



# 2012 CRUCIBLES in SURVIVAL PRACTICE

## **PART I – MAN IN THE CREEK!**

This three-part article discusses the use of Crucibles, or self-tests, in survival training. The Crucible concept includes the acquisition and practice of a new skill-set (today's example includes fire-craft) and then the testing of the skill-set in a pre-designed scenario. Crucible scenarios require a training partner or team to monitor the safety of the trainee who is being tested. The following is a description of a Crucible used in military survival training, and is an excerpt of The Survival Template by John A. Heatherly.

### **Man in the Creek!**

Years ago I participated in a training program that required proficiency in building “man-in-the-creek” fires. The exercise started whenever someone uttered the words “man in the creek,” and the objective was to build a knee-high fire as quickly as possible. The intent: to develop efficient fire-making abilities so that if someone fell in the creek during the winter they could be warmed up and dried out before the effects of hypothermia became deadly.

For months we honed our skills and lowered our times from about an hour to less than five minutes. The man-in-the-creek contest evolved into an event that we looked forward to rather than dreaded.

One early spring afternoon our Instructors tasked us with the chore of gathering massive amounts of firewood. As we worked, we wondered why such an effort was necessary, as we had been in the field for a week with no such requirement.

After our firewood stash grew to about the size of a mini-van, we were ordered to practice our “trouser floats,” a water survival technique that involves using a pair of pants as an improvised flotation device. The technique could have been considered fun, but in this case a glacier-fed river served as our training environment. After more repetitions of trouser floats than I can recall, shivering and other signs of hypothermia began to set in. An eternity of cold-soaked misery passed before an Instructor said the words, “man in the creek!” The fight was on!

A few minutes of bedlam ensued as eleven hypothermic trainees tumbled out of the water in search of yet more firewood for their “personal” fires. Fortunately a few of us were able to get knee-high fires going, and then later enlarge them using the previously collected mini-van sized stash. Some were so hypothermic that they just stared at their pocket knives and shivered. The rest of the afternoon was spent warming up and drying out.

The man-in-the-creek exercise took on new meaning that day. We regained respect for cold water and the dangers it presented – and also a confidence boost in our acquired skill-sets.

Warren Bennis, a prominent researcher in the field of leadership, would call our fire-building exercise a “crucible experience.” According to Bennis, this type of transformational experience is “both an opportunity and a test. It is a defining moment that unleashes abilities, forces crucial choices, and sharpens focus. It teaches a person who he or she is.” Bennis argues that effective leaders must survive at least one intense, transformational

event to maximize their effectiveness...

## **Self-designed Crucibles**

Again, safety is a concern when developing and using Crucibles, so include training partners in the practice and designate them as observers during the process. Crucibles and self-tests do not need to be extreme or life threatening to be effective. It is better to make the test a game with a set of rules. For example, after practicing the skill of fire-building for some time, use a stop-watch to gauge efficiency and speed in building a knee-high fire. Use different methods as part of the practice (matches, lighters, metal-match strikers, etc...) to determine what works the best.

As always, keep the Crucible experience fun and safe while using them to develop confidence and self-sufficiency.

## **PART II – THE THREE DAY RUCK RULE**

Crucibles in Survival Practice: Part I – Man in the Creek!, introduced the concept of self-tests and scenario-based survival training. It discusses how Scenarios can add realism to training while Crucibles act as measures and ultimately lead to proficiency and confidence.

Part II discusses a mind/body phenomenon known as “The Three Day Ruck Rule.” Everyone encounters adversity when pursuing new skills and this little known rule is effective in survival training or in any difficult endeavor.

### **The Three Day Ruck Rule**

Years ago a grizzled old special ops troop told me, “It takes three days to learn to carry an extremely heavy ruck. The first few days you’ll think you are going to die, but after that it is no problem.” I was green, and in decent shape, but had never carried more than about fifty pounds during my own backpacking treks.

A few months later I found myself water-logged and carrying one-hundred plus pounds through mountains covered with deep snow. The ruck was about two-thirds of my bodyweight at the time, and despite my best efforts, my gear never stayed as dry as I wanted it to. The problem was compounded by my inexperience with snowshoes, but I quickly learned to appreciate them.

As new troops we learned to see the humor in rescuing a buddy who had tipped over in a snow drift and was flailing on his back like an inverted turtle. Nothing to be embarrassed about, as it happened to all of us repeatedly.

The first three days of that trek I remember hurting to the point that I resorted to focusing on each footstep, one at a time. Nothing felt better than reaching the summit of a peak and taking a break.

