

WILL TO SURVIVE

BY JOAN GARRETT

WANT TO VISIT THE AMAZON,
WANT TO SEE SOUTHEAST ASIA?

ARE YOU WILLING TO
KILL YOUR OWN FOOD,
SEARCH FOR YOUR WATER?

CAN YOU BUILD
YOUR OWN SHELTER?

WILL YOU SLOSH THROUGH
SWAMPS, FEND OFF
SNAKES AND RISK
LIFE AND LIMB?

WILL YOU FIGHT TO STAY ALIVE?

IF SO, WE'VE GOT THE
PERFECT TOUR GUIDE
FOR YOU.

EVERY YEAR, THEY DROP PEOPLE OFF
IN THE AMAZON JUNGLE
OR THE WOODS OF THE SOUTHEAST
AND EXPECT THEM TO COME BACK ALIVE.



Don't get Jeff Randall started on "Bear" Grylls and the countless other survivalists trekking through most people's dens via reality TV.

When the Southeast survival kingpin speaks about the "Man vs. Wild" star, about the whole survivalist craze spurred by popular television, about the people who

think getting close to death is a rush, about the political crazies who expect the world to go to hell any day now, he gets really serious.

He'll lean into his heavy forearms and look you straight in the eye and make you wish you had never asked. His eyes get glassy, his hands thick enough to crack coconuts.

"All these survival shows are bullshit," says Randall as he

prepares to order dinner at the Cracker Barrel off I-24 at the bottom of Lookout Mountain. "We don't play that game."

Sure, it's great television—building rafts to hop islands, running through forest fires, using urine soaked T-shirts to beat desert heat, sleeping in a sheep carcass. Amateur stuff, he'll say.

"I don't think the world is going to

end. I just don't believe all that," says Randall. "We are not out here to be entertainers or to attract all the nuts."

There is survival for the cameras, and there is survival to survive.

Randall is in the business of the latter, and it's a scary business. Just ask.

For 15 years, Randall, 48, and his friend, Mike Perrin, 59, have been running Randall's Adventure

and Training out of North Alabama. Every year, they drop people off in the Amazon jungle or the woods of the Southeast and expect them to come back alive.

At Cracker Barrel, Randall meets with his team, a burly but tender sheriff's deputy from Whitfield County and Perrin, a wiry, gray-haired

flirt from around Knoxville. Every now and then they meet here to load up on catfish and biscuits and talk shop.

The team agrees that knowing how to survive on little to nothing is good, but air-conditioning and high-calorie country cooking is better.

This night, they talk about

the business of their knife and survival equipment company, ESEE Knives, and the deputy, Patrick Rollins, debriefs them on the most recent training trip to Peru. The class included an emergency worker, an anthropologist and a construction worker and they just returned state-side a few weeks ago.





SURVIVE & THRIVE

Every year RAT holds five or so trainings that range in cost from \$300 to \$1,400. Airline pilots come to learn how to live in situations that sound like television scripts. Federal agencies send people to get trained. So do military branches. Other countries send agents, too. Search and rescue workers come to learn how to track humans and find their way when lost.

“What drives our business is not the survival market as much as corporations needing to learn certain skills; individuals, law enforcement, rescue personnel and other government agents who may have a need for these skills,” explains Randall. “We train people so that others, as well as the student, may

survive should they be placed in a situation that requires these skills. Period.”

In May, Randall and his team will take a group to the Philippines for six days for what they call the Southeast Asia Jungle Survival Course. The schedule online explains that they will hunt frogs and bats daily, make eating utensils out of bamboo and learn to make signal fires.

Sounds innocent enough. A brief disclaimer follows.

“You will be in the middle of the largest and most diverse jungle on Earth. Should an accident or injury occur, we will make every effort to evacuate you to civilization and primary care. But we

make no safety guarantees due to the remote nature of these trips! Each person participates at their own risk!”

To survive, students learn the five key aspects of living in the wild: food, fire, water, shelter and navigation. Many of the practices are passed down from the natives, says Perrin.

