

SURVIVAL

After the Forced Landing

How many times have you flown over some remote and not particularly hospitable part of the country, whether it's desert, snow or jungle, and been grateful that the aeroplane kept flying? But what if it doesn't? Due to your regular practice, you and your aeroplane will of course survive the forced landing. Now, on the ground in the middle of nowhere, what priorities will help to ensure that it's not your last-ever flight?

The ERSA Emergency section has some good tips on survival, many of which look familiar to those of us who were forced to endure 3 weeks of Aircrew Combat Survival Course at RAAF Townsville. The key priorities of survival are, in order:

- Protection;
- Location;
- Water;
- Food.

Protection from the elements is Number 1, more important than getting yourself fed and watered or found. Protection encompasses:

- First aid;
- Clothing;
- Shelter;
- Fire.

There's a rule of thumb involving 3's that underlines the reason for this order of priorities. In a critical first aid situation you could be dead in 3 minutes without help. In a hostile environment you could be dead in 3 hours without clothing and shelter. Without water you've got 3 days, and without food 30 days.

First aid

Good preparation will obviously improve your chances dramatically, so if you're planning a long flight, a basic first aid kit would be a good part of your plan. ERSA EMERG lists some recommended contents. And if you're in need of some basic skills, there are plenty of course providers such as St John.

Clothing and shelter

When it comes to needing protection from the elements, it's one of two things: you're either too hot or too cold. In WA we can more or less limit ourselves to talking about the desert and the bush, since we don't have much snow or jungle. In summer in the desert, you'd probably use the downed aeroplane as shelter, and in the bush you're likely to have more options for shade. When it comes to protection from cold, clothing will be your first line of defence. To this end, over terrain where a forced landing would mean a cold night, dress for the ground and not the cabin, or at least take warm clothing with you. The motorcycle analogy, as put so aptly by editor MJ, is "Dress for the slide not the ride."

This point was a factor in the crash of JAL123 in 1985. It was on a remote mountainside late in the day, and the rescue operation was not mounted until the morning, by which time some of the

survivors of the impact had died, either from injuries that may have been survivable if the rescue had been more prompt, or from exposure. End result – 4 survivors and 520 dead, which is the biggest-ever death toll from an accident involving a single aircraft.

And an aircraft cabin may not keep you warm, but it can tick two vital boxes – staying dry and getting out of the wind. As for being stuck on the ground for a while and needing to build a shelter, that's a subject for a book of its own.

Fire

Fire-making items such as waterproof matches and hexamine tablets would be part of a good survival kit. But it's worth mentioning the value of a fire. Other than warmth, it's useful for location, cooking, light at night, and last but by no means least, morale.

Location

The first thing you do to help yourself is to make sure someone comes looking for you, thanks to a SARTIME or a Flight Note. Whether you call it a Flight Note or use politically incorrect non-gender-neutral terms like "MUMSAR" or "WIFESAR", it means after a certain time someone will miss you and someone will come looking for you.

Location aids such as flares and a signalling mirror will be part of your survival kit, but the best aid to location, as evidenced time and time again by stories of both successful and unsuccessful rescue attempts in the outback, is to stay with the aeroplane. Apart from being a shelter, it's bigger and easier to spot than a person, and it's on the route where you expect the searchers to look. The only time you'd leave the aeroplane (or a broken-down car) is if you know exactly where you're going, such as to the settlement you flew over five minutes before the engine failed.

Water

You'd also have quite a bit of this on board for a long flight over country where you don't want to come down, and finding more once you're on the ground is, like shelter, another book of its own. Dehydration means your decision-making is going to suffer, as discussed in February's Flyabout. That will be followed by symptoms of mild dehydration, which the RAAF Combat Survival Course handbook states are similar to a hangover. But then, what would military aircrew know about hangovers?

And based on the maxim "Ration your sweat, not your water", if you do decide to walk to that nearby settlement, you won't do it in the heat of the day.

Food

A few energy bars in the survival kit would be a good idea, but if you remain unrescued for long enough that you need to start digging for witchetty grubs, then the Location item on the list has clearly gone very wrong!

And if you're interested, Google the name Howard Blackburn. It's one of those stories about a bloke who made it because he had the most important asset of all in a survival situation – the will to live.