

In Serene Setting, Real-World Dangers Journalists Learn War-Zone Tactics In Session at Airlie

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The hooded men in combat fatigues emerged from the woods as the two-car convoy reached the checkpoint. One of the men fired warning shots while his companions herded the vehicles' occupants -- American journalists -- to an isolated spot, where they were forced to their knees and interrogated.

Although this could have been Iraq, Haiti or Bosnia, it was closer to home, on the grounds of the 3,000-acre Airlie Center in Warrenton. For five days, a dozen journalists signed on for a pull-no-punches course called "Surviving Hostile Regions," taught by AKE Group, a worldwide risk-management company.

The journalists, abandoned by their instructor, a former member of the British Special Forces who was posing as a local driver, told the "terrorists" they were writing a story about orphans.

"Maybe you're spies," the leader retorted.

Finally, they were allowed to leave, minus one journalist. "Don't turn around. We keep your cars and equipment. And your friend."

As the journalists started to run, there were screams and a gunshot.

Then David, their AKE instructor, stepped forward with a clipboard and notes. The terrorists took off for a cigarette break.

"Let's talk about this. Did you lock the doors? Someone had a window open. Who had their cell phone ready to call for help? Did you ask your driver anything about where he was taking you?" David asked. Citing security reasons, the journalists and instructors in this story agreed to speak only on the condition that they be identified by their first names.

Since 1991, British-based AKE has trained more than 2,500 journalists in safety in war zones and other challenging locations. In August 2003, AKE opened a Washington office to focus more attention on North and South American clients.

AKE Senior Manager Natascha French, a former journalist with CNN, looked at more than a dozen locations before selecting Airlie for the group's U.S. training programs. "It's secluded, and there's so much space for us to conduct our scenarios," she said.

"Journalists are people who run into danger while most of the rest of us hide under the bed," said John MacGaffin, president and chief executive of AKE's U.S. company, AKE LLC. "This is a group that really needs help. They are in the most danger with the least assistance."

MacGaffin, who worked nearly 40 years with the CIA, FBI and U.S. Department of Defense and in the private sector, said AKE's phones have been ringing more frequently lately as the situation worsens in Iraq.

"We're not a high-profile 'guns and fast cars' outfit," MacGaffin said. "We're discreet. Our clients want that. We help them work with the Iraqis."

MacGaffin also gets about 50 resumes a week from people who want to join the company's security team. "I wouldn't let most of them walk my dog," he said. "We aren't a shaved heads

and Ray-Bans group. That attitude is, 'We use force to get the job done.' AKE works to create a secure environment, an environment of protection."

The company also teaches its clients how to stay safe. Monthly classes run by former U.S. and British Special Forces personnel are divided equally into medical training and security awareness. One afternoon is devoted to field exercises that AKE calls "the scenarios," where the staff tests students' knowledge and nerves.

MacGaffin called the medical training "one of AKE's greater strengths." Tony, the medical instructor, taught elite British and European military personnel for more than 20 years.

During the last morning session before the journalists headed into the field, Tony continued emergency first-aid drills in a room resembling an elegant hunting lodge.

"Everyone on the floor," he said. "Groups of four. Pick a victim. We're going to splint and immobilize a fractured femur."

As the journalists tended to their colleagues, Tony inspected their work.

"Untie that bow. It's very pretty, but his legs will wobble when you move him." He knelt and showed the student how to make a taut bandage crisscrossing the ankles.

"Okay, the Iraqis are advancing, and your vehicle is trapped in barbed wire," he said. "Now what do you do about that leg?"

"How much time have we got?" someone asked.

"The soldier whose buddy it happened to didn't have much," Tony said.

He looked around. "You're in danger. You can't just lie there. So you tell him, 'Bite down onto something, mate,' because there's going to be a bit o' screaming going on. And drag 'im out of there."

Later he asked, "Is there a moral dilemma in hearing someone screaming and realizing to go help will pose further risks?"

When no one spoke, he said: "It's a hard call, isn't it? There are no right or wrong answers in this course. On your head be it, mate. It's your call on the day."

The sobering lectures and gritty, real-life examples had an impact on the students. Mike, a gray-haired cameraman with a network affiliate, admitted he was reconsidering asking for hardship duty in Iraq after taking the AKE class.

"It's not a game for someone over 50," he said. "The course gave me a lot to think about that I didn't think about before. Now I'd ask for body armor, a medical kit and security."

But some of the younger journalists were still ready, even excited, about the opportunity to go into a war zone. Daniel, a network cameraman based on the East Coast, said the program taught him to be cautious. "I'm kind of the cowboy type, and the course has taught me if you're the cowboy type, I should hang in the back."

Jeremy, another young cameraman with the same network, added: "They tell us information dispels fear, and it does. It makes you feel more confident about going." Then he said, "Before I go, I want to talk to my family."

David, AKE's senior instructor, who returned recently from working with clients in Iraq, said he was pleased by some of the introspection.

"The last thing I want is for people who still think it's a jolly to be walking around Baghdad with their hands in their pockets, going to a restaurant and having a drink," he said. "They don't realize there are guys out there who are saying, 'Let's capture you; let's kill you.' "

The practical applications of a week's lectures and quizzes were tested in the scenarios. A minefield. Mortar fire. A traffic accident. Injured colleagues. The journalists spent the afternoon traversing grounds meant to be the Iraqi desert or the Albanian border.

It is a serene landscape where George Washington once traveled as a surveyor. There also are reported sightings of the legendary "Gray Ghost," Confederate Col. John S. Mosby. An Airlie brochure claims he haunts the grounds.

But for a few hours, the peace at Airlie was shattered by exploding mortars and gunfire.

"Have a plan," David told the group. "Do some eyeballing. Know where you are. Keep your wits about you. If your security guard is injured, we bleed just like the rest of you. You have got to be in control the whole time."

"We teach them to think," MacGaffin said. "We don't answer specific questions because the answer is always going to be 'none of the above.'"

"We train the hardest, most vulnerable group of all. If we can do this for the people who run toward the danger, we can do it for anyone."