

Feature

Simon Mander

BUSHMAN RAY MEARS has been walking on the wild side for 35 years, teaching the kind of hardcore survival skills used by the UK's frontline fighters stranded behind enemy lines.

But while finding clean water, food and shelter are vital skills, the right mindset is key to determining who will and who won't get through the worst mother nature can throw at them.

"You can never predict who is going to survive and who won't," says the enigmatic woodsman who founded the Woodlore School of Bushcraft in 1983 and now teaches the subject worldwide.

"You can have somebody who appears timid and unlikely to do so but who has some sort of gumption that will get them back."

"Everyone thinks survival training is about how to make fire, build a shelter, and get things to eat, it is about those things, but a good instructor will inculcate in students coping responses and mechanisms that are not so obvious but are there when the time comes."

"It's more than practical skills, there's a psychological side to it and one of the things we must never do is 'beast' people or break them down because you encourage them to be weak."

"There are people who have lived through horrendous situations with no training but in nearly every case you'll find that they focused on something that brought them back."

He says studying the stories of real-life survivors is key to understanding the subject.

One of them concerns an American Air Force crew blown off course on a bombing mission during a tropical storm who crashed in a remote part of Australia.

Only one of the five crew who emerged from the wreckage survived the 196 days they spent wandering in the outback after losing their way.

"He was the only one who survived despite having no training because he'd never had a girlfriend and never owned a car and was determined he wouldn't die until he had done both," said Mears.

"It can be something very odd that becomes the focus and a bollard on land when someone is adrift that they throw a mental lifeline around, hang on to, and use to pull them to safety."

"I've interviewed men who survived the most horrific torture during the Second World War at the hands of the Japanese and it was family, the determination that whatever came they would make it back to see their daughter or wife again."

How fire in the belly can help aircrew survive when they're behind enemy lines

Cranwell experts can call on the best when they need tips



FIRESTARTER: Mears with moss for kindling

Another example is veteran Jim Bradley who escaped from the infamous Death Railway in Burma, which claimed the lives of 61,000 Allied PoWs used as slave labour to build it.

Bradley was captured in Singapore in 1942 and spent 14 months being mistreated in the notorious Changi Jail. He took part in forced marches before escaping in 1943.

He was recaptured, but surprisingly not executed, surviving to be liberated in 1945.

And, bizarrely, when the chips are down, humour can be your best ally.

"Some years ago, I interviewed one of two brothers who in the late 1940s did a lot of research for

the US Air Force on survival," said Mears.

"I asked one of them if he was stuck on a desert island what would he want with him. He replied most people would say a machete but he reckoned he'd prefer a brunette!"

"Humour is a very important thing so it might be better to have Ricky Gervais along. If you can laugh in the face of adversity you can achieve anything."

"The British are good at this, we have a self-deprecating or 'black' sense of humour which is tremendously important in a crisis, it punches a hole in the canister of stress that is building and that's really important."

Meers' expertise is backed up by personal experience of a disaster which occurred when filming one of his first TV series.

In 2005, he and his production crew were in a helicopter flying over a ridge in Wyoming trying to

film a man riding a horse when the aircraft suddenly lost height and hit the ground.

Mears escaped with bruising but the cameraman broke both his legs and the TV presenter used his penknife to cut his safety harness before lifting the 6ft 2in man to safety and administering first aid.

"I remember the crash in vivid technicolour sadly, if I close my eyes I can still remember the sound and chaos of the whole thing," he said.

"The British are good at this, we have a self-deprecating or 'black' sense of humour which is tremendously important in a crisis, it punches a hole in the canister of stress that is building and that's really important."

"We are all capable of far more than we realise and what is heartening is in more cases than not, when push comes to shove, people find the ability to reach inside themselves – particularly when there's the need to assist and help others."

Meers is the go-to guy for the Defence SERE Training Organisation's Aircrew SERE Training Centre. Instructors focus on teaching the survival element of Survival, Evasion, Resistance

and Extraction, equipping the UK's frontline aviators with the knowledge and mind set to cope in extreme conditions.

Ray

has

been

patron

of

DSTO

Aircrew

SERE

Training

Centre

at

RAF

College

Cranwell

since

March

2015.

Training

Officer

Mark

Fairhead

said:

"We both teach

the

fundamentals

of

survival

in

a

worst

case

scenario."

"The

training

not

only

teaches

students

to

get

the

best

from

their

equipment;

it

also

stretches

them

mentally,

leading

to

them

developing

greater

resilience.

"In

the

event

of

a

crash

landing,

ditching

or

ejection

their

physical

and

mental

resilience

may

be

stretched

to

the

limits.

"Most

aircraft

are

well

provisioned

with

survival

equipment,

life

rafts,

location

beacons,

flares

and

so

on...

but

these

cannot

always

be

relied

upon

during

an

incident,

where

they

may

be

lost,

trapped

in

the

wreckage,

sunk

or

burnt.

"We

and

Ray

impress

upon

all

of

our

students

the

discipline

of

preparing

for

the

worst

and

that

their

'will

to

survive'

may

be

their

strongest

asset.

"When

people

ask

me

who

I'd

like

to

have

in