

## ***How to stay alive in a hostile situation***

*09 Mar 06, Broadcast*

Increasingly, journalists are risking their lives to report from war zones, but, with the dangers rising, news organisations are paying more attention to keeping their staff safe from harm. Robert Gray reports.

Last month, Atwar Bahjat, a 30-year-old TV journalist for the Dubai-based al-Arabiya news channel, went to report on the bombing that devastated the sacred Shia shrine in Samarra, Iraq and inflamed sectarian Islamic tensions. While researching her story, the well-respected frontline correspondent and two of her colleagues were mercilessly targeted by gunmen. Their bodies were later discovered near their satellite van after a fourth member of the crew was fortunate enough to escape unscathed.

These deaths illustrate all too vividly the risks inherent in reporting from the world's trouble spots. Al-Arabiya alone has now lost 11 employees since the US-led invasion of Iraq began in 2003 out of a total of more than 80 journalists and media assistants to have perished there over the past three years.

Iraq is not the only place in the world where TV crews risk paying the ultimate price for their endeavours. According to the organisation Reporters Without Borders, 63 journalists were killed worldwide in 2005, up from 53 the year before and 40 in 2003. Newsgathering can be a dangerous business and newer lightweight cameras and editing equipment has given TV journalists access to remote and often inhospitable areas where filming was previously more difficult.

Reporters on the ground risk being caught in the crossfire, and in some regions face kidnap, or as was the case with the unfortunate Bahjat, being deliberately singled out for slaughter. The conventions of war reporting have changed in recent years - with journalists and crews now viewed as legitimate targets in many conflict zones.

All the major UK-based TV news organisations have tightened up on health and safety procedures over the past few years and now insist that anyone working in dangerous territory must first undertake hostile environment training. This is usually a week-long course with a specialist external training company, then a refresher course a few years later.

"It is mandatory at ITN that any member of staff assigned to a hostile environment attends a course," says ITN health and safety manager Steve Nicklin. "We would also check whether any freelancer we use has been through such a course, too. They also have to undertake a refresher course at three-yearly intervals."

Reuters managing editor, Europe, Middle East and Africa, Michael Lawrence says that since 1997, the news organisation has put roughly 1,000 people through hostile environment training courses. Associated Press estimates that around 700 staff and regular freelancers have been trained since 2000, while BBC managing editor, newsgathering, Sarah Ward-Lilley says around 70 BBC personnel attended a full six-day hostile environment training course in the past year, with a further 30 or so undertaking refresher courses. "Although you would mainly expect this sort of thing to be for the news teams, these courses run for all the other parts of the BBC as well," says Ward-Lilley. "We might have a team from Trauma Team or the Natural History Unit looking for wildlife in a difficult area."

Large news organisations are usually more than willing to pay for their regular freelancers to attend

hostile environment courses. Some, such as BBC News, Channel 4, CNN and Bloomberg, also support the Rory Peck Trust, which provides bursaries for freelance newsgatherers to attend safety training courses - as well as making discretionary grants to the families of freelancers killed while on assignment.

The Trust will pay up to 75% of the course cost, to a ceiling of £750, leaving the freelance to fund the rest themselves. To qualify, you must have worked as a freelancer for at least 18 months, and as bursaries are understandably limited, priority will be given to those whose work habitually takes them to dangerous places or who have a confirmed assignment in a hostile region.

Some training providers offer discounted rates to individuals. Centurion Risk Assessment Services, whose clients include ITN and Reuters, charges a corporate rate of £1,725 + VAT for its week-long hostile environment course, but only £1,000 inclusive of VAT for those with a Rory Peck bursary - leaving just £250 for the individual to pay.

Given the specialist nature of hostile environment training, there are only a handful of credible suppliers in the market, all run by ex-military personnel. The Rory Peck Trust has four approved course providers: Centurion, AKE and Objective Team for hostile environment training and The CBRN Team (formerly known as Bruhn NewTech) for a specialist chemical, biological and radiological threats course.

There are a couple of other established companies in the hostile environments niche, notably Pilgrims Group and TOR International, which has a three-year contract with the BBC. Many of these companies also provide on-the-ground security services to media companies, NGOs and corporations active in hotspots, offer public disorder/riot situation training and can develop ad hoc or country-specific courses if necessary.

But just how helpful are these courses to journalists and crew? Do attendees leave courses better equipped to stay safe? Are lessons put into practice? What, if anything, would reporters like to see included on the standard hostile environment courses? And how do course providers ensure course content is relevant and up-to-date, given the fast-changing circumstances in unstable areas of the world?

Insight News TV managing director Ron McCullagh went on the first course run by AKE, just over 10 years ago. He found the practical first aid elements very useful and the details of "a bullet travelling through human flesh" extremely sobering.

"The fact that we were being trained by highly skilled and experienced soldiers helped a lot," says McCullagh. "They won the whole course over very quickly with their common sense and often shocking stories of their own experiences. Andy McNab, the author of *Bravo Two Zero*, was one of the course tutors. What was drilled into us was the need to act quickly and decisively in a medical emergency.