But first participants, who must be 18 or older, sign a lot of forms, fill out medical histories and background papers. “Our classes are pretty extreme,” says Randall. “We throw people out there with basically nothing.”

The whole venture started in the mid 1990s. Randall, who once owned a machine shop and was an internal project manager for Motorola, had always been interested in the outdoors and started writing freelance pieces for outdoor magazines. In 1992, he went to Peru to write about a man who trained survivalists in the jungle.

When the guy left the business behind because of legal issues several years later, Randall took it on and since 1995 he’s nearly filled up two passports with trips to South America. He built relationships with the local law enforcement and began charting trips with Perrin. At first they relied on the Peruvian military to conduct training, but turbulent politics in the country forced him to train people himself.

Over the years, he gained brutal experience. Once, he survived three weeks with nothing. He’s eaten monkey brains, a toucan, a macaw, ocelot, snakes, turtles and a sloth. He’s had a drug dealer put a gun to his head. His 12-year-old daughter Mattie, who lives on the family farm near Gadsden, Ala. with her mother, worries about her dad while he is gone.

But somehow, he always makes it back.



“WE THROW PEOPLE OUT THERE WITH BASICALLY NOTHING”





WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

The secret to surviving, Randall says, is improvisation, thinking on your feet. And living is more of a mental than physical struggle. He's seen muscled gym rats break down and cry the first night. He's seen women sail through. People have begged him to take them home. "We want them to be hungry. We want them to be without water," he says. "Stress is what screws people up. Immediate traumatic situations."

On the last trip to Peru, the group got off the plane with six things — mosquito nets, machetes, ponchos, knives, first aid kits and canteens, says Rollins. He warned them about the heat, the rain and the snakes.

If you get a hot bite, you will probably die before we can get you out of there.

The next morning they took a boat 175 miles up the Amazon River and stepped off into thick brush with no path and no plan. For miles, all day, they slash through

with machetes. Thousands of bugs ascend on their skin.

