

Decoding HEAT:

Navigating Security Training for Humanitarians

Navigating the landscape of Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) is complicated. The quality and intent of HEATs varies significantly among different providers, with some resembling intense boot camps, emphasizing rigorous training to prepare participants for a myriad of circumstances. Covid-19 has further complicated the landscape, introducing online HEAT, a misleading term as a HEAT involves a significant aspect of practical exercises. Claiming to train a HEAT online is similar to asserting one can learn to swim by watching a video.

HEAT, designed to ready individuals for real-world scenarios, encompasses a spectrum of skills crucial for fieldwork. From conducting access negotiations and handling checkpoints to responding to convoy attacks, navigating hostile environments, and managing kidnappings, these skills cannot be effectively educated through online platforms.

For humanitarian workers, a meaningful HEAT experience lies in its alignment with a humanitarian perspective. Bootcamp-style HEATs, tailored for other sectors like the military or private security, often prove unrealistic for aid workers. Unlike their counterparts, humanitarian workers rarely require the same type of physical training and are better served by focusing on context-specific challenges.

Some HEAT programs include self-defense or firearms training, but these elements are often irrelevant and can even compromise the safety of humanitarian workers. Understanding various weapons' technicalities holds little importance compared to recognizing the potential danger they pose and ensuring safe handling.

When faced with explosive sounds or loud noises, the primary concern is knowing how to reach safety. Similarly, self-defense in a humanitarian context emphasizes non-violent approaches. Overemphasizing irrelevant topics can lead to disengagement and aversion among participants, hindering the acquisition of pertinent skills crucial for safety.

This discrepancy highlights the bootcamp-like nature of some HEAT programs, where significant time is devoted to acquiring skills minimally or not relevant to aid workers' tasks.

On the other extreme, online HEATs eliminating physical simulations are equally unrealistic. Mission preparation involves not only theoretical aspects but also developing cultural sensitivity, a fact that cannot be neglected.

Contrary to initial concerns, the physical skills practiced in HEATs are natural responses to stressful situations. These responses need practice in a safe learning environment, especially for those who have not experienced hostile environments. A quality HEAT recognizes individual uniqueness, refining existing response mechanisms without being an intimidating security course.

Participants often arrive at HEATs anxious, anticipating a stressful experience. However, by the course's conclusion, they express satisfaction, having learned valuable skills and found unexpected interest in the material. Trainers with extensive humanitarian sector experience create an environment where participants feel comfortable discussing concerns openly.

Choosing security training demands knowledge beyond the HEAT title. Numerous variations exist, making it essential to select a program tailored for the humanitarian sector. Led by trainers with proven mission experience in INGOs and diverse roles, these programs ensure relevant and effective preparation for challenging environments.

Opting for a HEAT specifically designed for the humanitarian sector ensures enrollment in a course immediately beneficial to one's work. Built around humanitarian principles, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), and offering a realistic perspective on sector strengths and weaknesses, these courses enhance training effectiveness, providing skills and knowledge directly applicable to mission challenges.

About the Author:



William van Heerden joined in 1994, the International Red Cross Movement during the Rwandan genocide. Over the years, 1994-2005, he served in various capacities within the Red Cross, including as a Delegate, Country Representative, and regional security advisor.

Following his tenure with the Red Cross, William became a licensed risk analyst and founded Duty of Care NL, now known as PMO Excellence. With a focus on promoting safety and security, his work has taken him to numerous hotspots across the globe, including Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, among others.

Under his leadership, PMO Excellence has established an impressive track record in providing comprehensive security trainings worldwide and delivering high-quality assessments and crisis management solutions.