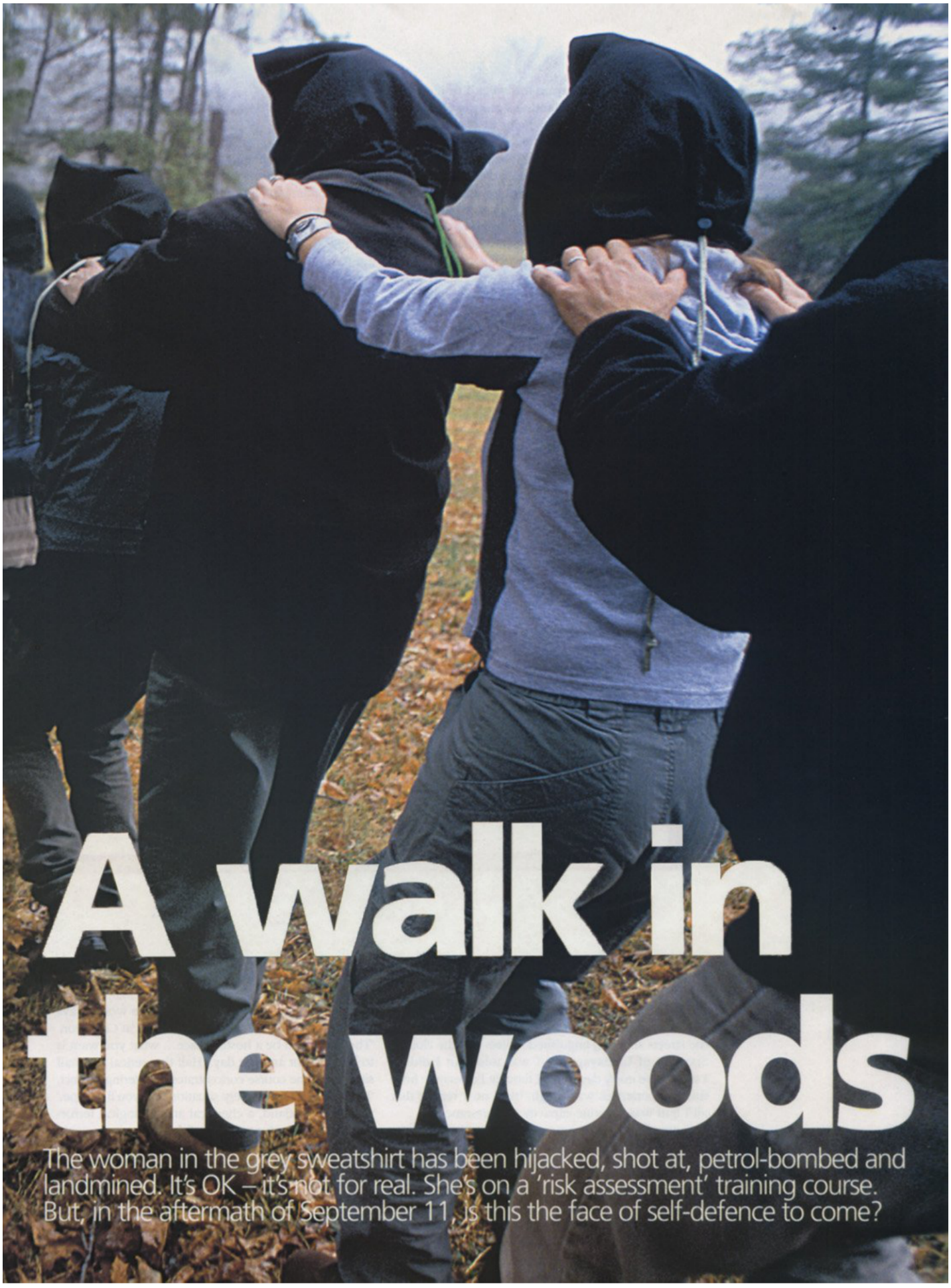

A walk in the woods

The woman in the grey sweatshirt has been hijacked, shot at, petrol-bombed and landmined. It's OK – it's not for real. She's on a 'risk assessment' training course. But, in the aftermath of September 11, is this the face of self-defence to come?

