

Survivability Test

By Lee B. Savidge

Armed with an M-16 and a “ brick ” (walkie-talkie), I’m hunkered down alone in my assigned fighting position. The old timers in our unit call it a “ fox hole ”. It’s a bowl shaped hole in the ground deep and wide enough for one or two armed soldiers to hide. I try to camouflage it and make it look as natural as possible hoping the enemy will not notice anything unusual.

It is a hot sunny day and the conditions are dry, sandy and rocky with some patches of scruffy grass that have turned brown. Wind blown sand has infiltrated everything. My glasses are smudged, but I do not dare wipe them for the fear of sand scratches. I long for the air-conditioned van where I normally work as a “ scope dope ” (radar operator). But, as security augmentee, it is my turn to maintain the vigilance.

Suddenly I hear some stones clattering in the ravine adjacent to my position. My alertness peaks and my pulse quickens as the adrenaline rush begins. Is it one of the animals that occasionally traverse the ravine or is it an enemy? How do I respond without giving away my position? If I use the brick to call “ Romeo 7 ” (command post) or “ Romeo 3 ” (the closest other fighting position), whoever is in the ravine will hear me. If I stick my head out of the hole and yell, “ Who goes there? ”, I give away my position and risk a bullet in the face. Well here I go, with brick set to transmit and with rifle shouldered and ready to fire, I spring up just enough to see.

Although the ravine initially appears vacant, I continue to hold my breath a few moments. My eyes thoroughly scour every detail. My heart is still pounding in my ears as I listen intently for any evidence of movement.

My thoughts flash back to the night before last. With night vision goggles at an early morning hour I jokingly call “0-dark-thirty”, I watched a deer stepping gingerly among the loose rocks in the ravine. He was a large buck with several points on his rack. He moved with relative majesty despite the loose footing. As I watched, something spooked him and with three large bounds he vanished past the tree line at the opposite edge of the ravine.

No man could bound out of sight, as the deer had done, in the time between my hearing rocks clatter and my springing up to see. I finally let out my breath with a large sigh of relief. My heart rate is lowering and the pounding in my ears subsiding.

I expect by now you might want to know where all this is happening. The above description is real. But the situation is not what you might think. The location is a training area at Fort Drum, New York. The “ enemy ” threatening to infiltrate our unit and take control of our command post is the US Army’s 10th Mountain Division. My unit, the 113th Tactical Control Squadron, out of Hancock Field, Syracuse, New York, is undergoing an Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI).

An ORI is basically three or more days of constant crisis management with little or no time to eat or sleep. You might catch a brief nap on the buddy system, as long as your buddy stays alert and ready to wake you at a moments notice. You might get a few moments to rip open a Meal-Ready-to-Eat (MRE) and wolf down some cold beef stew, if you are lucky, or some cold bean compote, if you are not.

In this instance, the MREs come from the fighter wing supply depot and the fighter pilots we are guiding with our mobile radar and radios get first choice of the available MREs, thus leaving mostly bean compote for the rest of us. I do not complain, as I would also avoid bean compote if I were going to be zipped in a flight suit and strapped in a confined cockpit for many hours.

As the ORI progresses, I come to realize my radar unit is a primary target that an enemy would want to eliminate as soon as possible during combat operations. As an Aerospace Warning and Control System operator, I expand the battle commander's view for as far as our radar can see. Also, our Weapons Controller's help him guide the air battle.

The ORI inspectors pound us with every possible wartime scenario they can think of. They continually increase the pressure trying to find our breaking point. They make it as real as possible including bombarding us with smoke bombs. They truly want to verify our unit as a whole and its individual members can perform our mission under combat conditions and survive.

The war is simulated, but the stress and fear are real and intense. For weeks after our unit passes the ORI, I experience some symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). My anxiety level is elevated. My sleep is erratic. My short-term memory frequently fails me. I am still occasionally plagued by these symptoms. Although my experience is not truly life threatening, I feel I can relate to those suffering PTSD, as I travel the fringes of their experience.