

THE SURVIVORS CLUB



The Secrets and Science
that Could Save Your Life

BEN SHERWOOD

New York Times Bestselling Author

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that Could Save Your Life*

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THE
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CLUB

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FICTION

The Man Who Ate the 747

The Death and Life of Charlie St. Cloud

To William Richard Sherwood

PROLOGUE

Brace for Impact

First they tell you not to panic and then they try to drown you.

Honeyed light settles over the US Marine Corps air station in Miramar, California, just a few miles from the Pacific Ocean. A warm breeze ruffles the palm trees. But the golden surroundings are deceptive. The military sends its sailors here to learn the art and craft of escaping from crashing jets and sinking helicopters. If your job involves flying over water—and that pretty much includes everyone in the navy—you come to the Aviation Survival Training Center to learn how to survive a “mishap,” the euphemism for an accident or worse. There are four men and one woman in my class, and right from the start in our “welcome aboard” briefing, we’re told this training is “high risk.” An instructor hands out a government form to sign. It’s a release discharging the United States from any and all claims of injuries.

The navy takes men and women barely out of high school and teaches them to survive dangerous missions in hostile environments. It prepares people with no prior experience to endure the unimaginable. It molds warriors *and* survivors. That’s why my research begins here behind barbed wire and guard posts where they don’t usually invite civilians. I want to experience the stress of survival training and immerse

myself in the military's culture and customs of staying alive. Above all, I want to learn the secrets of who survives.

We spend the first eight hours in a classroom with intense, highly focused experts who hit us rapid-fire with information about every imaginable survival threat. They rattle off the different kinds of hypoxia—not enough oxygen—and how to recognize the symptoms. They plow through sensory physiology—how our senses often trick us into making deadly mistakes. They emphasize the importance of situational awareness—S/A—which means knowing what's going on around you at any given moment and being able to anticipate danger. They also instruct us in some very practical matters: No matter how thirsty you are, never drink urine and *never ever* drink seawater.* And finally, they insist that the key to survival is attitude. “If you lose that will to live,” one burly instructor says, “odds are you aren't going to make it.” By late afternoon, we're finished in the classroom. Now it's time for the real reason we're here: dunking.

I'm standing in my trunks on the pool deck, sucking in my stomach and checking out the rest of the class. They're all ridiculously lean and fit. Right next to me: a ramrod young man who received the Sailor of the Quarter award from his command. Next to him: the crisp and wiry commanding officer of a destroyer. I figure I don't stand much of a chance. For the opening test—can you swim?—here's what they do. First, they dress you up in full flight gear: helmet, flight suit, steel-toed boots, anti-g pants, parachute harness, survival vest, life vest, and gloves. Then they throw you in the pool and make you tread water till your heart is about to explode. Without a break, they force you to do something

* In a British study of 163 “life craft voyages,” 38.8 percent of the people who drank seawater died compared with 3.3 percent who did not. Seawater consists of 3 percent dissolved salt, and drinking it—even diluted—“aggravates dehydration” and “hastens death.” Most survival experts also advise against drinking urine because of the salt content, as well as waste products that can make you sick.

called drown-proofing, a vexing technique of floating like a dead man in order to conserve energy and catch your breath. Many just sink and fail the course. If you make it through the preliminary tests, they've got a kind of extreme water park waiting for you. They whip you across a big pool with pulleys and wires to simulate a parachute dragging you over the ocean. They yank you up a cable while drenching you with the most powerful showerheads you've ever seen to imitate the rotor blast of a rescue helicopter. And finally, the grand finale: They strap you into a chair, crash you into the pool, flip you upside down, sink you to the bottom, and tell you to escape.