I'd found the landmine, but missed the machete against the tree. I'd spotted the compass on the fence post, but missed the bullets at my feet

Over and over again this week I've died. It's only day three, and this morning I lost the lower half of my right leg to a landmine. As injuries go, it was surprisingly painless, though yesterday I also failed to identify arterial bleeding in a colleague (who pretty much died), then hurled myself headfirst into a pile of knotty sticks during a mortar attack. Later, I nearly got my entire team killed at a military checkpoint when I failed to answer a guard's question as to why we had a note in our car about interviewing a rebel leader. Like a child caught repainting the walls with her mum's lipstick, my mind had drained of plausible explanations. 'Bloody hell,' was about the best I could conjure. After a lengthy search, several threatening swipes with guns, and a bribe the size of the down-payment on a luxury penthouse, I was released, having lost the interview but escaped with my stunningly inadequate wits.

These were not, as you might have already guessed, actual exercises, but small parts of a week-long course in hostile environment training and emergency first aid by the UK-based Centurion Risk Assessment Services. Taught by retired British Special Forces, and attended mainly by journalists and aid workers preparing to work in war zones, the courses have taken on a haunting portent since the events of September 11. In a single three-week period in November, eight journalists were killed in Afghanistan (more than US and British ground forces together) and another 100 in the preceding 10 months in places such as Colombia, Bolivia, Spain and even the US. Coupled with the thousands of non-combatants killed on the morning of September 11, the numbers begin to show how front lines have dissolved and military targets have become myth, which in itself suggests something chilling about whether, where and how any civilian is safe. Are these courses the shape of self-defence to come?

Of the dozen in my class, eight are journalists from Reuters, and several of us are headed off to places such as Colombia and Afghanistan. Most of us have – to varying degrees – experienced hostile environments, and we have come here to learn to save ourselves with something other than blind luck. One man had been extradited by the Iranian government, another had covered the recent conflict in Indonesia, a third was a photographer during a Philippines coup.

'I remember [during the coup] there were gunshots and there was nowhere to escape,' says Chris Noble, a reporter for Reuters. 'I was literally blinded by fear. I took cover behind this breeze-block wall, which makes me laugh now.' (Day two: 'Walls don't stop bullets.')

I speak as a once-hardened woman. In Cambodia during the last elections, I was out after curfew and hid in the back of a truck to go through a police checkpoint. In Honduras following a hurricane, the country declared martial law, and drunken men wandered the streets shooting anguished bullets into the clouds. Stay out of Comayaguela, I was told. But I didn't. I went there every day. What I thought I'd become from these experiences was tough, but I now realise that all I had was a terrific capacity for ignorance.

I am doing my course at the American base – Massanutten Military Academy – surrounded by mountains in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. It's unusually warm, and fog hangs like a scrim around the field's perimeter. We spend much time training our eyes to see what's in front of us: tripwires, machine guns under tree limbs, ammunition belts on branches – things that are obvious once they're pointed out, though to most of us it's like trying to find a patch of velvet in a night sky.

I find the landmine, but miss the machete against the tree. I spot the compass on the fence post, but miss the bullets at my feet. Divide your view into foreground, middle ground and background, then again by three vertically, we are taught. Too often our eyes focus only on a single area, and in a precarious situation that could mean missing the sniper on the roof or the landmine at your feet or the assailant on the streets of your city who could claim your life instantly.

'You've got to evaluate the hazards that exist within a given situation,' says senior instructor Jon Seward. Holes in buildings suggest gunfire, carcasses in fields suggest landmines. 'Try to blend in,' he tells us. 'Be the grey man or woman.'

The real theme of the week is about tough choices. As children, my brother and I used to ask my mother who she'd take if we were drowning and she could only save one. 'Neither,' she'd laugh. But it's precisely this sort of tough choice that students are forced to think about during the course. Who dies and who gets saved? How important is it to get that story if it means driving down a road infamous for ambushes?

We are asked, as a group, what we'd do if one of us, say it was me, was walking ahead in a field and triggered a landmine that blew off my leg. If the group ran up and tried to save me, they'd probably be blown up, but if they attempted to clear a path first, I'd likely bleed to death and the group would survive. The group decides to leave me. But we learn to clear a path in a minefield *and* tend our accidental amputations.

