

Feature

Simon Mander

BUSHMAN RAY MEARS has been walking on the wild side for 35 years, teaching the kind of hard-core 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."

Mears' 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.

"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."

Mears 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



EXPERTS' EXPERT: Mears is the patron of RAF SERE



WOODSMAN: TV personality and survivalist Ray Mears founded his bushcraft school in 1983

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

Ray has been patron of the 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



MASTERCLASS: Mears teaches students some of the skills he has learned over the years

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.

"The reason Ray is our patron is that he's excellent at what he

does, he's credible, knowledgeable and highly skilled. He has his own personal experience, he has survived a helicopter crash himself and kept other people alive.

"When people ask me who I'd like to have in a survival situation, it'd be Ray. We're proud to have him as our patron."