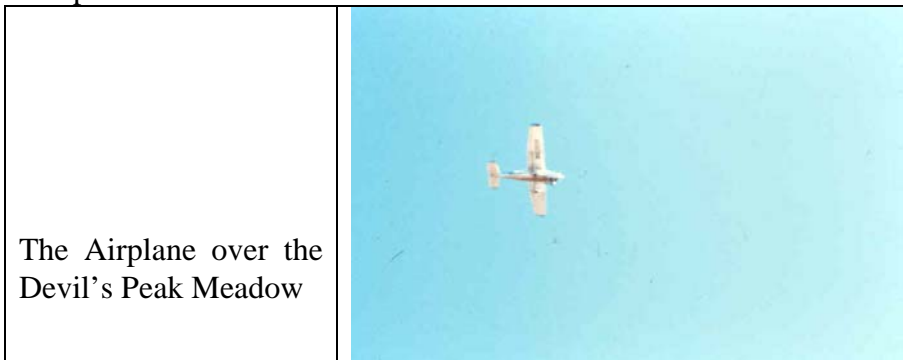


Mountain Survival Signals

The Cadet Corps program at La Sierra, San Juan, El Camino and Grant spent a long weekend in the Sierra's near Camp Winthers putting into practice the Mountain Survival techniques they had learned in the classroom. Sometimes it was possible to arrange to have a member of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) fly over our mountain survival bivouac held at the base of Devil's Peak on the Soda Springs quadrangle map and drop a small package of survival rations and/or candy if they were able to see the air to ground signals that the Cadets constructed on this yearly Mountain Survival Bivouac. The Civil Air Patrol pilots used our survival bivouac as an excuse to get a small airplane into the air and practice their air-ground search skills.

Usually, these afternoon Civil Air Patrol visits only added realism to the Mountain Survival Bivouac and motivated Cadets to do an especially good job building their survival signals. However, one year our signals were especially successful and we were in for quite a surprise.

On clear Saturday morning at about 10:30 a.m., I noticed a small single-engine airplane circling at a high altitude over our camp area. The Cadets, who were still busy building their ground to air survival signals for an expected afternoon drop of rations stopped their construction and immediately begin using their survival signal mirrors to flash the aircraft. (They often attempted to flash aircraft that flew over the area in the past.) The small plane left the area, only to return again in a few minutes. This time the plane was at a lower altitude. Again the Cadets used their signal mirrors to flash the plane. It made one pass and then left the area.



Just after noon, the small plane was back over the bivouac area and this time it was flying even lower than before. They dropped something that looked like a long white streamer. This surprised me as nothing like this had been arraigned with the CAP and it had never happened before. The streamer landed in the middle of the open meadow area and the Cadets ran out to retrieve it, expecting survival rations, candy or some other treat. What they found seemed very strange at the time. There was a message that said: "You are saved, help is on the way!" which was found inside of what was left of a roll of toilet paper. Evidently, this was the streamer that had been dropped from the airplane.

This was not what I had expected to be dropped and it was just a little too early. What was supposed to have been dropped was an ammunition can filled with candy that I had previously given to the CAP. It was to have been connected to a small orange and white parachute. At the time, I thought that the flyover must have been another CAP pilot who had found out about our bivouac or that the package of candy had somehow been forgotten or lost. In any case, this drop added the realism of an airdrop to our survival bivouac which is what I really wanted.

The Candy Drop – An ammunition can suspended from a small parachute (Center of the Picture)



However, at about 2:00 PM, the expected time for the CAP drop another small airplane arrived over our survival area. This plane made a couple of low passes, then came in very low over the meadow area and dropped the green ammunition can connected to a small parachute. This can of candy was quickly recovered by the Cadets. Their actions were perfect as they held the can and parachute over their heads when the plane came back to see if they had received the drop. It wagged its wings back and forth to show that they knew the drop had been successful.

A Cadet showing the CAP Pilot that he had successfully recovered the air delivered package



I was impressed and could not wait to talk to my CAP friend after the bivouac to see what the first plane was all about. After the last pass of the airplane the candy was distributed to everyone on the bivouac. We spent some time discussing the signals and the actions that the Cadets had taken after the delivery to show the pilot that we had actually received a box of candy and then didn't think much more about the other two flights. The rest of the afternoon was spent completed required survival tasks. I did conclude that the low flyovers had made for some very effective survival signal training that we had ever had.

Just before sunset I was surprised in the meadow area at the base of Devil's Peak by a four-wheel drive Placer County Sheriff's Office vehicle that drove up. We seldom ever saw anyone on our survival bivouacs. A four-wheel-drive vehicle was, and is, still required to drive into the area at the base of Devil's Peak. One of the deputies told me that they had spent most of the afternoon on a search and rescue mission on the other side of Devil's Peak. He said that they had received a report from a pilot that there were several people including a pregnant woman in trouble that needed to be rescued. He asked me if I knew of anyone that was in trouble.

At this point, I realized that the first plane to come over our survival area must NOT have been from the Civil Air Patrol and did not realize that our survival bivouac was only a training exercise for high-school Cadets. I told sheriff's deputy about our survival bivouac, our ground to air signals, and the strange message that had been inside the roll of toilet paper dropped by the airplane. I also told them about the coordination with the CAP and their airdrop of candy to our group. The two sheriff's deputies seemed a little bit upset about wasting their day looking for people who didn't the need to be rescued. They took down my name and address and left the area as it was starting to get dark.

We had been careful to construct a ground to air signal of "LL" which is an easy to build, internationally recognized signal that means "all is well." One of the earlier Civil Air Patrol pilots had suggested that we use this signal rather than an "F" for food or an "X" for unable to proceed just in case someone else saw the signal from the air. At that point, I was glad that I had taken his advice. I really didn't think that there would be any kind of a problem.

However, I was surprised the following week at school when I received a letter that included a bill from the Placer County Sheriff's Office to pay for their unnecessary search and rescue activities behind Devil's Peak during our survival bivouac. I was both concerned and surprised. We had done everything correctly and should not have had to pay for the sheriff's mistake.

Before the bivouac, I had sent letters with information about our survival bivouac to both the Placer County Sheriff's Office and the Nevada County Sheriff's Office as our bivouac area was near the border between the two counties. I had included a copy of the letter from the Southern Pacific Land Co., a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad whose land we were using for the bivouac which granted us permission to use the land and to build camp fires if we had camp fire permits.

I immediately telephoned the Placer County Sheriff's office about the bill and told them about the letter I had sent and explained the survival trip and our "LL" ground to air signal constructed for the Civil Air Patrol air drop. After a few minutes on hold, the dispatcher that I spoke with came back on the telephone and apologized for the bill and told me not to worry about it. Evidently, my letter had been placed in the dispatcher's logbook but had not been briefed to the officers working that day and was not read when the report from the first pilot came in. As a result, they had dispatched a search and rescue mission by mistake. Everything could have been avoided if someone had just remembered to read my letter that day. That letter and the "LL" signals that we had used for the exercise saved the day.

One thing was very clear after this bivouac. The air to ground signals and the survival mirrors that we used were very effective at attracting the attention of pilots flying small airplanes flying over our bivouac area. All of my students were impressed. A survival mirror became a permanent part of my wilderness survival kit. Everyone now had the confidence that ground to air signals and a survival mirror would work if they were ever needed.