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High-Risk Environments with Robert Currie

We sat down with Robert Currie – owner and founder of [RC Advisory Services](#) and security consultant to many companies – to discuss high-risk environments, covert operations, armored transport, and more.

You have traveled the world, delivering services in countries known for their hostile conditions. What are the key takeaways from operations in high-risk environments that you can convey to executive protection agents reading this?

I can't overstate that time spent in the environment before — the recce phase — is a critical ingredient for a successful EP operation. Of course, provided your threat assessment is in place, you can move onto other vital components. For instance, a considerable part of an EP agent's role is to spot things that stand out.

Suppose you have never been to a particular country. How then will you ever hope to notice behaviors or situations that pose a threat without a baseline?

If at all possible, during your pre-trip preparations, finding another EP detail that has worked in that area recently is invaluable. If you have a good relationship with this other group, they can share what worked and what didn't with you.

They may also be able to recommend local resources you can leverage to augment your EP detail. Having a local EP support person can "fast track" your learning the environment during your recce. They will likely have access to local intelligence sources and can advise on items such as:

- Local customs,
- Traffic patterns,
- Hotel recommendations, and other things.

If language is an issue, your local support person can also assist in this regard.

One area where I have stumbled upon serious issues is with local drivers in high-risk environments. For example, I had an executive's admin assistant book a limo for pick up at the airport. I consented to let the limo driver pick us up and regretted it later on. The car was awesome; leather seats, media screens in the back, and bottled water were available.

My issue was the driver did not have any EP training and made a variety of simple mistakes. This was 100% my fault, not the limo driver's. I'd hire him to take my kids to their high school graduation but never again for high-risk environments.

I hired EP drivers in all future operations AND drove with them to see if they had the training they say they did. If possible, I prefer to have my own drivers who I know are well trained. Unfortunately, this isn't always an option due to cost or resource strain.

One caveat worth mentioning when contemplating your own driver(s): Ensure you are legally allowed to drive in that environment.

Planning and crisis management are the cornerstones of your work as a security advisor. Can you go into depth on what you advise your clients/principals so they can avoid crises and enhance the planning process?

The more sharing of information that you can do before the EP operation, the better. Especially if it's a new principal or first travel to high-risk environments.

There is obvious information to gather, such as:

- Business itinerary,
- Preferred hotels,
- Medical needs and client party size.

It is equally important to know your principals and their habits.

Do you have an avid runner in the group? Are your principals going to ask for a place to grab a drink after a long day of business? Will they take any local sights during the trip? What is their comfort level traveling to high-risk areas? This is not an exhaustive list by any means.

It may not be possible to gather this information directly from your principals. Admin assistants are your best friend in this case as they spend so much time with the principal.

Once you arm yourself with this information, evidently, the immediate attention goes towards planning around the business itinerary. Once this is complete, start adding branch plans for any of the above contingencies. In which case, when a principal says — "where can I

go for a 30-minute jog?" — you immediately have the answer and have already run that route yourself.

Same if they ask to go walking one evening to buy a gift for a family member. You should have anticipated that these are everyday things we all do when we travel and that the request may come up.

One item that I always plan for is a backup hotel. There can be many reasons why you may need to move to another site that ranges from safety to the principal's personal wishes. These could include a fire in your hotel to personal desires.

I was in a hotel once with a senior executive that asked to move. The reason was that the hotel was undergoing renovations. Needless to say, there was a strong odor of fresh paint on the floor.

The executive said they were experiencing headaches and wanted to leave immediately for another hotel. We were ready with another venue within minutes because of pre-planning. Not the sort of high-risk environments you would expect.

You were a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for 29 years. There you worked on surveillance, reconnaissance, and supporting tactical teams, among other things. What words of wisdom can you impart to those wanting to dive into these waters? And what time does it take to become skilled in each of them?

At the start of my career, I spent ten years in a drug enforcement unit where surveillance was a ubiquitous tool. We received excellent training, but it takes 6-12 months before being genuinely comfortable to surveil a target.

I remember in my first few months, I ended up being dispatched on foot to follow a target, and we ended up in the same elevator. I spent the whole ride wondering: *Can they see me?!*

Of course, the person knew I was there, but they really weren't paying any attention to me. Why would they? It took a lot more practice before I was comfortable and subsequently acting more naturally in proximity to targets. Eventually, you start to blend into different environments and conduct the surveillance undetected.

