

# Danger Zone

With journalists facing ever increasing danger in the field, how can hostile environment training help lower the risks? **Susan Thompson** donned her flak jacket and went to find out

**S**pend a week on a hostile environment course and you'll never watch a Hollywood battle scene in the same way again. Remember that helicopter chase in *Rambo*? The one where Sly Stallone fires a shoulder-mounted rocket? If he had done this in real life, he would have blown up his own chopper because of the back blast. And a note to all Hollywood action heroes – a car door is not going to protect you from a bullet, even a low-velocity one.

I'm sounding like an anorak, I know. But attention to detail is essential if you are part of a crew reporting from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Yemen, Palestine... And while *Broadcast* has no immediate plans to send me to Kabul to report on the state of TV in Afghanistan, I was asked to go along and check out just how helpful these courses are.

The course I'm attending is run by Centurion, a company which has been training media and aid workers, who are preparing to work in volatile areas, for over 10 years.

Currently based in Heckfield Place, a rambling country estate outside Reading, the company was founded by ex-Royal Marine Paul Rees in 1995. Rees, who was trained in jungle warfare, had been working in the public relations office in the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall when he was approached by the BBC to train one of its journalists. He spent a day with the reporter teaching him the do's and don't's of surviving in a jungle. The idea took off from there.

It costs £1,725 for the five-day media course which runs almost all year round. Centurion also provides three-day training for aid workers and refresher courses which it recommends journalists take every three years. Such is the demand from US organisations for training, Centurion has also opened an office in Virginia.

Today, there are eight of us in total from all over the globe and our course is run by a team of 10 ex-Marines.

I do wonder at first why one attendee, the Reuters cameraman from Somalia, Farah Roble Aden, needs to learn about hostile environments when he lives and works in one already. Farah has captured on camera some shocking stuff in his time, including the aftermath of the US Embassy bombing in Nairobi in 1998.

Course co-ordinator Tim Holleran explains that even people they've had on the course who have spent a reasonable amount of time out in war zones realise they may have been doing the wrong thing all their professional lives – and have survived more by luck than judgement. "And on the other side," he says, "the courses themselves are better when you have people who have had a bit of experience, like Farah from Somalia or Ange Aboa [a Reuters stringer] from West Africa. In some of the scenarios they have input which helps those who haven't been to a hostile environment to understand."

We start off in the classroom, where emphasis is placed on first aid, followed by a range of outdoor exercises. Staged emergencies include a mine explosion near a refugee camp, with mass casualties and a car crash, both involving fake blood and dangling limbs.

There are also lessons in weapons and ballistics awareness, hostage abduction, personal protective equipment, danger areas, resuscitation, observation, vehicle checkpoints, mines and booby traps and cold climate environment training. Through role-play, live encounters, lectures and videos, we are told how to react to almost every threat we could expect to confront on assignment.

How to get out of a minefield with all your limbs intact is taught by a



married couple fondly referred to by all the ex-Marines as "Mr and Mrs Semtex". Between them, there isn't much they don't know about explosions.

It's fascinating – but also sobering. One of the things you learn is that there is no quick way out of a minefield. And according to Mr Semtex, aka Dave Thomson, the best way is with a barbecue skewer, which you should bend in half and carry with you at all times. The skewer must be inserted into the ground at an angle no greater than 30 degrees and at a depth of 50mm. If you are unsure what type of landmine is used in the area then the minimum distance between insertions is 25mm. Basically it takes a long time to poke your way out of a minefield and if you are trying to carry an injured colleague, it can get very messy.

Thomson says that out of the hundreds of people he has taught this technique to, two have got in touch with him to say it has saved their lives.

Another exercise is the "bag-over-head" style hostage scenario. Centurion prefer this is not written about in too much detail, as it is likely to spoil the shock factor for future course attendees... suffice to say the "victims" are removed of all personal items – cigarettes, mobile phones, jewellery – and guns are

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cocked and held to heads or jammed into their backs.

As Jake Britton, a freelance soundman who has been sent on the course by Sky News, explains: "You are taught to keep your mouth shut and do what you are told. Especially for blokes, who tend to be more combative, it's drummed home that it is best to keep quiet."

All eight of us on the course are guilty of moments of naivety, even the most experienced. One journalist asks if soldiers are made aware of the media's whereabouts. Former marine Holleran quickly knocks that notion on the head. "Why would they be?" he asks. "If you're going to stick yourself in the middle of a war zone... I'm not saying people should be killed and injured but they are and anyone can be."

He adds: "What you may think is a totally innocent action, to soldiers, who have to react quickly and at a distance, it can look suspicious. Especially if they have just been shot at by a load of guys with RPG-7s and someone comes into view with a camera on his shoulder. People say surely soldiers should be well trained enough to avoid that – they put the onus on the soldiers rather than the media people who should be thinking a little bit more."

The instructors often refer to CBS correspondent Kimberley Dozier during the training. Dozier had kept in close contact with the ex-Marines after attending one of

Centurion's five-day courses. She would keep them up to date with any developments which could be passed on to other journalists. She was also instrumental in helping Centurion set up its US base in Virginia.

But earlier this year Dozier was critically wounded in Iraq by the same Memorial Day bomb that killed CBS soundman James Brolan and cameraman Paul Douglas. The three journalists, who were embedded with the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, were doing a Memorial Day story about what life is like for the troops in Baghdad when an explosives-packed car blew up nearby.

Dozier's story is a stark reminder to us all that even the most experienced journalists get hurt. It also highlights how Iraq is a new breed of hostile environment. According to the International News Safety Institute, 159 journalists and crew have been killed since the war started in March 2003.

Sandy MacIntyre, director of news for AP Television News, says that at the moment AP has between 70 and 100 staff in Iraq and, in his 25 years as a journalist, it is easily the most dangerous place he has ever had crew working from.

Holleran agrees: "Iraq has changed a lot – the war was the easy bit. The problem has been the

## HOW THE EXPERTS CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE



We learn to identify a variety of firearms



Afternoon stroll – a wooded path littered with mortars, grenades and trip wires. We are told to hit the deck at the first hint of danger



The instructor explains about the deadly effects of shrapnel

Helmets can protect you from shrapnel travelling at up to 350 mph. Journalists should wear the best vests commercially available. The National Institute of Justice recommends IIIA.



## AP AND BROADCAST SET UP FREELANCER BURSARY

Broadcast's sister brand Broadcast Freelancer has teamed up with AP to offer a bursary through the Rory Peck Trust for a freelancer to complete a hazardous environment training course.

The course will cover basics such as ballistics awareness, how to react to a hostage taking, some golden rules on health and hygiene in remote areas and the pros and cons of wearing personal protective equipment.

The bursary will cover the costs of a freelancer completing the course and the successful candidate will be selected by a panel of industry figures. The AP and Broadcast Freelancer bursary will begin next year and be administered by the Rory Peck Trust. Details of the scheme will be published in the new year on [broadcastfreelancer.co.uk](http://broadcastfreelancer.co.uk) and on the trust's website at [www.rorypecktrust.org/training](http://www.rorypecktrust.org/training)