigarettes; then as the reality sinks in, the food supplies will be stripped bare. Bulk storage facilities might last a little longer just because they're harder to break into, but in a week, they'll be empty too. Then, of course, with sewerage systems failing and bodies starting to appear, disease will become a major hazard. It's probably best to get moving as soon as the first wave of looting subsides, with the early hours of the morning likely your best time to make a quiet exit.

If you already have a refuge prepared, you'll naturally want to head for it; otherwise, your aim is to get away from urban areas and all the hazards that come with them and find a location where you can start to prepare for whatever comes next. That means getting somewhere rural then either finding or building a shelter. And rural areas bring a whole new set of survival challenges.

Luckily for soldiers, they're pretty good at surviving in the countryside. That's where most training still takes place, from the first days of Basic through to annual

military skills qualification. Soldiers spend a lot of time under wet trees complaining, but they rarely die there.

Prioritize Shelter

In an urban survival scenario, you're looking at short periods of activity outdoors, with most of your time spent inside a building. Surviving in the countryside is the exact opposite. You'll usually be moving, either heading towards your final destination or foraging for water, food, and fuel. That means a lot of exposure to the elements, and in cold, wet weather, that's a major hazard. Wind and rain will slowly strip away your body heat, and hypothermia is the inevitable end result. You need a shelter where you can recover and warm up. That can be an abandoned farmhouse, or it can be a groundsheet strung between two trees and pegged down into a pup tent; it doesn't matter as long as it gives you protection from the weather. You should always have some form of shelter in the gear you're carrying; military ponchos or basha sheets are

ideal. Carry some 550 cord of bungees and a handful of tent pegs.

Focus on Water

After shelter, water is the highest survival priority. Just a couple of days without water will start to take a serious toll on your strength and health, and any longer will put your survival in real doubt. If you plan to stay in one location for any length of time, make sure there's a good water source within easy reach; when you're on the move, take every chance to replenish your water stocks. Don't take risks by drinking untreated water, because that's a fast way to pick up a crippling illness; always boil, filter, or chemically sterilize it. If you find yourself with surplus safe water, drink as much as you can then fill all your containers before moving on.

Take Care of Your Feet

If you're moving on foot, you'll be inflicting a lot of abuse on the unfortunate objects at the end of your legs. Carrying a heavy pack over rough ground is no joke for feet, so they need some care and attention to keep them in good shape. If you feel a hot spot or blister developing, don't push on in the hope it will go away—it won't. Stop, tape it up, and sort out any issues with your socks and boots. Only a life-threatening danger justifies ignoring foot problems and pressing on. Blisters are painful, and if they get infected, you could be completely immobilized. Do your best to keep boots as dry as possible. Change socks regularly, and use foot powder if you have it. Dirty socks can be washed in a stream and tied to the outside of your pack to dry as you move.

Stay Invisible

Obviously ignore this one if you're the sole survivor from an airline disaster and you're trying to be noticed

by search planes, but usually in a long-term survival situation, it's best to be as inconspicuous as possible. In a SHTF scenario, there will probably be groups of looters and desperate people out to grab whatever useful gear they can find, and you'll want to stay hidden from them. Use camouflage to blend in. Foliage attached to your pack will help break up your outline, but make sure it's constantly changed to match the surrounding vegetation. Avoid walking on skylines, and stay clear of obvious linear features. Instead of walking along a wood line, stay ten yards inside the woods, and walk parallel to it. Handrail parallel to roads instead of walking on them. Camouflage your shelter when you stop for the night.

Small Fires, Big Savings

A big fire is conspicuous and will give away your position (see above), but it's also inefficient. A roaring blaze is great to sit around with your buddies, but in a survival situation, it's just a waste of fuel. You can cook and stay warm just as efficiently with a small fire,

and you won't have to spend all your time collecting firewood. Dig a pit or build a fireplace from rocks. (Don't collect the rocks from a river—wet ones can explode.)

Make a reflector from logs to direct heat towards your shelter and make the fire less conspicuous.