The keys here are professional training and on-the-job practice.

Understanding how surveillance teams work can assist when preparing and conducting EP operations. If you think about your principal and their expected movements for a moment, try

and think of where you set up for static or mobile surveillance. At this point, you "step back" and monitor key points during dry runs or the actual EP operation to see if you have anyone following you.

If you do spot anyone, remember that there might be various persons following with no malicious intent. For example, it could be a local government or the media monitoring your movements, depending on the profile of your principal(s). This is another area where your local EP support person can be a tremendous asset in identifying hostile intent in high-risk environments.

Reconnaissance, in an EP sense, is much easier to learn than surveillance. Recce trips are typically jam-packed with running through all routes, venues, and eventualities. So, they can be tiring. That said, I find them much easier than the EP operation, as there is no principal or rigid schedule (sometimes).

I had someone teach me on one trip where I was able to see the process "live." After that, I was comfortable on my own. I have conversely taught junior EP agents the recce process by buddying up on one trip.

To summarize a recce: You basically go everywhere the business itinerary states AND anywhere the principal might go. Lastly, as you move through your recce environment, you also need to find key contacts at venues.

As a former Canadian police officer, I am only aware of tactical training made available through law enforcement or security agencies. Courses range in complexity, and much like surveillance, it likely takes a year after your introductory tactical course before you are entirely comfortable with operations.

It was only as a police officer providing EP support in high-risk environments or otherwise where I was allowed to be armed. This was always dependent on the host country extending permission to carry a firearm. I have found it far more beneficial to hire local armed EP operators if that is an absolute requirement for a civilian EP operation.

This is an area — like with drivers — where it pays dividends to validate the tactical acumen of the folks you wish to hire. For example, if I am on a pre-operation recce, I have asked to see where they train. Many will take you to a range, and you can watch their drills to assess your comfort level.

You have engaged in your fair share of covert operations during the years. In what way do principals/clients benefit from covert operations in the modern threat landscape? Has it

become more demanding to remain covert while implementing operations not intended for the public eye?

Most of the EP operations we ran were what I would call *discrete*. It was a conscious effort to maintain a very low profile. We did this so we would not draw undue attention to our principal(s).

From the outside looking in, you may notice someone helping with a car door or moving with or near the principals. There are no sunglasses nor a profile of someone that looks like they can bench press 600 pounds. They could easily be mistaken for a personal assistant.

Our choice of vehicles also would be modified with a conscious effort to avoid what looks like a limousine or any other high-net-worth individual's choice of car.

The rest of the EP team would be creating a low-profile ring around the principal with the lead person to leapfrog ahead to the next venue to:

1. Verify the viability of the chosen route, and
2. Assess the situation at the venue.

Placing a person in a local or non-business dress on or near venues before the approach can provide valuable intelligence about whether the press gathered or a crowd has formed. But also the mood of the group.

You can relay this information back to the head of the EP detail for decision-making. After an assessment, the detail can proceed as planned and select an alternate drop-off. Or, if necessary, abort the drop-off.

If there are concerns about a particular individual in the crowd, your low-profile advance agent can blend in with the group and place themselves near the person of interest.

One potential drawback to performing a recce and meeting stakeholder's beforehand is you risk letting too many people know when and where your principal will be in a few days or weeks, depending on your lead time. This is an area that requires discretion as much as possible.

In this situation, a light cover story may prove useful, as it will be challenging to elicit support from stakeholders without providing them some information. For example, you may be dealing with a director of security of a hotel in order to positively shape the environment for your upcoming EP operation.

Instead of stating that *the CEO of company X is coming*, you could suggest that you are profiling sites for a potential visit by Canadian business executives. It is not untrue, but you are not revealing anything about your client.

Suppose that level of information is still too risky. In that case, you can have your local EP support person manage liaison with locals. There they can state that we may have foreign business executives visiting.

Where I have seen this backfire and draw undue attention is trying to be discrete or coy when you are doing a recce for a well-known international event that everyone already knows that it will be attended by specific individuals. You risk looking ridiculous, and you would spend your energy better on other preparatory tasks.

