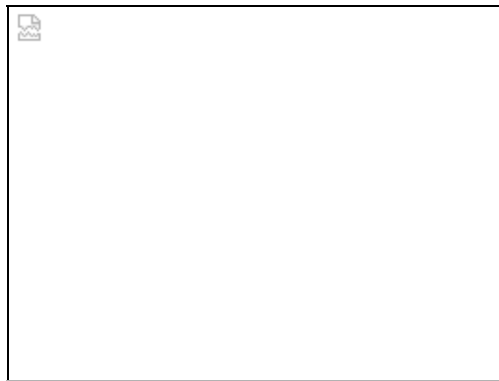


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The Simple Survival Site



I Survived Three Days in the Arctic! And, So Can You!

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Those of us who enjoy big game hunting very rarely consider the real dangers associated with the sport. We frequently hunt in the extreme cold and snowy country of the far north. As a result, we often find ourselves miles from any one or any place as we search for game. While the day may start out nicely, it only takes a short period of time for the weather to turn bad, and we will be forced to seek shelter quickly. But, do you really know how to construct a shelter in arctic like conditions? Could you survive until the weather clears, or help arrives? I do, thanks to the United States Air Force Arctic Survival Course.

“Alright, gentlemen and ladies. Listen up! The weather right now is minus twenty degrees, and it *will* go down with the sun.” The grizzled old sergeant said as he moved around our training site with his gloved hands on his hips.

I was physically and mentally overwhelmed, not to mention cold. Less than an hour ago I was snug and warm in a military survival classroom preparing for this venture. I had expected it to be cold, but not this cold. I actually felt the start of panic at the thought of three days in this weather with very little more than my mind. I was able to fight it to the back of mind by telling myself that I had just received days of intense arctic survival training. I was better prepared than most folks would be in a real survival situation, because I was actually in a semi-safety training site. At least the instructors had radio's to call for help, need be.

The sergeant disrupted my daydreaming once more, “I want each of you to start constructing a shelter, get an insulated sleeping area made, and get a fire started. I want all of this done by the time I return. Remember the buddy system. Keep your eyes out for the safety and health of the one you have been paired up with. What this means is that each of you do your own work, but stay within sight of each other. If you are injured

Survival News

This site is our Wilderness Survival Site, so be sure to read some of the sample stories we are providing for your entertainment.

Disclaimer

However, please keep in mind, wilderness survival is a very dangerous situation. And, as such your decisions in the wild could mean the difference between life and death.

The information on this site is posted with no assurance that it will keep everyone alive in all situations. No two survival situations are ever the same and as such, any action taken by a person in a survival situation will have associated risks. Neither Kuntry Graphics, or the author, assume any responsibility for actions taken, or injuries sustained, as a result of our web information. By entering this site you are agreeing to these terms.

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during this training to the point you cannot continue, you will be returned to camp for medical treatment and then, once the doc's say yer healthy again, you will start the program all over again at day one. Any questions?"

No one had any questions, but as I looked into the eyes of my fellow students, I could sense fear, uncertainty, and confusion. Oh, we knew what to do, as well as how to do it. But, there is a certain psychological feeling of doom or dread as you face the reality of survival at minus twenty or lower. I knew I had to shake that feeling off, because it is a killer, so I started making my fire.

Since we were not so far north as to be out of the tree line, I walked to a nearby tree and started looking for "squaw wood" or the dead twigs under or on the tree. These are not very large, often about the diameter of a pencil. I soon had a couple of hands full and placed them on the ground near where I would make my fire.

What I wanted next was mother natures own fire starter, pine pitch. I walked to a group of large pines and found globs of the light orange sap that burned like gasoline when ignited. It is sticky, like gum, and is easy to remove, but at times leaves an oily feeling (residue) on the hand. (While not actually needed, it was there and would make the fire starting that much easier). I placed the pine pitch on the "squaw wood" and returned to the trees once more.