I'm six foot four, so the first challenge is to find flight gear that's big enough. When I'm finally suited up, complete with size XL helmet, I can't help thinking of doomed presidential candidate Michael Dukakis and how ridiculous he looked on that M1A1 tank in 1988. I just hope I'm invisible as I submerge in the soothing eighty-five-degree water. We're in the shallow end, and I'm wearing twenty-five pounds of equipment. My feet slosh in size 13 boots that feel like clown shoes. I try to figure out the most efficient way to move, let alone swim. It's clear that the harder I try, the less effective I am. I come up with improvised mini strokes—a modified dog paddle—that seem to work pretty well. I look around at the rest of the class, relaxed and bobbing in the pool, and I get a competitive rush. I'm a little jittery—my breathing is shallow—and I don't want to fail. This trepidation is exactly what they're trying to foment. Until you're in the water, trying to float with all that gear, you can't even begin to imagine what it's like in the open ocean fighting for your life. In this safe and controlled environment, I'm experiencing the first sparks of the survival instinct: brain chemicals flowing, competitiveness surging, all thoughts focused on a plan to stay afloat.

The whistle blows, and we're supposed to swim across

the twenty-five-yard pool. I go all out with my improvised mini strokes. I win the sprint, but I've expended too much energy. Now I'm worried I won't get past the next challenge—treading water and drown-proofing. Again, my brain locks on to a strategy for conserving strength: I alternate between dog paddling and floating on my back using the helmet for buoyancy. When the whistle sounds at the end of this endurance trial, two of my classmates—the ramrod sailor and a female photographer from an aircraft carrier—have been eliminated. They flunked because they sank. Eight percent of the folks who come here fail the first time.

The woman who runs the survival school is waiting by the pool when I drag myself from the water. Lieutenant Commander Rebecca Bates is five foot eleven with short blond hair streaked by sun and chlorine. She's lean, terse, and wears a crisp green flight suit. Her radio call sign is "Sparky" but behind her back the staff refers to her as "Big Momma." As I stand dripping in front of her, she seems surprised, even a little amused, that I passed the drown-proofing test. "Are you made of cork?" she jokes. Then she lets me in on a secret: The instructors check out the candidates when they emerge in swimsuits from the locker room. Some get an immediate *oh no* reaction because they're destined to fail. When she first saw me, she thought I didn't have a chance.

Now it's time for the Devices, each with its own convoluted military acronym. These are ingenious contraptions designed to simulate every underwater survival scenario. First: the SWIMMER. That's short for—ready?—Shallow Water Initial Memory Mechanical Exit Release trainer. It's an underwater door with half a dozen different handles that you might find on navy aircraft. You take a breath, submerge, and swim a certain length to the door, open various levers and latches, then push your way through. If you succeed, you get to do it again with blackout goggles.

Next: the SWET. It stands for Shallow Water Egress Trainer. Imagine a little tower with a chair on top sticking out of the shallow end of the pool. You are strapped into the seat perched above the water, and then someone pulls down on a lever, flipping the chair (and you) upside down into the pool. It's like a human rotisserie. With a great splash, you're submerged and inverted. The challenge: Unbuckle your harness and swim out. If you make it, they fasten you into the chair again and you do it blindfolded.

Lieutenant Commander Bates is still smiling as I emerge again from the pool. She can't quite believe I made it through the SWIMMER challenge and the SWET spin cycle, but now she's got one final obstacle called the 9D6. I am led to a nearby building with a big indoor pool. The giant jib arm of a crane hangs over the water with a big blue gondola dangling on thick cables. It's the size and shape of a UPS truck. This is the METS, short for Multi-place Underwater Egress Trainer. The folks here call it the Dunker, a machine that simulates a helicopter crashing in the ocean. It's engineered to plunge into the pool, roll over, and sink upside down just like a real chopper that's top-heavy with its engine and rotors.*

This is the grand finale of water survival training. I ease into the pool, and the crane lowers the sixty-four-hundred-pound Dunker. I notice bubbles rising from the depths. Two navy divers are already waiting for me at the bottom. They're the rescue team if I get in trouble. Another trainer—called a safety swimmer—helps me into the main cabin, which is set up to look like a typical transport helicopter with six crew seats. Everything starts to shift and swing as the giant jib hauls us up into the air. The trainer leads me to the front of

* On the day of my visit to the Naval Survival Training Institute in Pensacola, Florida—the national headquarters of the navy's survival programs—a Seahawk helicopter crashed off the coast of San Diego, killing four sailors on board. Just nine seconds after the first sign of trouble, the helicopter hit the ocean and rolled on its right side. The Seahawk was recovered thirty-seven hundred feet below the surface. Three of the four bodies were still inside.

the gondola, where he buckles me into the pilot's seat. Between my legs, I've got a fake cyclic control stick for steering. My feet rest on pretend pedals to direct the angle of the tail rotor blades.

