



Outdoors-Magazine.com

<http://outdoors-magazine.com>

Survival vest

V Shrake

- Skills and guides - Bushcraft and Survival -



Publication: Friday 6 September 2002

Description :

Building a survival vest on a budget

Copyright (c) Outdoors-Magazine.com under a Creative Commons

Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike License

Whenever I've seen articles touting the "Ten Essentials" for a survival kit, I've wondered a couple of things: who are these kits designed for; and why can't any two "experts" agree on what the ten essentials are? In my little dissertation, I will make no claims to be an expert in any sense of the word, merely pass on the contents of my own kit, how I put it together, and the thought-process that should allow you to make a kit that suits your needs. Also, I'm going to pass on the "secret" to keeping costs down.

First off, just who are the majority of these ten essentials discussions aimed at? Usually it's day-hikers and/or car-hunters, who are most unlikely to venture far off the beaten path. As such, true survival is less a concern than is minimising discomfort if you're forced to stay out overnight due to losing your way, or if it rains during your hike.

But what about a full-time survival kit designed to contain the minimum necessary to keep you alive in a wide range of climates, perhaps for an indefinite period. This is where the disparity of the ten essentials-type kit are exposed.

Rarely weighing over seven to ten pounds and usually carried in a small rucksack or belt-bag, these kits are a valid start on what's needed for a true survival kit. Most things on those lists would be a benefit in a survival situation, while some are superfluous. What is necessary is to recognize the gaps in these lists, so as to prepare for the widest array of possibilities. Also, there is the manner in which the kit is carried. I prefer to use a surplus pilot's survival vest. This keeps everything handy and provides a convenient way to carry the large assortment of gear necessary. I also can switch everything over to mil-spec LBE, if that would be more practical. Versatility is paramount in a survival situation.

To illustrate the twin points above, I offer the following scenario: What would you consider the bare essentials for survival if dropped into the middle of a rugged wilderness with a widely-varying set of animals, plants, and terrain/climate conditions?

I'm not describing some alien planet that you've been marooned on, but our own Mother Terra. Even within a single range of mountains you can experience scrub, sub-tropic, and near Arctic conditions. Starting at the base of the mountains is semi-arid scrublands (around 2000 feet). When you reach the trailhead at 6500 feet, widely available water has allowed a thriving sub-tropical forest. Generally warm in the summer, it is not unknown for storms to develop very rapidly. If you don't keep a good weather eye, those shorts and tee-shirt that were so comfortable at the start of the hike could lead to death, or at the least a cold and wet experience.

At around 9000 feet you'll start hitting isolated pockets of snow, even in the summer; 10,000 feet brings snow in even greater quantities. At that altitude a 70 to 80 degree day can plummet to below-freezing at night.

The above mountain could exist almost anywhere on our world, and serves to illustrate my point. That much diversity in the mountains alone covers a wide, though incomplete, cross-section of Earth's climates. The stuff you theorize as being essential to survival must, therefore, be imaginative as well as multi-functional.

Another thing to consider is the weight and mass of this gear. Leaving out longarms and ammo for same, the food, water, and various bits of daily life necessary for survival adds up to ten or fifteen pounds. Add a pistol, a good knife or two, ammo, plus a cleaning kit, and you bounce up to around twenty or twenty-five pounds. That weight is for a service-caliber sidearm and ammo; while a .22 pistol or revolver is often recommended for survival kits, I would feel better placing my trust in a .357 or 9mm. For that piece of mind, I will gladly deal with the extra weight. Remember, we're talking real-world survival here.

Now, that's weight you're going to have to carry daily in a survival situation, whether you're on your own homestead

or moving cross-country. Sure it's possible (with a lot of training) to be able to survive with nothing; Australian aborigines and our own Native Americans used to do it all the time. However, this training requires time and resources you may not have time to spare.

What a survival vest does is improve the odds for an intelligent, resourceful person to combat the elements.

The philosophy of most survival schools is: "You've got a knife, you're rich." This is abundantly true, for if you are trained to live off the land, a knife becomes an especially valuable tool; far more versatile than any gun. Logically, then, a well-stocked survival vest would seem almost a luxury.

This article isn't directed at SERE graduates, however, but more to improve our own chances in the field. Of course, even with the best training, you may not have the time needed to set snares and otherwise show off your field craft; pursuit or injury may preclude that option.

The more training you possess, the better; knowledge is the key to any human endeavour. But, to make up for lack of skill, there are alternatives: a comprehensive med-kit, if you're not an herbalist; carrying food and water eliminates the need for foraging.

Everything you have in the kit increases your probability of survival. What follows is a list of what I carry in my vest. This is by no means the best, or indeed, only, kit; I only include it as an example. This set-up, done mainly through trial-and-error, works for me. Using my experiences as a guideline, perhaps you'll miss some of the same pitfalls along the way.

The one thing all of these items have in common is that they free your mind from worrying about the mechanics of survival, allowing you to get down to the serious business of actually staying alive.

