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Main picture Steve Pennells in protective gear.

Opposite page As part of the training course Pennells and his team had to track down rebel leader "Major Bagote" to his stronghold in the middle of a forest in the fictional South-East Asian country of Ameaca. The militia were tipped off by a fixer and a gun battle erupted, forcing them to flee into the forest and navigate their way to an evacuation point.

Sending reporters to the world's hot spots can make them targets, not just for bullets but kidnappers and warlords. An Australian training course run by former soldiers teaches journalists how to survive once the grenades start flying. **Steve Pennells** spent three days in the Australian bush honing battleground survival skills.

IN THE END, it was the pipe bomb that killed me. I'd survived the landmines, the militia, the sniper fire and the roadside ambush but it was a crudely made pipe bomb — taped to a mobile phone detonator and jammed in the front of my four-wheel-drive — that detonated as soon as I got in the car, killing me and my colleague instantly.

"You're dead," Justin Bowden said, walking up to us and grinning as he removed the dummy bomb from under the bonnet.

In the real world I would now be a statistic, one of hundreds of journalists killed on the job.

But this was Ameaca, the fictional Asian country embroiled in a bloody civil war, with a political climate that echoed 1970s East Timor, and where death had a reset button. In the real world, Ameaca was an empty scout

Australian media organisations have been slower than their international counterparts in their readiness to prepare journalists for the dangers of their job. But there has been a gradual shift, helped along by criticisms of the way organisations managed the risks.

"Europe has been used to doing safety management in the media for some time, as have the Brits and the Americans," Bowden said.

"But it has taken a little bit of time for Australia to get on board. We always saw an element of risk in the day-to-day role of the local media. I think it took the Australian psyche to change a little bit, with certain events happening closer to home, that highlighted the need for formal training."

Bowden's company, Beltin Group, now has Fairfax, News Ltd, Channel Seven, AAP, SBS and WA Newspapers

year, nearing the record 177 in 2006. These included 134 murders and violent deaths and 37 deaths by accident while on assignment. The World Association of Newspapers has confirmed 95 journalist deaths last year. The more conservative New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) lists 64 deaths last year — up from 56 in 2006 — with a further 22 deaths as being unconfirmed but suspected to be in the course of the journalists' work.

Of those killed over the past decade, 72.4 per cent were murdered, 17.4 per cent died in crossfire or combat and 9.9 per cent during another dangerous assignment.

At the time of writing, 14 journalists have already died since the start of this year.

If I'm killed in the field, there is a good chance (52.1 per cent) that it will be with a hand gun or rifle, a 14.6

the zone

camp two hours' south of Sydney. But to us it was the setting for a new kind of journalistic war game, an intense microcosm of the worst we could face in the field.

For three days we had honed mapping and communication skills, first-aid techniques and defensive driving skills (with a trail of flattened witches hats to represent the unfortunate civilian casualties of my enthusiasm).

We had been confronted with landmine victims, bomb blasts and dumped in the middle of bush in southern NSW and told to find our way out.

And we had navigated in the dead of night to a rebel hide-out where I had been held hostage, interrogated and managed to escape as I heard the chilling screams of my colleague being tortured and "shot" somewhere in the distance.

This is Bowden's bread and butter. For the past six years, the former bodyguard and captain in the military police and his group of ex-army officers have trained almost 700 Australian journalists, photographers and cameramen in the art of risk management. About 20 have been put through the more intense Ameaca scenarios.

on its books and trains their staff to assess and manage risks.

And not just in the predictable global hot spots, either. In a first on Australian soil, Bowden and his team equipped photographers and camera operators last year with helmets, goggles, slash-proof vests and crowd training in preparation for the APEC protests.

Now the group is preparing journalists for the Beijing Olympics.

"I think the term that we coined was 'watching their back'," he said.

"When something happens and you're running upstairs and everyone is running down and away, we're the ones who are watching your back, trying to make sure you get in and get out safely.

"You go right against the survival instinct. That's the very unique nature of your role."

It is difficult to get a clear picture of the number of journalists killed on the job. Press freedom groups track the deaths each year but the figures vary, depending on the criteria. According to the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists, 171 journalists were killed last



per cent chance it will be with heavy artillery or in an air strike, a one in 10 chance it will be explosives, a 6.7 per cent chance I would be killed with a knife and a 5.1 per cent chance I would be beaten to death or strangled.

According to the CPJ, almost one third of the suspected perpetrators in the murders were political groups and 18.3 per cent were government officials. One in 10 were killed by criminal groups. 13.5 per cent by military or paramilitary, 1.6 per cent by local residents and one per cent by the mob. The killers in 22.8 per cent are unknown.

In almost 90 per cent of the cases, the killers got away with complete impunity.

"In the vast majority of cases, nobody is brought to justice for their murders," says Tim Balding, CEO of the Paris-based World Association of Newspapers.

"Iraq continues to be the deadliest country in the world for media and the rising number of journalists killed in all conflicts is a cause for deep concern."

I was in Iraq two-and-a-half years ago — a hell of a place with the kind of twisted reality that makes Ameaca seem like the scout camp that it is. The bar at the British

military base in Basra, in Iraq's south, operated under a strict dress code: compulsory body armour.

"You'll want it if we get mortared tonight," the doorman said when we got there, waving us away with his assault rifle.