"Overall, the course demanded that we all open our eyes to all the factors we should be considering in a given situation. You didn't get all the answers, no course could do that, but it did explain how broad your thinking needs to be. I wouldn't let anyone work in risk areas without going on this or a similar course."

McCullagh says that how not to stick out in a battlefield and the importance of planning were among the key points he took from the course. He is adamant that one course is insufficient for regulars on the frontline, as lessons can be forgotten and bad habits creep into working practices after time, and advocates refresher courses be taken at least once a year.

McCullagh and his colleagues have over the years had occasion to put training into practice. "Four of our colleagues were jailed in Liberia for a capital offence in 2000. The hostage situation training we had helped us plan how to get them released. They were released after a week. Swedish freelancer Martin Adler helped a wounded cameraman in the Balkans and in every trip I've done I've used lots of tips and ideas we discussed on the course."

Channel 4 News international editor Lindsey Hilsum describes her experiences of hostile environment training by Centurion as "really useful", with first aid and situation awareness training - such as observing what is happening around you - as being particularly helpful. The course involved "yomping" around the countryside and exercises on awareness, which Hilsum says she puts into practice all the time.

Hilsum also has some criticisms, however. "I felt that as ex-British Army guys, they weren't always aware of how journalists operate. They assumed women would be in more danger than men, which is rubbish. In my experience, it's much safer to have a mixed sex team. For example, if you come to a checkpoint run by drunken soldiers, it's safer to have women do the talking because there's less chance of them being perceived as aggressive. So while the course is good, there are still things to learn that you pass around your colleagues."

BBC special correspondent Ben Brown, a member of the News 24 presenting team, has been in more sticky situations than most. He undertook a hostile environment course several years ago and had a refresher last June.

"I was initially quite cynical about this," he admits. "Having been in a few wars, you have a slight swaggering arrogance that you've been in more dangerous places than your instructors. But journalists don't know much about first aid or ballistics - about body armour and what bullets can do. But actually all that kind of stuff is important and can save your life. The trouble with journalism in hostile environments is you get sucked into chasing the story and get blinkered to the dangers."

Brown endured the rather uncomfortable experience of seeing one of his own reports used as an example on the course of what not to do. While filming in Chile, Brown got himself into a vulnerable situation amid a throng of supporters of erstwhile leader General Pinochet and was beaten up. "It was embarrassing to watch, especially as the people who were beating me up were middle-aged housewives," he concedes.

Much more sobering was the footage of a cameraman effectively filming his own death in Bosnia, shown as an example of situation awareness. The film crew was walking down a quiet street - and the footage was shown to drive home that reporters should ask themselves questions such as, why is this street quiet?

Brown feels hostile environment courses have become increasingly sophisticated and in his experience they "simulate the fear" of assignments in dangerous places very well. Staged kidnappings, interrogation and mock executions sent a shiver down his spine.

CNN senior international correspondent Nic Robertson is, like Brown, a war zone veteran. He has been on a week-long course run by AKE and says the training was useful. One important lesson he learnt was how not to resemble the military, for example by concealing his flak jacket under other garments. "I'm putting into practice in Iraq these days what I learnt on the course," he explains. "The awareness skills are important and knowing what you should do in the event of an accident or bomb attack. I carry a personal first aid kit with me every day."

Robertson adds that next time he goes on such a course, he will ask more questions about what to do if taken hostage.

This is clearly a vexed area. Kidnappings are undertaken for different reasons - sometimes out of political or religious motivation, on other occasions purely for financial gain. Conditions on the ground change very quickly, so how do the training providers stay up-to-date with which threats are the greatest and how to mitigate risk?

The leading providers tend to supply security in the field as well as training and make sure that they glean insight and knowledge on hot-spot conditions and threats from their field security operatives. AKE, for example, says it offers country-specific courses on Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, run by trainers who have direct field experience of the country and are rotated through the operations department. Furthermore, an intelligence and analytical department allows the company to keep course content current.

Another provider, Objective Team, runs a broad range of courses, but its blue chip four-day course is run in conjunction with the **European Broadcast Union** and is based in Bavaria. What is unusual about this course is that the journalists have to film during two of the afternoons and edit for the evening news in a bid to create situations very like those in which they will have to work.

APTN, which uses Centurion as its hostile environment training and security company, has commissioned tailor-made courses for staff covering major sporting events such as the Athens Olympics. Staff covering the games received specialist training a few days before the opening ceremony on how to react if there was a terrorist attack and how to cope among large crowds. "We take safety and security very seriously," says APTN managing editor bureaus and operations Dave Modrowski. "We do not encourage our journalists to be Rambos, but we have to cover the story." It is this need to get the story that puts editorial lives on the line. But the tightening up of news organisations' health and safety policies and the growing realism and sophistication of hostile environment training courses at least ensure that journalists are more risk-aware and better equipped to deal with crisis situations should they arise.