Gathering up armload after armload of dry wood (as dry as I could find), I stacked it near my fire pit. I quickly had enough for at least one night of continuous burning in a small fire. I did not want a large fire because I would not need it. I intended to spend a great deal of time in my shelter, out of the wind. While there was no wind now, there might be later that night. I knew from training that the shelter would be warm and I did not intend to lose any more body heat than I had too.

I placed four of the larger pieces of wood I had gathered in a line, sides touching sides. Essentially, I had just made a platform for my fire. I knew that as the fire burned the logs of my platform would burn as well. Thus, over time the fire would sink lower and lower into the snow, until it did me little good. At that point, I would have to start all over again and make a new fire pit. If I could, I would have covered the logs with sand, dirt or stones to keep the wood from burning. But, I was unsure how deep the snow was or how hard the ground would be. I did not want to work up a sweat, or use up energy, digging for ground level. Additionally, I would have used green logs, only I didn't have an ax to cut them with. I had to make do with what I had on hand.

As I said earlier, I intended to spend as much time as possible out of the cold and in my shelter, so the problem of the fire sinking like the Titanic was a small concern. I mainly wanted it to warm my hands as I constructed my shelter and made my sleeping platform.

After making my fire platform, I placed two pieces of pitch in the middle. I then made a very small teepee from the twigs I had gathered, taking care that I allowed room between the pieces of wood for airflow. This teepee was constructed right over the most of the pine pitch. Next, I need a fire source.

There are many different kinds of fire sources available and I usually carry at least three on me at all times (matches in a water proof container, lighter, as well as flint and steel) when I hunt. On this day, however, I had to start a fire with flint and steel. Not an easy task in the numbing cold of the arctic. I did have an advantage because the instructors allowed us to prepare individual survival kits, which they inspected closely for unauthorized food items, to bring along. This was to get us used to the idea of *always* having a survival kit of some sort, as well as learning what should go in it.

I had used an old survival trick of putting dried lint, from a clothes drier, in my survival kit wrapped in a plastic sandwich bag. I gently placed the lint up against and part way into my teepee of sticks and twigs. Once again taking airflow into consideration. Since the lint was dry and not compressed, it only took one tiny burning piece of flint from my trembling hands to start the fire.

As the flames slowly grew in size, I gently added more and more wood until I had a nice fire burning. Now my attention turned to constructing my shelter. Having been warned to avoid sweating in arctic weather, it leads to chilling and possibly hypothermia; I removed my parka and started to work.

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My first step was to dig down into the snow and clear a trench about three feet wide, three feet deep and seven feet long. This was a little longer and wider than I am, to allow me to store my meager field gear in the shelter with me. I was looking for emergency protection from the environment, not a suite. The actual size used in construction is an individual preference, but I wanted a small and compact shelter with only my immediate needs in mind.

As soon as I had the trench made, I lined the floor of my shelter with pine boughs from the nearby pine trees. Other sources of insulation can be used if pine is not available where you are (If you survive an aircraft crash, the insulation from the walls or the material from the seats on an aircraft provide excellent protection from a cold sleeping surface). I place the boughs a little over a foot thick. I would have piled them higher, but I had to be able to crawl into the thing once I had a roof on it. I have discovered, in my opinion, that you can never have too much floor insulation in a survival shelter.

Next, I put my gear in the shelter up against the far wall, away from the entrance. I walked to the nearby trees and started gathering up logs and limbs to cover my trench. I had been cautioned to avoid rotted wood for the roof. As I gathered the logs, I stacked them near my trench until I had a large supply to work with. Once I started working on the roof, I didn't want to have to keep walking into the woods to find more material.

Starting at the end opposite my entrance, I laid the logs and limbs over the open trench until I had it all covered with the exception of a small opening. This opening would be my entrance. You will have to estimate the size of your entrance based on your body size, but keep it as small as possible.