Centurion's courses, teaching 1,200 people annually, began in the UK seven years ago and in the US last year. Besides hostile environment and emergency first-aid training, there are also courses in nuclear, chemical and bioterrorism threats, survival and safety, and corporate security and surveillance, among others.

Paul Rees, the founder and executive director, had been working in public relations for the military when the BBC asked if he could offer journalists some sort of training preparation for reporting in war-torn areas. Do you comply or run when you're abducted? Do you exit a car or stay inside in a civil disturbance? The truth is that every situation is different, and what Paul Rees does is teach us to read the signs and make informed decisions when trouble arises.

'It doesn't matter where we are in the world,' says Paul Burton, an instructor and consultant at Centurion. 'The world can be a hostile place… what you want is to live to fight another day.' Half theoretical and half situational, the course concentrates on altering instinct. 'Expect the worst in every situation and you'll be fine,' says Pete Scotland, a chemical and biological terrorism expert at Centurion. 'One of the best ways to avoid trouble is to see it in the first place.' If a phone rings, instinct tells you to answer it. If it were off the hook, you'd put it on. If a door were closed, you'd open it. If a pile of debris blocked an entrance, you'd move it. If a package came in the mail, you'd open it. They

Hands-on, from top: during a mock mine-clearing exercise Rachel picks up a blown-off hand; learning about mortars, rockets and grenades; landmines in close-up; weapons training

are all common booby traps that could get you killed. The point, say the Centurions, is not that you'll be able to sniff out anthrax posts or tackle would-be suicide bombers, but that you'll learn to read the signs of a situation and decide what course of action to take.

After my mine trauma, we are led, lemming-like, into a booby-trapped house. The fact that we know it's wired and that these traps will not kill us does nothing to diminish our skittishness. 'There's nothing out here,' says Jon, as he gestures around the front yard. 'Really, it's safe.' We love Jon. But we don't trust him. He's got the smile of a priest, the build of a superhero, and the mind of James Bond. We walk with the foreboding of pot-smoking freshers called to the principal's office. 'What is the most obvious entrance?' he asks. We know it's the door, but we point to roofs and windows anyway. 'OK,' Jon says, 'the door.' It isn't until he reaches his hand down underneath a trip wire on the steps to the door that we see it, and even then we must rearrange our bodily angles to see the light glinting off it. The instructors on this course have freakishly good vision. Once inside the house, Jon points out a back window that might have offered a better entry, save for the undoubtedly wired plywood boards underneath the sill. Suddenly, an explosion causes us collective heart thumping. A woman from a German TV film crew covering our training has pushed open a door, causing a grenade to bounce off her head and tumble to the floor. We nod knowingly, sympathetic to her embarrassment and mostly glad it wasn't us.

Jon points out other traps. A gun on the windowsill begging to be picked up might be wired to an explosive device. A chair blocking the doorway might have a grenade, with pin ready to be pulled, under it. A tripod sitting in the middle of the room might have a trip wire. Though civilians are unlikely to exchange their karate or ju-jitsu self-defence courses for this one, hostile environment training does offer you a glimpse into the myriad ways you might meet your untimely demise. How lucky we are to wander the world unscathed every day, luckier still after September 11.

Yannis Behrakis was less lucky. A veteran photographer for Reuters who took the course in 1996, he and his three colleagues were ambushed by eight rebel soldiers on a road outside Freetown in Sierra Leone in May of 2000. When it was over, he said, only himself, one Reuter's colleague and a single soldier were alive. Behrakis spent nearly four hours in the jungle. 'At some point, I remembered the day at Centurion when we had to walk through the forest and a guy stepped on a trip wire and there was an explosion,' he recalled. '[In the jungle] it took me three and a half hours to move 500 metres. I thought about anti-personnel mines and booby traps and I realized the best way to move was through the most difficult paths, not the ones >

Ambush, from top: masked gunmen stage a mock-kidnapping of the course participants; hoods are placed over their heads; they are pushed to the ground; and finally robbed

easy for humans, because this was where mines and traps [would be]. I went through thick bush and sharp branches, but I knew it was the safest way… I don't know if they had any booby traps, but the thought that I knew what I was doing gave me a lot of strength.'