SURVIVAL VEST CONTENTS

1. Weapons: Ruger GP-100; SOG Bowie knife; Shrade skinning knife
2. Basic Med-kit
3. Food and Water: (3) MR-8 bars, 1 quart canteen and cup; halazone tablets
4. Fire: Matches (strike anywhere and waterproof), Magnesium bar and flint, tinder bars and solid fuel.
5. Foraging: Snare-wire, Fishing kit, Pistol for hunting
6. Navigation: Maps, Compass, Writing supplies for log
7. Shelter: Mylar blanket
8. Miscellaneous: Mini-torch [\[1\]](#) (extra batteries and bulbs), Cyalume sticks, mini-binoculars, toilet paper, nylon cord (various weights), pistol ammo (57 extra rounds), Swiss Army knife, Leatherman tool, wire-saw, pistol cleaning kit, insect repellent, Army survival manual, pen-flares

That's more-or-less the stuff that I take with me whenever I leave the pavement. You will note that I didn't include spare clothes, ponchos, or anything that won't fit easily into a pocket. That kind of stuff is for your pack, or a mussette bag which you could add to supplement your vest. Everything listed is the gear that you will keep on you at all times; of necessity, bulk must be kept to a minimum. If at all possible, learn to improvise to cover any lack of appropriate material.

Survival vest

You will always have your brain, so learn to use it well.

Of course, as your situation changes, so will your gear. Or, you may find something that works better than what you already have. For instance, I wish to exchange my mini-binoculars for a monocular; less weight and bulk, yet it would perform the same function. For now, though, I make do with what I have.

And don't sneer at toilet paper being included on my list. You may wipe with leaves and bark if wish, but I prefer something a little more civilized.

That earlier comment about "making do with what I have" is really at the core of surviving on a budget. Had I unlimited funds, my equipment would change substantially. The basic list would remain the same, but I would buy first-quality stuff, not surplus. Since I don't have great gobs of cash (these days, who does?), I "make do".

The vest I designed my kit around is a prime example. Bought from this very magazine, it has changed dramatically from the days when it was issued as flight gear. Around the bottom of the vest is a built-in belt of sorts, no doubt to allow a little leeway for a pilot's individual needs; I used that "customizing" option to its best effect.

With pouches bought from surplus shops and mail-order catalogues, I added space for a canteen, spare food in the form of MR-8 ration bars, a Mylar blanket for shelter, and other goodies. I took the leg-straps that came with the vest and used them to make a "hanger" for my Bowie knife. This gave me more room on the belt itself, and put the blade in a handier spot. To keep the sheath from flopping around, I put a tie-down on it, around my thigh. The vest came with a concealed knife sheath, which I removed and replaced with a skinner of my own.

The vest originally had a zipper front, and the pilot who it was issued to was considerably smaller than myself. Probably a good thing, considering the size of a fighter-jet's cockpit.

Be that as it may, it wouldn't fit. After removing the zipper, I added three fastex buckles, and re-sewed the webbing on the vest's back. This resulted in a vest that was stronger, as well as fitting me perfectly.

For modifications like this, you need a certain skill with needle and thread, plus the right materials. I'm always on the look-out for canvas and nylon webbing of various thicknesses and weights, and look for good deals on pouches and the like. The more of this relatively inexpensive stuff you have on hand, the more creative you can get. "D"-rings, old zippers, buckles, fasteners of every sort; if you've got it, you'll eventually find a use for it. Just collect the kind of stuff you know you'll need for your weapons and other gear, then let your imagination take over.

One project that I'm especially proud of is the holster for my .357. The shoulder strap is a camera-bag sling, and the actual holster was originally designed for an autoloader. I put a speed loader case on the holster body, and two more on the shoulder strap; I also sewed on four shell carriers that hold twelve rounds each. That gives me six speed loaders for quick refills, and another forty-eight rounds for more leisurely moments. Including the six in the weapon, I have a total of ninety rounds. Then, of course, I've got fifty-seven more in the vest itself. A waist-strap of one-inch nylon webbing, with fastex buckle, keeps the holster close to my body.

Of course, the stuff inside your kit is more important than how you carry it. I used my experience as a hiker and hunter, plus limited time in the Army, to choose what I consider essential. Add a dash of imagination as to possible future uses (all readers of this magazine know what that future may prove to be) and that will give you some idea of where to start. So will other articles on this subject, by other writers.

Survival vest

To keep costs as low as possible, look for sales, but don't skimp on quality; saving a buck in the wrong area could get you killed. On your med-kit, get as much as you feel capable of using. In other words, don't carry a field surgery if you can't operate. Concentrate on everyday items, things like aspirin and vitamins, and add bandaging materials or burn spray or any other such special-purpose meds that you feel should be in your kit. You're not trying to be Albert Schweitzer, just a simple survivalist trying to ease your own or a companion's pain. To gain insight on where to start, read the contents list on a variety of med-kits; determine which you might find useful. To get meds at a good cost, order industrial-type kits from wholesalers. They come in a variety of sizes and have the additional benefit of individually packaging each item. That way you can pick and choose, taking as much of each as you wish.

To close this piece, I'd like to give a little insight into my own views on survivalism, to better explain my choices; at least it will give you some insight into my decision-making process.

First, I believe in carrying as much gear as is feasible, then adding a comfortable safety margin. This is because a survival situation won't allow frequent trips to the store to re-supply. What you have on you will have to last the duration of the emergency; if you don't have enough of the "right stuff", both supplies and the will to survive, the end of your travails could be death. On the other hand, having the proper gear immensely improves your chances of living.

Also important is how your gear works, not merely alone, but in conjunction with everything else you carry. I designed my holster the way I did because it was one of the few ways to comfortably carry a sidearm and ammo effectively with my vest. In other articles I will show how I integrate a longarm, ammo, and a pack with my vest and pistol to form a complete hostile-environment wardrobe.

Ingenuity in survival is for every stage of the game, from training and preparation to the actual event. Use your brain, use your imagination. It will help to keep you alive in the event of our worst fears (fondest wishes?) coming to pass, and it will save you a few bucks while preparing for them.

Post-scriptum :Original article at [OldJimbo's site](#).

[1] brand name removed