

DAY TWO: Beale airmen go into the woods to learn how to evade enemies

Daniel Witter
[Appeal-Democrat](#)
May 18, 2004

Capt. Alex Castro hunkered down in a dense thicket of underbrush and studied a topographic map spread across the ground in front of him, shielded from an enemy helicopter circling overhead in the Tahoe National Forest.

Castro had two hours to reach a "safety zone" one mile away, but 16 heavily armed Sutter County Sheriff's deputies posing as "bad guys" and a Placer County Sheriff's helicopter stood in his way.

This isn't "Mission: Impossible." This is survival and evasion training for Beale Air Force Base's newest U-2 pilots.

"By forcing them to do things they probably wouldn't do, it creates a lot of dilemmas," said Kevin Wagner, a civilian Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape specialist at Beale Air Force Base in eastern Yuba County.

The pilots have had the training before, but for some who enter the U-2 program as part of the 9th Reconnaissance Wing, it may have been 10 years since their original class, Wagner said.

"We want to knock the rust off of their skills because they have nobody else to depend on. They have to be completely independent and self-sufficient," he said.

In a world where terrorism grows each year and with the United States fighting wars on two fronts, U-2 pilots are in high demand right now, according to the Air Force.

Before new U-2 pilots can actually fly alone on missions, they must go through a long series of training programs. Part of that training is what to do if they have to eject from the U-2.

Pilots who eject are immediately alone and become their own medic, psychologist, carpenter and food provider in a hostile environment. They have to deal with those stresses while wearing a 35-pound pressure suit, which presents a variety of problems due to its bulk and bright orange color.

"And if there is combat, they're going to have to do all of that while hiding," Wagner said. The idea is to prepare the pilots as much as possible before they get to that point, he said.

"They do most of their learning, I think, while they stand out in the woods by themselves," Wagner said. Survival starts with his or her self confidence, he said.

"Unless they go into it confident and have the right attitude, (survival) isn't never going to happen," he said.

One of the first exercises of Day 2 was for pilots to put on their pressure suits and practice evasion maneuvers once they land on the ground.

Castro, Maj. Blane Kilpper and Maj. Howie Robinson sat on bins and pulled on their suits with the help of instructors. Pilots enter the suits through an opening in the backside. The feet and legs go in first, followed by the arms, and the suit is pulled over the head. Once zipped up, the pilots put on special gloves that twist and lock on and a white helmet.

"I don't want you to say I would have done this, or I would have done that," Wagner told the pilots during the field training exercise. "I want you to do it. I want you to put yourself in the mindset. I want you to make that mistake today, not in Iraq, not in Afghanistan, or wherever."

Surrounded by forest, he went over a checklist of things pilots should do during their parachute descent - checking for injuries, determining visible threats on the ground, finding a landing spot with possible food and water sources.

"That is the best view you have," Wagner said pointing toward the sky. "Utilize it."

Once on the ground, a pilot must gather up the equipment he or she ejected with and pull out survival gear they need. The pilots must find a hiding spot quickly where they can dispose of what they don't plan to take.

"It's going to take you about five steps to go 'OK, this sucks,'" Wagner said. "You make 152 decisions from the point where you go 'It's bad, I've got to get out' to the point where you're talking to rescue in that first half hour."

Instructors focus 70 to 80 percent of their time on teaching survival the first hour after ejection, Wagner said.

"You're going to be scared. That's a God-given right to be scared - and that's good," Wagner said. "You're going to utilize that. You're going to hear, see and be stronger than you've ever been in your life - that's fear of the enemy."

"One of the worst things that can ever happen in an evasion is to lose that fear," he added.

Pilots who don't see anyone for days stand a greater chance of being captured because they become complacent and stop using their survival and evasion skills, Wagner said.

How far a pilot will travel depends on his or her physical condition, the enemy threat and the geography, Wagner

said. The more distance between the pilot and the crash site, the better, because it increases size of the search area.

Staff Sgt. Jon Reed, another SERE specialist, said parachuting to the ground is one of the most dangerous times for a pilot because he or she is very exposed.