The walk in the woods that saved Behrakis is our next activity. Lovely autumn day, changing leaves, nothing to worry about, we are told. But by now we've all developed the tremors, jumping at every sound, checking our hotel bathrooms for tripwires and our shoes for butterfly mines. The walk begins with a gunshot. Was it a high-velocity or low-velocity bullet? Did we hear the bullet first or the weapon being fired? In the same way we see lightning before thunder, high-velocity ones travel faster than the speed of sound, and if we can hear the difference, distance can be measured. Farther up the path we get caught in crossfire and dive for cover. In a gunfight, identify where the shots originate and get out, doing a zigzag duck and cover.

Concrete walls and car doors are the stuff of movies, Jon told us earlier. 'Almost no man-made thing can protect against a machine gun. And nothing will stop a sniper's bullet. "One shot, one kill," is a sniper's modus operandi.' What you don't want to do in a gunfight is stand still and make yourself a target.

On the other hand, if a grenade or mortar fire goes off, you want to do exactly the opposite. Mostly we just scurry about at knee-level in the dirt, kicking our feet at each other's heads and understanding that, were the situation real, half of us might be dead. 'Civil disturbances,' Pete Scotland says, 'are more dangerous than military actions because you don't know the sides or the weaponry.' Escape routes should be sought. Look for elevated spots, or lamp posts and telegraph poles that will part a running crowd – safe standing cover. Wear natural-fibre, non-flammable clothing in case of petrol bombs. Use cool water to shower after being exposed to tear gas (warm water reactivates it). And know the history of where you are. Is it infamous for trouble or usually peaceful?

An abduction midway through the week is meant to introduce us to the shock of capture. It begins with explosions and gunshots. While most of the details of the abduction must remain off the record, I can say that it is near to impossible to still your beating heart even in the face of fiction. Our captors aren't real. They give us muffins and soothing pats afterwards. But the hoods they place over our heads most definitely are real, as is the sinister quiet in the valley and the cold, wet grass and the sound of our laboured breathing. We are searched, robbed and left face down on our bellies. We do not know how long we will be left here, or if we can run, or if we'll be killed.

Our captors aren't real… But the hoods they place over our heads most definitely are real… We are searched, robbed and left face down on our bellies

The key to answering these crucial questions, as always, lies with observation. The fact that our captors had masks suggests they didn't want to be seen, but would seeing them matter if they intended to kill us anyway? Ditto for our own masks. If ridding the world of us was the goal, why not blow us up?

'In a hostile situation, you want to climb a morale ladder,' Jon says. 'What signs will give you hope that you can get out of this alive?' Our captors, once we'd been hooded, were silent, a professional organisation, not likely to go off on emotional rages. Machete-wielding peasants half drunk in the middle of the night might suggest something completely different. Should the journalists killed in Afghanistan have tried to run once their car was stopped? It's impossible to ever know, but some of these signs might have suggested they had little to lose by attempting escape.

The world will always be full of near misses and accidents that could have been avoided. Centurion's course gives alternatives, not absolutes. 'At the end of the day, it's a judgement call,' Jon says. 'It's all about awareness.' Jill Dando, he tells us, might be alive today had someone created an airway for her to breathe. She was shot, slumped over, and essentially suffocated. In any emergency-aid scenario, creating an airway must come first. A victim will die much more quickly from suffocation than loss of blood.

We learned, this week, to dress gunshot wounds and impaled objects. We made stretchers from rocks, belts and tarpaulins, jackets and tree limbs, tripods and rucksacks. We collected bloody limbs and bandaged the stumps. We learned to tend quiet victims first because screaming ones have airways, and that blood flow should be stopped from pressure on the arteries, not with tourniquets. We learned that carrying a weapon is often far less effective than engaging your own mind. We discovered our own vulnerabilities and how to turn the world a little inside out to see it more fully. In my neighbourhood now the street feels different under my feet. Less unpredictable, more solid. The shadows less dark. Later this year I will go to Peru, and then Bolivia and Honduras; and the jungles and mountains and cities seem more like challenges than earthly mysteries with a million potential ways to die. On the last day we are told that the speed with which we die depends upon where we're injured – we go most quickly from the top down. Shrapnel to the neck, as opposed to the foot. Head first. That's how we die. It's also what keeps us alive.

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