

Winter Survival School Topeka Style

by Sam Pizzo



Back in the mid-fifties, the 55th had a survival school somewhere in the beautiful Topeka area on which there was a small lake which, as you will see later, played a part in the training exercise.

During this time frame, Crew R-38 with Pat Woolbright, AC, Bill Palm as the CP and yours truly as the Nav had the distinct pleasure of attending this required Aircrew Training exercise conducted in this beautiful locale.

Notwithstanding the fact that it was in the dead of winter with snow up to our necks, we looked forward to freezing our tails off in addition to anticipating hunger pains.

One really does need to be trained on how to freeze to death and die of hunger, right?

At any rate, off we went for our training as if we had good sense.

We arrived, had our indoctrination, and was escorted to our winter quarters, a red and white parachute hanging from a tree.

Inside was a small fire pit and we were briefed on the way to keep the fire going all night.

Later we agreed that we should have paid closer attention to this lecture.

That evening Pat took the first watch, I took the second and Palm the third. Ground rules stated keep the fire small. I woke Bill at the appropriate time and dozed off only to be awakened some time later by Bill screaming that he was on fire, and what a fire it was! A really really big blaze in the center of the tent with Bill jumping around screaming he couldn't get his sleeping bag unzipped. The foot of his sleeping bag was on fire.

Now Bill Palm was a big man and his antics in jumping around that tent (parachute) with the foot of his sleeping bag on fire was the funniest thing that both Pat and I had ever seen. Needless to say we both bust out laughing while all the time Bill, doing his best rendition of an Indian Rain Dance, is yelling he was going to kill the both of us when he got out of the sleeping bag. We finally wrestled him to the ground in the snow outside the tent and all was well. He didn't kill us.

Bright and early the next morning our first lesson consisted of taking an axe, a safety pin bent in the form of a hook and told to go chop through the ice, catch some fish and have a hearty meal.

After a strenuous attempt to do this, we found the faster we chopped the faster the ice froze and the more frustrated we became. Result, no breakfast of fish.

Now those of you that knew Pat, knew that if you wanted Pat to do something, just tell him not to do it, and it would be done.



So it was when the rules stated bring no food to the exercise, that Pat brought food, i.e., candy bars.

Along around noon as we were sitting in our warm quarters, Pat starts laughing to beat the band, yelling he was going home. Come to find out he had taken a bite of his frozen candy bar and broken a tooth off of his bridge, and had swallowed it. He said he told the Instructors that he had to go home so that he could look for his tooth, and that he couldn't do that out here in the snow.

Sure enough, home he went.

I cannot tell you how long it was before Pat quit telling us, in vivid detail, how he searched for that tooth, but it was a long time. He always ended the story by saying,...no matter how much he washed that tooth it still tasted like you know what.

Pat Woolbright, one of a kind.

VO,
Sam Pizzo
Pat's Navigator