One technique that works quite well to "mask" the profile of the upcoming EP operation is to recce other sites. If someone is collecting intelligence and you only visit one hotel before the operation, they do not need to be rocket scientists to know where you will be staying with your principal(s).

It costs very little to visit two or three more hotels than your preferred location. Also, if you plan your day right, most hotels offer coffee and a snack while visiting (laughs).

It allows you to select a backup site, and now anyone profiling your visit has 3 or 4 hotels to cover off. In addition, you can do this for other venues you will be visiting for the business agenda.

A final point on discretion – do NOT talk about the details of your upcoming detail in uncontrolled areas. You have just spent a few days on a recce trying to keep things discrete. So why jump on the phone in a taxi back to the airport to blab about your principals or details of the upcoming trip?

Those on the receiving end of security services often ignore the importance of armored vehicles and tend to care more about the cars' visual appearance. So, what's the role of armored transport in everyday operations? Is it only necessary in high-risk environments?

Armored vehicles absolutely have their place for certain operations. There are times when high-risk environments demand the principal(s) be placed in a secure shell for road movements. It is possible to find lower-profile armored vehicles. Yet, more often than not, the profile of your EP operation will be overt because of the visible presence of a much heavier vehicle.

I have already mentioned the importance of having a trained driver. If you are going to use an armored vehicle, having an experienced driver is a must. These vehicles provide lots of extra protection but require time behind the wheel to control the excess weight and features.

There are no absolutes in the EP business where it would be safe to state that an armored vehicle is imperative. However, case by case, you need to weigh the profile of using an armored vehicle against maintaining a discrete profile.

My team and I were planning a very high-risk EP operation in an African country, and our liaison with British EP professionals who had previously been there was enlightening.

Armored vehicles were available, which we thought was a plus. Our colleague stated: "They are bullet magnets, mate!" So, we opted for a low profile, which posed its own challenges.

In the end, each scenario will dictate what approach is best. And which high-risk environments necessitate different methods.

The last point I'd like to share is that I have seen armored vehicles used as decoys. First, they were seemingly picking up a principal and moving away. In the process, they were drawing the press with the "motorcade." Then, a few minutes later, a non-descript sedan pulls away from the loading dock area where no one even noticed.

Your website states, "Battle-tested and experienced leader with expertise in security, risk management, crisis management, and client relations." How do you juggle between all these different areas? And what are your top tips for EP agents looking to provide better client service?

At this point in my career, I spend far more time providing advice to clients instead of being "out there" in high-risk environments.

So, there is a lot less juggling today than before (laughs). My advice to EP agents would be to have very deliberate discussions with the client or the client's representative before engaging.

This is easier said than done in a competitive market.

Setting expectations early on will improve the experience for both parties. I have unfortunately seen some EP professionals state that they can manage anything with minimum resources only to have that bite them later when they are stretched too thin on a detail or asked to do something irresponsible from a security perspective.

Some red flags for me are organizations that have you work through a spokesperson/personal assistant/chief of staff type person blocking or filtering access to the principal.

If you can't meet the principal before, to understand their requirements and risk tolerance, when will you provide them a pre-briefing on the operation? How will you communicate with them during the operation?

I am not suggesting you do not work with persons in this role. The reason? They can provide loads of valuable insight. If they become a filter, though, you are headed for a potential disaster.

Another critical area for an EP professional to manage is roles and responsibilities. Both in high-risk environments and outside them.

I have seen EP agents with a task to get dry cleaning and have to leave their post only to have somebody blame them for an incident that was avoidable if they had remained on the post.

I am not suggesting EP agents can't be a value add and help out, but there is a time and a place. For example, I have noticed EP agents trying to ingratiate themselves by loading luggage into a vehicle while the principal embarks from the hotel.

How can you be scanning for threats while you are placing the matching Louis Vuittons in the trunk? Judgment is essential here, high-risk environments or not. Suppose you have just driven the principal two hours in the woods to a friend's isolated fishing lodge in the middle of nowhere. In that case, you can probably assist with some of their other tasks.

The final piece of good client service is always to perform your own hot wash after every detail. What worked, what didn't, and what needs to change. Seeking frank feedback from the client and stakeholders will make for smooth future operations.

If you think you no longer have anything to learn in this business, it's likely time to hang up your squiggly earpiece and find other work.