Be Ready to Downsize

Soldiers have to carry all their gear with them, which means a big, heavy pack. But what happens when you have to react to contact with the enemy? You need to move fast, and you can't do that with a full marching load. Pack the essentials—shelter kit, water, and rations—into a small day sack, and carry it under the top flap of your main pack. That way, if you have to ditch your load, you can just undo the flap, grab the day sack, and leg it with the basics. If you can come back for your pack later, great; if not, you still have enough to keep you alive. You're basically

creating a two-stage bug-out bag. Keep all gear stowed as much as possible. Everything should be packed and ready to go except what you're actually using. When you're sleeping, you only need your shelter and sleeping system; as soon as you're done with something, clean it and stow it. That way, if you have to move in a hurry, you lose the minimum of gear.

Use the Twilight

Dawn and dusk are very useful times. Many animals are on the move, making an ideal opportunity for trapping or hunting. There's enough light to see, but deep shadows make it easy to move undetected—especially if you're on the low ground. If you're moving, take advantage of these times to cross areas where you'd be conspicuous in daylight. You can move more quietly and more safely in twilight than in darkness. On the other hand, if you're resting, twilight makes it easier for enemies to approach you undetected. Soldiers in the field stand to before dawn,

so when the sun rises, everyone's alert and in their fighting positions. Then, before dusk, they do it again and stay on alert until it's fully dark. You should always be awake and alert at twilight because it's the easiest time for threats—human or animal—to close in.

Secure Your Location

It doesn't matter whether you're in a farmhouse stuffed with stockpiled gear or under a tarp shelter in the woods; your base is important, and you don't want it to be found. In a long-term survival situation, you're going to have to leave it to go foraging, and that creates a risk of someone seeing you and following you home. Then they can either attack you or wait until you leave again then plunder your stuff. When soldiers return to their harbor after a patrol, they set a snap ambush to make sure nobody's on their trail. When you're still a couple of hundred yards from your refuge, break off the track then double back parallel to it, keeping it in sight. Then go to the ground and wait

for a while—up to half an hour. If anyone's following you, they'll walk right past your hiding place.

Eat the Landscape

Well, not all of it. However, most environments have a lot of vegetation, and plenty of it is edible. In a long-term survival scenario, you need to look at collecting most of your food from plants. Fishing, trapping, and hunting can be useful if you're in a static location but aren't really options if you're on the move. When you need to cover distance, you can't take the time to set up traps and fishing lines then check them periodically. Instead, learn how to identify edible plants by their taste; there are some simple rules that will filter out most hazards. Put a small piece in your mouth, and reject anything that tastes like almonds or causes a burning sensation. If it seems okay, swallow it and wait a few hours. If you don't suffer any ill effects, eat a handful and wait again. If you're still fine, the plant is safe to eat. But this *doesn't* work with

fungi—avoid those unless you can positively identify it as a safe species.

Leave No Signs

Unless you're trying to attract the attention of rescuers, leave as few marks on the landscape as possible. If you're hunting the local wildlife, your traces and trash will frighten them away. (Some wildlife is *attracted* to trash, but those are usually predators, and you can do without those.) If there are hostile humans around, they can track you by the evidence you leave behind and also tell a lot about what you're carrying and the condition you're in. Aim to leave as few traces of your passing as you can. Cut turf before lighting a fire, and replace it over the remains. Don't cut brush where you can avoid it. Harvest shelter materials and firewood from the ground, not from trees. Carry any trash with you. I used to carry a few empty sandbags in my gear because they have all sorts of uses, such as pulling them over muddy boots before getting in your

sleeping bag for example. I kept one strapped to the outside of my pack and stowed all my trash in it.

Lots of survival books go into massive detail about how to build traps or weave your own rope out of moss, but the biggest challenge to survival is the weather. When soldiers get survival briefings before deploying somewhere, you can guarantee that at least 90% of it will be about the climate. Most of the rest will be about any particularly horrible local diseases, with a mention of dangerous snakes and insects at the end, but the climate is always the first priority. There's a good reason for that. Lack of food will kill you in a month, lack of water in a week—but hypothermia can see you off in ten minutes. We've already looked at the importance of shelter, but here are a few more tricks soldiers use to survive the weather.

