

SEA SURVIVAL TRAINING

BY

LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER V. J. SHERRATT, R.N.
(Phoenix NBCD School)

ABSTRACT

Hypothermia and exposure cause many deaths after abandoning ship. Survival equipment is available and training courses ensure its effective use.

The Problem

Many incidents have proved how dangerous the sea can be: the *Herald of Free Enterprise*, the Fastnet Race, H.M.S. *Glorious*, and the *Titanic*, to name but a few. The Royal Navy lost over 50 000 personnel during World War II. Of this number approximately 45 000 had abandoned ships and two-thirds of these died after surviving for some time in the water. Because of this fact, a committee under the chairmanship of Admiral Talbot was formed in 1946, to find out why so many men lost their lives.

The committee established that the lifesaving equipment of the day was totally inadequate. Hypothermia and exposure were major reasons for many fatal casualties and adequate protection in a cold environment would greatly improve a man's chances of survival.

The learning process and research into the problems of surviving at sea have continued to the present day, and have led to the development of some of the best survival equipment in the world. Furthermore, there is now a far better understanding of the effects of cold on the human body (see FIG. 1), as a result of work at the Institute of Naval Medicine.

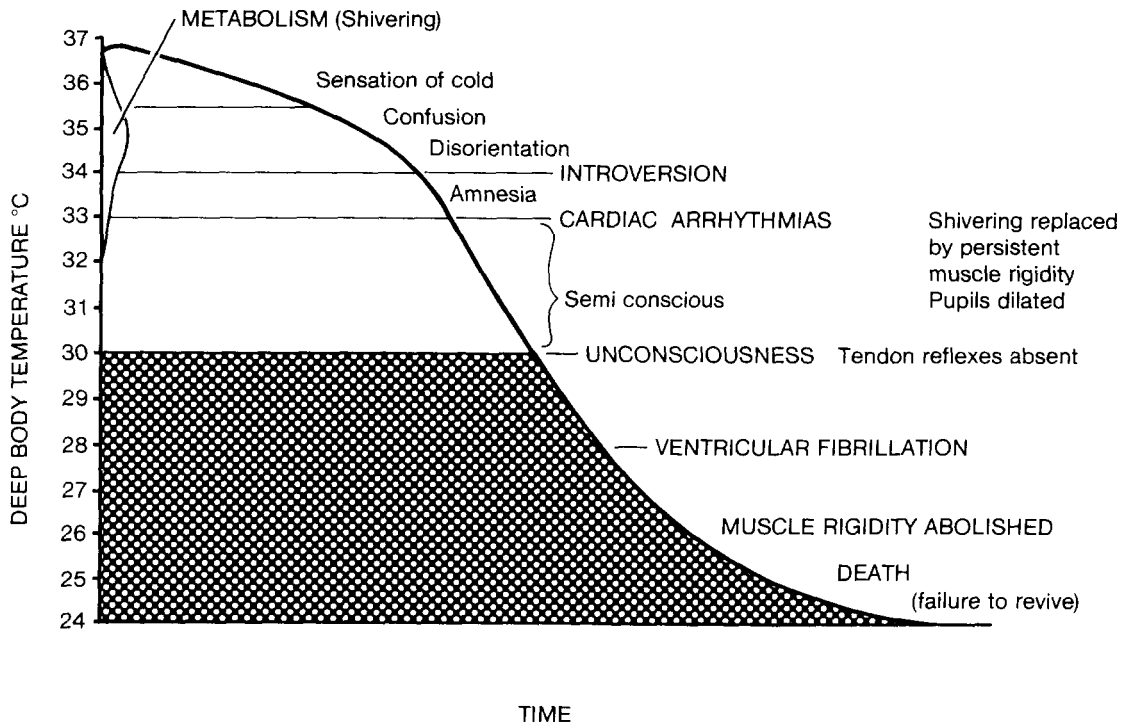


FIG. 1—THE EFFECT OF COLD ON THE HUMAN BODY

Based on work carried out at the Institute of Naval Medicine

Equipment is available to enable personnel to survive; but the equipment is only as good as the user and to gain full benefit adequate training is essential. Sea Survival training is by no means new to the Royal Navy, although in the past its importance has not been fully recognized and the expertise has been restricted to relatively few people.

All naval personnel are given a basic introduction to Sea Survival Equipment when they join the new entry establishments of H.M.S. *Raleigh* and the Britannia Royal Naval College Dartmouth. Seamen of all ranks receive further training when they attend specialist career courses at the Seamanship School, H.M.S. *Nelson* (Gunwharf), formerly H.M.S. *Vernon*.

The Royal Naval Survival Equipment School (RNSES) at Seaford Park, near Fareham, provides courses for instructors, as well as others who need to be familiar with sea survival procedures and the maintenance of the equipment. The RNSES also operates a mobile Sea Survival classroom and information vehicle which tours dockyards and establishments throughout the country.

The Falklands Factor

The Falklands War of 1982, in which several ships were sunk, highlighted the need for a greater awareness of survival techniques and equipment. As a result of the lessons learned from that campaign, the Admiralty Board approved the implementation of a Basic Sea Safety Course (BSSC) for ratings before their first sea draft and an Intermediate Sea Safety Course (ISSC) for officers and senior ratings. Each course lasts a week and covers NBCD, firefighting and one day's Sea Survival. The first BSSC in September 1986 was a major step in ensuring that all Royal Navy personnel going to sea would have a thorough knowledge of survival principles and techniques in the event of a maritime disaster.

On the 5 February 1988 Phoenix NBCD School became the lead school for Sea Survival Training in the Royal Navy, enabling a common standard of training to be achieved. The monitoring of this common standard is now the responsibility of the Sea Survival Standards Team (SSST) based at the RNSES.

Survival Course Content

The one-day Sea Survival Module of a BSSC or ISSC is carried out at the Sea Survival Training Centre at Horsea Island, Portsmouth. Classes are currently restricted to a maximum of twenty-four students, but plans are in hand to enlarge the Training Centre so that this number can be doubled. Horsea Island's windswept salt water lake and the enthusiastically manned hoses of the local fire brigade enable the training staff to create some of the problems that students can expect to encounter when trying to survive at sea. Furthermore, the lake temperature falls to almost freezing point in winter and conditions become ideal for 'getting the message across', especially when the practical part of the course is as follows:

Phase 1:

- (a) The correct jumping procedure when abandoning ship.
- (b) Use of hood and visor.
- (c) Righting an upturned liferaft.
- (d) Boarding a liferaft unaided.
- (e) Casualty handling.

Phase 2: An exercise to test the ability of the class in a survival situation. Students are given a comprehensive brief in the classroom on other aspects of sea survival, including:

- (a) The basic principles of survival.
- (b) Survival requirements.
- (c) Raftsmanship.
- (d) Medical aspects of survival—cold-related problems.
- (e) Experience from the Falklands.
- (f) Contents of survival drums.

The latest videos are also shown—‘Abandon Ship’, ‘The Sea Can Kill’ and ‘Cold Shock’.

The one-day course in Sea Survival at Horsea Island does not qualify a man to survive, but forms a basis upon which to build. Continuation training should of course follow on board ship.

Conclusions

Sea Survival Training has improved dramatically since the Falklands War. Practical training in ships is encouraged in order to remind personnel of the emergency procedures and the available equipment.

Remember: you are not a survivor until you have been rescued, and death is nature’s way of saying ‘You should have completed a Sea Survival Training Course’.