

How to report from the hot spots and come back alive

TRAINING IN THE WAR ZONE

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Thirteen years ago, George Matheson was an IRN reporter attempting to cover the violence ignited by the murder of the populist South African communist leader Chris Hani. Caught up in a riot at a Johannesburg football stadium, he realised that people were being pushed into a burning house. Two men were murdered before his eyes and he was grabbed by a crowd of youths chanting "Kill the white policeman" and swept towards the flames. "I was getting near the door and thinking this was it, when an ANC member grabbed me and screamed at them," he says.

These days, Matheson spends his time doing his best to make sure that other journalists - particularly raw, young reporters anxious to make their names - don't get into similar life-threatening scrapes.

In times when staff jobs are scarce and conflict zones across the Middle East offer opportunities for building a journalistic reputation but are also fraught with risk, Matheson is performing a key role.

Only last month the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that three a month are being murdered in places such as Iraq - 580 have lost their lives in

the past 15 years. The vast majority are local reporters but foreign correspondents are at risk as well. Matheson, 49, believes there has never been a more pressing time to emphasise to young reporters the need to balance risk over the enticing lure of a story, to assess the safety of each situation and learn certain crucial rules.

For this reason, he has incorporated hostile-environment training into a university degree for the first time. After 30 years of running a postgraduate broadcasting course, University College Falmouth approached Matheson to help devise an MA in international journalism.

The kidnap of the freelancer James Brandon, right, who was abducted in Basra two years ago when freelancing for The Sunday Telegraph and The Scotsman, inspired Matheson to incorporate hostile-environment training. Brandon, then 23, was eventually released but, despite claims from friends that he was well versed in the dangers of the job, the case ignited a debate on the ethics of encouraging such eager youngsters to enter war zones. Since the start of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan news organisations have become increasingly wary of endangering reporters, relying, some would say all too heavily, on local journalists - who make up the majority of the death toll over the past few years.

Staff members who do venture into the fray are now given expensive hostile-environment training provided by private companies set up by former members of the armed forces. But this, the lecturer believes, will the first time it is incorporated into a university degree.

Matheson refutes claims that he is only encouraging inexperienced reporters to seek out dangerous situations. Instead, he insists, he is trying to balance the lure of a story with awareness of safety. "The whole raison d'être of the course is to tell them not to be macho, to make sure they don't take these stupid risks. Far too many journalists are getting themselves killed. With international coverage getting cheaper and mushrooming across the globe,

more and more journalists may be tempted by the so called "glamour" of the hot spots and head out there unprepared," he says. "We teach them that when you get that pull [of the story], to take one step back, think it out in terms of safety. We have students who would go out there anyway with absolutely no training. They need to start thinking of safety at college. It is about getting them to think more than anything."

The riot in Johannesburg was not the only time Matheson faced death during a career spanning more than 20 years, including working in Baghdad during the first Gulf War. On another occasion, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, he "stupidly" objected to a group of the notorious East German Stasi secret police beating a man in an alleyway and was repeatedly clubbed. In another riot in South Africa he stuck his microphone over a bank to capture the noise of gunfire. "It was really, really stupid. I went to the top of the bank and put the microphone up. A hail of bullets just came flying over the top of my head. I realised I was never going to do that again," he said. "When I came back from there I got some training. "

The 45-week MA at Falmouth is an intensive course which aims to teach young reporters to multi-task in the fields of television, radio, print and online, offering a serious grounding in global issues and ethics. The hostile-environment module analyses real conflict situations. It looks at matters such as risk assessment, avoiding kidnap, dealing with civil unrest, first aid, and certain battlefield techniques.

"Journalists can't do their jobs unless they can both observe and safely retreat from front-line situations. As the world becomes a more hostile environment for journalists, courses like this one are becoming more and more vital," said Bill Neely, ITV News international editor.

Fellow Falmouth lecture Paul Lashmar said: "Apparently well-qualified people have got themselves into trouble. It is a risky business and you can't eliminate the risks. What you can do is teach them some of the basics."

Terri Judd has reported for 'The Independent' from Afghan-istan