As the third day drew to a close, my body started to feel numb. My shoulders and back felt the weight of the pack straps, but it was more of a dull, numb ache than it had been before.

On the morning of day four, after sleeping on a bed of pine boughs underneath an improvised parachute shelter, I strapped on my pack and prayed for the best. With surprise I noticed that I was a little sore, but the pack somehow seemed lighter. After walking for a few minutes, my body warmed up, and for the next several days I did not notice the weight of the pack, or any pain, whatsoever. In fact, my entire team felt the same way, and the synergy allowed us to almost jog from waypoint to waypoint. That old special operator had been right! The resulting confidence boost helped me to cruise through the rest of that phase of training, and I remember clearly

the moment when I first realized that I was probably going to make it.

Three days appears to be a magic number. Whenever making changes in daily habits, the first three days require the most attention. After three days new habits start to become ingrained, and eventually they feel like second nature.

## **Applying the Rule**

The story above describes the process of becoming a “human pack mule.” It is an example of how the body can outperform the expectations of the mind during a test. When testing yourself, keep the Three Day Rule in mind and do not allow early adversity to disrupt your focus.

\*Note – Common sense is also authorized when employing this rule. For example: Do not try to increase your run distance from 0 miles to a 26-mile marathon in 3 days. This concept applies to carrying a ruck AND to changing mental habits.

Again, the body can outperform the expectations of the mind when given the opportunity. Train smart, don’t underestimate yourself, and maintain focus when hit with adversity.

## **PART III – A BETTER DOJO**

Much like Part II: The Three Day Ruck Rule, this third installment discusses an interesting mind/body phenomenon that is fundamental for survival. Like many training outcomes, this observable fact is often discovered during a training Crucible, or self-test (see Crucibles in Survival Practice: Part I – Man in the Creek!).

My interest in self-defense had led me to a karate studio, one that utilized “point karate” as its main sparring exercise. Truthfully, much of the training was effective though I came to believe that point sparring lacked realism. Additionally, it did not take long for me to discover that I was horribly inept. (I am sure that I would still be pathetic at point sparring to this very day!)

After several weeks I formed the perception that my peers were all excelling while my skill-set had not improved at all. Disappointment turned to frustration and eventually became a high-degree of tension that all but ruined my efforts. After all, only a relaxed warrior is a truly effective warrior.

Several months of agony slowly passed; I wanted to quit but was intrigued when the Chief Instructor announced we would be “building a new exercise.” For several days we constructed improvised walls to sub-divide the training area. Our dojo was to become a rehearsal arena for various street-fight scenarios. What a fabulous idea!

The training area gained incredible new elements of realism. One “room” was an alley, complete with garbage cans, litter, and sticks. Another was a bar; yet another was a parking lot. Trainees were meant to proceed through the gauntlet and defend themselves against unknown assailants using any means available.

I recall being nervous as I ventured into the “alley”; when the mugger appeared (in realistic mugger attire!), I instinctively grabbed a garbage can lid and bashed him. Seconds later I finished the fight with a long stick found in that same garbage can. The feeling of accomplishment was exhilarating! The other training scenarios were equally effective and exciting (though I did fail to see an assailant’s hidden accomplice in the parking lot who eventually shot me in the back – lesson learned.)

In this case, the differences between point-sparring and scenario-sparring were numerous and vast. For me, the

most noteworthy distinction was the transformation of my mentality during the scenario-based exercise. Rather than being tense and slow, the realistic scenario helped me to relax and simply act. The change in mindset became a change in my physical expression and performance.

The story above emphasizes a basic point in this series of articles: realistic, scenario-based training uncovers latent abilities and produces more capable trainees. For those like me, a realistic scenario can teach the difference between tension/failure and relaxation/success.

When considering survival training, relax and keep it real!

*John A. Heatherly is the author of [The Survival Template](#) and blogs at [SurvivalTemplate.com](#). John has been a student of survival for more than 18 years and is a natural at making people really mad. His interests include philosophy, literature, and the Paleo lifestyle. If forced to choose, he is not sure if he would add a lightsaber or a blaster to his personal survival kit, though both would be nice.*

*Quick note before you go...*

*Because I can not respond to every request individually, I decided to create a new reader email list and website where I could communicate with everyone, instead of just a select few whose pleas or wit or offers or come-ons catch my eye.*

*The website is all about learning, sharing, and interaction, so check back often for regular updates and participate in the discussions, so I can get to know you a little better as well.*

*Membership is complementary to fans. Join the discussion...*

Neil,  
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