"It hasn't happened for a few months but when it does, there'll be no time to go back to your tent and get it. You'll be dead."

After a couple of weeks in Iraq your mind slowly adapts and a 20kg bulletproof vest — caked in dust and reeking of body odour — becomes your most treasured possession. Bizarre daily rituals, shaped by the constant threat of violence and all involving the heavy, claustrophobic shell of body armour, become habit.

Moving from one place to the next takes place by way of a frantic ride in an armoured vehicle — always in daylight and always wearing armour — as part of a convoy dashing through wastelands filled with bombed tanks and Iraqi kids who line your path with arms outstretched like extras from a Mad Max movie.

"If you hear gunfire do not get out of the vehicle. If there is an explosion or loud bang, do not get out of the

Below Justin Bowden, chief executive of the Beltin Group, explaining the threat of unexploded military ordnance when working in regions such as Sinai, Cambodia and Iraq.

Centre Rebel fighters proudly show off the prone body of an "Indonesian journalist" they have tortured.

Right Steve Pennells runs for cover after a simulated bomb is thrown at him while driving at high speed.



vehicle. If the vehicle stops, stay inside, we will collect you," yelled Lt-Cdr Chris Hall — a man I remember as a short, barking ball of bitterness — from the front. "The trick for us is never slow down."

Longer trips happened in the bloated belly of a Hercules which corkscrewed rapidly into the sky in the limited airspace around a military base.

A couple of months before I got there, shots were fired at a Hercules on take-off. One bullet pierced the fuselage and killed an American contractor on board.

Troops said there is, on average, one attack a week and stories of death were traded each night with such regularity they are the equivalent of office water-cooler conversation.

There was the camp interpreter who was dragged from his bed in the dead of night and had his throat slit just before I got there. And the Iraqi Navy officer who had a hand grenade thrown at his house for working with the British.

One night in the bar where you have to bring your body armour, the assembled British troops regaled me with tales of a "crazy American" journalist, Steven Vincent, who chose to live outside the base and live off his wits. "You should meet him," they say.

Less than a week later, the man's bullet-riddled body was found on the highway a few kilometres south.

It was Friday morning in Ameaca and again I had slept badly. The scenarios during the past three days had been fast and relentless. Bowden's team made the most of the element of surprise which was why I had slept fully clothed with my boots on and a satellite phone in my pocket.

Paranoia had turned the possums in our cabin's roof into gunmen, scurrying across the ceiling with the intention of taking us hostage. Or worse: violating us, as Bowden had explained the day before, methodically peeling an orange and putting it in his mouth, piece by piece, as he ran through the more gruesome details of how hostages were typically broken.

Dawn came and there were no surprises. Bowden joined us for breakfast, telling us that our last day would be a test of everything we knew. Great.

We were told we were still in Ameaca's south-east province. Our assignment was to track down the leader of the rebels, Major Bogate, at his hide-out, interview him, get out of there and contact DFAT to arrange a rendezvous point for extraction. Our fixer would come to get us soon, Bowden explained.

Fixers are locals paid by journalists to arrange whatever they need for their story. Depending on the

green hut at this location. My men and I have secured this location. You are located at WGS 84 grid reference 56H 001 086. This is your extraction point.

"The magnetic bearing to my location from yours is 256 degrees.

"Regards, Maj Bogate."

We walked through the bush, scrub scratching at our feet. "Do I get my money now?" demanded our fixer, who by this stage we had named "Mr Orange", in deference to Bowden's habit.

We walked for about half an hour before our new-found navigation skills led us to a green hut in the clearing.

"Hello friends," called Major Bogate from the bushes — a man who bore a remarkable resemblance to a roadside guard and Afghan woman I had already met, as well as my kidnapper from the previous night. He rose

There was the camp interpreter who was dragged from his bed in the dead of night and had his throat slit just before I got there.

from a ditch, lowered his AK-47 and led us into the hut where we sat in a circle and I took photographs as he told his story. Mr Orange was pacing nervously outside.

Then all of a sudden: crack!

Ten minutes into the conversation, the familiar sound of a hand grenade made us freeze.

"Down!" yelled Major Bogate.

We heard gunfire. It must have been the militia. The three of us ran into the bush, my camera gear falling around me. I scurried back to retrieve it but wasn't so

lucky with my sunglasses. As I write this, they're still in Ameaca.

The next hour was a stop, start, duck and stay silent affair. We heard rustling in the distance and sometimes saw the bright red of Mr Orange's Hawaiian shirt through the distant bushes.

We didn't trust him any more and decided against going to our car. We headed the other way, scrub cutting at our heels.

We had our interview and

photos. We also had our compass, our new navigation skills and a map of the surrounding bushland, which had the three dots which marked the huts of the scout camp where we were staying.

We arrived an hour later, circling the camp in case of booby traps and then laying out a fluorescent mat to mark our location for the helicopter that would come to get us. The kettle boiled, we made coffee and waited for our "extraction".

Half an hour later, Bowden and his crew returned. We hadn't followed the script. We were meant to come across two more scenarios in the bush which were designed to test us further. But he said he couldn't fault our reasoning. We had escaped with the story and that was what we were meant to do.

The mission was over. There would be no helicopter rescue, just a two-hour drive to Sydney and beers for a job well done. That's the difference between Ameaca and the real world. **W**