I hear the crane whir and the cables creak. In the final seconds before dunking, I recall the most important lesson of my classroom training. If the experience gets too intense or if I need help at any point, I'm supposed to use a simple, unmistakable rescue signal. The exercise will stop immediately and the frogmen will pull me to safety. That sign couldn't be easier or more apt. I'm supposed to press my palms together in front of my face and pray.

"Brace for water impact," the instructor shouts. The cockpit shudders, the Dunker drops, and we hit the pool. Water surges through the floor and windows, and I try to focus on my goal: timing it just right so I inhale one big gulp of air before going under. But the cabin suddenly lurches and plunges and it feels like I'm being sucked down a giant drain. I barely capture a mouthful of oxygen, let alone a deep breath. I curse to myself. As the water whooshes to the ceiling and the cabin spins and sinks, the twirling and churning sensation feels thrilling, but then I see only bubbles. The world goes white. The big blue gondola settles at the bottom of the pool. Upside down, fifteen feet underwater, and buckled into a metal canister, I'm completely disoriented. The first twinges of alarm ripple through my brain: *How long will I last? Can I get out? Will I survive?*

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INTRODUCTION

The Survivors Club

The field is known as “human factors in survival.” Translation: Why do some people live and others die? How do certain people make it through the most difficult trials while others don’t? Why do a few stay calm and collected under extreme pressure when others panic and unravel? How do some bounce back from adversity while others collapse and surrender?

This book answers those questions. It shares the true stories of regular people who have been profoundly tested by life—men and women who have been beaten down, sometimes literally flattened. It explores how ordinary folks somehow manage to pick themselves up, again and again, in the face of overwhelming odds. It investigates whether survivors are different from you and me. And it dissects the mind-set and habits that are shared by the most effective survivors. In short, it unlocks the secrets of who lives and who dies and shows how you can improve your chances in virtually any crisis.

At the outset, I’d like to put a few things on the table. Almost everyone I know has faced—or is coping with—some kind of serious challenge or adversity. I wrote this book for them and for myself. While I certainly haven’t been tested like the survivors in these pages, I’ve hit some bumps and experienced my

share of loss and grief. My father was in excellent health when he died suddenly at age sixty-four from a massive and inexplicable brain bleed. Defying the probabilities, my mother has beaten back ovarian cancer for nine years, always deflecting credit to the aggressive treatment orchestrated by her superb oncologist. As a journalist, I've had a few close scrapes and witnessed plenty of tragedy. In August 1992, while covering the bloody siege of Sarajevo for ABC News, I was sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with a veteran producer and friend named David Kaplan when he was fatally wounded by a sniper. A nine-millimeter bullet ripped through the back door of our Volkswagen van, pierced David's back, and severed his pulmonary artery. French combat surgeons fought to save him, but his injuries were too grave. It was pure chance that he—not I—ended up in that fatal middle seat, which had seemed the safest spot, away from the windows.

I've always been something of a control freak, so each of these events called everything into question. Why do healthy people drop dead without reason? How can cancer strike those who aren't at risk? Why do bullets find one victim and not another? Perhaps in an attempt to regain some command, I began to ask: Are there any hidden ways to improve the odds? If "no one here gets out alive," as Jim Morrison sings, what are the tricks of sticking around as long as possible? My search produced this book, and the answers are both humbling and comforting. When it comes to survival, as you'll see, there's a whole lot that you can't control, and a surprising amount that you can.

A few other disclaimers: I'm not a survivalist or an outdoorsman. I don't stockpile canned goods and I'm not preparing for Armageddon, although I did buy emergency kits for my car and home while researching this book. I'm a city guy, a journalist, and an occasional novelist. I've spent most of my life asking questions and I've always been drawn to stories of people under pressure. I remember the summer at age ten when I began to read