

Snow Survival School: Taking the Danger Out of Winter's Hazards

by William D. Siuru, P.E.

Every winter we read about folks who venture out into remote, snowy areas never to return. Many times they are hikers, skiers and hunters. Sometimes they are employees of utility, telephone and microwave communications companies. Even those who have lived and worked through many winters can fall prey to avalanches, hypothermia, carbon monoxide poisoning, or get lost in a blizzard or white out.

Often their plight is compounded by a vehicle that breaks down or becomes hopelessly stuck in deep snow. Most of the time these victims could have lived had they had the proper training in extreme climate survival, signaling techniques, emergency vehicle repair and so forth.

This is exactly the training provided by the Snow Survival School based in Littleton, Colo. This, the oldest and largest snow survival school in North America, offers standard courses at its ideal facilities in the Colorado mountains. It also puts on custom programs to meet the needs of specialized cus-



Insulation from natural materials, body heat and a candle can keep the interior of a vehicle at 50 degrees F even when the temperature outside is 0 degrees F.

tomers who want the training presented in their particular locale.

Hands-on Instruction

For instance, each winter between January and April, three groups of about 15 students each get five days of intensive, hands-on instruction and experience in snow survival. Their instructors include mountaineering instructors, winter survival experts, meteorologists, expert snow vehicle operators, engineers and medical doctors. Instruction in all the practical aspects of survival of both man and equipment under standard and extremely hazardous cold climate condition is covered in both the classroom and in the field.

If you are in trouble, signaling for help becomes a top priority. Therefore, the course covers distress signaling techniques from impromptu fires and snow tapping to smoke grenades,



Students from sheriff departments and utilities at the Continental Divide at the completion of an exercise.



A student enjoys a warm meal at the entrance to a snow cave.

flares and even satellite locator beacons. The training includes flight time in a helicopter so students better learn how to spot and be spotted from the air under both daylight and nighttime lighting conditions. Students comment after attempting to spot their classmates that they are amazed that anyone lost in the snow is ever spotted from the air.

Then there is the matter of surviving while you wait for help or while travelling to safety. The course includes in depth coverage of wilderness survival techniques that often rely on using materials from the surroundings in addition to special supplies.

For example, students learn how to build snow caves and trenches, find food and build a fire using wet kindling or vehicle tires.

Since avoiding trouble is always better than getting out of it, the course includes such subjects as field meteorology for weather forecasting and recognizing weather hazards. The course also covers avalanche prediction and avoidance, and if these fail, escape and survival from an avalanche. Also students are instructed in locating avalanche victims. Preparation for survival includes selecting the correct clothing and what food and other emergency gear to carry with you during winter travel.

Navigating Snow Vehicles

A significant portion of the course is devoted to snow vehicles—snow cats, trucks and snowmobiles. This includes proper navigation over difficult and hazardous terrain, route selection and extricating vehicles stuck in the snow.

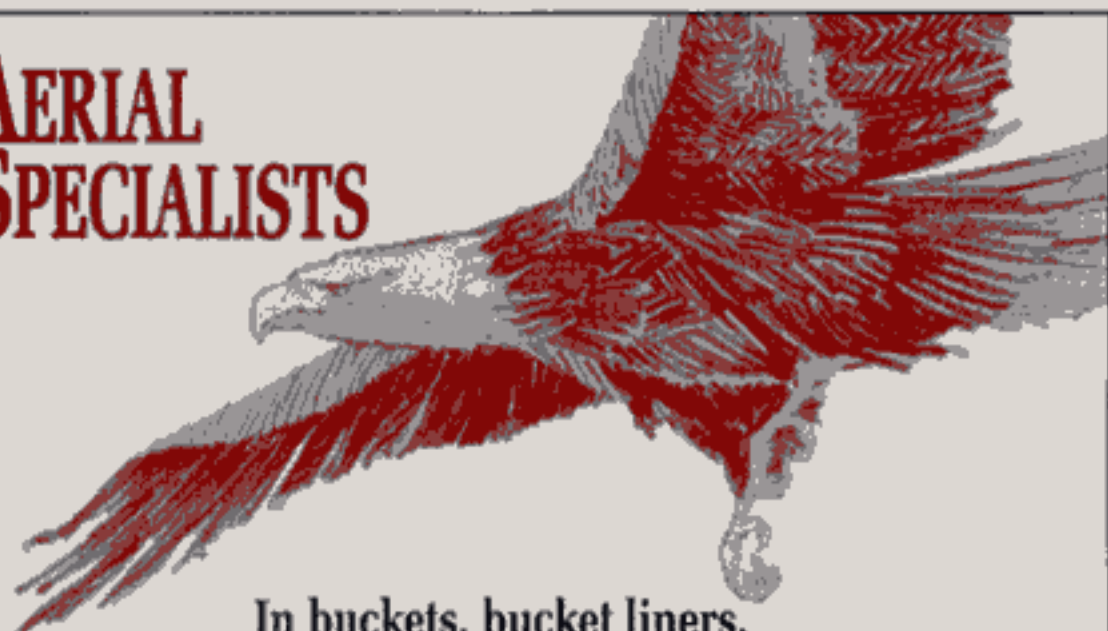
Students are instructed in navigation techniques during blizzard and white out conditions. For the worst case, the course includes instruction on converting a truck or snow cat into a comfortable shelter using available materials. With proper insulation it is possible to heat the interior of a vehicle to 50 degrees F with a single candle even in 0 degree F outside temperatures.

For snowmobile operation, faculty from the Tiger Run Snowmobile Resort in Breckenridge, Colo., are brought in to teach not only how to safely navigate steep slopes and deep snow but how to perform snowmobile emergency maintenance. Should all other forms of transportation fail, students are instructed on how to make snowshoes from materials on hand and then use them to travel.

Students are instructed on how to handle medical emergencies such as detecting carbon monoxide poisoning symptoms and handling hypothermia by a doctor who is one the country's foremost wilderness survival experts and a Colorado Rescue Paramedic. An important part of the course is "lessons learned" from past mistakes that have cost lives. **UTF**

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