

Your brain as a survival tool

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

Theodore Roosevelt  
One of the perks of my traveling around on hunting trips, is getting to meet people in the same business as me and sharing of ideas. I run into first responders, police, medical and EMT folks everywhere, and it is always interesting to see how different areas train and react to emergencies.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

On a trip to New Foundland last fall, I had opportunity to hunt with Craig Wiseman. The hunting season for caribou and moose up there only lasts six weeks, so most guides have a real job the rest of the year. Wiseman’s been guiding for 17 years, but I was very interested when he told me about his real job.

Wiseman has the title of wilderness nurse. Since we have no such distinction here in the states, I pressed him to elaborate.

“You first obtain your Registered Nurse (RN) degree, then go through a year of wilderness medicine. There you learn how to care for and treat injuries and emergencies sustained in the backcountry,” Wiseman stated.

This is very close to what we have here known as a Wilderness EMT. In the backcountry, emergency personnel may have a patient in their care for a long period of time before they can be transported to a medical facility. This could be because of an injury sustained far from help, or a patient stranded because of weather and medical transportation cannot get to them right away.

On the first morning, heading out from camp, I loaded up my pack while Wiseman joined me with his. He asked about the contents of my pack and I ran through a brief list of what I brought along. I had everything from rain gear, fire making tools, food, GPS and compass, knives and my personal IFAC.

My IFAC (individual first aid kit) is set up for more serious emergencies, such as severe trauma and bleeding. The smaller problems, like blisters, small cuts, bruises and splinters can be dealt with when I return to camp. This helps with the amount of stuff I have to lug around all day.

Wiseman was especially interested in my IFAC, as expected for a medical man such as him. We discussed its contents thoroughly, which included a SWAT-T tourniquet, Israeli Bandage, and QUIK-Klot blood stopper.

At this point, I quizzed Wiseman about his survival gear and especially his medical equipment. I was dumbfounded by his answer.

“I don’t carry any medical supplies at all. It takes up too much space to lug it all around, and you don’t really need it. Just use your brain. Your brain is the best tool in the box,” Wiseman went on, “If you have trained well and often, as well as practiced your skills, you will react to an emergency properly and solve the problem.”

This went pretty much against any training I have ever received in my career. Even in law enforcement, we are carrying personal trauma kits. I have these small kits in all my vehicles, ATVs and packs.

In fact, after every training I have had over the years, I seem to have added more to my personal kits. Looking back to my DMT days (Diving Medical Technician) I remember carrying a large box of supplies and multiple oxygen tanks every time we went scuba diving. If I could have found a way, I would probably have brought along a hyperbaric chamber.

“Let’s say we have a person who cut their leg open with a knife; deep enough that it hit an artery and blood loss is a concern. I would use my belt as a tourniquet and some clean clothes from my pack to control the bleeding. I would then call for a chopper with my satellite phone,” said Wiseman.

After thinking this through, I realized his response was very similar to mine, except I carried medical supplies with me. The more time I spent with Wiseman, the more I began to agree with his reasoning.

Every one of us, who spends time in the woods, has a responsibility to be able to care for our self and those along with us. This means training, training and more training for survival skills and emergency first aid.

A regular Red Cross type first aid class is a good start, but not near enough. Yes, it would be nice if



(Top) Before you take off into the backcountry, make sure your mindset is correct and that you have been properly trained for any emergencies. (Bottom) Of all the survival tools in your kit, the most important tool is your brain. Use it wisely in the backcountry. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

all of us could become wilderness EMTs before we head out, but that is not practical either.

I would suggest that folks take a couple classes. A benefit from these classes is the hands on practice and training you get. First aid is a skill that must be practiced, not just learned. If you do not practice these learned skills, you will forget them, it is just that simple.

There are hundreds of books available about wilderness first aid. One that comes to mind is “The Outward Bound Wilderness First-Aid Handbook,” by Jeffrey Isaac. This book discusses just about every type of outdoor emergency you may ever encounter. A digital version of some books can be downloaded on your cell phone for reference when needed.

I am not suggesting that everyone get rid of your medical kits when you head outdoors. Rather, I offer this as food for thought. I learned a great deal from my nine days hunting with Wiseman, and I

think he learned a bit from me. I still, however, carry my personal IFAC with me.

An emergency can occur anytime. Train and practice your life saving skills with great vigor and excitement. Look for classes in first aid/ CPR through the hospital, fire department and the Delta Montrose Technical College.

You never know when Murphy is going to make his presence known, and the feces will impact the oscillator. Be prepared because in a critical incident, you will respond and fall back on your training. Remember, your brain is the best tool in the box.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, an avid hunter, travels across North America in search of adventure and serves as a director and PIO for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the Posse, call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

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