



Pressure points

The media image of a desk-bound bureaucrat is far removed from the day-to-day experience of many public servants, says **Oliver Rowe**.

Approaching an unofficial vehicle checkpoint in the middle of the Surrey countryside and practising trauma first aid in a UK classroom may seem a long way from the dangers of Afghanistan or the Yemen. Yet both of these are a vital part of the preparation that civil servants and diplomats undergo before being sent to hostile parts of the world.

While parts of the media love the image of elegant embassy cocktail parties and desk-bound ‘bureaucrats’, for a growing number of officials the reality is working in an environment few would envy.

Henry Dove, secretary of the Diplomatic Service Association — the FDA’s section for Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) staff — spent considerable periods of time in the 1990s in the former Soviet Union. He explains it was “a case of going into various parts of the world — going into a

sort of no man's land essentially – to talk to opposition leaders". Also involved in setting up UK embassies in the region after the 1991 dissolution of the USSR, Dove had no specific training – beyond previous TA experience as a postgraduate student – for one of the then toughest Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) postings.

"It is very important, particularly if [you] are working in that kind of environment, [that] you view the world in a slightly different way. You have to subsume your natural instincts in terms of flight or fight, and realise that actually, no, you are in someone else's game and you have got to play by their rules.

"There's that Chinese proverb – the tallest grass stem gets cut down. If you want to survive, blend into the background. Be obliging, do as you are asked, even though it goes against your natural instincts."

Officials now posted to the world's hotspots receive thorough formal training – by companies such as the Pilgrims Group.

Sam Mostyn, Pilgrims' training manager, explains that the company will train around 1,000 people this year across government – from 15 departments including the FCO, the Department for International Development and Department for Transport.

Diplomats and other officials posted to countries such as the Yemen, Pakistan or Afghanistan, complete a four-day SAFE-Plus (Security Awareness in Fragile Environments) course, while those posted elsewhere undergo the first three days of this course (the basic SAFE course). The fourth day includes working with security teams, wearing body armour and helmets, and use of GPS systems.

Pilgrims also provides a HEAT course (Hostile Environment Awareness Training) for the international media, business people and others who travel to dangerous regions.

Mostyn and his fellow instructors – all with extensive Special Forces experience – deliver the training from a building on Redhill Aerodrome set in 250 acres of Surrey countryside. He explains: "Both [courses] are immersed in a fictitious country. Both [involve] going out on taskings. [They] include the eight key modules from planning, personal safety, trauma medicine, vehicles, conflict management and so on.

"Our main approach is to really practise stuff – to hardwire the skills. We try to keep people practising so that they can

hardwire key life-saving lessons."

Providing this training for FCO staff "does reflect an increased interest in the duty of care", says Dove. "We did have far too much of an attitude – particularly when I was doing it – that you were recruited because you were considered to be resilient." But this, he says, is not enough. "[The] hostile environments of Afghanistan and Iraq bought it to a head. We now have places like Abuja [in Nigeria] that were once seen as safe, but are now no longer so. It's becoming much more important as the world becomes a more aggressive and hostile place."

As part of this increased awareness of the duty of care – and in addition to SAFE and SAFE-Plus training – the FCO also provides TRiM (Trauma Risk Management) training for a number of staff to provide help to those exposed to traumatic incidents. TRiM-trained staff talk to those affected, both immediately after and then one month later, to assess how staff are reacting to the trauma. Dove explains that this "helps reassure people that what they are going through is normal... and if

they are not clearly... coping as you would expect people to cope, you can refer them [to more specialist help]".

TRiM training was developed by the Royal Marines in the 1990s, and adopted by the FCO as a result of incidents such as the bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi in 1998, 9/11 in New York in 2001 and the 2003 bombing of the UK consulate-general building in Istanbul, when at least 14 people were killed including the consul-general Roger Short.

"Istanbul really brought the need for TRiM home because we then realised that we weren't in a position to cope without specially trained personnel," says Dove. "The week-long, in-house TRiM training, which includes role play, has been successfully translated in recent years across the FCO, but is also used by police and emergency services both in the UK and elsewhere around the world."

All a long way from the cocktail party image that still lingers.

Oliver Rowe is editor of *Public Service Magazine*.

Getting trained

Oliver Rowe spent a day as an observer on Pilgrims' two-day fast track HEAT course.

"[We will] try to put you under a bit of pressure", training manager Sam Mostyn explained at the outset. "You can use these skills wherever you are in the world... we just want to give you more options for completing your task."

Right from the start of the 11-hour-long first day - with the issuing of a visa for a fictitious country - we were immersed in an unknown state in the grip of a complex civil war.

During what was a very challenging day, we learned and practised trauma first aid (casualty assessment, applying tourniquets

and bandages, and resuscitation techniques), as well as the all-important preparation necessary before and after arriving in a foreign country.

Then we moved out in Landrovers to practise scenarios involving official and unofficial vehicle checkpoints, being taken hostage, and casualties in a 'minefield'. At various times blank-firing AK-47s and pistols were used to add authenticity to the training. It was never possible to predict what was coming next.

Taught throughout the day were useful checklist acronyms e.g. for preparing a vehicle, personal safety and first aid.

A practical assessment and theory test concluded day two.