Get Ahead; Get a Hat

You'll almost never see a soldier on duty outdoors without a hat of some kind. There's an excellent reason for that—it's so they can salute. Hats have other uses though. A lot of the heat your body generates ends up being sent to your head to keep your brain warm. In cold weather, if your head is exposed, a lot of that heat will escape. Your body will pump more that way, and it will escape too. Eventually, your core temperature will fall, and you'll get hypothermia. In hot weather, it's just the opposite. Sunlight will heat your head up and raise the temperature of your brain. Brains work well in a pretty narrow temperature band; too hot or too cold and they start to fail. Then you die. Avoid death by keeping your head covered. Any hat will help, but wool or fur is good in cold weather, and a broad-brimmed hat works best against the sun.

Use Layers

Your layer system should start off with an outer shell, like a field jacket. This is your main protection against thorns and wind and can also be a camouflage layer. Multiple thin layers under it will let you adjust to the temperature—and don't be shy about adding or removing them. When you're moving with a heavy pack, you'll probably just need your shell and a T-shirt, but as soon as you stop, add warmer layers. Remove them again before you move off once more; get lazy about that, and when you stop again, you'll be sweaty and overheated. You won't have any dry layers to add either, so you'll cool down and get hypothermia.

Wind Kills

The air temperature might be mild, but wind chill can turn it lethally cold. Your body constantly radiates heat to the air around it. If you're in a sleeping bag, the result is a nice warm bubble of air to sleep in, but out

in the wind, it's different. The air surrounding you never gets a chance to warm up, because it's constantly being replaced by the wind. The result is a constant drain of heat. If you don't have a good windproof outer layer and there's a cold wind blowing, you need to consider stopping and finding shelter. If you stop shivering but still feel cold or taking your clothes off suddenly seems like a good idea, you *must* stop—you're in the early stages of hypothermia, and if you don't get out of the wind right now, you'll enter a tightening spiral that ends in coma and death.

But Wind Can Also Be a Lifesaver

In very hot weather, the wind can help keep your body temperature down. Your most effective way of losing heat is by sweating; as sweat evaporates, it draws heat from your body. In still air, that eventually stops working though. The atmosphere around you gets saturated with moisture, and no more sweat can evaporate. If you can get an airflow going through

your shelter, that will constantly bring in dry air, so your body will be able to keep cooling itself down.

Drink to Regulate

The main danger from weather is the effect it can have on your body core temperature. If that falls more than a few degrees, you'll get hypothermia and die. If it *rises* more than a few degrees, you'll get heatstroke and die. Your survival depends on keeping your core temperature in a narrow band centered on 98.6°F. What you drink can help regulate that. In cold weather, hot drinks will deliver heat directly to your body core, and they'll also draw blood into the core and away from the skin, where it's being chilled by the weather. In hot weather, drinking cold water will bring your core temperature down. If you have spare water and a rag, you can chill water even in the desert. Soak the rag, and wrap it round your water bottle. Then stand it somewhere in the wind but out of the sun. Evaporation will bring the temperature down to well below the air temperature.

Protect Skin

Extremes of weather can do a lot of damage to your skin—possibly bad enough to be crippling or fatal. If the temperature's below zero, never touch metal or smooth rocks like granite with your bare hands; the skin can freeze to the surface instantly, and freeing yourself will tear it off. Long-term exposure to deep cold will cause frostbite, and that can easily cost you ears, toes, and fingers. Strong sunlight isn't any better. Sunburn can be agonizing, and a bad case can lead to blisters, loss of skin, and serious infections. Keep skin covered in extreme weather. In the desert, loose, long sleeves will protect you and keep you cool; in cold conditions, wear a hat, gloves, and, if necessary, a face mask.

Move Wisely

If you have a choice, don't move when weather conditions are at their worst. In the desert, rest up during the day, and move out as the sun sets. In cold

conditions, move in daylight and when the wind drops. That way you can stay in shelter and out of the most dangerous conditions then cover distance when the weather's at its safest. Of course, you won't always have a choice. In the Army, some things need done in almost any weather. It has to be really bad before patrols stop going out, and it's almost never bad enough to make a commander pull in their sentries and local security teams. In a survival situation, you might find yourself having to move in bad weather too. A natural disaster won't wait for the temperature to rise for example. If you end up in that situation, pick sheltered routes where you can. Cross open spaces as fast as possible, and be prepared to take a break at the other side to sort yourself out. And if you feel signs of hypothermia or heatstroke, stop and shelter.