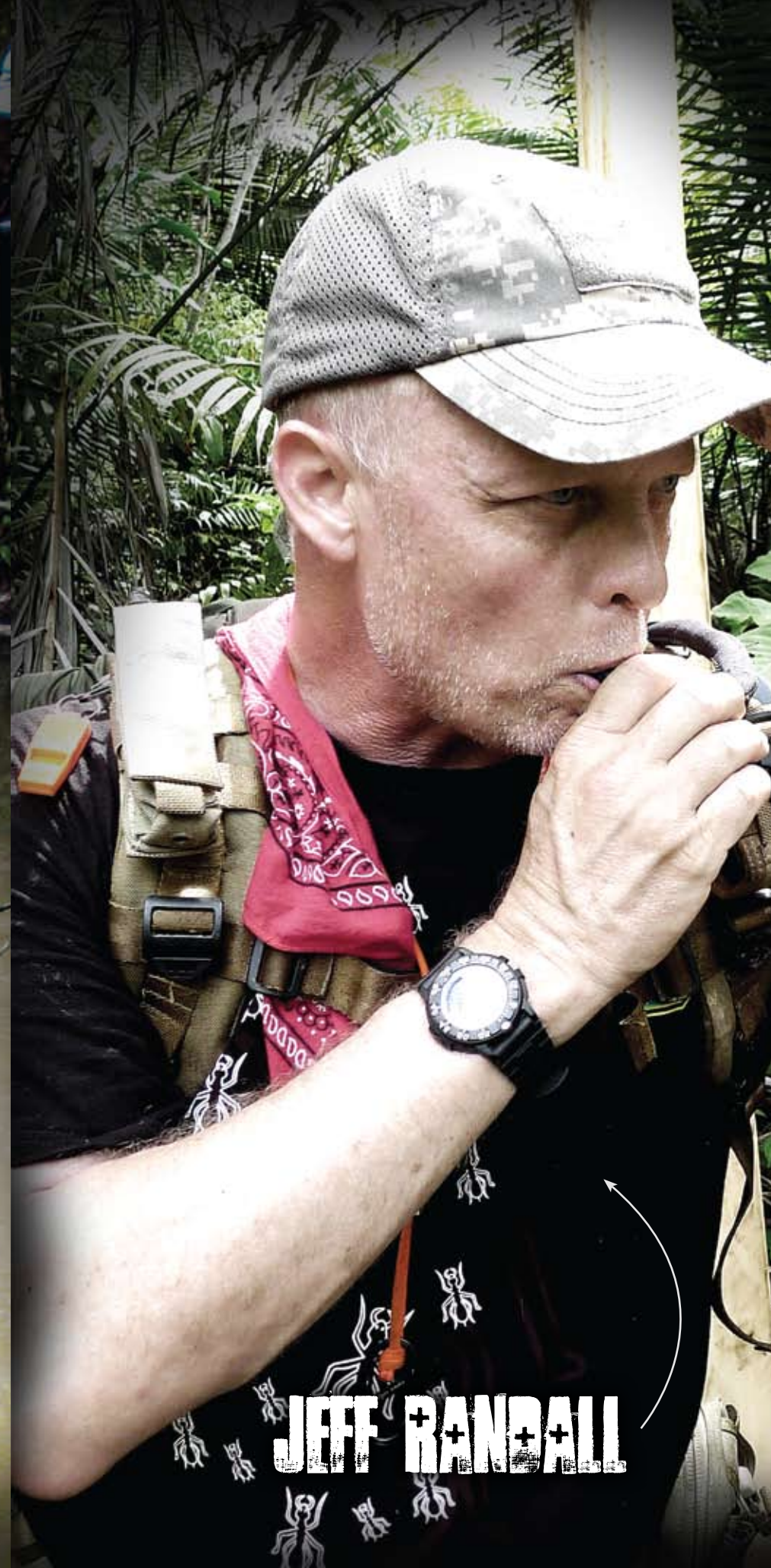
At night, itching and hungry, they build a swamp bed made of saplings. The next day they learn to kill to eat. Usually Rollins buys a dead chicken at the market the day before and teaches the group how to skin and cook it so they won't feel squeamish in the coming days.

Most will kill an animal for the first time in the jungle those days, he says. It can be unnerving.

They build snares and fires and skin animals and fish. By the end, if everyone lives (thankfully, there has been no major injury or death on the trips) they go to a village the last night and drink the pain away.

Randall and Perrin have a favorite village known for its wild parties that they often use to let off steam and get in a few laughs.

"They learn a lot about themselves and the misery that they can put up with," says Rollins. "A lot of them do it just to say they did."



JEFF RANDALL

WORDS TO LIVE BY

"Some type of communication device (that works) is probably the best survival item you can have. Why worry about trying to build shelter and find water if you can simply dial 911 or hit the button on your PLB (Personal Locator Beacon)?" advises Jeff Randall. "Again, we're realists with a goal of keeping people alive the simplest way possible. PLBs are reasonable in price now and work anywhere in the world. Anyone who travels in remote areas should always have one."

"With that said, anyone who wanders into the woods should ALWAYS have basic survival gear in case their electronic commo gadget fails," he adds. "If you don't have a way to communicate immediately then I would say stick to the basic survival priorities when you wander into the woods."

- + **Water** (a container to gather it in)
- + **Shelter** (poncho, space blankets, large contractor garbage bags, extra socks and a jacket — no matter if it is 90 degrees outside)
- + **Fire** (3 sources: waterproof matches, Bic lighter, Ferrocerium rod)
- + **First Aid** (basic first aid kit to include your prescription meds and spare glasses)
- + **Navigation** (map and compass of the area)
- + **Rescue** (signaling devices such as whistles and signal mirrors)

"But, number one above all those I listed, is the will to survive and proper mindset. Without that and basic survival knowledge, tools are pretty much useless. For the most part, surviving is about accepting your current situation and going forward one step at a time. If you choose to complain, whine or panic over your situation then you will only make your situation worse."