I walked around my shelter and made sure the logs overlapped the sides of my trench by about a foot on each side. I did this to give the roof strength and additional support. After the logs were in place, I returned to the pines and brought back enough pine boughs to cover the top of my shelter. These pine boughs would provide the insulation my shelter needed. This insulation would prevent body heat from escaping and help keep the shelter protected from the wind and elements.

Once the boughs were placed on top, I covered them with a small part of my parachute. While it is unlikely most people in a survival situation will have a parachute, a poncho, sheet of plastic, space blanket, or any material could serve the same purpose. If you do not have any material to cover the boughs with, then proceed without it. I anchored the edges of my "chute" material with wooden stakes and started covering it with snow.

As I worked covering my shelter, I began to sweat in the freezing cold and removed a layer of clothing. I wanted to avoid sweating because of the danger of the sweat freezing. Also, when I felt myself becoming too warm, I would stop for a few minutes. Also, as soon as I had the shelter about half covered with snow, I stopped and boiled me a cup of "pine needle" tea. Yep, it is exactly what it sounds like. Not my favorite drink, but it did the trick and refreshed me as I took a much-deserved breather.

The rest of my shelter was quickly covered with snow. All in all, it was not a difficult task, but one that required some planning and hard work. I had to ensure it was long enough and wide enough to hold me, and all of my equipment. Additionally, I wanted it high enough to be able to move around it, but not high enough to standup in. The smaller I kept it, the easier it would be for me to heat. But, I still had two more tasks to complete before it was ready for an occupant.

I crawled inside my shelter and poked a hole approximately three inches in diameter in the top. I did this to allow for ventilation. Since I planned to burn a candle in the shelter, plus I wanted some fresh air, I would constantly, over the next few days, be checking to make sure the hole stayed open. Without the ventilation, and with the candle burning, carbon monoxide poisoning was a real threat. Always keep your shelter well ventilated.

My very last step was to make a door for my shelter. I took a large piece of parachute material (you could use a poncho, tarp, space blanket, etc.) and spread it out on the snow near the entrance to my shelter. I piled snow on the material until I had enough snow, or so I thought, to block the hole I used for an entrance. I pulled the ends and sides of the parachute material together and tied them in place using some cord. I now had a door, roughly the shape of a circle. I could use the ends of the parachute material as a crude door handle to pull the "door" closed once I was inside my shelter.

By the time the old sergeant had returned, I had completed my assignment. My fire was burning well, my sleeping area was lined with pine boughs, and my shelter was complete. I was actually proud of myself. The earlier fears of survival I had fought in my mind were now gone. (Remember, an active mind is less prone to the psychological dangers associated with wilderness survival). Actually, I had expected a small compliment when the sergeant returned, but he just took a long critical look, turned to me and said, "Not bad. Not good either. We will see tonight if it is good enough."

Well, it was good enough and then some. I spent the next three days living in my snow trench shelter. While not exactly the most comfortable place to live in, it did serve its purpose, it kept me alive in sub-zero weather. I learned how cramped, lonely, and boring it can be when a howling blizzard is pounding on the outside and I was confined to my shelter. I actually felt how warm and comfortable a small candle can make such a dismal place feel.

Most of all, it honestly amazed me at the end of the three days of training, to open my shelter door and emerge as an arctic survival school graduate. Before, I never would have thought it possible, would you have?

Gary Benton is a retired United States Air Force Senior Master Sergeant. He is a graduate of a number of U.S. Air Force Survival Schools, including Arctic, Water (Sea and Ocean), Desert, Mountain, and Jungle survival schools. He spent twelve years teaching parachuting techniques and survival skills to Air Force aircrew members. He has an Associates Degree in Search and Rescue, Survival Operations, a Bachelors Degree in Safety and Health, and a Masters Degree in Psychology. Sergeant Benton retired from the USAF in 1997 with over twenty-six years of active duty.

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