Some More about Shelter

You can find some shelter almost anywhere. In the desert, dry stream beds tend to have steep sides; these cast a shadow for large parts of the day. Just

being out of direct sunlight will make a big difference. In open desert, you can scrape a trench in the sand, lie in it, and cover yourself with a thin layer of sand. Pouring water or even urine on top will help cool you by evaporation. Obviously, don't bury your head—protect it with a hat. In deep snow, a snow hole is a very effective and surprisingly warm shelter; snow makes excellent insulation. Just tunnel into a wind-packed drift, smooth the exterior, and poke an air hole in the top.

You Can Dehydrate Anywhere

When it's below zero and you're struggling through snowdrifts, it's easy to let the risk of dehydration slip from your mind. It's also a big mistake. Dehydration is almost as much of a problem in cold climates as in hot ones; wearing heavy clothing tends to make you sweat more. Control fluid loss by using the layer system and breathing through your nose. Breathing through your mouth means losing a lot more moisture, and at a dozen breaths a minute, it soon adds up.

Balance Food and Thirst

Eating is important to keep your energy levels up, but it isn't always a good idea to eat everything you can find. If you're short on water and at risk of dehydration, it might be worth going slightly hungry until you can sort out the hydration issue. We all know that eating salty food makes us thirsty, but your body actually needs to use water to process food—and that water is then lost as urine. This is why desert survival experts advise you not to drink soda; a twelve-ounce can of Coke takes a full pint of water to metabolize, so you'll actually end up more dehydrated than you were to start with. If you're in the desert and find a mysteriously abandoned case of Dr. Pepper, make a solar still, pour the soda in there, and collect the water that evaporates. Eating dry food like chips or jerky is also a bad idea; your body will use a lot of water processing them. If water's short, eat the minimum you can get away with unless it's juicy plants.

Finally, let's talk about weapons. They're a big part of military life. Obviously, as a soldier, you don't need to decide what sort of guns you're going to carry; that

decision is made for you. As a civilian gun owner, it's different because what you carry is pretty much up to you. Some military knowledge can be useful for civilians in a survival situation though.

Standardization is Smart

When I was in the Army, I could go to any NATO unit, from any country, and get resupplied with ammunition. Rounds for an M4, G36, or FALAS would work fine in my L85A2. Rounds for an M9, P8, MP5, or Glock would work fine in my Browning Hi-Power. I could even beg, borrow, or steal rifle magazines. But if I'd been carrying weapons chambered for .30-30 and 10mm, I'd have been pretty screwed. In a long-term survival situation, you are sooner or later going to run out of ammunition. Then you'll need to survive on what you can pick up. That means your shotgun needs to be 12-gauge Magnum, your rifle needs to be 7.62mm NATO or 5.56mm NATO, and your handgun needs to be 9x19mm. In the USA, you can maybe get away with a .45 ACP, but there's a lot more 9mm

ammo out there. Pick a non-standard caliber, and no matter how good it is, sooner or later your gun will just be a badly balanced club. In the USA, it makes no sense to get a .223 rifle that isn't based on the AR15 platform. That's not because it's anything special; it's because the country is awash with spare parts for it.

Concealed Carry Wins

Unless society has already completely broken down, concealed carry beats open carry every day of the week. If you're carrying openly, you just mark yourself down as a potential target. Having a handgun tucked away gives you a surprise you can spring at the right time. When I operated in civilian clothes, even in places where the locals routinely carried openly, I kept my pistol neatly hidden away under my shirt.

Dirty Guns Don't Work

Some guns are more reliable than others. No gun is completely reliable, and they're all vulnerable to dirt. Whether it's carbon fouling, mud, or sand, dirt in the working parts sends the risk of a stoppage way up. In the field, Army NCOs inspect their men once a day for weapons, gear, and personal hygiene. If time is short, that gets cut down to weapons because they're the one thing that *must* be kept clean. Clean your weapons every day, even if you haven't used them. If you *do* use them, clean them as soon as possible afterwards. If you have to move quickly for a while, take thirty seconds at your first rest stop to get plenty of oil on the working parts. Never, *ever* neglect weapon maintenance.