"He's going to have to hit the ground and boom," pushing out his arm as if it would run from him. "Now he has to deal with it. Bad guys are in the area; how's he going to deal with it?"

All three pilots had their gear on and were ready to leave.

"I want you to look at the last spot you're at for anything that you might be leaving behind," Wagner said. Pilots then must look for cover quickly.

"There are so many things that are reflective," he said. "You want to get into the darker areas of the woods."

During the exercise, Castro accidentally left behind a buckle and a path where he dragged his gear into the brush. Wagner pointed that out after that exercise was over.

Robinson and Kilpper were nearby undergoing the same ordeal, sweating without the aid of cool air because the suits do not "breathe" well.

Finding the right safe spot is critical to survival, Reed said.

"You could be out there and it could be the perfect spot at night and you think, 'Yeah, this place is great,' and the next day you could find you're sleeping next to the road or a trail right where the bad guys are," he said.

"That's the problem with evasion," he said. "You run the risk of being near a line of communication without realizing it."

After about a half hour moving around in the suits, the pilots took them off. They were damp with sweat, even though the temperature was only in the high 70s or low 80s.

Training shifted to other aspects of survival, such as using signal mirrors, building fires, and navigating with a compass and topographic map.

Pilots practiced flares to signal aircraft flying overhead during the exercise. Small pungent clouds of billowing orange smoke drifted from the guns as the aircraft roared overhead.

"Recovery can happen when you don't really want it to necessarily happen," said Reed to the pilots. "You need to be ready for it to happen. You need to react to that, so we're going to see how you deal with that."

Later in the afternoon, the training turned to perhaps the most difficult part of the days training - the evasion solo.

Wagner said the proper way to evade is to stay low, stop frequently to listen and hide in dense brush.

"If it's thick, nasty and hard to walk through, it's perfect for our guys because nobody wants to walk through that stuff when they go looking for them," Wagner said before the solo. "[Enemies] just want to walk the roads, walk the trails."

The pilots climbed into a van and were ordered to shut their eyes before they rode further into the forest to start the solo exercise. Wagner turned on the van's radio.

Deep Purple sang "My Woman from Tokyo," which set the mood for the exercise. Each pilot was dropped off at a different point in the middle of nowhere. They had two hours to pinpoint their location and find the "safety zone" with a compass, global positioning unit and a topographic map.

About the same time the U-2 pilots were entering the training area, Placer County Sheriff's deputies were doing the same. Almost immediately, the pilots had to deal with a helicopter overhead.

The pilots used whatever resources they could to make their way, including the noise from the helicopter.

"It helped and it hindered," Robinson said of the helicopter afterwards. "There were a lot of bad guys running around in the woods, and that provided a lot of noise cover. Whenever the helicopter was going and I knew he couldn't see me, I just took off."

Robinson did the same when a gust of wind blew.

"You go because you know you're not going to hear all of the crackling," he said. "You could tell when the wind died down. You could hear every little noise out there and those were the times you didn't want to move."

Breaking branches as a pilot walks along can be dangerous, but it can also be an equalizer.

"They're going to be searching though the woods and you're going to be able to hear them. You have to move as the environment allows you," Wagner said. "It takes an incredible amount of motivation, it takes tenacity, it takes patience and a lot of self motivation, especially if you don't see an enemy."

Castro spent much of his time pausing to listen for the enemy and checking his map. He decided to cut across a small ravine heading in a straight line toward the safety zone.

He found out later that the deputies had gone around the ravine because they thought no one would go through it.

The forest can play tricks on a person trying to evade capture. On the edge of a person's vision, every leaf that flutters in a gentle breeze, every hovering insect that passes by and every natural moving shadow on the forest leaves the fear of the enemy approaching.

At one point, Castro stepped on a garter snake and flinched away. Kilpper came across deer foraging in the woods. Each encounter raised their awareness of their surroundings, they said.

All three pilots made it to the safety zone without being captured, despite having a reporter and two photographers tagging along.

Things were most difficult at the end when they were within a short distance of their destination point, said Robinson.

"You go through all that evasion stuff and you don't want to blow it right at the end," he said.