Magazines Are a Weapon Part

A magazine isn't just a box that holds ammunition; it's part of the weapon, and if it's dirty and badly cared for, the weapon will malfunction. Magazines should be

stripped down and cleaned at least weekly. Always keep one empty, and rotate it once a week to give the springs a rest. I've lost count of how often a soldier showed me a sparkling clean weapon but a dig in his magazines found sand and grit building up under the follower.

Keep it Simple

A great invention is 1913 rails, but to some, the temptation they present is irresistible. It's not rare to see weapons so covered in bolt-ons that you can barely see the rifle itself. That's all great, but you'll screw up the balance and add lots of potential for stuff going wrong. In the Army, if your weapon has a rail system, you can add an optic, a forward grip with bipod, and a laser module. That's plenty. Do not add anything else.

Keep Weapons Secure

In a survival situation, your weapon should never be more than an arm's length away. Ideally, it should be secured to your body—that means a holster or sling. If it isn't, it should always be in your hands or close enough that you can just reach out and pick it up. If it isn't, it's no use to you.

Sights are for aiming. You can use an optic for long-range observation, but in general, you're better looking over the sights, not through them, until you're actually lining up a shot. It's easy to get sucked into the sight picture, but even with iron sights, that plays hell with your peripheral vision. If the worst happens and you get involved in a firefight, get your head up out of the sights every few seconds and look around. Another fun sort of tunnel vision is when the sight line clears an obstacle in front of you but the muzzle doesn't. This is embarrassing and potentially dangerous; firing high velocity rounds into a concrete windowsill two feet from your face may sting.

Cover from View is Not Cover from Fire

People hide behind the craziest things. Car doors, bushes, wooden fences—anything that gives cover from view. That's great until someone decides to shoot at where they think you might be. If you're hiding behind a car, get behind the engine block or wheels. They'll stop a bullet; the bodywork won't. If you're behind a fence or foliage, act as if you're in the open and stay down—bullets will come right through. Single layer brickwork or double layer cinderblock isn't a guarantee of safety either. Look for earth banks or solid concrete.

Bayonets are Not Decorative

Bayonets have gone in and out of fashion in the last few decades. Every army buys one to go with its service rifle, but they don't always get issued. A lot of U.S. troops in Vietnam weren't given one, because it's an obsolete weapon. Except it's not. If you have an

AR15-style rifle—or any military rifle with a bayonet lug—get a bayonet that fits it. At the very least, you have a serviceable field knife. What you also have is a very effective psychological weapon. The British Army has never stopped issuing bayonets, and it used them in action many times since 1945. Usually the enemy run away before the point gets close to them. If you're persuading someone to leave your food cache alone, six inches of pointy steel on the end of your rifle gives you an extra psychological edge.

Shoot to kill

Never shoot another living thing unless you absolutely have to. Don't shoot more game than you need for food, and don't shoot a human unless it's to save a life. But if you *do* have to shoot, shoot to kill. For hunting, the reason is obvious; you want a clean kill that's easy to find instead of having to track a wounded, irate hog through thick bush. For human threats, if you're sure it's time to shoot, then it's too

late to worry about movie rubbish like hitting them in the leg or shooting the gun out of their hand. Put your sights on their center of mass, and keep pulling the trigger until they stop moving. The decision to shoot should never be taken lightly, but once it is, there are no half measures.

Military survival skills are a lot different than what many people expect. Soldiers don't spend days learning how to make deadfall traps or snare rabbits with a length of dental floss. They don't practice martial arts very much or knife throwing at all. Instead, they spend a lot of time learning how to stay safe from the weather, to move through the landscape without being seen, and to use whatever equipment they have available. Instead of focusing on details, they build up a set of attitudes and general skills that can be quickly adapted to any environment, and then they season it all with a healthy dose of paranoia. These 50 tips have saved a lot of lives on a lot of battlefields; if you take on the principles behind them, they could save yours too.

